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Feature

The Poem That Caught a Nation's Pain: Pavel Antokolsky's *Son*

By Michael Jones

Visiting the Hall of Memory in Moscow's Museum of the Great Patriotic War is a deeply moving experience. The lighting is subdued and Mozart's *Requiem* plays softly in the background. The walls are reddish-brown – the colour of human blood. A white marble figure is bowed in sorrow and grief. Thousands of crystal pendants hang from the ceiling. They symbolise tears for the dead of the Great Patriotic War. There were 27 million of them, soldiers and civilians.

This is the sacrifice the Soviet Union made to defeat Nazi Germany, commemorated each year on 9 May. Its struggle and eventual victory must never be forgotten. Sometimes the sheer amount of suffering is hard to comprehend. But during the war a remarkable poem spoke to millions of

grieving families. It was written by Pavel Antokolsky and was entitled *Son*.



Vladimir Antokolsky (photograph reproduced courtesy of the author)

The poem first appeared in the Russian journal *Smena* in February 1943. It had an immediate impact, with many writing to Antokolsky to share their heart-felt appreciation for his words. By the end of the war it had touched countless Soviet people and was awarded the prestigious Stalin Prize in recognition of this. It is a long poem, but many in the West will recognise a powerful extract from it, where the dead son speaks to his father. It occurs in the series *World at War* (in Episode 11, *Red Star*), narrated by Sir Laurence Olivier, as newsreel footage shows Red Army soldiers burying their dead:

*“Do not call me, father, do not seek me,
Do not call me, do not wish me back.
We are on a route uncharted; fire and blood
erase our track.
On we fly on wings of thunder, never more
to sheathe our swords,
All of us in battle fallen – not to be brought
back by words...”*

The father responds:

*“Let this farewell be the end of a story
Of solitude past, which now is more lonely...
I will dream of you still as a baby,
Treading the earth with little strong toes,
The earth where already so many lie buried,
This song to my son, then, is come to its
close.”*

The poem drew its power from Pavel Antokolsky's personal grief, and – using the family archive¹ – this tragic story can now be told. It began on 8 June 1942 at Moscow's Kiev Station. Antokolsky was saying goodbye to his 18-year-old son Vladimir, who had completed his period of military training and was leaving for the front. The two solemnly shook hands. Later that day his father wrote in his diary: “At seven in the morning I saw my boy off. Many others joined him, splendid lads, accompanied by solemn fathers and mothers, hushed and pale. Some were seen off by girls with branches of lilac blossom. We went out onto the platform. And with a roar, the company descended upon the train's empty green waggons...”

On 28 June Antokolsky received a letter from his son and a mailing address. Vladimir had reached the frontline near the town of Orel. His father responded immediately: “I wait impatiently for your news and try to imagine your new surroundings. Each day I wish you good health, strength, courage and happiness. Please try to write often. I will read each word over and over again...”

But Antokolsky heard nothing more. On 12 July he wrote anxiously: “Dearly beloved, almost two weeks have passed with no message – you cannot imagine how hard that is. Mama is worrying like crazy.” Three days later a short letter arrived from

Vladimir's friend and fellow soldier, Vasily Sevrin: “It grieves me to tell you such sad news,” Sevrin began. “Your son was killed in a fierce battle with the German bandits. We buried him by the banks of the River Resseta. We will avenge his death.”

Vladimir Antokolsky died on the morning of 6 July 1942. At first light two Panzer divisions attacked his position. Vladimir jumped up from his trench and ran towards his gun. But he was spotted by a German sniper and shot in the face. He fell back, clutching at his jaw in a reflex action. His death was instant.

Later on 15 July Vladimir's distraught father confided to his diary: “My son is no more. His short life ended before it really began. He was not able to accomplish anything. His only achievement was to grow up healthy and handsome, ready for love and happiness. But it was not his lot to experience it. Only a brief, terrible initiation into a fearful and bloody conflict...”

Antokolsky struggled to continue: “Sensitive, a little shy, a passionately honest and upright person, he was for some reason, by some terrible accident of fate, my son. Why am I writing this?” he concluded bleakly.

Pavel Antokolsky, a poet and theatre director before the war, now worked as a war correspondent. And as the months went by, he started on a patriotic piece, comparing the honest idealism of his own son, fighting in defence of the Soviet motherland, with the predatory instincts of a German ‘son’, motivated solely by race hatred. The spark was a terrible dream Antokolsky had had, in which Vladimir was attempting to come home. “It was as if you were alive, and were knocking at my door with urgent, burning hands,” his shaken father wrote. “But try as I might, I could not open the door to you.”

On 10 February 1943 the finished poem, *Son*, was accepted by *Smena*. Antokolsky had wanted a photo of Vladimir to accompany it, but the editors disagreed. “I understand their reasoning,” he commented.

“They want it to have the widest possible appeal.”



Pavel Antokolsky (photograph reproduced courtesy of the author)

And so it proved. On 6 July 1944, on the two-year anniversary of Vladimir’s death, Antokolsky penned a journal entry as if speaking to his son in person: “Through this poem thousands have come to know you and love you,” he said, “fathers, mothers, sons and daughters.”

One death in a vast and terrible war that claimed the lives of millions. But a death that moved the heart of a nation.

Footnote

1 Thanks to Andrei Toom (Pavel Antokolsky’s grandson) for permission to use the Antokolsky archive, from which all material in this article is taken.

Michael Jones is the author of ‘After Hitler: The Last Days of the Second World War in Europe’ (John Murray, 2015), as well as ‘Total War: From Stalingrad to Berlin’, ‘Leningrad: State of Siege’ and ‘Stalingrad: How the Red Army Triumphed’.

SCRSS News

Message from Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS

I am delighted that *SCRSS Digest* Editor Diana Turner has been able to put together this special issue of the publication commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Allied Victory over Nazi Germany. The SCRSS, like most similar organisations in the UK, effectively suspended its activity in March 2020, following Government guidance related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The SCRSS Council will continue to monitor the situation and assess when volunteers can return, and library openings, events and room hire resume. At the time of writing, the Government has announced some loosening of restrictions. We will communicate by email and keep members informed about developments as much as possible. Up-to-date information will also be found on the SCRSS website.

Meanwhile, I am extremely grateful to those members who have renewed in the last couple of months. We will endeavour to send out membership renewal notices in the coming weeks and your prompt response, if you receive one, would be much appreciated. Membership income plays a vital role in covering the day-to-day expenditure of the Society. You can also make a one-off online donation to us on our Virgin Money Giving page (see the link top right on the SCRSS website home page).

