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Feature

The Spark for Great Art

By Christine Lindey

The arts were intrinsic to the Bolshevik revolution. “In the land of the Soviets every kitchen maid must be able to rule the state”, said Lenin. But achieving this momentous step forward was no mean task. Eighty per cent of the population was illiterate and serfdom, abolished in 1862–4, was still within living memory. It was the arts that opened people’s minds and boosted their self-confidence to seize power by expressing the revolution’s aims through imagination, emotion, humour and joy.

How best to do this was hotly debated. Rejecting unique works of art as self-indulgent bourgeois commodities, some artists heeded the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky’s dictum: “the streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes.” Turning to agitprop (agitation and propaganda), they created ephemeral posters, street pageants and street decorations to educate and enthuse support for the revolution. Thus, in 1920, artists including Nathan Altman organised the ambitious re-enactment of the

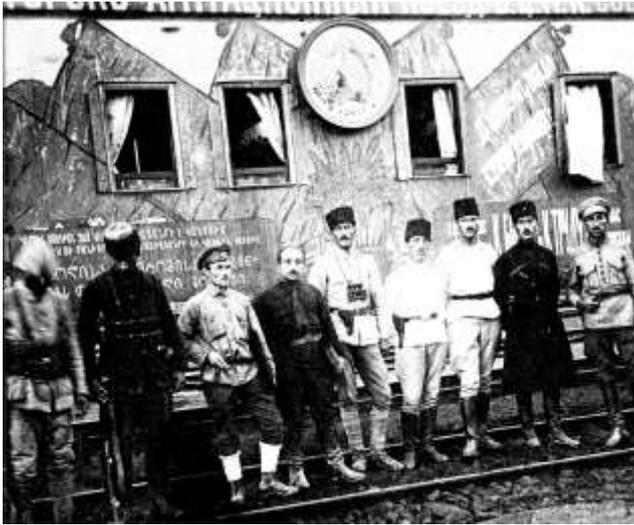
storming of the Winter Palace, involving decorated buildings, factory sirens and 2,000 Petrograd proletarians. Perhaps a few kitchen maids were among them. They painted vivid images and slogans on trains to transform them into ‘moving posters’ and filled them with travelling theatre companies, film shows, books and literacy classes to bring socialism to the countryside.



ROSTA poster by Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1919
 (SCRSS Library)

Such actions were possible because the worker state became patron of the arts. Recognising the importance of culture, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Minister for Enlightenment, immediately revolutionised cultural institutions. The arts would now serve the people, not the aristocracy or bourgeoisie. The art market was abolished,

museums nationalised, and their contents reorganised and re-interpreted from a working-class perspective. Two radical artists – Alexander Rodchenko, a washerwoman’s son, and Wassily Kandinsky, a bourgeois ex-lawyer – jointly founded twenty-two new museums and purchased contemporary art for the young state. Museums worldwide still envy these collections.



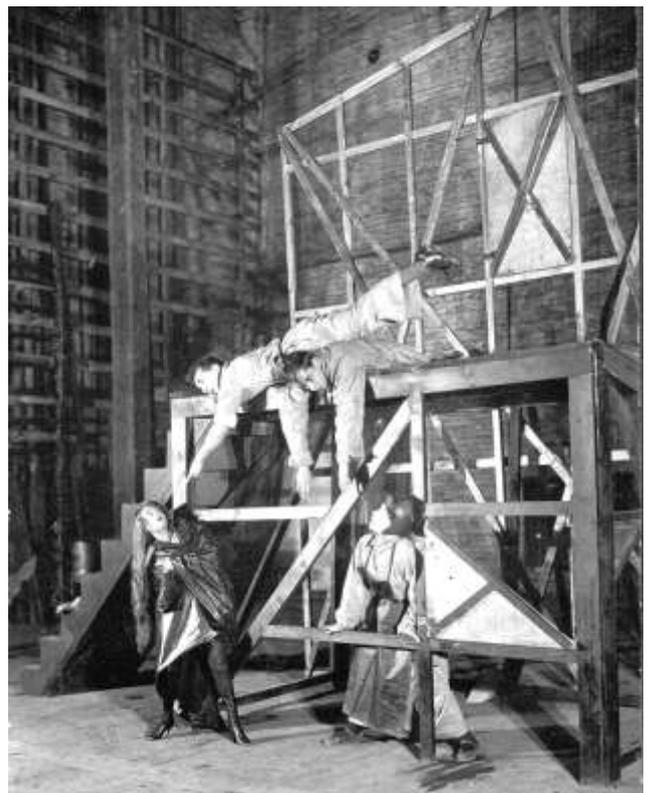
Agit-Train, Red Caucasus, 1920 (SCRSS Library)

