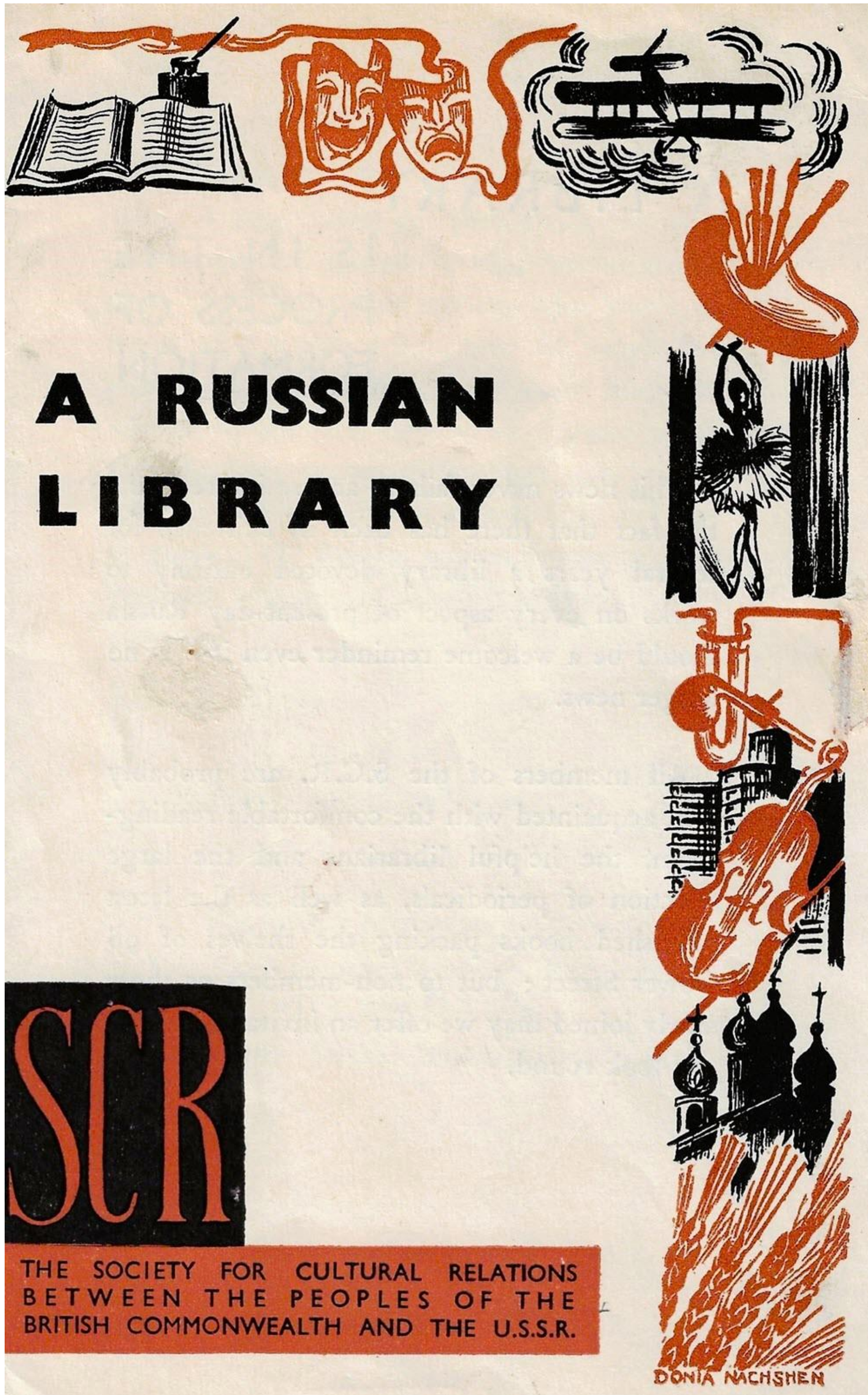
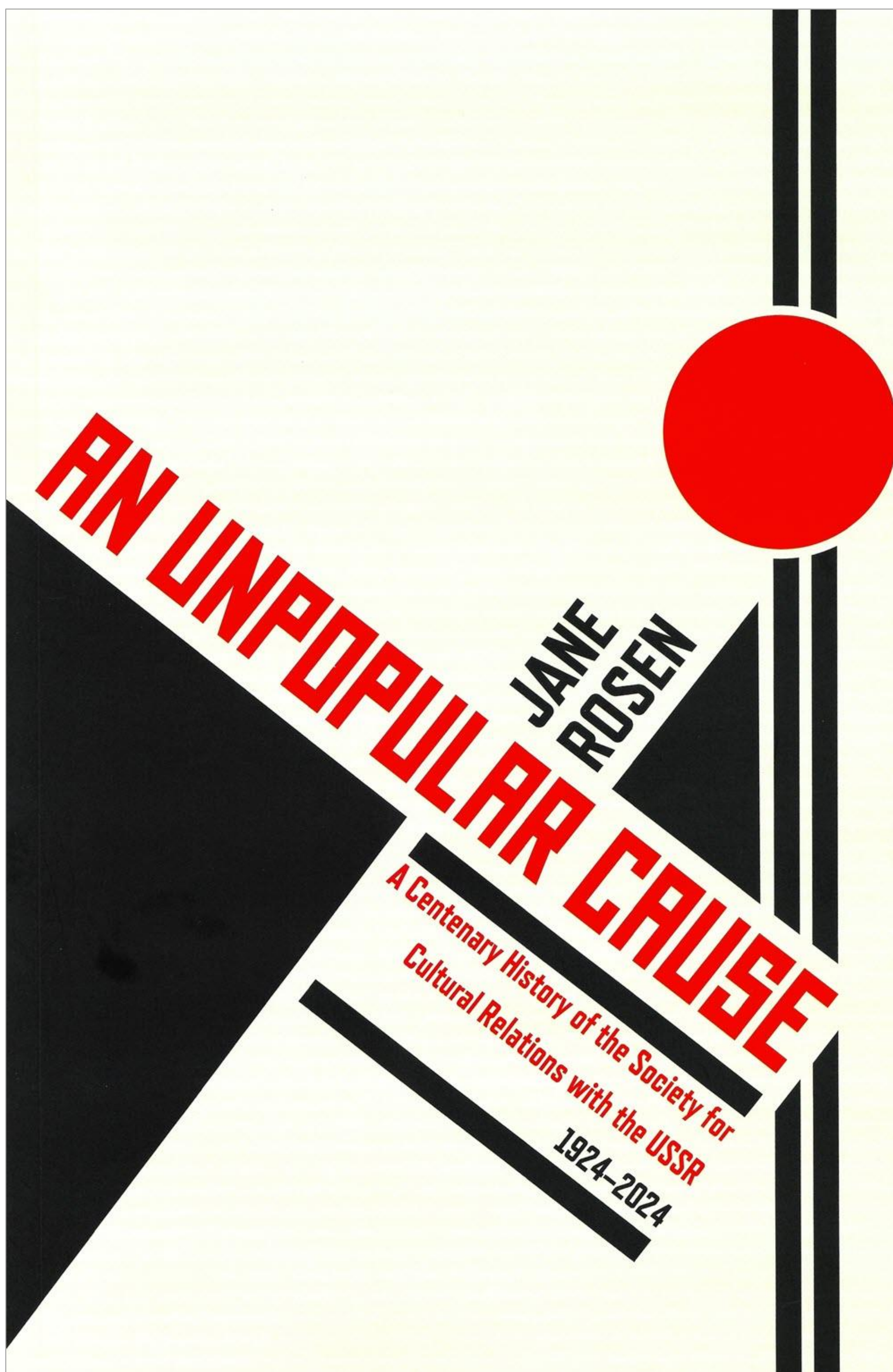



# SCRSS Digest

**Autumn 2024, SD-32, £2.00**

## SCRSS Centenary Issue, 1924–2024

**Society for Co-operation in Russian & Soviet Studies**




*The definitive history of the Society, available from the SCRSS*
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Society for Co-operation in Russian & Soviet Studies, 2024

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# SCRSS Centenary

## Marking 100 Years

By Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary of the SCRSS

Welcome to this special centenary issue of the *SCRSS Digest*. Ten feature articles delve into the life and work of thirteen individuals who have contributed to the Society's work at different times in our long history, helped foster closer cultural relations with the USSR (and, later, former Soviet Union) and been prominent in their respective fields of work. I hope you enjoy the insights from this small but revealing cross-section of men and women from the Society's past – and, in the case of Tabitha Salmon, present – membership. Thanks to all the contributors, and especially the Editor, Diana Turner, for producing such an excellent addition to our centenary year!

Our main centenary celebration took place on 6 July 2024 – a few days before the actual 100th anniversary of the founding of the Society on 9 July 1924.

Over one hundred members and friends enjoyed an afternoon of food, drink and chat. There were brief speeches from SCRSS President Bill Bowring, SCRSS Chair Phil Matthews and special guest Margarita Mudrak, Chair of the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation, who presented the Society with several books. A toast to the Society's first one hundred years followed, with the cutting of the centenary cake and a special celebratory song in Russian by members Olga and Zinaida to round off the formal side of things.

*Left to right:* Margarita Mudrak, Chair of the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation; Phil Matthews, SCRSS Chair; and Bill Bowring, SCRSS President (Photograph: Karl Weiss)

Jane Rosen signed many copies of her new book *An Unpopular Cause,* the recently published and definitive history of the Society from 1924 to the present.

And everyone had a good opportunity to view the new exhibition *A Centenary History of the SCRSS in 100+ Objects*, located on the ground, first and second floors, which includes rare photographs, publications and artefacts from our archive. The large basement library was also open for guests to browse part of our extensive book collections.

Thus, all three main centenary projects came together on the day: the book, the exhibition and the celebration itself. Congratulations and thanks to everyone who made this possible.

## We Are All Volunteers!

I noted that some visitors on 6 July were perhaps not fully aware that the SCRSS is now an entirely volunteer-run organisation. Everyone, including myself, who delivered the centenary event – and delivers everything else connected with the day-to-day running of the Society – volunteers our time.

After twelve years as Honorary Secretary, I will be stepping down at the 2025 AGM, as working full-time and bearing the overall responsibility for the SCRSS are no longer sustainable. It is essential for the future of the Society that we attract more volunteers (and, of course, members). If you are inspired to become more involved, just drop me an email. You can support the library team cataloguing and sorting the books and other material in our collections, offer to help deliver our events programme and library openings, or even assist in the maintenance of the building if you have the relevant skills!

## Soviet War Memorial

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the unveiling of the Soviet War Memorial in London on 9 May 1999. Members should be aware of the leading role the Society played in the creation of the Soviet War Memorial Trust responsible for its creation, and the numerous ceremonies and events undertaken in the period since then. Despite the pause in formal events since February 2022, the Soviet War Memorial continues to stand in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, adjacent to the Imperial War Museum, as a fitting reminder of the enormous sacrifice by all the peoples of the USSR during the Second World War. Flowers are laid on behalf of the Society on key dates: Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January), Victory Day (9 May) and Remembrance Sunday in November. If you would like to find out more, please visit www.sovietwarmemorialtrust.com. The current SCRSS centenary exhibition features a section on the Soviet War Memorial.

# Feature

## Alan Bush, Composer

By Thornton Miller

Alan Bush in the Music Room at Radlett, aged 69
(Copyright: Alan Bush Music Trust)

Alan Bush (1900–95) was a British composer, pianist, conductor and pedagogue who tirelessly advocated for closer cultural relations between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. He was a long-standing member of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR, now the Society for Co-operation in Russian and Soviet Studies), served as a Vice-President of the SCR for several years, gave lectures at the Society, and was a regular contributor to the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*. Throughout his long, illustrious career, which spanned from the 1920s to the 1980s, Bush stayed true to his principles and sought positive social change through the synthesis of music, activism, cultural diplomacy and public outreach.

Bush studied at the Royal College of Music under the tutelage of the composer John Ireland. He was a member of the socialist

wing of the Labour Party in 1924 but his experiences at Berlin University, and the influence of his friend and fellow composer Hanns Eisler, led him to adopt Marxism-Leninism as his world view. In 1935 he joined the Communist Party and created the Workers' Music Association (WMA) in the following year. He was the Chairman of the Association until he volunteered for the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1941.[1] After the war, he became both the President of the WMA and the Conductor of the WMA Singers.[2]

QUEEN'S HALL

(Sole Lessees: Chappell & Co., Ltd.)

LANGHAM PLACE, LONDON, W.1

Saturday 13th April 1940

at 2.30 p.m.

SYMPHONY CONCERT

of works by

SOVIET COMPOSERS

THE LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

(80 Players)

Leader: THOMAS MATTHEWS

Conductor: ALAN BUSH

Solo Pianist: MOURA LYMPANY

S. C. R.

SOCIETY FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE PEOPLES OF GREAT BRITAIN AND THE U.S.S.R.