In addition, more members have joined the Centenary Club, launched late last year as part of the Society’s *Strategy 100*. The aim is to secure the basic income necessary to keep the Society operational until its centenary in 2024. Club members commit to donating £1,000 over the course of five years – either in a single payment, five annual payments of £200 or sixty monthly payments of £17. The Centenary Club donations have already transformed the financial situation for the Society – and you will see this reflected in the financial report for 2019 that will be sent out after approval

by the SCRSS Council. I urge members and supporters to consider joining this endeavour. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

The SCRSS Council has decided to recommence meetings online, and if you have any thoughts, suggestions or comments for it to consider, please email the Honorary Secretary at ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk.

Next Events



Russian Victory Day poster (SCRSS Library)

Monday 22 June 2020, 19.00–20.30
Event: Online Panel – Historical Memory and the Fight Against Fascism

Joint SCRSS / Marx Memorial Library (MML) event. The panel will explore the role of the Soviet Union / Communism in the fight against Fascism in the 1930s and its defeat in the Second World War. Seventy-five years since victory over Nazi Germany in 1945, it will reflect on how and why this history is now under attack, with particular

reference to the resolution passed by the European Parliament *On the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe* in September 2019.

Speakers: Dr Michael Jones, historian and author of *Total War, Stalingrad* and other titles; Phil Katz, author of *Freedom from Tyranny: The Fight Against Fascism and the Falsification of History*; Jonathan White, MML tutor, Trade Union Official and Associate Editor of *Theory & Struggle*. Meeting Chair: Meirian Jump, MML Archivist and Library Manager. The event is free, but please register in advance at <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/online-panel-historical-memory-the-fight-against-fascism-tickets-104940337374> (and consider making a donation). Once registered, a link to join the meeting will be sent to participants 24 hours in advance of the event.

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. Up-to-date details for all events are available on the SCRSS website at www.scrss.org.uk/cinemaevents.htm.

Soviet War Memorial Trust News

Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SWMT

Victory Day: 9 May 2020

The 75th Anniversary of the Allied Victory over Nazi Germany was marked by a short wreath-laying ceremony at the Soviet War Memorial in London on Saturday 9 May. Ambassadors representing seven countries of the former USSR – Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – gathered for the event organised by the SWMT.



Ambassadors gather around the Soviet War Memorial, London, on 9 May 2020 (photograph courtesy of the Russian Embassy)

The Russian Ambassador, HE Andrei Kelin, noted the decisive contribution to Victory made by the Soviet Union, but at a tremendous cost: 27 million Soviet people perished, and thousands of cities, towns and villages were destroyed. He also paid tribute to the Allies in the anti-Hitler coalition, including the Arctic Convoys. “We pay tribute to everyone who died in fighting for the freedom of humanity. We will always remember and be forever grateful to the veterans of World War II who brought us peace while selflessly fighting the enemy.”



Russian Ambassador Andrei Kelin delivers a brief address at the Soviet War Memorial, London, on 9 May 2020 (photograph courtesy of the Russian Embassy)

The SWMT had been planning a large-scale event to mark Victory Day this year, but this had to be cancelled. Princess Anne, who had intended to be present, sent a message to the participants. “It is vital that we recognise the incredible sacrifice made by

the peoples of the former Soviet Union. Few people fought more bravely, or suffered more grievously, for the price of victory.” Her message also noted the important contribution made by the Arctic Convoys – with personnel from the UK, Norway, the US, Canada and across the British Commonwealth – in delivering critical military supplies to the Soviet war effort. She recalled her welcome in Arkhangelsk in 2016 for the 75th Anniversary of Operation Dervish, the first wartime convoy that landed supplies and a squadron of fighter aircraft within three months of the Nazi German invasion of the USSR.

In his message to the ambassadors, Philip Matthews, SWMT Chair, recalled the huge sacrifices made by the peoples of the USSR, the battles and the Siege of Leningrad. He drew attention to the Soviet prisoners-of-war in the Channel Islands who were used by the Nazi occupiers as slave labour. Many perished there. He noted that the Islands mark 9 May as their liberation day.

The full text of the Russian Ambassador’s speech and photos of the event, together with a range of materials in English and Russian connected with the 75th Anniversary of Victory, can be viewed on the Russian Embassy website at www.rusemb.org.uk. This includes links to an online exhibition *Stalin Churchill Roosevelt – The Common Struggle Against Fascism*.

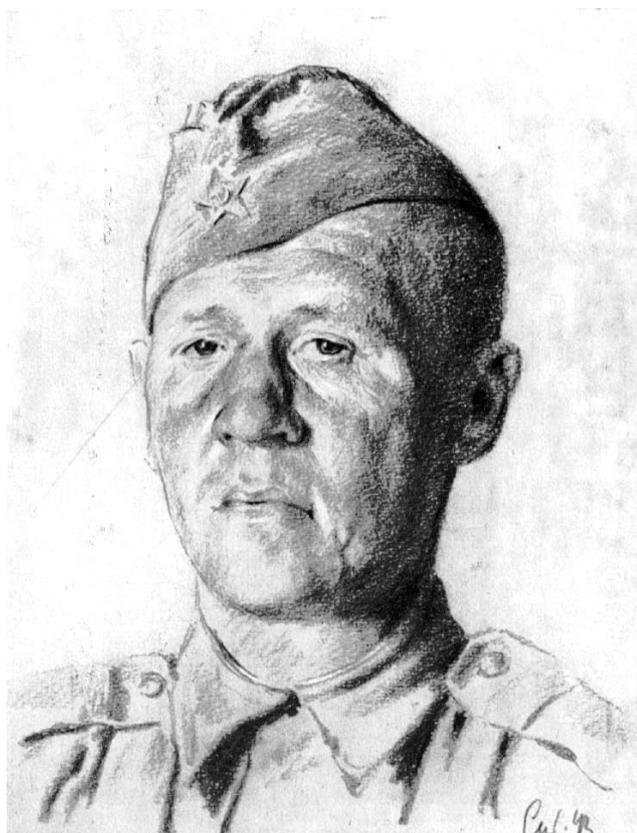
The Soviet War Memorial, dedicated to the 27 million Soviet men and women who lost their lives during the fight against Fascism in 1941–45, is located in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, Lambeth Road, Southwark, London SE1 (adjacent to the Imperial War Museum). The SCRSS is a founder member of the Soviet War Memorial Trust (SWMT). Events take place at the Memorial on Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army), Victory Day (9 May) and Remembrance Sunday. More information about the Soviet War Memorial and the SWMT can be found at: www.sovietwarmemorialtrust.com.

Feature

The Great Patriotic War in Soviet Literature

By Andrew Jameson

In this short article I shall try to sketch the main trends and then look at a few key works, written during the war or after it, that illustrate various aspects of this mighty conflict.