The nineteenth-century progressive intelligentsia had already challenged tsarist Russia’s near medieval socio-political conditions through equally polarised aesthetics. The aristocracy favoured Western academic art as a mark of their superior sophistication, while denigrating their serfs’ woodcut prints (luboks), icons, carvings and embroideries as ‘crude’ and ‘primitive’. But the early avant-garde upturned these aesthetic criteria. Arguing that photography liberated them from academic art’s fussy illusionism, they were inspired by the flat shapes, bold colours and outlines through which folk art succinctly expressed visible and inner worlds.

So, after 1917, the lubok-inspired revolutionary posters, illustrations and textiles energised peasants and workers by affirming their own, hitherto denigrated, cultural traditions. But artists also embraced the social progress promised by industrialisation and the surge in recent technological inventions – film, recorded

sound, telephones, flying machines and motor cars. Their forms and functions symbolised the speed, dynamism and energy of modernity and of the revolution.

As art education was re-organised, the Marxist Vladimir Tatlin headed up the innovatory VKhUTEMAS (literally, ‘Higher Art and Technical Workshops’), the Russian state art and technical school, founded in Moscow in 1920, which influenced the Bauhaus. Inspired by the machine age, it dispensed with traditional art to investigate forms, spatial organisation, materials and processes as a basis for producing cheap mass-produced goods, accessible to everyone. Rejecting the bourgeois concept of the artist as individual (male) genius, they defined themselves as classless, self-effacing ‘constructivists’, collectively constructing the revolution alongside other workers, regardless of gender.



The Magnanimous Cuckold, 1922, designed by Lyubov Popova (SCRSS Library)

Lyubov Popova’s transportable theatre, Rodchenko’s posters and Vavara Stepanova’s textiles shared the abstracted forms of modernity: the circles of factory

cogs and wheels, electricity's lightning zig-zags, the soaring grace of flying machines.

At Vitebsk Art Academy Kazimir Malevich founded UNOVIS, a group in which students and teachers collaborated in explorations of the essence of form and volume to create futuristic architectural models as prototypes to inspire designers, engineers and architects. And they did.

It was Marc Chagall, painter of poetic evocations of Jewish village life and Commissar of Arts for his native province, who founded the Vitebsk Art Academy during the revolution. Lunacharsky's pluralist aesthetic policies enabled Malevich to teach in the same academy. Similarly, Alexander Deineka, who argued for realist paintings to represent the revolution and workers' lives, taught in the same Moscow institution as Tatlin.

During the hardships of War Communism (1917–22) artists concentrated on speculative research, but some of their ideas reached fruition afterwards. Kitchen maids sported dresses printed with modernist motifs celebrating technology and socialism. Buildings such as Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin Communal House (1930) incorporated communal facilities such as laundries, dining halls, kitchens and reading rooms. Inspired by UNOVIS, its horizontal banded windows sweep across the facade, providing maximum light and air, behind wide, heated corridors in which tenants could interact.

Together with parallel developments in the other arts, the visual arts made real differences to people's lives. In this centenary year of the Russian Revolution, numerous exhibitions will repeat the neo-liberal mantra of 'great art, shame about the politics', perpetuated since the 1920s. In fact, it was great politics that generated such a blossoming of the arts.

Christine Lindey is an art historian and lecturer. Her areas of expertise are nineteenth and twentieth-century art, with a special interest in Soviet and Socialist art. She is currently finishing a book on British

socially committed art in the 1940s–50s. She has taught art history at Birkbeck College, University of London, and at the University of the Arts, London.