SCR programme for a concert of Soviet music conducted by Alan Bush, 1940 (SCRSS Archive)

As a choral music director, Bush sought to create accessible, albeit modern, and politically conscious works for amateur musicians. This effort involved the performance of Bush's own compositions, as well as the classic works of Handel and Beethoven to demonstrate that these canonical works did not only belong to elite institutions but also to the general public. In many ways, the Soviet Union, with its emphasis on large-scale participation and generous state support for the arts, was Bush's model for encouraging the mass involvement of the citizenry in song.[3] He also conducted the British premieres of important Soviet works such as Dmitri Shostakovich's Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, thus ensuring that the British public had access to the latest Soviet compositions.[4]

Bush first visited the Soviet Union in 1938 where he met elite Soviet musicians and performed three concerts of British music.[5] His charisma was made fully evident at a reception hosted by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) in Moscow when, as the event was dying down and people were preparing to leave, the composer spoke to the band, softly played a melody on the piano, walked to the centre of the hall and invited the guests to join him in the 'Lambeth Walk', a dance created the previous year in the West End musical *Me and My Girl*. The gesture was a great success with those present and, arguably, led to the 'Lambeth Walk' taking the Moscow nightlife by storm.[6] Moreover, he edited Igor Boelza's *Handbook of Soviet Musicians* in 1944, which provided an English-language introduction to the major Soviet composers of the time for British readers.[7] For the remainder of his long career he encouraged the performance of his works within the Soviet Union, facilitated the travel of Soviet musicians to Britain and returned there at least five more times. Highlights of these visits include Bush's meetings with well-known Soviet composers such as Dmitri Kabalevsky, Aram Khachaturian and Tikhon Khrennikov, as well as a concert in 1962 when he conducted his 'Festive Overture' and his Second Symphony ('The Nottingham') with the USSR State Symphony Orchestra in Moscow.[8]

Two Soviet music figures that bear special consideration are the musicologists Grigorii Shneerson and Boris Kotliarov. Shneerson, who served in VOKS and as the head of the foreign bureau of the Soviet Composers Union, was Bush's main point of contact in the Soviet Union. During the Second World War, Bush sent musical scores and recordings of British contemporary music to Shneerson over perilous waters in order to

maintain cultural ties between the two allies. Bush and Kotliarov met during the war while the former served in the Royal Army Medical Corps and the latter at the Soviet Embassy in London. Later, after returning to Chişinău, Moldavia, Kotliarov wrote the first biography of the composer. In a tribute for Bush's 80th birthday celebrations, Kotliarov referred to the composer as a man of integrity who was willing to stand up for what he believed, despite the repercussions that such a stance had on his career in Britain.[9]

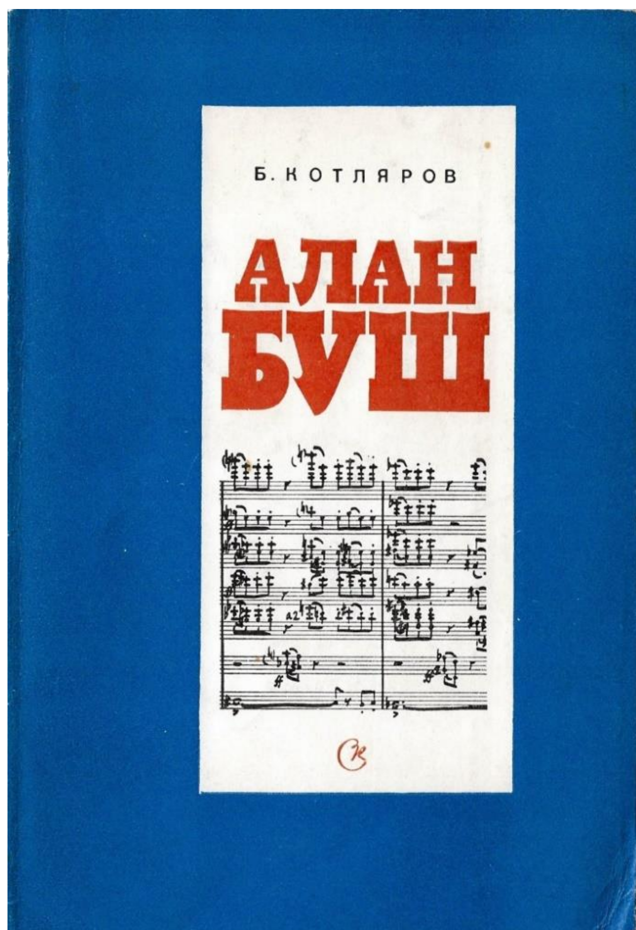
Scene from Alan Bush's opera *Wat Tyler*, performed by the Keynote Opera Society, Sadlers Wells, June 1974, with John Noble – centre right – in the lead role (Copyright: Alan Bush Music Trust)

As a composer, Bush sought to promote social change through his music. He believed that music (and the arts in general) was an expressive practice, that the composer had a responsibility to reach as many people as possible and that they needed to stay true to their cultural background.[10] Themes in his music often included the unveiling of wrongs in society past and present, as well as expressing optimism in the possibility of a utopian future. In his works, Bush incorporated the influence of Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht by breaking down the so-called 'fourth wall', in order to spur his performers and audience to action. His Piano Concerto included a vocal section in the finale that addressed the audience directly and called for them not just to enjoy listening to music passively but instead to reconsider the concert hall itself as an institution, and for audiences to engage actively with the societal issues of the time.[11]

In his operas, Bush sought to reveal the struggle against injustice in the feudalism and capitalism of the past, and in the imperialism of the present. His first two operas – *Wat Tyler* on the 1381 Peasants' Revolt and *The Men of Blackmoor* on the rise of coal labour unions – focused on the heroic struggle of the people against insurmountable odds. His third opera, *The Sugar Reapers* (also titled *Guyana Johnny*), was on the Guyanese struggle for independence against British imperialism. The fourth, *Joe Hill*, concentrated on an individual union leader's struggle, trial and execution. *The Sugar Reapers* received two Soviet productions: it was performed at the Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu, Estonia, as well as the National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre in Odesa, Ukraine.

Kaarel Ird, a director and producer at the Vanemuine Theatre, recalled that the ensemble had difficulty mastering Bush's opera as the company primarily performed older works within the canonical repertoire, as opposed to more technically difficult contemporary compositions. They were terrified that the composer himself was planning to attend the rehearsals and the performance, and assumed that Bush would simply storm out of the theatre in frustration. Contrary to their fears, he helped them overcome the difficulties of the score and even rewrote parts of the piece to match the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of the performers. Ird realised that Bush was genuinely dedicated to the spirit of collaboration between artists, and that he cared far more about expressing the message of the work than the sanctity of the notes on the page.[12]

Bush believed in music's potential to communicate a message to the audience, in its ability to spur social critique of political and economic corruption, as well as in its capacity to encourage the public to participate actively in the betterment of




Monograph in Russian on Alan Bush by Soviet musicologist Boris Kotliarov, published by Sovetskii kompozitor, 1981 (SCRSS Archive)

society. He collaborated with and befriended Soviet performers and composers, and facilitated the Anglo-Soviet exchange of music in both wartime and peacetime. As a musician and a scholar, he was fully dedicated to the SCR and its mission to foster closer cultural relations between the British and Soviet peoples.

**Footnotes**

**1** Joanna Bullivant, *Alan Bush, Modern Music, and the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 1–2

**2** Nancy Bush, *Alan Bush: Music, Politics and Life*, London: Thames, 2000, 34

**3** Bullivant, 93–94

**4** Louise Wiggins, '"Story of a Friendship": Alan Bush, Grigorii Shneerson and Cultural Diplomacy Before and During the Cold War' in *Russian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2016, 256–57

**5** Bush, 41

**6** Grigori Schneerson, 'My Friend Alan Bush: A Soviet Musicologist's Tribute' in *Time Remembered: An 80th Birthday Symposium*, ed. Ronald Stevenson, Kidderminster: Bravura, 1981, 76

**7** Igor Boelza, *Handbook of Soviet Musicians*, Alan Bush, ed., London: Pilot, 1944

**8** Boris Kotlyarov, 'Alan Bush: His Soviet Biographer's Assessment' in *Time Remembered: An 80th Birthday Symposium*, ed. Ronald Stevenson, Kidderminster: Bravura, 1981, 25

**9** Ibid., 21–22

**10** Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*, London: Faber & Faber, 1963, 54–63

**11** Bullivant, 58–60

**12** Kaarel Ird, 'Producing a Bush Opera in Estonia' in *Time Remembered: An 80th Birthday Symposium,* ed. Ronald Stevenson, Kidderminster: Bravura, 1981, 92–94

*Dr Thornton Miller is an Instructional Assistant Professor of Musicology at Illinois State University. His research is on British and Soviet music history, and he is currently drafting a monograph on the cultural diplomacy between these two countries during the Cold War.*

# Feature

## Beatrice King, Educationist

By Claire Weiss

"A Vivid Personality. In picturesque appearance, precise speech and practical opinion, Miss Beatrice King won high favour among her listeners... Miss King permitted no dull moments to seize upon her lecture." Thus enthused the *Wolverton Express* of 26 January 1942, reporting on a One-Day School for teachers on the Soviet Union's reconstruction policy, organised by the Buckinghamshire Education Committee and addressed by Beatrice King (1893–1971) of

the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR).

"Beatrice King had a happy knack of illustrating the point with a timely picture,"

Beatrice King – from the dust jacket of her book *Russia Goes to School*, New Education Book Club, 1948 (SCRSS Library)

reported the *Blyth News and Ashington Post* of 18 December 1944 about a talk that she gave on *Family Life in Russia*. The *Nottingham Journal* of 5 April 1943 had earlier asserted that she was "one of our few authorities on Russian language and people, she has a fund of stories".

These are just three examples I have found from some sixty-five press cuttings dated between 1932 and 1962 that feature Beatrice King's stupendous sharing of knowledge about the Soviet Union. Chair of the SCR Education Section, Beatrice became known throughout the country as a leading expert on Russian education and, as such, during the 1940s she was employed by County Education Committees to give lectures to teachers and by the War Office to deliver sessions for the Army. This was in addition to her talks at multiple public events organised by the SCR, Anglo-Soviet friendship committees and women's groups. She travelled the length and breadth of the country over those years, from Worthing to Aberdeen, from Aberystwyth to Peterborough, from Belfast to Sunderland, and to many major centres such as Liverpool, Manchester and London. In addition to her speaking skills and evident outgoing personality, it is clear that Beatrice possessed significant organisational and leadership talents. Not only did she give talks, write books and articles, she also presided over wide-ranging panels of speakers at mass events. The *South Wales Gazette* of 12 March 1943 described her thus: "Renowned educationist and Anglo-Soviet leader."

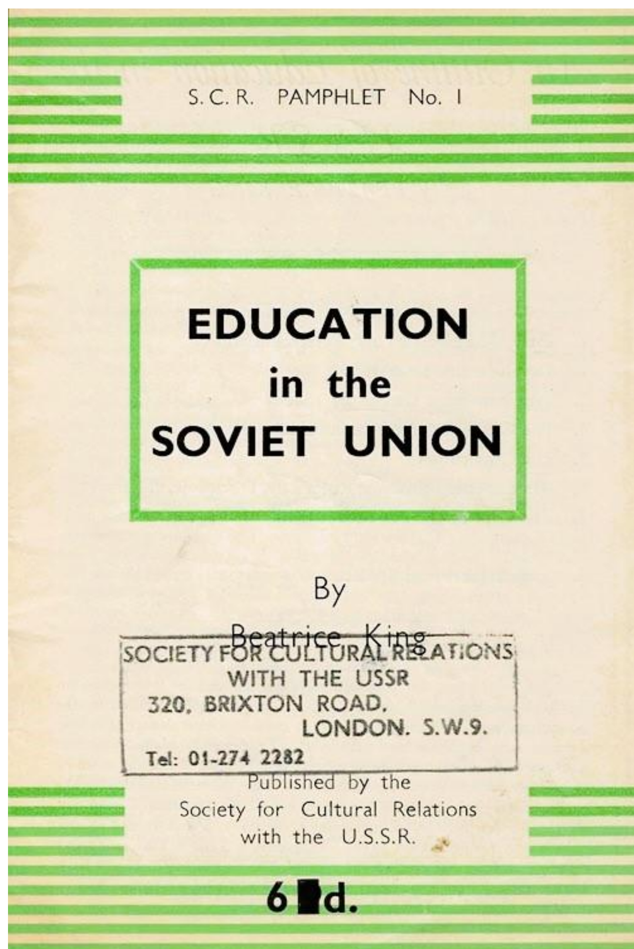
Beatrice King had been born as Lily Beatrice Lapin to parents Ethel Lapin and Abraham Israel Lapin in Lithuania in 1893. The Lapin family included three other daughters and moved to London around 1903, settling in Whitechapel, the East End of London, where Abraham ran a linen draper business. On the 1911 Census, 18-year-old Lily Beatrice, the eldest, was listed as a 'student teacher'.