Sniper Ivanov, 1943, by Solomon Telingater (from EV Mozhukhovskaya, *Na ognivykh rubezhakh: Moskovskiy khudozhniki frontovoy pechati 1941–1945*, Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1972, SCRSS Art Library)

On 23 August 1939 the Soviet Union and Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a non-aggression pact that saw the two countries divide Poland between them and neutralise that country militarily in the event of any future conflict. This bizarre period of phoney peace has left almost no trace in Soviet literature, although Anna Akhmatova reacted to the news of the Blitz on London in a poem entitled *Лондонцам* (*To Londoners*).

The peace ended on 22 June 1941 when Germany and her three allies invaded Russia, and the Great Patriotic War began. Soviet writers immediately supported the war effort. Some became war correspondents, others – if they stayed at home – concentrated on patriotic topics. Many felt that it was a relief to be able to engage in a meaningful activity that they could sincerely endorse. Kazakevich and Nekrasov fought in the war – and survived, while Gaydar, Krymov and Afinogenov were killed. Others were evacuated to distant parts of the Soviet Union – Akhmatova to Tashkent and Tsvetaeva to the Tatar Republic. The poets Inber and Berggolts were caught in the Siege of Leningrad. Writers who wrote on non-patriotic themes in this period, such as Zoshchenko and Fedin, were attacked for being ‘objective’ and ‘detached’. Sholokhov, Leonov and Fadeev published war novels, essays and plays, although Fadeev’s highly praised novel *Молодая гвардия* (*The Young Guard*), 1946, was later criticised for neglecting the role of the Party in the resistance movement, and he was forced to re-write it.

Evgeny Evtushenko, right at the beginning of his poetic life, brought out the tragic pathos of mobilisation in his poem *Свадьбы* (*Weddings*), written in 1955 while he was still living in Siberia. The poem is too long to include all of it here, but in short: Evtushenko as a boy is in demand to perform his Cossack dances at wedding parties. The bridegroom has just been called up, his bride and her family are in floods of tears, their first night may be their last. The groom leans across the table and calls for the dance to begin. “Everyone forgets their drinks, all eyes are on me, my shoes beat out the rhythm, I whistle, clap, fly up towards the ceiling. All around are posters that Hitler is kaput! I am exhausted, I can’t dance any more, but they cry in desperation, Come on, dance!” At last he is allowed home, his feet are numb, but hardly has he got there, when drunken wedding guests from another party arrive to demand his presence. “I feel scared, I don’t feel like dancing, but to refuse is – impossible...” Please read this poem in Russian if you

can, you will be moved by its passion.
(Translation: Andrew Jameson.)

We have a hint of the devastation of the actual invasion in Andrei Voznesensky's poem *Goya*, 1959. He used to perform it at all his poetry readings. It is not an easy read:

*I am Goya!
Eye sockets of shell craters pecked out by
the enemy
flying over the naked land.
I am Grief
I am the Voice
of war, burnt timbers of towns in the snow of
year 41.
I am Hunger
I am the Throat
of a hanged woman, whose body beats like
a bell in the village square.
I am Goya!
Oh Grapes of Wrath!
I fire back to the West
the ashes of the uninvited guest!
And into the memorial sky I hammer stars
like Nails.
I am Goya.*

(Translation: Andrew Jameson.)

Although the Wannsee Conference had not yet taken place, mass killings of Jews were well under way, aided by some of the local inhabitants. Slavs were also being killed. It was Evtushenko again who recalled the events that took place in Ukraine and elevated them into a campaign against anti-Semitism in his well-known poem *Babi Yar*, 1961. He showed considerable civil courage in writing words like: "I feel like a boy from Bialystok. Blood runs over the floor. The bar-room rabble rousers, stinking of vodka and onions, kick me aside, shouting: Save Russia, Smash the Yids! And rape my mother. Oh my Russian people, I know, you are international by nature. But often those with unclean hands have sullied your pure name. I know the kindness of my country. How shocking it is, that without turning a hair, the anti-Semites called themselves 'The Union of the Russian People'..."
(Translation: George Reavey.)



Damn you!, 1942, by Peter Krivonogov (from *El Vostokov*, Petr Krivonogov, Sovetsky Khudozhnik, 1972, SCRSS Art Library)

Konstantin Simonov in 1941 wrote a poem that everyone who lived through the war remembers: *Жди меня, и я вернусь*. "Wait for me, and I'll return, but wait with all your might, wait when dreariness descends with the yellow rains, wait when snowdrifts sweep the ground, wait during the heat, wait when all are given up and forgotten in the past..." The musicality of these Russian words is already a comfort and the following stanzas introduce more comforting thoughts. (Translation: Lubov Yakovleva.)

The turning point of the Second World War in Europe is generally held to be the Battle of Stalingrad. Victor Nekrasov's *В окопах Сталинграда* (translated as *Front-line Stalingrad*) is not only an honest account of the great battle from the viewpoint of one who fought in it, but also presents Soviet officers and soldiers as credible individuals. Written in 1945, published 1946, it launched the career of its author and brought him a Stalin prize in 1947. Nekrasov is one of the most attractive writers of his time. Another famous novel entitled *Сталинград* (*Stalingrad*), by Vasily Grossman, is a

chronicle of the war, as experienced in Stalingrad and Eastern Europe, from the individual's point of view. Completed in 1949, and published in various edited Soviet versions in the 1950s, a new English translation by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler appeared in 2019 (see book review on page 15 of the *SCRSS Digest*, Autumn 2019 issue).



Drawing from the Stalingrad Series, 1943, by Evgeny Kibrik (from MZ Kholodovskaya, Velikaya Otechestvennaya Voyna v sovetskoy grafike, Izd Muz Izo Iskusstv im AS Pushkina, 1948, SCRSS Art Library)

We must not forget Leningrad in this survey. While the male writers were always constrained by the need to observe the propaganda line of the moment, the spotlight was not on the women. Two women writers, Vera Inber and Olga Berggolts produced long and short poems, and lyric diaries, of the Siege. Berggolts was also a commentator on Radio Leningrad and is regarded as among the first rank of Russian poets. Anna Akhmatova only returned home from Tashkent after the Leningrad Siege had been lifted.

Let us end with a mention of the most successful literary production of the war, and one that raised the spirits of the fighting forces and civilians alike. The poem *Василий Тёркин: Книга про бойца (Vasili Tyorkin. A Book about a Soldier)*, 1941–45, by Alexander Tvardovsky, has been newly translated by James Womack. See the review on page 17 of this issue of the *SCRSS Digest*.

Note: For a free copy by email of a narrative text with all the names, dates and titles for the war period in

Russia, or, separately, the Russian texts of the poems, contact the author on a.jameson2@dsl.pipex.com.

Andrew Jameson taught Russian at Portsmouth and Lancaster universities, and has a particular interest in the cultural history of the Russian language. Since retirement he has often lectured in St Petersburg, Moscow and Khabarovsk. He now works as a professional translator.