Note: A version of this article first appeared in the *Morning Star* in the 31 December 2016 – 1 January 2017 weekend issue.

SCRSS News

Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS, unless otherwise stated

SCRSS AGM 2017

The Society held its AGM on 20 May 2017. The Annual Report and Accounts were discussed and approved. SCRSS members on our email list were emailed copies after the event. If you didn't receive a copy and would like one, contact the Honorary Secretary by email or post. The meeting also elected the Honorary Officers of the Society and a new member of the Council, Bethany Aylward, who has been an enthusiastic library volunteer for several years. *Honorary Officers:* President: Professor Bill Bowring; Vice Presidents: Robert Chandler, Professor Robert Davies, Dr Kate Hudson, Dr David Lane and Dr Rachel O'Higgins. *SCRSS Council:* Philip Matthews (Chair); Kate Clark and Charles Stewart (Vice Chairs); Ralph Gibson (Honorary Secretary); Jean Turner (Honorary Treasurer); Christine Lindey (Exhibitions Officer); Andrew Jameson (EC); Len Weiss (EC); Bethany Aylward; Mel Bach; Christine Barnard; Michael Costello; Diana Turner. The Executive Committee (EC) is formed of the named officers and two additional members of the Council. The AGM was followed by a very well attended lecture by Christine Lindey on *Art and the Russian Revolution*. The centenary of the Russian Revolution is attracting lots of attention and our exhibition and lectures in June (see Next Events below) will hopefully build on that growing interest. Do please support the Society by spreading the word and coming to the events yourself!



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Revolution Centenary

The SCRSS is a co-founder of the Russian Revolution Centenary Committee (RRCC), which brings together a wide range of labour movement, heritage and cultural organisations not only to mark the anniversary, but also to inform debate about its continued relevance to politics and society today. The RRCC is organising a major international conference on Saturday 4 November. Tickets are now on sale and we advise early booking – see the RRCC website at www.1917.org.uk. Details of the RRCC film festival planned for the autumn will be included in the next *SCRSS Digest* and in e-news mailings to members.

British Library Exhibition

The SCRSS has supplied two original items from the early days of its foundation for display at the British Library's recently opened exhibition *Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths*. The exhibition provides a wide-ranging overview of the events of 1917 and their aftermath. Alongside the books, maps and artefacts, there are video and audio elements, and the ebb and flow of the Civil War and foreign intervention, as the Red and White armies fought over huge swathes of territory, are captured in a large-scale digital display. At her talk to the SCRSS in February, the curator, Katya Rogatchevskaia, made it clear that one of the aims of the exhibition was to help visitors understand the sheer complexity of the events that occurred. Judging by the initial feedback at the opening, it succeeds in doing so. The exhibition runs until 29 August.

SCRSS 9th Russian Language Seminar, 8–9 April 2017

Our annual seminar for advanced speakers of Russian attracted twenty-six participants, over half of whom were professional teachers, translators and interpreters. The seminar programme was taught by Tatiana Piotrovskaya, Senior Lecturer at St

Petersburg State University (*Russian linguistics*) and Vadim Levental, writer and literary critic (*Russian literature*), both from St Petersburg. The lecturers provided fascinating insights into contemporary developments in Russia. The seminar was a great success with the lecturers and programme all rated highly by participants. Thanks for support go to SCRSS volunteers Christine Barnard, Nadia Bezkorvany, Ralph Gibson, Andrew Jameson, Diana Turner and Jean Turner, and the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation.



Tatiana Piotrovskaya and Vadim Levental

The Society was also delighted to receive a signed copy of Vadim Levental's collection of short stories in Russian, *Комната цмррр* (Izdatel'stvo Ast, 2015). The Library also holds a signed copy of the English-language edition of Vadim's novel *Masha Regina* (Oneworld, 2016).