Two years later, she married Charles Douglas King, an accountant ten years her senior. Prior to the wedding she had moved to the King family household in Shepherd's Bush, west London, possibly as a lodger. The King family included Charles' father Henry; his brother Lawrence Aubrey, a student teacher working for London County Council; and sisters Alice and Eva working as 'Board School teachers'. Beatrice must have thrived in this pedagogical environment, and, while her husband Charles was on military service during World War One, she completed a teacher training course. After the war Beatrice and Charles set up home in west London where their children – a daughter in 1921 and a son in 1925 – were born.

Beatrice would go on to specialise in the teaching of drama and was soon to become active in the English School Theatre Society. An article in the *Middlesex County Times* of 1937 described Beatrice's

professional activity, while also identifying her wider political development: "She trained as a teacher at Furzedown and during the war she was on the executive committee of the Union of Democratic Control (UDC).[1] She has visited Russia every two years since 1932 and has been able to study the development of education there, and to see the children's theatre in Moscow, where classic Russian plays are acted. She is now doing organising work for the English School Theatre Society."

Jane Rosen, in her recently published history of the SCR, notes that "many of the Society's first supporters were also members of the UDC".[2] It is no surprise therefore that Beatrice, with her Russian language mother tongue, was one of them.




Pamphlet by Beatrice King, published by the SCR, probably in 1942 (SCRSS Archive)

Beatrice was evidently a 'joiner' and over her lifetime she contributed actively to the following organisations, some of which were re-iterations of each other: New Education Fellowship; Women's Anglo-Soviet Committee (serving as Chair from time to time); Anglo-Soviet Friendship Committee; Russia Today Society; Joint Committee for Soviet Aid (as a member of its Executive Committee); National Council for British-Soviet Unity; National Association of Women; and SCR (joint Editor of the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* and Chair of the Education Section).

It is sometimes unclear from the manifold newspaper cuttings who exactly organised the various events. Occasionally the SCR was mentioned, but more likely than not the local bodies received credit as promoters. Some events were large-scale and strategic in concept. For instance, in July 1942 during the 'British Soviet Friendship Week' one hundred teachers attended a weekend course in Swansea on Russia, promoted by the County Council, and with the following eminent speaker line-up: Chief Inspectors for Schools in England and Wales; Sir John Russell, agricultural scientist and Director, Rothamsted Experimental Station; Professor JA Crowther, physicist; Sir Bernard Pares, Professor of Russian History and former diplomat; Gleb Struve, School of Slavonic Studies, Russian literature specialist; Andrew Rothstein representing TASS – Soviet Press Agency; Beatrice King, "authoress and expert on Russian education"; Maurice Dobb, Cambridge economics lecturer; and Charlotte Haldane, writer.

The background to this event was the Government's planning for postwar educational reconstruction: Beatrice knew what the wartime ally Soviet Union had been doing in this respect. Similar events were held in other cities, for instance in Nottingham in April 1943, hosted by the Nottingham Teachers' Association.

As testified earlier, Beatrice's reputation in terms of the relevant knowledge was second to none. She was quoted, for instance, by the *North Wales Weekly News* in 1944, as being "one of the foremost authorities on life in the USSR". Her panoply of topics extended to youth delinquency, wider social services, and life in the armed forces, the linking factor of all being their relationship to the USSR's communist aims.

She did not shy from taking the lead in other campaigns. The *Daily Herald* of 13 April 1945 carried the news: “A deputation led by Mrs Beatrice King and representing women all over the country went yesterday to ask two San Francisco delegates to present their Charter of Women’s Rights to the World Organisation Conference. They chose two chief women’s delegates – Miss

Photograph from Beatrice King’s book *Changing Man*, Gollancz, 1936, showing a mathematics class at the Gorky Model School, Moscow (SCRSS Library)

Florence Horsbrugh Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health, and Miss Ellen Wilkinson Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Home Security, who agreed to bring the charter before the conference.” In June 1945 Beatrice campaigned for DN Pritt, a leading member of the SCR, to be returned as a Labour MP for her constituency. Some years later, on 6 January 1962, *The Birmingham Daily Post* reported: “CND prayer vigil and anti-bomb march. 70 women to deliver letter to PM. 12 women’s organisations’ January Campaign for Peace. Mrs Collins, Marchioness of Queensberry, Mrs Diana Leslie who organised the march and Beatrice King chairman of National Association of Women went into Admiralty House.”

Naturally, not all the publicity given to Beatrice’s work was favourable. The indignancy of Major Tufton Beamish, MP for Lewes, to her book *Life in the USSR* echoes through the pages of *Hansard* (Volume 477, 20 July 1950) in his statement that “it is Communist propaganda at its worst”, making an appeal to the Minister to have it withdrawn from circulation. The Parliamentary matter was quickly curtailed by Fenner Brockway MP’s recollection that the book had been issued when there was a Conservative Minister of Education.

Giving talks and interviews was not the only way in which Beatrice carried out her strongly held convictions of understanding the developments in Russia. Her activities boosted funds to finance the cost of named beds in Stalingrad’s hospital. She led a tour of teachers to the Soviet Union in 1933, authored five key books, seven major journal articles and in 1942 narrated a film *The Soviet Schoolchild*.

Beatrice was a driven woman who commanded widespread respect. Her scores of whirlwind tours of the country, giving talks and leading discussions, brought her into close co-operation with people of differing political backgrounds, including local church leaders. Undoubtedly, her leading position in the SCR, as well as its resources as a library and as an organisational centre, were used to the greatest benefit in her work.

Her personal life was not delved into by the press. Beatrice and Charles continued to live in Ealing after their offspring left home and grandchildren were born. Charles pre-deceased Beatrice by six years, her last major article for the SCR being issued at that time.

**Footnotes**

**1** Through its one hundred branches and 10,000 members the UDC addressed the processes of ‘secret diplomacy’ that had drawn Britain and Northern Ireland into World War One.

**2** Jane Rosen, *An Unpopular Cause: A Centenary History of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR 1924–2024*, London: SCRSS, 2024, 23n

**Publications by Beatrice King**

Books and Pamphlets:

**1936:** *Changing Man: The Education System of the USSR*, London: Gollancz. **1942(?):** *Education in the USSR*, London: SCR. **1943:** *Education in the USSR*, Calcutta: International Publishing House; *Soviet Childhood in Wartime*, London: Russia Today

Society; *Life in the USSR,* London and New York: T Nelson. **1946:** *Introducing the USSR*, London: Sir I. Pitman & Sons. **1947:** *Women in Postwar Russia*, British-Soviet Society. **1948:** *Russia Goes to School*, London: New Education Book Club.

Articles:

**1933:** 'The New Decree on Soviet Education', *British Russian Gazette*. **1935:** 'Education for Leisure', *British Russian Gazette*. **1937:** 'A Kiev School', *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, published in three parts in Vol. 1, Nos. 6–8; 'Education', *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 10. **1938:** 'Soviet Education: Its Phases and Purposes', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. XVII, No. 49. **1939:** 'Extra-Curricular Activities in the USSR', *The American Quarterly on the Soviet Union*, Vol. II No. 2–3. **1941:** 'Children in the Soviet Union', Russia Today Society journal. **1967:** 'New Trends in Soviet Education: The New Decree', *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. 27/3.

Film (as narrator):

**1942:** *The Soviet Schoolchild*, Soviet War News Film Agency.

*Claire Weiss has been a library volunteer at the SCRSS since 2011 and has taken an interest in the Library's Education Collection which is now fully listed on the online catalogue.*

# Feature

## Harry C Stevens, Translator and Journalist

By Jeremy Hicks

Harry C Stevens (1896–1972) was one of the first people to speak at the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) in November 1924, having returned from Russia only weeks before.[1] First-hand knowledge of the Soviet Union was highly valued in the 1920s and Stevens, by his own reckoning, "could have claimed to be the best informed person on Soviet affairs in England, outside permanent correspondents".[2] He gained his experience and expertise in relevant languages as a relief worker for the Friends Emergency and War Victims Relief Committee, first in Poland in 1919 as part of an 'anti-typhus' unit, then transferring to Minsk in January 1922 to conduct famine relief work, and finally to Buzuluk (Samara oblast, Volga region) from May 1922, returning from Russia in September 1924.

At this point he took up translation. His greatest achievement was the translation, under the pen-name Stephen Garry (evoking 'Harry' in a Russian accent) of Mikhail Sholokhov's epic of the Revolution and Civil War, *Tikhii Don* (1928–40). He rendered this as two volumes: *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1934) and, later, *The Don Flows Home to the Sea* (1940). These translations were a huge success and instrumental in Sholokhov receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1965 (the only one for a pro-regime Soviet writer).

Stephen Garry's translation of *And Quiet Flows the Don*, Putnam, 1941 reprint (SCRSS Library)

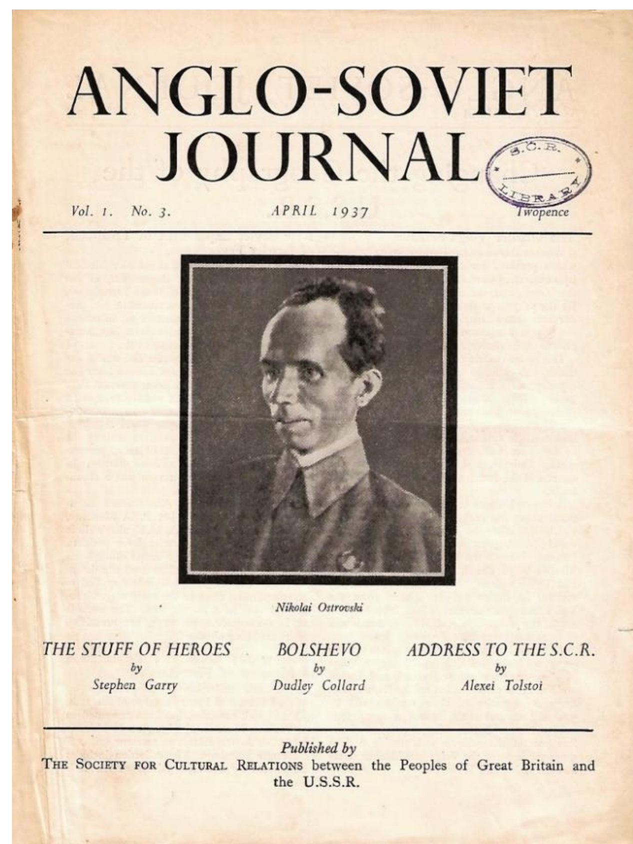
However, in 1968 Konstantin Priima, Russian critic and curator of the Sholokhov archives, criticised the Stephen Garry translation for cutting out over one hundred pages, accusing the publisher Putnam of political censorship.[3] Stevens responded in defence of his publisher, insisting the cuts were made on his own initiative, not that of

the publisher or for political reasons.[4] As correspondence in his archive shows, Stevens abridged the book to make it more compact and marketable, combining the first two volumes in a single edition, and adapted the title to echo Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the English translation of which had been a bestseller. He cut Sholokhov's verbatim reproductions of documents, Lenin's speeches, and the unflattering, one-dimensional representations of living figures, including leaders of the White Army and the British military intervention, for fear of libel suits.[5]

Stevens' translation was later condemned as a 'desecration' and Robert Daglish produced a new version restoring the cuts, which was then reworked and re-issued as *The Quiet Don* with further editing by Brian Murphy.[6] But this was in the postwar period when the general standard of translations from Russian was higher, and there was an expansion in the teaching and knowledge of the language. Stevens nevertheless deserves great credit for taking on the translation when others declared the language, which includes much vernacular and some Ukrainian phrases, too difficult to translate.[7] He did it and his version reached a very wide audience who otherwise would never have heard of Sholokhov; it was still being reprinted by Penguin into the 1980s.

The fact that the story is told through the eyes of Grigorii Melekhov, a Cossack opponent of the Revolution, as well as Sholokhov's age when he began writing it (22 years) with little formal education, gave rise from the very beginning to claims of plagiarism, notably championed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The consensus now is that Sholokhov came upon a group of documents, including an unfinished novel about a White Cossack, that he rewrote and extended to turn into his famous novel.[8]

The value of the SCR for Stevens lay not just in providing a forum where he could impart his knowledge and insights, both through talks and articles in the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*. He also used the library extensively, scanning the latest Soviet literary journals and newspapers when looking for new things to translate, and to keep up to date on Soviet cultural and wider current affairs. The Society was also an important place to network and Stevens forged strong professional relationships with


ANGLO-SOVIET JOURNAL

Vol. 1. No. 3. APRIL 1937 Twopence

Nikolai Ostrovski

THE STUFF OF HEROES by Stephen Garry

BOLSHEVO by Dudley Collard

ADDRESS TO THE S.C.R. by Alexei Tolstoi

Published by The Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of Great Britain and the U.S.S.R.