Feature

We Shall Remember Them

By Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary of the SCRSS and the SWMT



Wreaths and flowers on the Soviet War Memorial, London, 9 May 2020

The 75th Anniversary of the Allied Victory over Nazi Germany was shaping up to be a major international commemoration – particularly as it was appreciated that it would be the last to involve significant

numbers of veterans of that conflict. For their part, the Trustees of the Soviet War Memorial Trust (SWMT) had been planning a large-scale ceremony at the Soviet War Memorial in London and were looking forward to welcoming hundreds of guests, including veterans from across the UK and a group from Russia.



The Soviet War Memorial, London, on 9 May 2015, taken from the rooftop of the Imperial War Museum

Instead, apart from some notable exceptions, such as in Belarus, most major national events were cancelled or postponed. At the Soviet War Memorial, seven ambassadors from countries of the former USSR came together on 9 May to lay wreaths, and observe a silence in memory of the 27 million Soviet soldiers and civilians who lost their lives during the Second World War (see SWMT News, page 4).

The formal ceremony went well, and the ambassadors expressed their appreciation. But what particularly struck me as I prepared the 2-metre distance markings for the diplomats was the steady flow of ordinary people coming to the Memorial to lay their own tributes. And this flow continued after the formal ceremony and through the afternoon. Given that the main event had been cancelled due to the coronavirus restrictions, all of them had come on their own initiative to remember and to pay tribute. They were from a number of different parts of the former USSR. And, of course, there were Britons there as well. Once again this reminded me of the very basic importance of the Soviet War Memorial as a permanent reminder

here in the UK of the Soviet contribution to the Allied Victory, helped by its convenient and fortuitous location in the park surrounding the Imperial War Museum in London.

This simple Memorial – a bronze sculpture and inscribed marble slab – has become the focal point for people from all over the former USSR living, working and studying here. For British people, and especially Arctic Convoy and other veterans, the events at the Memorial have given them an opportunity to show their appreciation of the importance of the shared struggle against a common enemy, and the crucial role played by the peoples of the former Soviet Union in the final victory.

In the twenty-one years since its unveiling, thousands have attended one or more of the annual ceremonies on Holocaust Memorial Day, Victory Day and Remembrance Sunday. And tens of thousands must have stopped and looked as they approached the Imperial War Museum (Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, the Southwark park that surrounds the Museum, has one of the highest footfalls per square metre of any park in the UK!).



War veterans and standard bearers at the Soviet War Memorial, London

What members of the SCRSS reading this need to remember – and take pride in – is that the driving force behind the creation of the Memorial, and the events subsequently connected with it, was the Society.

The process of the creation of the Memorial started with ceremonies on 9 May 1995 at the graves of Red Army soldiers in military cemeteries in Wiltshire and Dorset, organised by the SCRSS and the Russian Embassy. These ceremonies coincided with the 50th anniversary of VE Day, and attracted local and national media interest.



UK Defence Secretary George Robertson MP and Russian Ambassador HE Yuri Fokine at the unveiling of the Soviet War Memorial, London, on 9 May 1999

Later that same month, at the SCRSS AGM, a motion was passed urging the Society to work for a memorial in London to commemorate all the Soviet wartime losses. In the following months, preliminary investigations took place and design proposals were considered. By the beginning of 1996, Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park was identified as the most suitable site for the memorial. This led to joint talks between the SCRSS and representatives of Southwark Council and the Russian Embassy.

The SCRSS agreed to set up a trust fund to raise money on the British side for the erection of the memorial, with the main

sculptural element coming from Russia. The Soviet Memorial Trust Fund (SMTF) was established on 9 May 1997. The following year a dedication ceremony, attended by Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov and UK Defence Secretary George Robertson, gave a further boost to the project. Incidentally, the dedication stone created for that occasion can be seen at the SCRSS.

On 9 May 1999 the Memorial was unveiled. The first wreath was laid by HRH The Duke of Kent in his capacity as President of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

The day-to-day organisation behind all this was the SCRSS itself, with Jean Turner, our Secretary at that time, staff and members of the Council all heavily involved. A large proportion of the £35,000 funds raised in the UK came from the Russian Convoy Club and numerous members of our Society, including former SCRSS Chair Stanley Forman's company ETV Ltd. Jean was also Hon Secretary of the SMTF from its foundation until 2006, when I took over the role. The SMTF was transformed into the Soviet War Memorial Trust, an HMRC-registered charity, in 2018. Philip Matthews, currently SCRSS Chair, has been Chair of the SMTF and, subsequently, the SWMT since 1997.



HRH Duke of Kent lays the first wreath at the newly-unveiled Soviet War Memorial, 9 May 1999

Although strong support for the Trust over the years has come from Southwark Council, the Russian Embassy, Rossotrudnichestvo and a number of

organisations and individuals, it is the SCRSS that has provided the main organisational and administrative support, as well as hosting meetings and housing the archive of the SMTF / SWMT.



Vladimir Putin visits the Soviet War Memorial, London, in 2003 and is introduced by Jean Turner to Eric Yates of the Russian Convoy Club

And if the need for such a Memorial was ever in question, one only has to see the omission of the USSR from this year's US White House VE Day message on social media, which declared: "On May 8, 1945 America and Great Britain had victory over the Nazis" (sic). This is simply the latest in a long list of examples over the decades since the end of the war.

With continued financial and other contributions from its many supporters, the SWMT will continue to organise ceremonies, maintain the Memorial, and seek to broaden knowledge in the UK regarding the Soviet contribution to the Allied Victory. And standing with it, I hope, will be the SCRSS.

More information about the SWMT and the Soviet War Memorial is available at www.sovietwarmemorialtrust.com.

All photographs in this article reproduced courtesy of the SWMT.

Feature

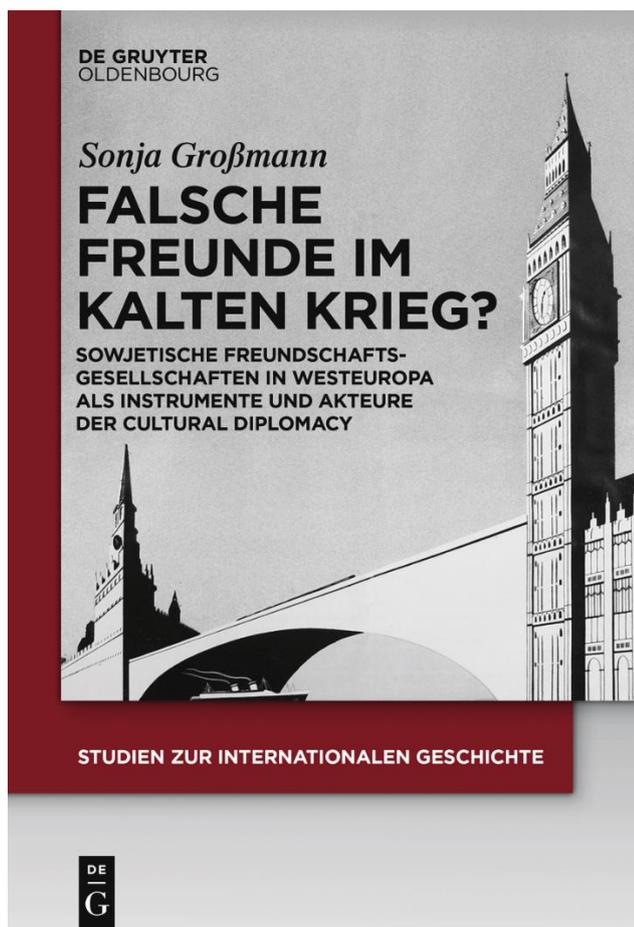
'False Friends'? Soviet Friendship Societies in Britain During the Cold War