Diana Turner

Membership Renewal

If your annual membership of the Society is due for renewal at any time up to the end of August 2017, you'll receive a renewal notice with this issue of the *SCRSS Digest*. Please help us by responding promptly to avoid the need for further reminders. If you're uncertain about your membership status, contact the Honorary Secretary. My thanks to all those members who have generously added donations to their membership fee. Such donations are vitally important for the day-to-day operation of the Society.

Professor Leonid Seleznev: A Tribute

In February 2017 Leonid Ivanovich Seleznev passed away in St Petersburg, to the regret of all those in the SCRSS and Soviet Memorial Trust Fund who knew him from his visits to Britain under their auspices.



Leonid Seleznev in July 2016

Born in Leningrad in 1931, he survived the Leningrad Blockade during the Great Patriotic War. His wife Ella was also a siege survivor and joined him on some of his visits here. Those fortunate enough to have visited their charming flat overlooking the Neva, near the Peter and Paul Fortress, will remember their warmth, hospitality and companionship. Leonid Ivanovich graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), served in the Soviet Diplomatic Service in India and the United Nations, and was latterly Emeritus Professor of Sociology at St Petersburg University. He was a former Chair of the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation (SPAIC), with which our Society has close relations, and a highly-respected figure in St Petersburg government circles and local cultural affairs. Last year he contributed an article on 'Gorbachev and Perestroika' to the SCRSS *Digest*, Spring 2016 issue. The Society has

expressed its deepest sympathy on their sad loss to Margarita Mudrak, SPAIC Chair, to the Board of SPAIC, and to Leonid's beloved wife Ella. His kindly presence will be missed.

Jean Turner

Next Events

Saturday 3 June, 11.00–14.30
Event: SCRSS Saturday Library Opening for Members

Saturday 3 June, 14.30–16.00
Lecture: Andrew Jameson on *The Influence of the October Revolution on the Russian Language*

Tuesday 20–Saturday 24 June, 14.00–17.00 daily
Exhibition: The Impact of the Russian Revolution on World War One (1917–22)
Free admission.

Friday 23 June, 19.00
Lecture: Professor Mary Davis on *The Significance of the Russian Revolution*

Friday 13 October, 19.00
Lecture: Mike Pentelow on *Lenin in London*

Saturday 4 November, 10.00–18.00
Event: Russian Revolution Centenary – Marking 100 Years Since the October Revolution
Location: Congress House, TUC, London
Tickets: £10.00 / £8.00 unwaged. Book online at www.1917.org.uk.

Please note: Full details for all the above events are available on the SCRSS website at www.scrss.org.uk/cinemaevents.htm.

Events take place at the SCRSS, 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB, unless otherwise stated. Admission fees: films and lectures £3.00 (SCRSS members), £5.00 (non-members); other events as indicated. Please note: dogs are not permitted on SCRSS premises, with the exception of guide dogs.

Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News

Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SMTF

Victory Day 2017

Victory Day, 9 May, brought over 500 people to the Soviet War Memorial in London. The Mayor of Southwark, Cllr Kath Whittam, noted that this year marked the twentieth anniversary of the foundation of the Soviet Memorial Trust Fund (SMTF): “The Cold War that followed the Second World War affected the way that the contribution of the USSR to Victory was presented here in the UK, but in the 1990s this began to change. In 1995 the fiftieth anniversary ceremonies also commemorated the loss of Soviet lives. It became apparent that there was a need for a permanent memorial in London to commemorate the loss of twenty-seven million Soviet men, women, and children. Twenty years ago, on 9 May 1997, the SMTF had its inaugural meeting. The Trust was established to raise funds to create a memorial and we are here today in the presence of the fruits of that work and the dedication and commitment of those involved.”

The Russian Ambassador reflected on the lessons to be learned from the alliance forged in World War II to defeat Fascism: “The lessons of World War II call for unity and solidarity among nations. Now more than ever the international community should work together to strengthen the peace that came at an impossibly high cost. Today, our civilisation has once again encountered a cruel and violent global threat – that of international terrorism. It is an affront to us all, to peace, security and human dignity. All nations must work together and do all it takes to defeat this evil.” Neil Coyle and Sir Simon Hughes, both parliamentary candidates for the local constituency, also spoke. A group of Soviet veterans, in the UK for ceremonies at Loch

Ewe in Scotland and for Victory Day in London, were welcomed by their comrades-in-arms from the Russian Convoy Club. A selection of photos of the ceremony can be found on the Russian Embassy website at www.rusemb.org.uk/photogal/669.