*Anglo-Soviet Journal*, April 1937, with an article 'The Stuff of Heroes' on the writer Nikolai Ostrovsky, written by Stephen Garry (SCRSS Archive)

academic Sir Bernard Pares, publisher John Rodker and filmmaker Ivor Montagu, to name just three members with whom he frequently corresponded about translation work. Stevens chaired the SCR's Association of Russian Translators from 1936 and was an Executive Committee member for a number of years from 1925. He was one of several Quakers who took a leading role in the Society from its earliest days, including Ruth Fry (variously Vice-Chair, Chair and Vice-President – *see pages 25–27 of this issue*), whom he already knew from his relief work in Poland.

Stevens' attitude to the Soviet Union was one of sympathy for the formally egalitarian aims of the Soviet project, and in this sense common among Quakers at the time. In particular, he seems to have been attracted by the Soviets' democratic attitude to

culture. As he described it in a 1923 poem: "Land of great hopes, and infinite despairs." This led to him defending many Soviet policies, starting with the New Economic Policy (NEP), which he saw as a form of state capitalism, then collectivisation, which he perceived through the prism of the famine he had witnessed. "The peasants are the greatest problem the Communists have to face," he wrote in 1924. However, this seems to have led him to defend Stalin uncritically in 1938 as he criticised the *New Statesman* for its "anti-Stalin bias".[9] This was a position he was immediately to regret the following September, as the Nazi-Soviet Pact led to the Red Army's annexation of eastern Poland. As he wrote to Pares: "The German-Soviet developments, culminating in Monday morning's events, have sickened me; you may be able to guess how deeply I have felt it when I say that I have been working to the best of my ability for a rapprochement between the peoples of Britain and the U.S.S.R since 1924."[10]

This was not just a moral and professional blow, undermining Stevens' whole life's work in furthering understanding of the Soviets, but also immediately hit his bank balance as work dried up. Stevens' personal archive contains letters to the Halifax Building Society asking for their understanding with the delay in mortgage payments. At this point, he tried to return to aid work and wrote to a contact on the Friends Service Council to see whether there was any work helping Polish refugees. Although no such work was forthcoming, Stevens was able to switch to translating Polish literature (published under his real name), before benefiting from the booming interest in all things Russian after the June 1941 Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the 1942 Anglo-Soviet Treaty.

The Cold War led to translation work drying up again. As Stevens wrote in 1964: "[T]ranslators these days are of value only in so far as they find politically useful books to translate, such as Solzhenitsin [sic], or even Dr Zhivago… And I haven't had a commission for over two years, from Russian or Polish!"[11]

*The Don Flows Home to the Sea* was one of the books that introduced me to Russian literature, after my mother bought me a second-hand copy at a jumble sale. I remember first reading the whole novel in Russian in a library on 9 September 2001. When a librarian came over to tell me the news, I was annoyed at the distraction: reading Sholokhov seemed more important. Perhaps he is not so relevant now, although still enjoyable to read and insightful about the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Whatever our views on Sholokhov, the story of his translator tells us a lot about the history of the SCR.

*I would like to thank Kacper Regulski and the SSEES-UCL Library Archive and staff for help with the research for this article.*

**Footnotes**

**1** Jane Rosen, *An Unpopular Cause: A Centenary History of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR 1924–2024*, London: SCRSS, 2024, 11

**2** Letter to *Daily Express*, 5 September 1936, Stevens Collection UCL-SSEES Library

**3** Konstantin Priima, 'Kuda ischezli v Anglii 100 stranits "Tikhogo Dona"' in *Ogonek*, 39, 1968, 26–28

**4** H C Stevens, 'The "Quiet Don" in English' in *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 April 1969, 369

**5** Letter to David Stewart, 9 August 1964, Stevens Collection UCL-SSEES Library; Barry P Scherr, Richard Sheldon, 'Review: Westward Flows the Don: The Translation and the Text' in *The Slavic and East European Journal,* Vol. 42, No. 1, Spring 1998, 119–125

**6** Mikhail Sholokhov, *Quiet Flows the Don*, edited by Brian Murphy, translation by Robert Daglish, London: J M Dent, 1996

**7** Letter to David Stewart, 9 August 1964, Stevens Collection UCL-SSEES Library

**8** Brian J Boeck, *Stalin's Scribe. Literature, Ambition and Survival: The Life of Mikhail Sholokhov*, New York and London: Pegasus, 2019

**9** Letter to John Lehman, 19 October 1938, Stevens Collection UCL-SSEES Library

**10** Letter to Bernard Pares, 19 September 1939, Stevens Collection UCL-SSEES Library

**11** Letter to David Stewart, 30 July 1964, Stevens Collection UCL-SSEES Library

*Jeremy Hicks is Professor of Russian Culture and Film at Queen Mary University of London and has written widely on Russian and Soviet history, documentary*

*film, literature and journalism. He is currently researching the relationship between film and the international famine relief campaign to Soviet Russia and Ukraine in 1921.*

# Feature

## Arthur Ling, Architect and Town Planner

By Helen Turner

Arthur Ling (SCRSS Archive)

Arthur Ling (1913–95), longtime SCR member and Chair of the influential SCR Architecture and Planning Group from 1945–57, was a British architect and town planner with a lifelong belief in the importance of architecture and city planning for community structure. He was City Architect and Planning Officer for Coventry from 1955–64, and as Head of Nottingham University's Department of Architecture and Civic Planning from 1964–69 he acted as Consultant Architect Planner for the Runcorn New Town Masterplan in 1967. He also served as Vice-President of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) from 1963–64; as Chairman of the Commonwealth Association of Planners from 1968–76; and acted as the UN Habitat's Project Manager from 1977–80.

Ling studied architecture at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, and joined the Communist Party as a student in the mid–late 1930s. He would have been aware of the interest in the Soviet planning system, which was channelled through the SCR. The focus of much of the SCR's early architectural interest was the USSR's rebuilding programmes, starting from the first Five Year Plan of 1928 with its aim of complete industrialisation and collectivisation.

Lord Marley, Labour peer and SCR member, visited the USSR in 1932 and became an early speaker on Soviet planning; the same year Kenneth S Dodd, a planner from the Ministry of Health, was impressed by the sheer scale of building works in the Soviet Union, enabled by a national planning policy; while in 1937 Lewis Silkin, Chair of the Housing Committee of the London County Council (LCC), led a town planning tour there.[1] Architects in the USSR tended to lead urban planning: there were architect-planners, architect-engineers, and architects of civil buildings, in a system different from the UK.[2] Interest in this system resulted in an increasing number of tours. The SCR's first architecture and planning tour took place in 1932, and there was a 4-week research tour in 1936 to view progress on the reconstruction of Moscow under its new General Plan. By 1937, 30 per cent of the SCR's income came from specialist tours to the Soviet Union, arranged through the Soviet organisation VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries).

In August 1939 Ling visited the USSR with the Association of Architects, Surveyors and Technical Assistants (AASTA). He stayed behind after the formal visit to study Soviet town planning further, although it is hard to know for how long: Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. In the early

1940s this research resulted in two key articles in the SCR's *Anglo-Soviet Journal* and a pamphlet *Planning and Building in the USSR* (1943). However, by the end of 1939,

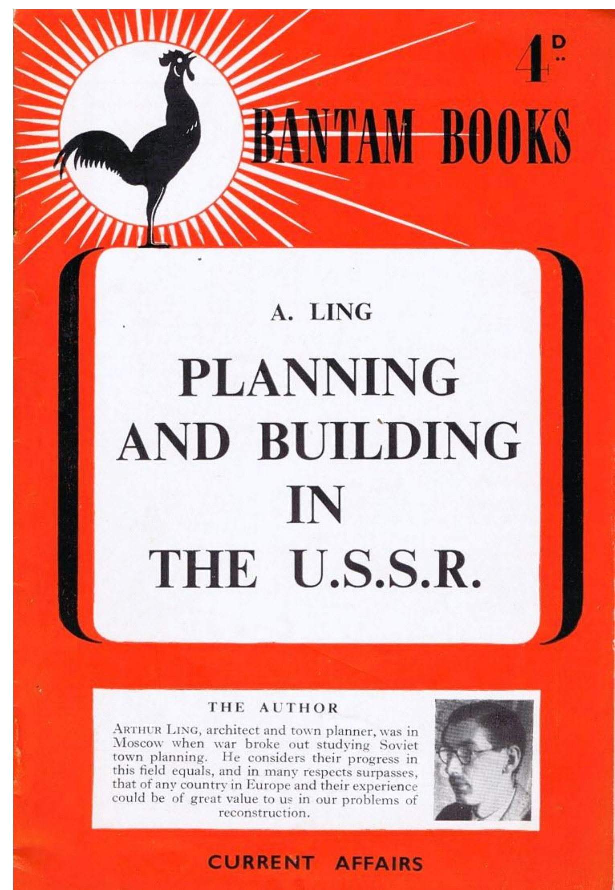
Photograph from Arthur Ling's article 'The Reconstruction of Moscow' in the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, 1942, showing artists at work on a model of the Moscow Plan for public display (SCRSS Archive)

Ling was back in the UK and had joined the City of London Corporation. In 1941 he moved to the LCC within the team working on the County of London Plan (the architecture department at this time was a hub of communist activism in planning and architecture). In the same year he joined the SCR.

In October 1941 he wrote a detailed article for the SCR on Soviet town planning, extolling the benefits of nationwide planning "from Arctic to Caspian, Baltic to Pacific".[3] He acknowledged that planning new construction was easier without having to deal with private land ownership. He also pointed out that reconstruction was not only a wartime need but had begun in the USSR in 1920. He was particularly taken by the huge communal heating schemes, with their fuel savings and reduction of atmospheric pollution, and the new and improved street lighting schemes. A further article in 1942, detailing the pre-war reconstruction and improvement plans for Moscow, compares the situation there to London in the 1930s:[4] "[T]hey have built, widened, acquired, while we have only talked and made reports. We wait patiently for 999-year leases to fall in before widening roads, new homes must yield a profit… public subsidy is swallowed up by exorbitant land costs… and with them the cost of reconstruction."

After Germany's invasion of the USSR in June 1941, the Anglo-Soviet alliance (1941–45) heralded a move away from earlier distrust of the USSR in Britain, and millions of pounds were raised in the UK to support the war effort of Britain's new ally. The SCR thrived in this atmosphere with a flourishing events programme, including *The Eastern Front* exhibition (1942), designed by Hungarian émigré architect Ernö Goldfinger, and *Hero Cities: Leningrad and Stalingrad* (1944) which explored reconstruction in the Soviet Union.

The growing importance of architecture and planning in Anglo-Soviet relations encouraged other communist and progressive architects to join the SCR. Renowned architect and Head of the Liverpool School of Architecture Sir Charles Reilly became an SCR Vice-President. RIBA Librarian EJ Carter became a Vice-Chair.




Pamphlet by Arthur Ling, 1943, based on his pre-war research in Moscow (SCRSS Archive)

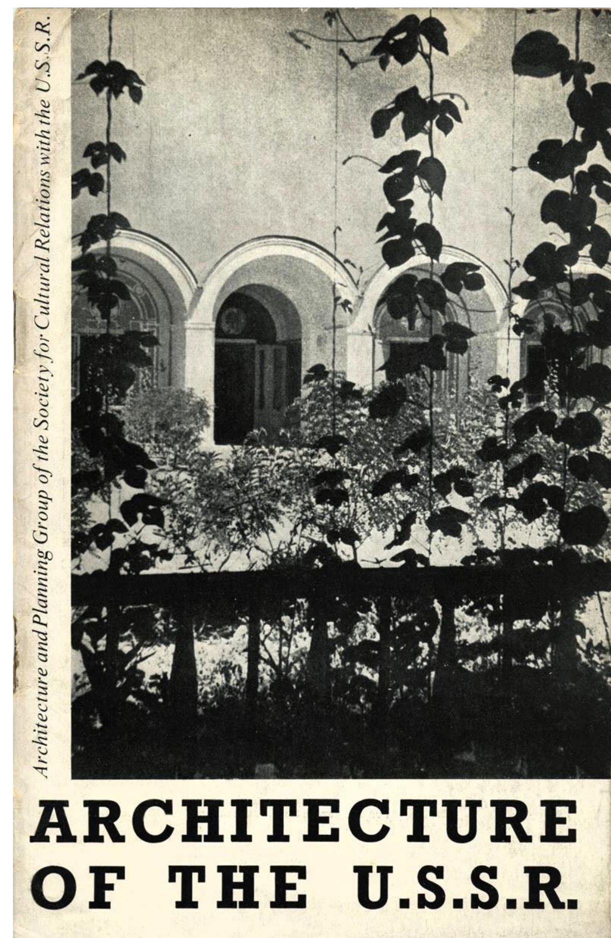
On 19 April 1945, at the instigation of Ling, the SCR Architecture and Planning Group

was set up with Ling as Chair and Sir Charles Reilly as President. By June the group was seventy-one members strong and included both the famous modernist architect and Tecton Group founder Berthold Lubetkin, who had arrived in the UK from the USSR in 1931, and Goldfinger. Ling was in regular contact with Soviet architects about methods of construction and the design of new settlements. From 1944–49, he was the Editor of the new SCR journal *Soviet Reconstruction: Town Planning, Building and Architecture*. In 1945 Ling became Head of the Town Planning Division at the LCC, and later Chief Planning Officer, focusing on estate planning and redevelopment. Many architects and planners of huge importance to British postwar construction were members of or allied to the SCR: planners of new towns Peterlee and Stevenage New Town, those working on the City of London's reconstruction, and Coventry's City Architect.[5] In March 1948 the SCR Architecture and Planning Group organised the popular *Exhibition of the Architecture of the USSR* at the RIBA; Ling wrote the preface to the exhibition catalogue.