By Sonja Großmann

During the Cold War there were associations working for better relations with the Soviet Union in almost all countries – regardless of whether they were socialist or capitalist. These so-called friendship societies differed, however, fundamentally from each other. Their membership, activities and scope of action depended largely on the national and international context – and on the role of the respective communist party. All of them collaborated with and were coordinated by the central organisation VOKS, re-named SSOD in 1958, in Moscow. The Soviet regime used them as instruments of its cultural diplomacy to improve its image abroad. In their home countries, their members were often considered friends of the 'wrong side'. However, in the course of time, these friendship societies themselves were also able to become agents of cultural diplomacy by bringing people together and transcending the Iron Curtain. This raised Soviet suspicion that they might be only 'false friends', trying to change the system from within.

In Britain, since its foundation in 1924, the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) had promoted cultural and scientific exchange, addressing a predominantly intellectual, scientific public. The Second World War, with all its suffering, brought a boost to British-Soviet friendship, thanks to the British war alliance with the USSR. Cooperation with various social and political groups became possible. In 1943, the National Council for British-Soviet Unity (renamed British-Soviet Society in 1946 and British-Soviet Friendship Society in 1950) was created. It merged several associations, among them the Russia Today Society. In contrast to SCR, the BSFS had a

clearer political agenda and appealed predominantly to working-class people and trade unions.



The cover of Sonja Großmann's book
False Friends in the Cold War?

After 1945, many Soviet and British activists hoped for a new era of cultural collaboration. However, the rupture between the Allies and the revival of the Soviet policy of isolation made exchanges impossible again. The friendship societies became ideological 'weapons' in the 'Crusade for Truth', without any space for political nuances and dialogue. Only after 1949, during the Soviet peace campaigns, did carefully selected delegations of artists and scientists come to Britain for 'Friendship Months', while small trade union delegations were invited to Moscow for the 1 May celebrations.

However, the BSFS and SCR could build on these scarce contacts after 1953, when the Soviet Union became very interested in cultural exchange to improve its image abroad. The Soviet authorities wanted the

friendship societies to integrate all political tendencies, to become mass organisations and to finally convince British people and politicians to act in favour of the Soviet Union. However, this turned out to be difficult, as members of the Labour and Conservative Party had to avoid these 'communist organisations'. Nevertheless, the BSFS and SCR were quite successful in realising cultural contacts and bringing famous companies to Britain, such as the Beryozka Dancing Group. Therefore, the Foreign Office feared a monopolisation of cultural relations by friendship societies. "To squeeze out the fellow-traveling societies"¹, they founded an alternative friendship society, the Soviet Relations Committee, renamed Great Britain-USSR Association in 1958. Despite protests from the BSFS and SCR, the Soviet side was quite open to collaborating with the new governmental association, as it helped to create contacts with people of all political tendencies interested in the Soviet Union, whom the BSFS and the SCR were obviously not able to reach. As a result, there were three large associations working for better relations with the USSR, and competing for membership and influence of the British public, as well as for Soviet cultural events. Thus, indirectly, friendship societies such as the BSFS and SCR pushed Western governments to realise their own cultural exchanges with the USSR.

In the 1960s and 1970s friendship societies diversified cultural diplomacy. Delegations and touristic trips to the Soviet Union – even to regions far from Moscow – increased. Also, a growing number of Soviet citizens were allowed to come to Western Europe and Britain. Members of the BSFS and SCR, for example, organised welcome events for Soviet tourists who came on cruises. The BSFS played an important role in bringing to life town twinning relations, such as Nottingham–Minsk, Manchester–Leningrad and Coventry–Volgograd, and maintaining them throughout all crises. During the *Manchester Days in Leningrad* and the *Leningrad Days in Manchester* in 1974 and 1975, for example, more than 130 Mancunians travelled to Leningrad in music or sports groups and, conversely, more than

forty Soviet artists came to Britain. Nevertheless, the BSFS remained relatively small, except for these regional centres. As leaders of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) oriented towards Eurocommunism and increasingly distanced themselves from the Soviet model, the BSFS left no doubt about its loyalty to Moscow, backing – for example – the interventions in Prague and Afghanistan. In the 1980s, the BSFS could nevertheless benefit from the peace campaign, collaborating with several peace associations and from a clear anti-Thatcherism position. The SCR, in contrast, tried to concentrate on cultural and scientific exchanges.

During *perestroika*, when interest in and curiosity about the USSR increased tremendously, the SCR became a popular source of information – thanks to its library and expertise on the Soviet Union. Even the Foreign Office asked for its experiences with cultural exchange with the Soviet Union.

The BSFS, however, was not able to keep up with the pace of change in the Soviet Union. With the rejection of socialism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it had lost its point of reference and disintegrated in 1991. Even if the SCR also ran into financial difficulties and had to close down the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, in May 1992 the members decided to continue the Society under a new name – SCRSS – and with a new mission:

Today, the Society exists to make common cause with all those writers, artists, historians and others who seek to preserve and develop the best traditions of Russia and the former USSR. We stand together against the present world-wide tide of ignorance, xenophobia and resurgent fascism.²

Note: Sources on Soviet associations in Britain are not easily accessible, including the SCRSS archives. The BSFS records were scattered. However, the Nottingham Archives has preserved the documents of the local branch from the 1970s onwards. The Hull History Centre holds several personal papers of leading members,

among them John Platts-Mills. The papers of SCR member Ivor Montagu are available online in the CPGB Archive. Due to the close monitoring of SCR and BSFS activities by the Foreign Office, the National Archives are also very helpful.