The Soviet War Memorial is located in Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park. Adjacent to the Imperial War Museum in London. For more information about the Memorial and events organised by the SMTF, see the SCRSS website at www.scrss.org.uk/sovietmemorial.htm.

Feature

The Development of Soviet Literature 1921–37

By Alexei Tolstoy



Alexei Tolstoy (SCRSS Library)

This is an abridged and edited reprint of a speech given by the Soviet writer Alexei Tolstoy to members of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (today's SCRSS) at the Royal Society of Arts on 16 March 1937. It first appeared under the title 'Address by Alexei Tolstoi' in the Anglo-Soviet Journal, Volume 1, No 3, April 1937 (pp9–13).

In 1921 the picture presented by Soviet Russia was that of a land swept by a hurricane. Everything had been overthrown: the structure of the social system, everyday life, and so on. Everything was in confusion – moral conceptions, customs, ideas [...]

It was in these circumstances that the first books written by young Soviet authors saw the light of day. These were the first 'earth's bubbles', the first attempt to understand what had happened.

Soviet literature of this first period (which I reckon from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the First Five-Year Plan) may be characterised as a period of [...] striving for the gigantic, and the artistic production of this time suffered from the dilettantish inexperience of the artists.

You will find, therefore, that the literature of that period works with great masses of material; the author draws his picture with a sweeping brush, in bright colours and very often carelessly. The hero of literature is the human mass; the crowd. Characters are not differentiated; the portraits are more like huge outlines of people, outlines filled with the passions and temperament characteristic of the masses... The customs, morals and mode of life generally found in the literature of that period are more a remnant of the old pre-war days. In my opinion, the most powerful, the most expressive and daring artist of this first period was Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Poetry is characteristic of this first period. Such, for example, are the last songs of Alexander Blok; the militant nihilism of Sergei Yesenin, the village lad who went tramping across the world, drunk with the wine of revolution and weeping over his lost village soul... My favourite is Eduard Bagritsky who died young of tuberculosis. His poem *The Lay of Opanas* sounds as if it were sung by the people themselves. It is already an epic... Hundreds of poets [...] swept across the sky like meteors [...] All of them reflected the tragic grandeur and the vastness of hope roused by the stormy dawn of the Revolution.

As to the Soviet prose and drama of that period, I would say that they were like fragments of a huge and as yet untouched historic canvas. Here you will find a mixture of literary schools and artistic methods – from the wild impressionism of Pilnyak to the naturalism of Gladkov's *Cement* or Serafimovich's *The Iron Flood*.

Who were the readers of this literature? We should bear in mind that seventeen or eighteen years ago Soviet Russia was still in the rags it had inherited from Tsarist times: 80 per cent of [the population were illiterate], while in some of the smaller nationalities it was 100 per cent. Our books at that time were published in five to ten thousand copies. Besides, we did not yet know our reader very well.

In the consciousness of the reading masses, literature fulfilled an ancillary function: either as propaganda or as recreation or amusement. At that time, the first necessity was to till the soil and concentrate on producing food and clothing. Literature was still a luxury to the masses.

The beginning of the second period in Soviet literature starts with the First Five Year Plan [(1928)] and with the great plan for the collectivisation of agriculture and the industrialisation of our country. All the resources of the Soviet Union were mobilised as for a great war [...] Everything, literally everything, was pressed into service for that end, including literature [...]

The form of Soviet literature characteristic of this second period is hurried, matter-of-fact, sketchy work... Millions of people, the builders of the new life, displayed a new and unusual interest and desire that their deeds and their labour should receive literary expression. Literature was rapidly drawn into the process of construction [...] Readers demanded: Let us have the TODAY! Tell us about the new man who is tearing down mountains and conquering the Taiga... At all places of construction, in shops, factories, forests and the northern Tundra there appeared a myriad of papers, from wall-newspapers to printed factory and shop newspapers [...] Everybody was

learning, young and old, the need for knowledge and culture grew at a tremendous rate.