Although the SCR arranged visits of Soviet architects to the UK, and reciprocal visits to the USSR, through to the 1960s, from 1948 the Cold War created change. Growing tensions meant that it became harder, even through friendship societies such as the SCR, to visit the USSR. Government circles were increasingly wary of the political alignment of friendship societies. The SCR's Architecture and Planning Group lost its dynamism, and ceased to exist in 1956 after Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

Ling continued to take advantage of opportunities offered and attended the Moscow Conference of the International Union of Architects in July 1958, while Chief Architect and Planner for Coventry. However, ultimately, the intellectual stimuli for UK planning after the war came mostly from the USA or northern Europe.

Ling remained a loyal SCR member through the following decades, although he appears not to have participated actively. However, in October 1985 he wrote with a proposal to the SCR Secretary, Jean Turner, who had joined the SCR earlier that year and was a




Catalogue, with preface by Arthur Ling, for the SCR's *Exhibition of the Architecture of the USSR* at the RIBA, 1948 (SCRSS Archive)

community architect by profession. "Perestroika had led to a reassessment of architecture and planning in the USSR… Architects were looking to exchange ideas with Western architects and institutions. Therefore the time was ripe for the SCR to re-establish its architectural section and encourage exchanges."[6] Ling also wrote an article on architecture for the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* that autumn.[7]

In early 1986 the Section was revived as the SCR Architects and Planners Group, with Ling as Chair. With the help of Turner, Dr Catherine Cooke and Alan Spence, the Group organised a series of highly successful architecture and planning exchanges from 1986 to November 1991, including exhibitions and forums in Bath, at

the Polytechnic of Central London and the RIBA. However, plans for a joint British-Soviet conference in Moscow on *Garden Cities and New Towns in the 21st Century* ended when the USSR collapsed at the end of 1991.[8]

In 1992 Ling stood down as Chair of the Group, due to ill health, but remained an SCR member. From 1993–95 the Group continued to plan bilateral events but unfortunately these did not materialise. In December 1995, Ling died and the Group disbanded.

*PlanningWeek* magazine's obituary of Ling on 1 February 1996 recognised him as "a visionary and dynamic architect / planner with a fine analytical mind and a well-developed design ability... essentially an idealist and humanist, determined to use his considerable talents for the benefit of mankind". In 1996 Ling's family kindly donated the Arthur Ling Bequest to the SCRSS Archive. The collection includes books, photographs, and slides from Ling's travels to Moscow, Tbilisi and Eastern Europe.

**Footnotes**

**1** Stephen V Ward, 'Soviet Communism and the British Planning Movement: Rational Learning or Utopian Imagining?' in *Planning Perspectives*, 27 (4), 2012, 499–524

**2** Arthur Ling, 'Town Planning in the Soviet Union: Twenty Years of Reconstruction' in *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4, October 1941, 306–316

**3** Ibid.

**4** Arthur Ling, 'The Reconstruction of Moscow' in *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, April–June 1942, 91–100

**5** Ward, op. cit.

**6** Jean Turner, 'SCR Architects and Planners Group 1945–1991' in *SCRSS Information Digest*, Spring 2006, 1–2

**7** Arthur Ling, 'Some Thoughts on Architecture: Socialist Realism, Modernism and Post-Modernism in Architecture and Planning' in *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Autumn 1985, 8–15

**8** Turner, op. cit.

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*Helen Turner is the daughter of architect and former SCRSS Secretary Jean Turner (and mother to architect Rosa). She has been interested for many years in the development of social housing and city planning for the benefit of communities.*

# Feature

## Tabitha Salmon, Artist

By Diana Turner

Tabitha Salmon at the SCRSS centenary event, with her Moskvoretsky drawing *Outside Paveletskaya Station, 10 September 1986* (Photograph: Karl Weiss)

London artist Tabitha Salmon (born 1955) is an imaginative draughtswoman who has honed her use of media and colour over the years, as well as her technique. "All I ever want to do is use my eyes to observe. I usually draw on a small scale to record my initial, instinctive, reactions. Then I like to let the dust settle for quite a while and see

Two drawings from Tabitha Salmon's *Moskvoretsky* exhibition, which opened at the Morley Gallery, Lambeth, in March 1987. Top: *Blini (Pancake) Shop, 29 January 1986*. Bottom: *Fishing on the Canal Bridge, 1986* (Copyright: Tabitha Salmon)

where that leads – hopefully to something new for me and to something different." In 1986 our Society (then the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR, or SCR) helped her with an artist's residency in Moscow's Moskvoretsky District, followed by a trip to Georgia in 1988. Her acclaimed *Moskvoretsky* exhibition captured the Zeitgeist of the early *perestroika* years and changed her life.

In 1983 there was huge media coverage of the Women's Peace Camp at the US air base at Greenham Common, Berkshire. Curious, Tabitha visited the women throughout 1984, discovering her skill for 'reportage drawing'. "The most useful lesson I learned was drawing's such an open activity to do, people don't distrust you. It got me thinking, I can do this in a country where I can't speak the language, because *this* seems to be my language." Her first solo exhibition *Greenham Common* toured in late 1984–85, finishing at Kennington Library, London, where a group of Lambeth women councillors visited. What was she planning next? A trip to Russia, but she didn't know how. "Lambeth has a twin council in Moscow!" exclaimed Labour Councillor Joan Walley. "The second she said it, the whole plan just burst in my head. I knew that twinning was a friendly exchange of information about how our communities live, which was exactly what I'd been doing at Greenham."

Tabitha obtained authorisation (if not money) via Lambeth's Town Twinning Officer. Taking a cheap tour to Moscow in summer 1985, she delivered her letter of introduction in person to Moskvoretsky District Soviet, which approved the project. Back in London, she discovered the SCR through the Lambeth–Moskvoretsky Town Twinning Group. SCR Secretary Jean Turner arranged visa support, put her in touch with Friendship House in Moscow and provided a modest grant towards her travel costs. "The thing I remember about the SCR was just that they were kind, they were interested, they were enthusiastic."

She arrived in Moscow in January 1986 for a month, discovering that Moskvoretsky District Soviet hadn't received her telex. "That's why the whole thing carried on in a very casual way, which was perfect." An interpreter was put on standby – setting Tabitha up with an introduction only when needed. Moskvoretsky, like Lambeth, spread south of the river, opposite the seat of government. Tabitha explored on foot, drawing outdoors on streets, parks and building sites, and indoors in shops, cafes and the Metro. "I had one of those Falkplan maps, the fold-up ones, and it got completely dog-eared. Every day I was discovering something surprising. It wasn't some boring, modern district, it was an old merchant quarter of Moscow with some wonderful old buildings. And on top of that, I knew I was seeing stuff that was not normal for a tourist."

Tabitha brought watercolours, oil pastels, pencils and black crayon. Outside, she could only work for twenty minutes at a time. "[My] watercolours froze in the box. I was painting freeze-dried crystals onto the paper. I had to let the pictures dry on the flat or the colours would run once the ice melted."[1] Oil pastels were easier, she worked quickly on tinted grey paper, then drew into the oil pastels with pencil. The black crayon was reserved for her tiny sketchbooks.

No one was suspicious of Tabitha, quite the opposite. She was welcomed into people's homes. On a building site, the site foreman gave her a block of polystyrene to stand on to stop her feet freezing and tots of vodka in his portacabin to warm up. At the Danilov Monastery, her watercolour froze, she knocked on the entrance lodge door and was let in. Having sat her down and put on some classical music, the young man disappeared. "Every day I thought, sooner or later, some official's going to come along and say: 'You can't do this.'" But he returned with a cooked breakfast for her to eat while the picture dried. "In essence, that's what my whole trip was like – people being amazingly kind in ways I never would have imagined."

Back home, after another Moscow trip in summer 1986, she set to work on an

exhibition. In all her projects there are two layers: what she does on location and how she processes it later, at a physical and emotional distance. For Moscow, the core works became large oil pastels. Two sketchbook "scribbles", captured in seconds, were re-imagined in charcoal and became her most popular prints: five men fishing on a canal bridge at dusk, and two uniformed soldiers chatting on the up escalator in the Metro.

Her exhibition *Moskvoretsky* opened at Morley Gallery, Lambeth, in March 1987. Tabitha worried before the private view: would people just look at the pictures, smile and leave? Despite the SCR's grant, her Moscow trips had cost a lot. "Well, the first night, in two hours, it paid my debts!" It struck a chord with the public, coming just as the USSR opened up under Gorbachev. The exhibition toured to Bath, Edinburgh, Newcastle, and back to London's National Theatre foyer where writer Michael Frayn was overheard to say: "If you want to know what Russia's like, *that's* what it's like." Bob Daglish, Moscow diarist for the SCR, told her: "You've seen things I've never seen and I've lived here forty years."[2] Tabitha had glowing reviews and was interviewed widely in the UK print and broadcast media, including *Woman's Hour*, as well on Soviet TV's *Vremya* and *Trud* newspaper.

Moscow changed her life. It was her "big adventure", giving her confidence "to spread my wings", while the publicity provided "a useful leg-up for some other things I wanted to do". It would eventually lead to her becoming a professional painter full-time.

In 1987 she began a new project – Naples. In November she returned to Moscow to gift Moskvoretsky a set of her prints. She had been entertaining friends with tales of Neapolitan life – they sound just like Georgians, they laughed – when she called at Friendship House to angle for a second odyssey. Yes, they said immediately – *where*? Caught off guard, she replied "Georgia", when her real intention would have been to visit one of the more far-flung regions of the Soviet Union. She forgot this until an urgent SCR telegram reached her in Naples in spring 1988, saying she was booked for Georgia in May. She had an enjoyable, boozy time in Georgia,[3] visiting Tbilisi and Telavi, but the timing was wrong. She was "totally immersed in Naples", preparing for an exhibition, and there "wasn't room in my head for both". As a "delegation of me", it was also hard to get time alone to draw. She loved Georgia but, unfortunately, no exhibition came of it, although she sold most of her pictures.

*Soldiers on the Escalator, Moscow Metro, 1986*
(Copyright: Tabitha Salmon)

In the following two decades Tabitha was commissioned to paint several major engineering projects under construction, often after determined cold-calling, including the Channel Tunnel from 1988 onwards and the Tsing Ma Bridge in Hong Kong in 1995. She regrets that she never did a ship. Other commissions were BNFL Sellafield and 1930s British architecture. She also immersed herself in the exuberant colour and life of Deauville, Seville, Venice and St Moritz. But at a certain point she lost interest in travelling constantly to work and develop exhibitions, and nowadays prefers

to re-explore past travels in her studio, alongside developing new ideas. She has moved from drawings to watercolour to the rich colours of oil pastel and now works mainly in oil paint.

Almost forty years on from her Moscow and Georgia trips, why has Tabitha remained a member of our Society? “Loyalty. I’ve been a lousy member and I’m not useful. But I was so grateful to the SCR, they’re not a well-funded organisation, but they gave me a little, they helped me.” She later adds: “I say I’ve done nothing but the fact that you’ve got my pictures, it’s almost like my contribution is *that*.”

#### Footnotes

**1** Quoted in Simon Gooch’s *Tabitha Salmon*, Tabitha Salmon Ltd, 2005. This book is a beautifully illustrated, comprehensive survey of Tabitha’s work, covering from childhood and art school days to 2005. A copy is in the SCRSS Archive.

**2** See Robert Daglish’s account of his meeting with Tabitha, including reproductions of her sketches, in ‘Lambeth-Zamoskvoretsky Link-up’, *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Summer 1986, 11–13

**3** See Tabitha’s article ‘Visiting Artist in Georgia’, with sketches, in *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Summer / Autumn 1988, 25–31

#### Additional Sources

Tabitha Salmon, *For the Record*, published by Tabitha Salmon, 2022
In her own words, Tabitha describes the influences and experiences that have shaped her life and work. A copy is in the SCRSS Archive.

*Tabitha Salmon: Painter* website, URL: https://tabithasalmon.co.uk/
Tabitha’s online studio has a short film and a gallery section providing a taste of her work over the last thirty years (including Moskvoretsky), alongside some more recent work.