Footnotes

1 *Soviet Relations Committee of the British Council, Report on Activities: April 1955 to December 1956*, National Archives, BW 2/532

2 *SCR Annual Report 1992–93*, p 1

Having studied French and Eastern European Contemporary History, Sonja Großmann wrote her PhD thesis on Soviet Friendship Societies in Western Europe at the University of Tübingen, Germany. She was awarded two prizes for her book 'False Friends in the Cold War? Soviet Friendship Societies in Western Europe as Instruments and Agents of Cultural Diplomacy' (Falsche Freunde im Kalten Krieg. Sowjetische Freundschaftsgesellschaften in Westeuropa als Instrumente und Akteure der Cultural Diplomacy) which is available in the SCRSS Library. She now works in the Research Department of the University of Tübingen.

Book Reviews

Red Star and Roundel: A Shared Century
By Philip Wilkinson (Foreword by Air Chief Marshal Sir John Cheshire KBE CB KStJ, Fonhill Media, 2019, ISBN: 9781781557334, Hbk, 363pp, £40.00)

Air Commodore Philip Wilkinson has written a comprehensive and astoundingly well-researched history of the Royal Air Force's involvement in Russia from the October Revolution to the present day. It is a fantastic history of the relationship between the RAF and Russia – as allies and, sometimes, adversaries.

The author starts with the years 1917–18, when the Royal Flying Corps had just been transformed into the Royal Air Force. By April 1918 action involving British forces in

northern Russia was well under way, and the new Air Force would be engaged in all areas of intervention for the next two years. Thirteen chapters cover the intervention in northern and southern Russia, up to the withdrawal of British forces.

Chapter 18 focuses on the years 1921–41 and the Treaty of Rapallo, under which the Russian and German states collaborated on the production of military and civilian aircraft. Britain was struggling to recover after the Great War, and to manage and protect the Empire. With the rise of Nazi Germany, Britain took steps to match Germany with improvements to its fighter aircraft, for example the Spitfire with its powerful Rolls-Royce Merlin engine.

Despite his purge of the establishment, Stalin took an interest in the Soviet Air Forces. His attention was drawn to women aviators, one of the best known of whom, Marina Raskova, used her influence with him to gain approval for all-women flying units.

Chapter 19 is titled 'Full Circle – RAF in Russia Again'. Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Churchill promised aid to Russia – notwithstanding his criticism of Communism. The Arctic convoys are well known, but not the part played by the RAF. No 151 Wing RAF was stationed in northern Russia. The first Arctic convoy was named 'Dervish' and its principal cargo was Hawker Hurricane fighters. From then until the end of the war many more convoys were to go to Murmansk and Archangel. The man in charge of 151 Wing was a New Zealander, Wing Commander Henry Ramsbottom-Isherwood, whose primary role was defence of the naval base at Murmansk.

One problem aircrews encountered was that plane engines cut out due to the poor octane level of Russian fuel. A solution to boost performance was quickly found by Henry Broquet, seconded from Rolls-Royce.

One Russian pilot worth mentioning is Boris Safonov. He was the first pilot to shoot down a Luftwaffe aircraft two days after the

Nazi invasion and went on to form the Russian Hurricane Squadron. Sadly, he was lost in combat in May 1942 but not before being awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.



British pilots of No 151 Wing RAF with Soviet air ace Boris Safonov, North Russia, 1942 (SCRSS Photo Library)

The chapter covers many other exploits of 151 Wing but, sadly, also mentions those airmen who lost their lives and lie in the Vaenga Cemetery. Their graves are looked after by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and visited by diplomats and families.

The Russian Government has always honoured our servicemen with medals, most recently the Ushakov Medal (decree signed on 10 March 2014). However, it took seventy years for the British Government to do the same with the Arctic Star.

I am pleased the author has mentioned Peter Fearn who did a marvellous job in getting together the veterans of 151 Wing and forming the RAF Russia Association. Sadly, its numbers are reducing but the veterans still play an important part attending ceremonies at the Soviet War Memorial in London.

Chapters 20 to 26 give very detailed accounts of operations in northern Russia during the war.

The last chapters in the book deal with the Berlin Airlift and the Queen's state visit to

Russia in October 1994, when the author was our Air Attaché in Moscow!

This book should be read by all those interested in the Second World War. To quote Sir John Cheshire: "I strongly recommend *Red Star and Roundel* to those who are drawn to the history of the RAF and to those for whom Russia remains an enigma."

Phil Matthews

The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II through Objects

By Brandon M Schechter (Cornell University Press, October 2019, ISBN: 9781501739798, Hbk, 315pp + xiii, 40 B/W halftones, £28.99)

This book tells the story of the Red Army men and women who fought against Fascist invasion, and forged the weapons and spirit for victory. It does so through a meticulous study of their equipment, training, personal belongings, ethics and concerns, the 'stuff' of the title. It also describes how the soldiers developed psychologically during the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, sustained by the Soviet political system that, at huge cost, defeated the Nazis' previously unstoppable military machine.



The charred remains of their home, 1941, by Pavel V Mal'kov (from VA Shkvarikov, Ed, *Velikaya Otechestvennaya Voyna*, Vyp 1 - Geroicheskaya oborona Moskva, Gos Izd Iskusstvo, 1942, SCRSS Library)

As they advanced through huge areas liberated from Nazi occupation, often their own towns and villages, Soviet soldiers saw the results of the barbarous pillage, rape,

wilful destruction and mass murders systematically carried out by the German troops. Schechter discusses the effects of horror at what the soldiers found – how their mood toughened, with any lingering views of the Germans as conscripted fellow-workers lost and replaced by 'fury' and determination to exact revenge for the destruction wrought. Their anger was added to by finding food, clothing and everyday goods in German houses, plundered from their own homes. Those who had been murdered in the most savage ways included over a million Soviet prisoners of war, the Red Army wounded, and millions of civilians, men, women and children.

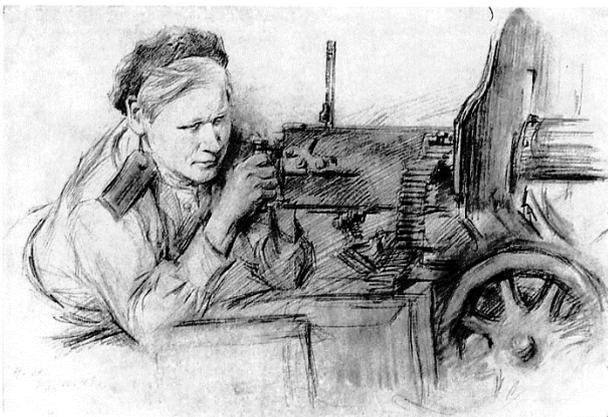


Tank crew, 1942, by Aleksei Laptev (from VA Shkvarikov, Ed, *Velikaya Otechestvennaya Voyna*, Vyp 1 - Geroicheskaya oborona Moskva, Gos Izd Iskusstvo, 1942, SCRSS Library)

This book draws extensively on newly released military archives, diaries, letters and documents of the college of political officers, the security services and censors; weaving the whole into an immensely readable account of the war, for both

scholars and laity. Much of this is new for introducing the Soviet soldier's daily fighting life and including the broader political and family settings, marking a break with the anti-Soviet histories that have dominated the literature for the past half century.