The literature of that period is very abundant. But it produced no complete or perfect works. And indeed, it would have been unnatural for it to have produced such works at that time. Writers themselves were devouring the new life; they themselves were learning 'while at work' [...]

[Today] the workshops and factories projected in the great Five Year Plan are completed, the necessary [...] workers and engineers have been trained and distributed, and the Stakhanovite Movement has given the lie to the pet prejudice which said that the 'Slav soul' was only capable of dreaming and contemplating... The shops and factories are already working, and they are working at full speed. Ten years ago, right near Moscow, we saw peasants wearing rags instead of shoes and dressed in home-spun blouses; they scratched the soil with primitive wooden ploughs, symbols of economic and social backwardness. Today the collective farms do their work with tractors and combines. The collective farms are building cinemas. They are buying aeroplanes and automobiles for their own needs. An ever-growing army of peasant youth is filling the high schools and universities of the capitals, where they receive a higher education (not to mention elementary and secondary education) free of charge [...]

Our new reader is unusually self-confident, and surely that is not surprising when you consider that in ten years, thanks to the creative will and power of the whole people, our country has risen from the ruins and has become a mighty and rich land [...] The most difficult task, the building of the foundations of socialism, has been completed. [People] are now tackling the new task of acquiring and assimilating the new spiritual culture.

Such are the conditions in which the third period of Soviet literature is developing. Our authors and writers have to deal with an exacting and culturally developed reader,

and what is more, an *organised* reader [...] Readers' conferences, literary circles, and the literary sections in factory and workshop newspapers serve as centres for the organisation and development of an arm of fifty million Soviet readers [...]

The dilettantism of the first period and the hurried sketchiness of the second period are now out of place [...] We are now required to portray men as individuals; we are required to create a new and real type for our times. This type already exists; one meets him everywhere in Soviet life. The reader demands that he be confronted with a living moral example of the finest type of Soviet man [...]

The transition from the second to the third period in Soviet literature was a very difficult one for our writers. It became necessary to finish once and for all with all dilettantism. And more than that: we were confronted with the task of creating a positive and wholesome type in art. We had to break once and for all with the traditions of our great pre-revolutionary Russian literature, which grew up and developed on the principle of opposition to everything that was. The formula of the art of that period was: 'I think, therefore I negate.' Our present formula is as follows: 'I think, therefore I build life.'

Thus in 1936–37 we already have a number of highly artistic and splendid achievements in the sphere of literature and cinema. I may mention the artistically mature and extremely humorous book *One-Storyed America* by Ilf and Petrov; [...] the splendid and lucid novel *A White Sail Gleams* by Valentin Kataev, dealing with childhood; [and] the original novel *In the East* by Pyotr Pavlenko, which is new in form and language, and which reveals extraordinary imagination and powers of observation [...]

All this is only the beginning of Soviet art: all this is only its dawn. I am confident that the people, who with their hands have created their happiness, will also create an art of a very high order, an art that is bright and joyous as sunshine, and as wide as our earth [...]

Reviews

The Fire Horse: Children's Poems
by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip
Mandelstam and Daniil Kharms
Translated by Eugene Ostashevsky
(New York Review Children's
Collection Original, March 2017,
ISBN: 978168137027, Pbk, 48pp,
£11.99)

SCRSS Catalogue No: 2586

Three works by well-known Soviet writers are represented here. All three poets are better known for their adult work but these are examples of their work for children, alongside reproductions of the original accompanying illustrations. Their work emanated from the new Soviet society's commitment to the foundation of an educational system that would cater for a new type of child – the Soviet child.