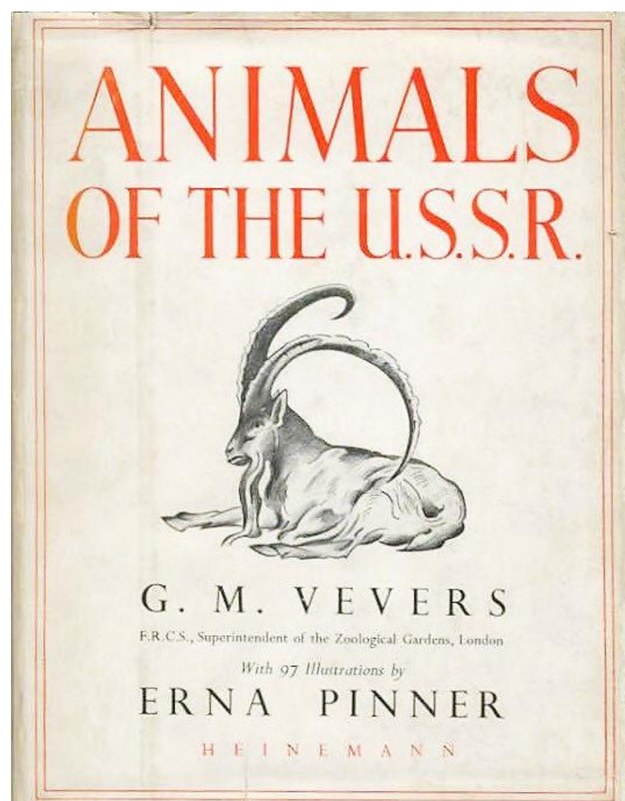
**Note:** Except where indicated, all quotations in this article come from Diana Turner’s interview with Tabitha Salmon on 19 June 2024.

*Diana Turner has been Editor of the ‘SCRSS Digest’ since autumn 2004. She loves this work, but occasionally regrets that for the last twenty years she has never opened a new issue of the Society’s journal without already knowing its contents.*

# Feature

## Geoffrey Marr (GM) Vevers, Zoologist

By Andrew Jameson




Cover of GM Vevers’ *Animals of the USSR*, Heinemann, 1948, depicting a Kamchatka ram by illustrator Erna Pinner (SCRSS Library)

Geoffrey Marr Vevers (1890–1970) was a very hard-working but extremely modest man. You may be surprised to learn that the survival of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) in the 1930s and 1940s is probably due to him. His real job was as Superintendent of London Zoo, added to which he was a qualified doctor in human and veterinary medicine. When the Zoo outgrew its London site, he helped found a new one at Whipsnade. He was also an expert on the fauna of the USSR in its nine different time zones. As a socialist, he was inspired by the new Soviet socialist state and ‘modernisation’. So it was also natural that he was a supporter of constructivist (or modernist) architecture in Britain: he himself lived in a modernist house built in a corner of the Whipsnade

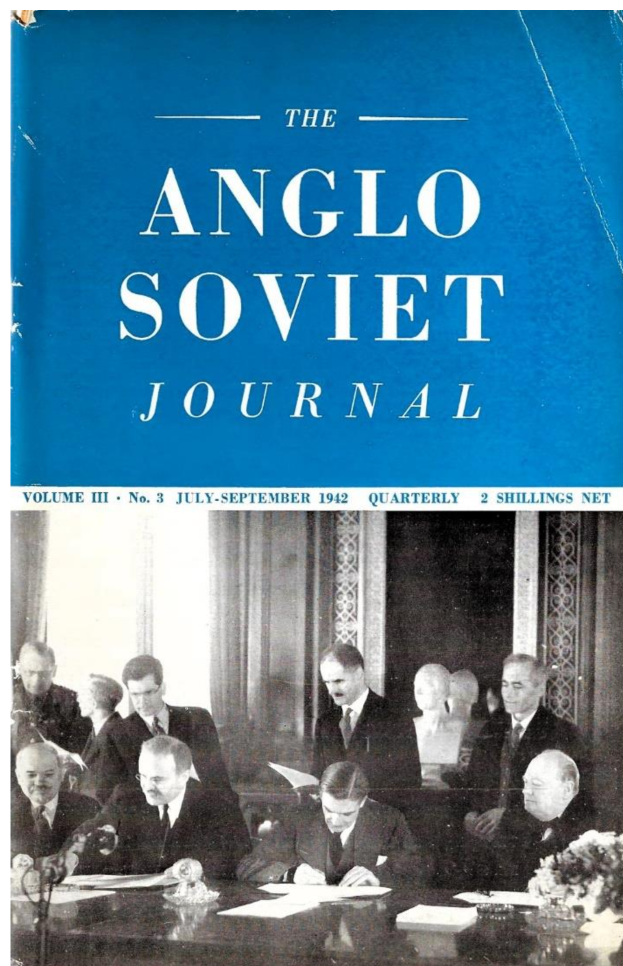
estate. He re-founded the SCR's *Anglo-Soviet Journal* in a form that was to last and was its Editor from 1940–47. And, finally, it was he who generated the money to give the SCR its first permanent home.

Vevers was born of Herefordshire farming stock in 1890. The surname is probably of Norman French origin. Vevers' father had a local practice as a surgeon, so it was no surprise that he entered St Thomas's Medical School in 1909. He served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in the First World War and later entered the London School of Tropical Medicine.

At the same time he became a member of the Zoological Society of London. In 1923, aged 33, he was appointed Superintendent of London Zoo, a post which he held until his retirement in 1948. In that capacity, in the early 1930s he paid several visits to Moscow and added a number of rare animals to the zoo's collection in London.[1] He also believed in spreading scientific knowledge to everyone, particularly young people. Would we be surprised to learn that he was a frequent broadcaster on the BBC's *Children's Hour*? In a book called *London's Zoo*, we find the transcript of a broadcast by him on 20 May 1946, describing the journey of the Giant Panda Lien-Hu to the Zoo that year. In 1948, the year of his retirement, his book *Animals of the USSR* was published by Heinemann.

In the 1930s two streams of Vevers' development came together: his socialism and his interest in the modernisation of society. It was the period of the Bauhaus and of constructivism. In 1931 a Georgian-Jewish architect called Berthold Lubetkin,[2] sensing that revolutionary constructivism was being replaced by Stalinist architecture in the USSR, settled in London. He was introduced to Vevers, and through him, was asked to design a Penguin Pool for the London Zoo. The Penguin Pool (completed in 1934) was, and still is, an elegant example of modernist architecture and is a Grade I listed structure.

We are not sure when Vevers first became a member of the SCR. However, he had been interested in the Soviet Union from an early stage – as an example of the new world of socialism. He became a member of the SCR Executive Committee in 1938 and served for two years as Vice-Chair. In 1940 he added to his duties the post of Honorary Treasurer.




Cover of the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. III, No. 3, July–September 1942, showing the signing of the Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance between Great Britain and the USSR (SCRSS Archive)

For an account of Vevers' involvement with the SCR, we turn to a tribute[3] by Judith Todd, Secretary of the SCR from 1937–52, on his death. Throughout the piece, she refers to him informally as "Geoffrey".

When Todd first met Vevers, the Society was housed in three small rooms in Gower Street, London WC1, and its activities were modest, although it had done much pioneering work already. Despite the vagaries of the political 'weather' in this period, Soviet and British scientists and artists (in the broadest sense) had always

keenly appreciated international contacts. Vevers respected the strength and importance of the USSR and this, together with his passion for educating the public, meant that one of his missions was to provide information about the USSR without propaganda from either side.

Thus it was that the new *Anglo-Soviet Journal*[4] came into being in January 1940, with the help of a sympathetic publisher, Lindsay Drummond. The science magazine *Nature* welcomed the new arrival, while providing an absolutely even-handed mention of the difficulties it might face.[5] The first number of the journal celebrated the great agricultural exhibition held the previous year in Moscow (in 1959 the permanent exhibition site was renamed to VDNKh or Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy).

Vevers' concept was that of a quarterly journal, something resembling a Russian *tolstii zhurnal* ('fat' journal) and devoted to serious study of all aspects of the Soviet state. It is worth taking the trouble to inspect these early volumes. The individual numbers are as big as a large paperback book, thick enough to have a spine with the journal name in large letters. The first year has a total of 348 pages, with high-quality photographic illustrations. The second has 352. Each number has an editorial commenting on current affairs, articles covering every possible subject area, book reviews and, finally, brief SCR news.

With hindsight we can probably see how the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* evolved in the early years. In the planning period Vevers would have spent some time building up a stock of articles (or promises of articles) and a collection of good quality photographs to illustrate the new venture. For the first two years the journal was just as he had planned. However, as the war took its toll, its physical size was reduced, likewise the print size. Thereafter, it maintained the new format with its distinctive blue front cover and usual coverage through to Volume 10 (1949).

Vevers had to deal with the problems of wartime editorship at a time when his own work at the Zoological Society in London and Whipsnade had doubled due to bombing and wartime shortages. Despite these obstacles, he managed to produce the regular periodical the Society had always wanted, conjuring up supplies of paper and disciplining contributors with friendly persistence.

After the Nazi invasion of the USSR, Vevers took on yet another job, that of the collection and despatch of medical supplies for the USSR. He had been one of the first, in the hot summer days of 1941, to realise the importance of speedy assistance, and his medical knowledge was invaluable in the selection of goods and equipment. His efforts, combined with those of the Joint Committee for Soviet Aid, meant that the flow of supplies began well before the Aid-to-Russia Fund started by Lady Churchill. Here he worked closely with the Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maisky and his wife Agnes (the couple developed a lasting friendship with Vevers), and later with Professor SM Sarkisov, the resident London representative appointed by the Soviet Red Cross Societies.

After the war, Vevers, as Honorary Treasurer, was responsible for much of the fundraising work to enable the Society to acquire a home of its own: the SCR moved in 1947 from its cramped quarters in Gower Street to Kensington Square. He retired from his zoo job in 1948 and it appears that he also gave up working with and for the SCR at the same time.

To sum up Geoffrey Vevers' contribution to the SCR, we can agree with Judith Todd that throughout his life he regarded the Soviet Union with admiration, affection and understanding, and maintained a lively and practical interest in Anglo-Soviet co-operation. This was a cause to which he devoted all his intelligence and his heart. In view of his many positive actions, we can say with assurance that the Society's debt to Vevers is simply incalculable.

**Footnotes**

**1** 'Obituaries: Dr G. M. Vevers' in *Nature*, Vol. 226, 4 April 1970, 89, URL: https://www.nature.com/articles/226089c0.pdf (accessed 01/08/2024)

**2** Berthold Lubetkin later became a member of the SCR's influential Architecture and Planning Group – *see pages 12–15 of this issue.*

**3** Judith Todd, 'Geoffrey Marr Vevers, F.R.C.S' in *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 3, April 1970, 62–64

**4** The first instance of the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* was published in 1937, finishing after only ten issues, and was in a different format.

**5** 'Anglo Soviet Journal' in *Nature*, No. 3669, 24 February 1940, 301

*Andrew Jameson is one of the last surviving RAF linguists who worked in Berlin. After that he spent time at Moscow State University making live recordings, some of which he still has, for a Nuffield-funded Russian Language Project. When he left Moscow, the Komsomol gave him the horn of a Kamchatka ram (as featured on the cover of Vevers' book 'Animals of the USSR').*

# Feature

## James Aldridge, Writer

By Helen Mercer

James Aldridge (1918–2015) is first listed as a committee member of the Writers' Group of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) in the annual report for 1949–50. At that time the Group included JB Priestley (President), Somerset Maugham, Sean O'Casey, Eric Ambler, Jack Lindsay, Compton Mackenzie and Dylan Thomas.

James Aldridge would count today among the lesser-known, if not forgotten, members of that impressive crowd, yet as a young man he was already well known. In the 1940s he was a celebrated war correspondent and a bestselling writer of wartime adventure fiction. In the postwar years he was a 'real literary hero' in the Soviet Union, where for a time he was the most widely published contemporary Western writer. He is the only British or Australian writer to have been awarded the Lenin Peace Prize (in 1972). He won the World Peace Council prize in 1953 for what probably remains his most famous book, *The Diplomat*, and he received two Australian prizes for children's literature.

James Aldridge (SCRSS Library)

He was a long-standing supporter of the SCR until 1992, speaking at meetings, entertaining Soviet visitors, and in the 1980s, when his wife Dina Aldridge was Chair of the Society, he arranged with fellow writer Emma Smith the successful exhibition of British books translated into the languages of the USSR.

Born in Australia in 1918, James Aldridge grew up in Swan Hills, a small town in bush country 400 miles north of Melbourne. His family was middle class and conservative but, growing up in Depression Australia, Aldridge became a lifelong Marxist: "This is my point of view and always has been since I was 16 anyway."

Aldridge made his name as a reporter during the Soviet-Finnish war of 1939–40, being one of the very few Western journalists on the ground when the war broke out. He became an official and widely

syndicated war correspondent, and by 1942, according to one newspaper, had covered more fronts of the war than any other reporter. From November 1943 he was based in Moscow from where he followed the Red Army across Ukraine, Poland and Hungary. His reports from these experiences are among his most moving. They include accounts of the underground resistance in Odessa and the Nazi death camp at Maidanek ("the worst day of my life," he later commented), as well as detailed descriptions of technical developments and professional training methods of the Red Army.