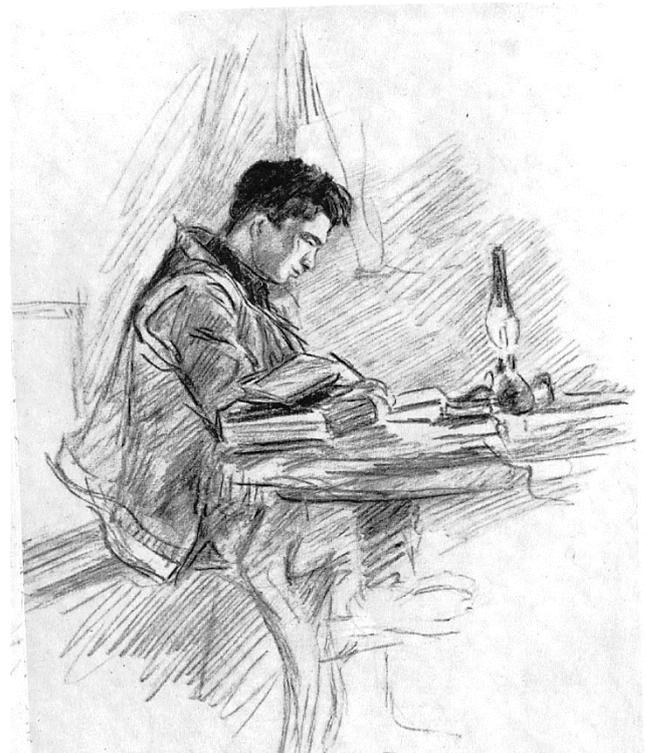
The 'stuff' of the book's title includes everything the soldiers had or collected: weapons, tools, rations, the contents of personal knapsacks, talismans – all relevant to daily combat and survival. It also describes the trophies taken as part reparations, posted home to alleviate the severe shortages brought by the Nazis' wholesale looting.



Machine gunner Loseva, 1942, by Nikolai Zhukov (from EV Mozhukhovskaya, Na ognivykh rubezhakh: Moskovskiye khudozhniki frontovoy pechati 1941–1945, Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1972, SCRSS Library)

The volume is truly remarkable for describing what could be called the 'pastoral' activities of the political officers. These built the morale of the soldiers and their families, linking them together as both suffered from the Nazis' wholesale brutality and destruction. For this, Schechter brings to the reader the texts of soldiers' letters to and from home. The records of the political censors include not only the texts of these letters but how they were discussed among the soldiers, with commanders, political censors, and family members and workmates behind the frontline. The whole was designed to weld all into an enormous single fighting social entity with a sense of togetherness to overcome personal worries, deprivations and fears; not omitting integration of the many Soviet nationalities

with their different languages, customs and religions.



Political worker, Major MT Matveev, 1943, by Il'ya Krichevsky (from V Shabel'nikov, Ed, Po dorogam voyny, Sovetsky Khudozhnik, 1968, SCRSS Library)

This exciting volume tells of grouches about equipment, complaints about officers' high-handedness (sometimes posted directly to Stalin), the allocations of rations.



Liudmila Pavlychenko, Soviet sniper, 1943 (SCRSS Photo Library)

The contents of knapsacks are examined, identifying the mainly household goods soldiers sent home from Germany in 20kg per month parcels: watches and clocks,

pliers, screw drivers, cotton and needles, clothing, bicycles and suchlike. These were considered 'reparations' from the Germans to fill gaps in supplies at home, where production of all non-essential goods had been halted during the war. Some of these items found their way into the markets, where they were traded.



Major General of the Guards Moskalenko briefing a combat assignment (SCRSS Photo Library)

All production in unoccupied or liberated areas was for the front and the military reciprocated by helping with sowing, harvesting and rebuilding destroyed industries. As there had been virtually no household goods made during and for some time after the war, people were forced to learn to make do, repair and recycle all materials, whether from the battlefields or at home. Families living in single rooms, just as soldiers in the trenches, shared single pots to cook in and eat from, each with a wooden or metal spoon.

The book gives a full picture of the stuff of soldiers and is well illustrated with photographs and diagrams.

Mick Costello

Vasili Tyorkin: A Book About a Soldier
By Alexander Tvardovsky (translated by James Womack, Smokestack Books, January 2020, ISBN: 978-1-9160121-0-3, Pbk, 425pp, £10.99. Bilingual text Russian and English)

I would like to thank Smokestack Books for bringing out this book at the time of the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

The original *Tyorkin* appeared as a series of humorous sketches in an army newspaper in Leningrad in 1939. When Tvardovsky transferred to Moscow in 1942, he looked through his scrapbook and was inspired to re-create *Tyorkin* in a more serious form and, in doing so, created a famous character who helped immeasurably to maintain army morale for the length of the war.



Sergeant Jacob Platov meets his family in a liberated village during the Great Patriotic War, 1944 (photograph courtesy of Sputnik)

The main character, Vasili Tyorkin, is a simple peasant lad from a Smolensk village, and his outlook on life is largely traditional. He has long-practised peasant skills: he mends implements, looks after horses, plays on the accordion, sings, dances and tells stories, some of which constitute the text of the poem's individual sections. Above all, Tyorkin is perkily indestructible. His author does not shirk the nasty details of war – and Tyorkin suffers many of them – but he remains resilient and good-humoured. He always has a song to sing or

a salty anecdote to tell his comrades. In a bold streak of fantasy by the author, army headquarters issues an order that there should be a Tyorkin in every unit! Tyorkin is strongly attached to his 'little homeland', his native village, and through it to Russia as a whole. He is a patriot, both Russian and universal.

Yet, though the text was published to keep up morale and put Red Army soldiers in a good mood – in which it obviously succeeded, to judge by the numerous letters Tvardovsky received – it scarcely mentions anything specifically Soviet: there is little or nothing about towns, industry, the technology even of warfare, and it offers no up-to-date ideology. Most remarkably of all, it never mentions either the Communist Party or Stalin. Soldiers go into battle with the cry “*За родину!*” (“*For the homeland!*”), but not “*За Сталина!*” (“*For Stalin!*”).

Instead, the poem glorifies the comradeship of ordinary soldiers. For a time, the poem's irreverence and its lack of ideology got Tvardovsky into difficulties. His editors wanted a more triumphalist tone. He started receiving curt messages from central publishing houses 'requesting amendments'. Publication and radio readings were briefly suspended. But the poem's sheer popularity overcame these obstacles: while the war was still raging, the soldiers' demand for serious yet good-hearted entertainment was so strong that the newspapers had to resume bringing a 'Tyorkin to every unit'.