The first poem, *The Fire-Horse* (1928), is by Mayakovsky and brilliantly illustrated by Lidia Popova. It deals with the procurement of a toy horse for a child. However, this is no simple purchase. Mayakovsky follows the co-operation of the workers providing the cardboard, the carpenter making the wheels, the blacksmith contributing the nails and the painter providing the colour – all collectively making the horse for the child so that he can imagine helping the Red Cavalry attack. The poem is a little lugubrious, which could be the translation, although Mayakovsky's poetry for children generally lacks the lightness of touch and sense of fun of his contemporaries. However, Popova's illustrations make up for that.

The second poem, *Two Trams* (1925), written by Mandelstam with illustrations by Boris Ender, has a lighter feel about it and, alongside the illustrations, provides a vibrant view of Soviet city life. Again, this is a tale of co-operation, as one tram enlists the assistance of others to find his brother tram and help him home, tired as he is from his efforts during the day.

The third poem, *Play* (1930), by Kharms and illustrated by Vladimir Konashevich, is the strongest poem as it follows three boys pretending to be something else. The poem and the illustrations with their breathless repetition reflect the exuberant imagination of children at play, totally immersed in their belief that they are "steamboat, car and Soviet plane".

This is a charming collection, though probably for the collector rather than the child. However, *Play* might well appeal to a young reader.

Jane Rosen

The Idea of Russia: The Life and Work of Dmitry Likhachev
By Vladislav Zubok (IB Tauris
Publishers, January 2017, ISBN:
9781784537272, Hbk, 225pp, £64.00)
SCRSS Catalogue No: 2612

The subject of this work is a Russian mediaevalist and religious philosopher with an *idée fixe*: that the Russian pre-revolutionary liberal intellectual carried the banner of 'Russianness' and decent values from pre-tsarist times onwards. No changes in social systems or history itself could alter that. With the restoration of capitalism, Likhachev is feted by the reformers as the 'conscience' of Russia.

Dmitry Likhachev (1906–99) was born in St Petersburg into an ennobled commercial family, was surrounded by privilege, attended 'good' schools steeped in Russian Orthodoxy and kept to their values until his death. Before the dismantling of the Soviet Union his life had its ups and downs, according to whether his views coincided with or were judged to be counter to the evolution in official Soviet political and academic policy. After university he spent three years (spanning the late 1920s to early 1930s) in prison and at a detention camp on the White Sea, where his first scholarly work was published in the camp's journal. This was followed by enforced

labour on the construction of the White Sea–Baltic Canal. On release, he worked as a proofreader in several publishing houses and from 1938 held posts at the Institute of Russian Literature of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Leningrad. He was in Leningrad for the first six months of the Nazis' two-and-a-half-year siege of the city. For his last forty-five years he headed the Department of Ancient Russian Literature at the Institute, and wrote major works on ancient Russia and the origins of Russian national consciousness. His awards were many, including Hero of Socialist Labour and the Orders of Lenin and St Andrew. Abroad, he was made Honorary Doctor of many universities, the first being Oxford in 1967.

This volume presents a chronology of his life, with three main threads running through: Likhachev's ideas on the timeless essence of being Russian; conflicts with Soviet authorities; his fame and advising political leaders during *perestroika*.

It is marred by serious weaknesses. These include the author's use of Western cold war terminology, as if worried that the reader might not 'understand' that everything following the October Revolution of 1917 was horrific, that Stalin personally decided everything and Soviet governments failed in everything they attempted. There is nothing of the vast achievements of literacy, education, health and science; the eradication of hunger, homelessness and unemployment; the industrialisation that underpinned victory over the Nazis, space achievements and the rest. One would search in vain for the role of foreign military intervention in Russia's civil war or, indeed, the Nazi responsibility for the vast destruction of cities, mines and factories, and mass murder.

Nonetheless, a careful reader who cuts through the propaganda slant will ferret out evidence of the lively academic life there was in Soviet times, despite periods of enforced orthodoxy and persecution of dissidents. This is a volume for those who are interested in Likhachev's personality and willing to plough through text where the

subject's name is spelled inconsistently throughout, there is no glossary of the many abbreviations and a minimal index.