Cover of a Soviet edition in Russian of *The Sea Eagle* (*Morskoi orel*), published in 1958 by Khudozhestvennaya literatura (SCRSS Library)

In between the fighting he wrote his first three novels – *Signed with Their Honour* (1942), *The Sea Eagle* (1944) and *Of Many Men* (published in 1946 but finished during the intense battle for Budapest). These first forays began his life as a novelist, although he continued to write occasional articles for Soviet and other journals. He published twenty-three novels between 1942 and 2006, together with many short stories, several non-fiction books and essays, a play and TV scripts. His themes and characters appealed to filmmakers, and several became films or TV series.

Eleven of his novels were for adults, mainly on political themes. They reflected his own experiences and observations of war, of imperialist rivalries in the Middle East, of the machinations of diplomats, intelligence services and newspapermen, of McCarthyism and the Cold War. One, *A Captive in the Land*, is set partly in the Soviet Union in the Khrushchev era.

The finest of these books is undoubtedly *The Diplomat*, set in Iran in the winter of 1945–46. Like others set in the Middle East, it provides, through the main character's painful struggles to understand his situation, an exploration of the effects of colonialism and of the forces for national liberation, a cause he actively espoused.

Commenting on these novels Jack Lindsay wrote: "It would be hard to point to any contemporary novelist who has dealt more directly with international political problems in the second half of the twentieth century. Certainly it would be difficult to find one who has done so with such success, uniting a warm sympathy for the persons about whom he writes with, in the last resort, a true artistic detachment."

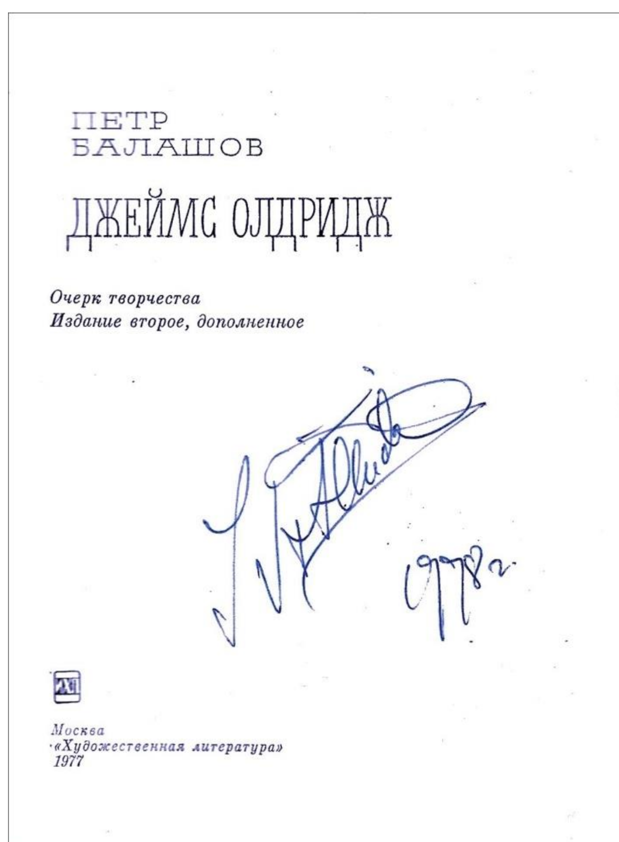
Aldridge applied the same warmth and perception to the small-town problems that feature in his novels about childhood. From the 1970s, and exclusively from the 1980s, Aldridge drew on his own memories with many stories based in St Helen, a fictionalised version of Swan Hills. Here many stories portray deprived or disadvantaged children seeking their own path in life in a conservative and often bigoted town.

Whether writing political or small-town themed books, Aldridge's interest was always in human motives and responses to their historically defined condition: "Each of

my books can be considered part of a continuing series entitled 'The Human Choice'. I believe that the decisive actions of people (including the individual) determine the survival or demise of mankind itself."

How typical was Aldridge of SCR members at that time?

Firstly, he shared with them, and the SCR in general, the hostility of much of the British establishment, and this may have contributed to his relative obscurity today. Indeed, he appeared on the infamous list of




Title page, signed by James Aldridge in 1978, of a Soviet monograph on his work by Peter Balashov, published in Russian in 1977 (SCRSS Library)

'fellow travellers' that George Orwell gave to the Information Research Department of the Foreign Office in 1949, a dubious distinction shared by other members of the SCR Writers' Group: Priestley, O'Casey and Arthur Calder-Marshall.

Secondly, the sources of his support for the SCR may mirror that of many others. Aldridge's commitment to the Marxism he learned in his youth was one reason for his belief in the Soviet Union and his hopes for what became known as 'actually existing socialism'. However, it was not necessarily the most important reason nor perhaps the most typical.

Of major importance was his admiration for the Red Army and for the Soviet people in their decisive opposition to and defeat of Fascism. He admired the Soviet attitude towards culture, often noting the sheer number of books and Western novels published there, and the high level of cultural knowledge and engagement among the people. In addition, he saw the Soviet Union as the counterweight to US and Western imperialism in general.

But his main concern was for peace. His experience of war made him a vocal advocate for peace, understanding and East-West dialogue. He attended the World Congress of Partisans for Peace in 1949. This became the World Peace Council whose second President was SCR member JD Bernal.

In the early 1950s he shared platforms with JD Bernal, DN Pritt and Hewlett Johnson as they spoke up and down the country on behalf of the Stockholm Peace Petition. He later supported the Helsinki peace process and at the 1973 World Congress of Peace Forces in Moscow he chaired the Commission on Co-operation in Education and Culture.

Aldridge made many contributions to discussions about the role of the writer in society, especially as the world careered towards renewed Cold War in the 1980s. "It was a writer's duty," he wrote, "to struggle openly against the forces of reaction and war." He characterised the literary tradition to which he first belonged as "writers who hated war".

There are many good reasons for getting to know James Aldridge. His children's stories are an important contribution to Australian literature and a literary understanding of that country's past. His novels covering contemporary political developments prove the value of literature as "the travelling

companion of history", as Gorky put it. Finally, his novels may be seen as an example of a specifically British interpretation of the concept of socialist realism, and he, in turn, may have exercised some influence in the USSR: an example of the reciprocity and fruitfulness of exchanges made possible in part through the activities of the SCR.

*Helen Mercer is a retired teacher and university lecturer. Her research into the British-Australian author James Aldridge is a recent interest inspired by the message of peace and anti-colonialism in his books.*

# Feature

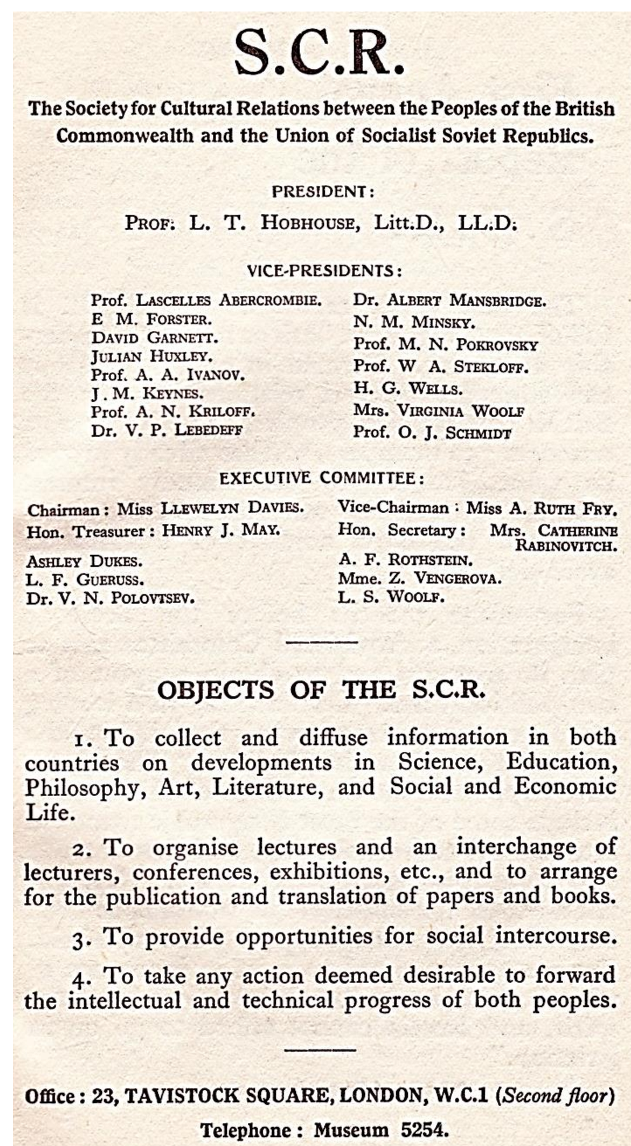
## Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Ruth Fry and Edith Mansell Moullin, Campaigners

By Jane Rosen

On examining the history of the Society there is no doubt that women were central to its formation. Looking at the list of original supporters of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR), thirteen of them were women. It is not, by any means, the majority, but it is a significant number.

Further to that, the meeting to constitute the SCR held on 9 July 1924 at Caxton Hall had Margaret Llewelyn Davies presiding. It also included presentations by two Russian women living in Britain: Dr Varvara Polovtsev on advances in public health and education, with suggestions on how to make Russian art and science better known in Britain, and Zinaida Vengerova on new literature after the Revolution. And although the resolution for the formation of the Society was moved by the economist JA Hobson and seconded by LF Gueruss from the Soviet Embassy, it was supported by Ruth Fry.

The first Executive Committee (EC) of the Society consisted of ten members, five of whom were women. Three of the women held three of the four highest offices – Chair, Vice-Chair and Honorary Secretary. This article will look at two of these women – Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Ruth Fry, as well as a later Chair, Edith Mansell Moullin.


S.C.R.

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1. To collect and diffuse information in both countries on developments in Science, Education, Philosophy, Art, Literature, and Social and Economic Life.

2. To organise lectures and an interchange of lecturers, conferences, exhibitions, etc., and to arrange for the publication and translation of papers and books.

3. To provide opportunities for social intercourse.

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The first page of the SCR's Annual Report 1924–25, listing Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Ruth Fry as Chair and Vice-Chair, respectively, on the Executive Committee (SCRSS Archive)

So who were these women and what drew them to the SCR?

According to Ruth Cohen in her biography,[1] Margaret Llewelyn Davies (1861–1944) came from a family interested in radical thought. Relatives on her mother's side were, variously, married to the daughter of Mrs Gaskell, involved in legal advice for trade unions, workers for women's suffrage,

involved in women's education, and included Professor Spencer Beesly, a Communard and the Chair of the meeting that went on to form the First International and who married Margaret's aunt, Emily. Her father's side included another aunt called Emily who was a supporter of women's education, involved in the setting up of Girton College, connected to the suffrage movement and was close to Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. Indeed, Llewelyn Davies' father assisted Anderson in setting up the New Hospital for Women.

At a young age Llewelyn Davies joined the co-operative movement and soon became a member of the central committee of the Women's Co-operative Guild. This was to be the central focus of her work, she became its General Secretary in 1889 and remained in the role until 1922. It was not the end of her hard work. She had a year's rest and then threw herself into organising a society that was aiming to recruit "the learned + distinguished in every dept of life", explaining that this was for the purpose of "fostering intellectual relations between the peoples of the USSR and the *British Commonwealth*".[2] This was, of course, our Society.

A major influence on her interest in the Soviet Union was her commitment to the co-operative movement. She stated that she saw "the creation of a socialist USSR as the possible first step towards the transformation of the whole world into an international co-operative commonwealth".[3]

Ruth Fry (1878–1962) was, of course, a Quaker. Her father, Sir Edward Fry, was a judge at the Hague Permanent Court of Arbitration and Fry's first employment was there as his secretary. This role increased her commitment to the idea that peace could be created through international dialogue and goodwill. This purpose led to her role as Secretary and Fundraiser for the South African Women and Children Distress Fund during the Boer War. This organisation had evolved from Emily Hobhouse's work exposing the conditions of the British concentration camps in South Africa. Emily Hobhouse was also a campaigner for women's suffrage and the sister of LT Hobhouse, who appears on the list of the first supporters of the SCR and as the Society's first President.

Fry continued her work in the field of humanitarian relief, being appointed as General Secretary of the Friends War Victims Relief Committee in 1914. She oversaw its growth from a small society to a trailblazing international humanitarian society that pioneered modern relief methods and was one of the few British societies to help civilians in need, often close to the front lines. While working for the Committee, she travelled to various countries, including the Soviet Union in 1921–23 during the Famine.[4] Emily Baugham states that during Fry's visits to Soviet Russia, she "developed an appreciation for Soviet Society", quoting her as saying that the "pervasive feeling of equality gave her pleasure".[5] In October 1924 she was asked to become Vice-Chair of the SCR and agreed to take the position for six months – in the end she stayed until 1935, latterly as the Chair of the Society after Llewelyn Davies resigned due to ill health.