Poetry is notoriously difficult to translate. I agree with Auden that the central problem is to get the tone right. Here the short jerky lines of the original are slightly lengthened in the English, which makes things easier for the translator. English must be longer in any case because of the articles, whereas Russian is typically more concise. And the translator needs space for a modicum of explanation, because realia are different in a different culture. Having said that, Womack's translation has been critically well received, although the English is slightly more formal than Tvardovsky's racy colloquial style.

Note: Smokestack Books will publish a further two collections of poetry in bilingual Russian-English editions later this year. The first is *Russia is Burning: Poems of the Great Patriotic War*, edited by Maria Bloshteyn, which includes poems by over fifty poets, including those written by soldiers on the front-line, by civilians in the Leningrad blockade, by émigré poets, by prisoners of war and by Gulag prisoners, by poets who wrote 'for the drawer' and by writers who later tried to understand the war and its long-term effects on Russian society. The second is *Wait for Me* by Konstantin Simonov, translated by Mike Munford.

Andrew Jameson

Fandango and Other Stories

By Alexander Grin (translated by Bryan Karetnyk, Columbia University Press, New York, January 2020, ISBN 978-0-231-18977-4, Pbk, 300pp, £13.99)

Alexander Stepanovich Grinevski (pen name Grin) was born in 1880. He died of cancer in poverty in 1932. When young, he drifted between vagrancy and random occupations. His association with the banned Socialist Revolutionary Party led to imprisonment and exile.

Grin wrote seven novels and nearly 400 short stories between 1906 and 1930. He achieved popularity in the 1920s.

Thanks to Karetnyk's translation skills, the eight stories in this collection are pleasantly readable despite Grin's own unappealing literary style. Grin's descriptions are excessive, his analogies dissonant, and his plots and characters contrived. Grin's qualities lie in his penetrating studies of individual will and his contagious flights of imagination. The common characterisation of him as a mere writer of adventure stories for young adults ignores these qualities, which are reflected in many of his works.

Grin's most famous work is the novella *Scarlet Sails*. A poor, taunted girl longs for the prophesied arrival of her saviour in a ship with scarlet sails. The hero arrives in a ship with white sails. To make the prophecy

come true, he paints the sails scarlet: "Miracles do not just happen, if you want one, you must make it." For Grin miracles are made by man's will, not magic. *Scarlet Sails* gripped the popular imagination and retains a hold today.

The first, and earliest story in the collection, *Quarantine*, mirrors Grin's experience with the Socialist Revolutionary Party and his refusal to kill. The story is not a political commentary but a psychological study of its hero reaching his decision after comparing the "darkness" of life as a killer with the "feast of light" in the natural world.

Most of Grin's later stories are situated in Grinlandia, the fantastical world he created. Grinlandia contains no modern inventions that would disrupt the natural order. It exists nowhere identifiable. Its roots are untraceable. Some of its inhabitants can fly or walk on water, propelled by will power alone.

The Grinlandia stories are realistic but do not describe contemporary historical events. Thus, in *The Heart of the Wilderness* the hero is tricked by three mischievous travellers into seeking a hidden utopia. Years later, having failed to find it and having decided instead to build it, the hero seeks out the travellers to express his gratitude. "Of course it existed," he said, "because I carried it in my heart."

In *Fandango* the hero is transported fantastically from frozen, starving Petrograd to the perfect antidote – the tropical natural splendour of Grinlandia's Zurbagan. To reach it, he steps through a painting of a sunlit room. In Zurbagan he hears a Fandango played by the world's greatest orchestra. "It stirs the wind and instils love," he says. This gripping story should be enjoyed for its charm and any confusion about what happened where and when, ignored.

An explanation for Grin's obscurity today is that his achievements have been bettered by others. Nonetheless, he deserves to be read for his perceptive analysis of individual will and his imaginative inventiveness.

Karetnyk's translation provides an agreeable opportunity to do so.

James Heyworth-Dunne

The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War

By Archie Brown (Oxford University Press, March 2020, ISBN: 9780198748700, Hbk, 500pp + xi, £25.00)

Archie Brown is an enthusiastic fan of Mikhail Gorbachev.

In 1997 he published the widely acclaimed *The Gorbachev Factor*. Nick Cohen wrote in *The Observer*, "It is hard to come away from this admirable book without an affection for Gorbachev's insistence on peaceful change, his willingness to let Eastern Europe go and his determination to nurture a pluralist culture."

This was followed in 2010 by *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, in which once more Gorbachev starred.

In 2014 Brown published *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age*, where, as *The Guardian* review noted, Truman, Attlee and Gorbachev are praised as "transformational leaders", while, for Brown, the more charismatic Lloyd George, Neville Chamberlain, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair all suffered from a suboptimal conception of the role of the head of a government: "that of the leader as boss." And all were ejected at the hands of their own colleagues, rather than losing at the ballot box.

The new book is no less than 500 pages long, and very reasonably priced. This is Brown's chosen period, and the book is crammed with information, is well-written, and shows that Brown has a dry sense of humour. There are chapters on (in this non-chronological order) Gorbachev, who became Soviet leader in 1985; Reagan, who won the US presidency in 1980; and Thatcher, who became British Prime Minister in 1979. There is very little criticism

of Thatcher or Reagan, rather admiration for their relationship with Gorbachev.

The remaining chapters are detailed chronological accounts of each year from 1985 ('Breaking the Ice'), to 1989 ('The End of the Cold War').

Of course, the paradox that Brown endeavours to resolve is this: for all his many talents as a politician and his evident commitment to saving the integrity of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev's leadership was a main cause of its collapse. The heart of the book is Chapter 13, 'Why the Cold War Ended When It Did'. Brown argues that this was not a victory for US military or economic might, but the result of Gorbachev's decisive role, the new thinking he empowered, and the radically new policies he pursued (page 297). His ability to win arguments in the Communist Party owed much to his exceptional persuasive skill, but it was decisively bolstered by his political power and authority, says Brown (page 299).

However, it is ironical that Thatcher was much more popular in Russia than in Britain; and Gorbachev in Britain rather than in Russia, where he is seen as responsible for the Soviet Union's demise. It was no accident that in March 2011 Gorbachev celebrated his 80th birthday not in Moscow, but with a star-studded gala at the Royal Albert Hall, *Gorby 80*.

But on 11 July 1991 I had been in Moscow, and watched on television the dazzling inauguration of Yeltsin as the first elected President of Russia. Gorbachev, who was still (unelected) President of the Soviet Union, sat ignominiously in the corner of the stage. Not quite with a dunce's cap.

Bill Bowring

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**Printed and published by:
SCRSS, 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB
Tel: 020 7274 2282
Email: ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk
Website: www.scrss.org.uk
Registered Charity No 1104012
Editor: Diana Turner
Publication date: May 2020**