Mick Costello

The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia 1757–1881
By Rosalind P Blakesley (Yale University Press, 2016, ISBN: 978-0-300-18437-2, Hbk, xiv + 365pp, 135 col & 155 b/w illus, detailed notes, bibliography, index, large format, £50.00)

I have no hesitation in describing this book as magnificent. It fills a huge hole in Russian art history. Hitherto, many art books have concentrated on superficial description and artistic technique. Here at last, laid out before us, is the well-nigh incredible development of Russian painting, proceeding from the absence of a tradition of secular art at the beginning of the eighteenth century to the making of the Russian national school in little more than a hundred years. In doing this, Blakesley explodes Soviet myths, corrects ignorance and unravels enigmas. She divides *The Russian Canvas* into two parts: 'Educators' and 'Satellites'. Her innovative approach is to take trends, themes and events, dedicating one chapter to each, and moving backwards and forwards in time as necessary.

The foundation for this development was the establishment of a remarkable institution, the Imperial Academy of Arts. It is still housed in its original building, where the author of this review purchased the major volume of Repin's painting (in French) now in the SCRSS Art Library. In a land where everything was run by the state under the Tsar, the Academy was in fact founded by one individual: Empress Elizabeth gave the job to the connoisseur Count Ivan Shuvalov (whose idea it was), accepting it as an autonomous body. Founded in 1757 (a decade before London's Royal Academy) and run by an enlightened council, it accepted students from many parts of the

Russian Empire and all social classes, including, from an early stage, serfs. Other early art schools are not neglected, and the Moscow School, the Provinces and Arzamas each have their own chapter. A final chapter is devoted to Russian and related foreign women artists of the period.

In this short review, we now move to the emergence of the Realist School in the 1860s and the 'Revolt of the Fourteen' at the Academy (1863). This began over a relatively trivial matter: the competition for an annual gold medal. Students were of two types: painters of historical themes or genre painters (everyday life). The affair was mishandled by the Academy and, in a dispute over subjects set for the prize, all students declared themselves to be historical painters. When the subject was announced as 'Valhalla', all students except one walked out! – not a trivial matter in those days. Ironically, the subject planned for the genre painters had been 'The Emancipation of the Serfs', which would have satisfied many of their aspirations. The unintended consequence was that the Fourteen set up an independent commercial Artel (workshop) and not long afterwards created the group that came to be known as the *Peredvizhniki*.

The *Peredvizhniki* ('Itinerants') were an association of artists who, with official permission, in 1869, organised an annual travelling exhibition 'in all towns of the Empire'. Blakesley establishes their true motivation as that of painters seeking to equal the status of workers in other arts, instead of being (as previously) artisans hired to paint to order. As often in Russia, the tendency to belong to an identifiable group with common aims proved a great stimulus. It is to these painters that we owe most of the nineteenth-century pictures of everyday life and, inevitably, many of these had a social content. Blakesley includes a number of pictures from this period that we have not seen before.

Blakesley's masterpiece ends shockingly in a twist of fate that is part of the tragedy of Russia itself. The ninth exhibition of the *Peredvizhniki* opened in St Petersburg on 1

March 1881. The big show-stopper was a canvas submitted by Vasily Surikov, *The Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy*, in which Peter the Great is seen calmly contemplating the coming butchering of the corps of elite soldiers who had revolted against his reforms. On that same day, on the embankment of the Catherine Canal, two bombs were thrown at Tsar Alexander II's carriage, less than a mile away. Visitors at the opening of the exhibition would have heard the two bombs explode. A month later, in a gruesome reflection of Surikov's painting, several members of the People's Will were publicly hanged. This was the murder of Alexander the 'Tsar Liberator', and things would never be the same again.

Andrew Jameson

SCRSS Library Images Used in This Issue

Page 1: ROSTA poster by Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1919 (SCRSS002350). Page 2: Agit-Train, Red Caucasus, 1920 (SCRSS002312); The Magnanimous Cuckold, 1922, designed by Lyubov Popova (SCRSS008116). Page 7: Alexei Tolstoy (SCRSS003313).

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Tel: 020 7274 2282, Fax: 020 7274 3230
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