Although many of the first female members of the EC had left by the 1930s, women continued to fill half the places on it, and take on the highest offices, until the Second World War. For example, Edith Mansell Moullin (1859–1941) served on the EC from 1928 to 1936 – first as Vice-Chair, then as Chair. Following this, she was a Vice-President until her death.

Moullin was a suffragist and pacifist. She helped in a soup kitchen during the Dockers' Strike and was a founding member of the Anti-Sweating League.[6] Her husband, Charles Mansell Moullin, was a surgeon and they were both supporters of women doctors and women's suffrage. Moullin was in the Women's Freedom League, the Women's Social and Political Union until 1913, and the Church Socialist League. She was a Founder and Vice President of the Forward Cymric Suffrage League, and as a result of her work for women's suffrage was arrested and held in Holloway Prison for five

days in 1911. The couple were friends of the suffragette Emily Wilding Davison, and it was Moullin's husband who performed the emergency operation after Davison's fatal demonstration at the Epsom Derby.[7] Moullin apparently once said: "[M]y career has been one long record of a supporter of unpopular causes."[8] The files kept by the security services for Eva Reckitt, founder of Collets Bookshop, show that she was Moullin's niece. It is likely that Reckitt introduced Moullin to the SCR. Like her predecessors, Llewelyn Davies and Fry, she worked unstintingly for the Society and for the exchange of information and peace between the two countries.

There have been many other prominent women who served in the SCR. These three show the range of interests and talents, and a willingness to challenge the status quo, that many of our members have shown and continue to show.

**Footnotes**

**1** Ruth Cohen, *Margaret Llewelyn Davies: With Women for a New World*, Merlin Press, 2020

**2** Ibid., 226 (italics in original)

**3** Ibid.

**4** See pages 9–12 of this issue about Harry C Stevens, Fry's fellow Quaker, Friends relief worker and SCR member.

**5** Emily Baugham, 'Fry, (Anna) Ruth' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, URL: https://www.oxforddnb.com (accessed 30/07/2024)

**6** The National Anti-Sweating League was founded in 1906 to campaign for minimum wages for workers in the 'sweating' industries i.e. labour based on long hours of toil for poverty wages, carried out in unsanitary, often dangerous conditions.

**7** Emily Wilding Davison threw herself in front of the King's horse during the race and died two days later.

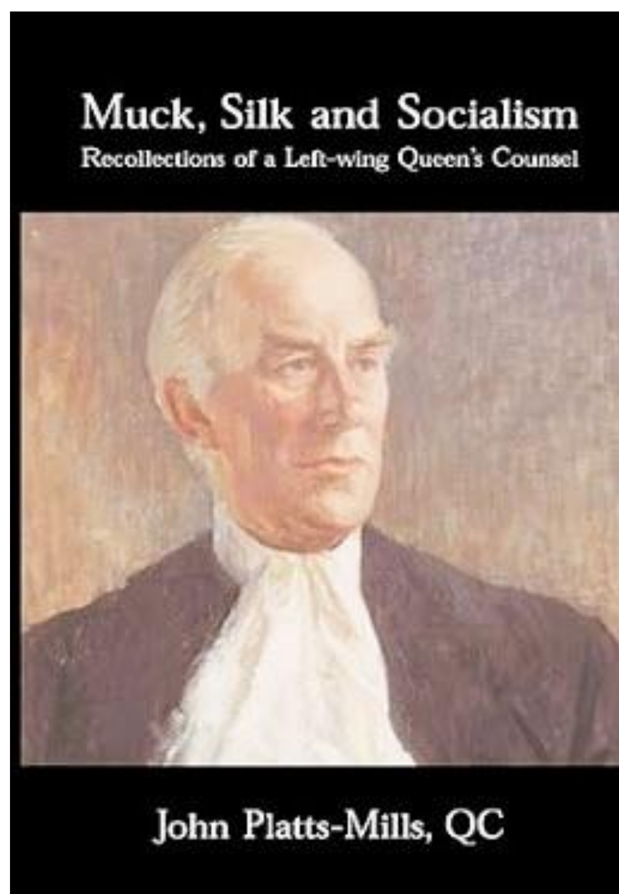
**8** Letter from E R M Moullin to Edith How Martyn, dated 6 September 1935, held in the Suffragette Fellowship Collection, 57.116/79, Museum of London.

*Jane Rosen is the author of the Society's new centenary history, 'An Unpopular Cause'. She is a librarian who has worked in specialist historical and cultural libraries, including the SCR, and has a research interest in radical and working-class children's literature.*

# Feature

## John Platts-Mills, Barrister

By Bill Bowring




Cover of John Platts-Mills' autobiography, Paper Publishing, 2002 (SCRSS Library)

John Platts-Mills QC (1906–2001) was President of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) from 1988 until his death. I was the Society's Chair from 1989 to 1997 and was elected President in 2007 (the solicitor Jack Gaster served as SCRSS President from 2001 to 2007). Platts-Mills was also President of the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers when I was Chair from 1990 to 1995 (with Keir Starmer, the newly elected UK Prime Minister, as Secretary). So I served under Platts-Mills for several years.

Platts-Mills was born into a wealthy family in New Zealand on 4 October 1906, and died at the age of 95 on 26 October 2001. He was representing clients in England – and Ghana in 1991 – until his death. His

autobiography, *Muck, Silk and Socialism: Recollections of a Left-Wing Queen's Counsel*, was published posthumously in 2002 and is my main source for this article.

He had a private education in New Zealand, and a first class degree from Victoria University College in Wellington, where he was also a top athlete in track events, boxing and rowing. In 1929 he won a Rhodes Scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, was called to the Bar in 1932, spoke with an Oxford accent, and obtained a flat in the Inner Temple which he kept for the rest of his life. At that time he belonged to the ultra-conservative 'English Mistery' group.

He made a patrician impression, tall and distinguished looking, and always drove a Rolls-Royce. He and his large family lived in grand country houses. He married his wife, the artist Janet Cree, in 1936 and had six sons, one of whom, Mark Platts-Mills, is now a KC. He paid for private education for all of them. Janet died in 1992. Having met my mother Pat Schuyler, who died in 2002, at a Haldane event, he had a brief relationship with her. She was enthralled to be driven around London in the Rolls-Royce.

Platts-Mills' views changed later in the 1930s, and in 1936 he joined the Labour Party. In 1945, he was elected MP for Finsbury in the Labour Party landslide victory, but was expelled in April 1948 for his pro-Soviet views. In 1949 he formed the (pro-Soviet) Labour Independent Group with Konni Zilliacus and DN Pritt KC (then SCR Chair).

In March 1953 he attended Stalin's funeral in Moscow for the World Peace Council, in place of JD Bernal. "I must have been World Stalin Lover No.1," he said in his book (p.356), and he could not accept Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in February 1956.

Platts-Mills discussed his work with the SCR in Chapter 25 of his book ('Friendship Societies'). He wrote (p.361–362): "Although I had connections of one sort or another with many friendship groups, my main concerns were the British-Soviet Friendship Society and the [SCR]... These groups promoted exchange visits and cultural tours and encouraged contacts in education, the sciences and the arts. The Friendship Society in Moscow would tell the BSFS or the SCR what institutions or professions were asking for a visitor, and often would

John Platts-Mills (left), then SCR Vice-President, addressing Soviet tourists on board a cruise ship at Tilbury, 1985 (SCRSS Archive)

name some leading person they would like to meet... With visitors from Moscow, the Friendship Society would provide the names and ask whether certain institutions would receive them. We would immediately forward the invitation... In whatever direction visitors were passing, the Russians usually paid... the Friendship Society repaid us the full amount through their embassy. It was probably this that made the British government suspicious of us."

He continued: "In theory, they were coming to meet people, but their needs were always the same: a comfortable lodging, a shopping expedition, to walk at large in the crowded London streets, to visit their embassy and send messages home, and to see the opera

or ballet. Only then would they want to meet the scientists, writers, designers or athletes or whoever were their local counterparts. The pattern was almost invariable. Then came further shopping expeditions and visits with their newly made friends. They also met a wide range of our own membership, most of whom spoke some Russian."

During his time as the Society's President, Platts-Mills performed important duties. For example, in May 1997 he welcomed guests to the launch event for the project to build a Soviet War Memorial in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park surrounding the Imperial War Museum in London. The Memorial was unveiled on 9 May 1999 by the UK Defence Secretary, George Robertson MP, and the Russian Ambassador, HE Yuri Fokine. The first wreath was laid by HRH The Duke of Kent, President of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The impressive memorial is a bronze sculpture *Sorrowful*.

Platts-Mills' first mention of the Haldane Society (p.83) relates to his civil liberties activities in 1934. He joined Haldane in 1936 (p.91) because it "not only fought Fascism but pushed into all manner of action at home and abroad... The Haldane was the first of the independent Bar societies, and was founded in late 1929 as a lawyers' protest group against Ramsay MacDonald's moves towards the right".

In 1938 he was paid a fee of £900 (p.118–119), "several hundred times greater than my normal fee, and so Janet and I bought Moorlands at Chappel and Wakes Colne in North Essex. £800 for fifty acres and a house, an ancient thatched barn, and sheds, garages, pigsties and outhouses of all kinds around a pond". In 1939 they bought the nearby Assington Hall, a large Elizabethan mansion with many bedrooms, eighty acres of garden and park, for about £3,000. In May 1940 Assington Hall was raided and ransacked by the police (p.127), "the result of local gossip based on our being a co-operative household with six families, some of rather left-wing views, and a number of refugees from Germany and Czechoslovakia".

Platts-Mills spent most of the war years in London. In June 1940, while still in pilot officer's uniform, he was briefed to defend Canon Morris and other members of his Peace Pledge Union at their trial at Bow Street. In 1941 he was elected the Chair of Haldane, and in July 1944 became a Bevin Boy in Yorkshire Main Colliery. "I was a volunteer because it seemed to me a wonderful chance of seeing more of English working-class life, on which score I was a bit short." (p.157) He was elected to Parliament in 1945.

I remember vividly his visit to the picket line at Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories in Willesden in June 1977. Grunwick has gone down in history for the 2-year strike between 1976 and 1978 over union recognition, which became a focus of trade union and Left activity. At its height, it involved thousands of trade unionists and police in confrontations, with over 500 arrests on the picket line and frequent police violence.

I think this was the first time that I saw him. He wrote: "[T]here was some surprise when I turned up on the picket line at Grunwick in black jacket and waistcoat, fancy (striped) pants, bowler and rolled umbrella. The Haldane Society had agreed to lend their support to the pickets and I stopped by on my way to court in the morning, wearing my ordinary working gear. At least twenty Haldane members were already there... penned in by the police. Jack Dromey, who was Chairman of NCCL [now Liberty] and Secretary of the local Trades Council... thrust a megaphone into my hand and said 'You have a go.' It seemed to me that the appropriate line would be, 'Who would picket for the police if they went on strike?' Why, who else but the Haldane Society? We would be there to picket for them. The police roared with laughter." (p.567)

At the end of his life he shared a room in the radical Tooks Court Chambers with Mike Mansfield KC, the current President of Haldane.

*Bill Bowring is SCRSS President, a practising barrister, and Emeritus Professor at Birkbeck College, University of London, where he teaches international law, human rights, and Soviet and Russian law.*

## Feature

# Lydia Saharova and Bert Pockney, Linguists

By Claire Weiss

Coincidentally having both come to an end within the months of May and June in 2004, the twentieth-century professional lives shared by Russian linguists Bertram Patrick Pockney (1927–2004) and Lydia Saharova (1920–2004) had very different origins.

Professor Pockney's obituary in the *Surrey University Alumni News* of 2005 stated that, on being appointed in 1965, he "was immediately involved with the planning and teaching of the degree courses and the Postgraduate Diploma in Russian. He was appointed Professor of Russian in 1982 and retired in 1992".

Bert, as he was known to students of the Russian Language and Soviet Studies course at the Battersea College of Advanced Technology from 1966 to 1970, had working-class origins in north London. In 1945 he registered to study economics at the London School of Economics (LSE) but part of his time took place at Cambridge, the LSE having been evacuated during the war.

After graduating in 1947 he taught economics at schools and joined a Russian evening class. From 1957 to 1960, while still teaching, he took a degree in Russian Regional Studies under Alec Nove[1] at the School of East European and Slavonic Studies (SSEES). He was appointed as Lecturer in Russian at the then Battersea College of Advanced Technology in 1965, the institution that was to become the University of Surrey at Guildford in 1970.

With his specialism of economics, he led on the Regional Studies part of the Russian Language and Soviet Studies degree course, delivering much of it enthusiastically in the Russian language. In 1991 Bert's major work *Soviet Statistics Since 1950* was published. It was to provide an invaluable aid to researchers of the post-Soviet economy.

In 1962 the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) moved from Kensington Square to Tottenham Court Road, and this marked Bert's first contact with the Society. In her new history of the Society, Jane Rosen explains that its work in the period 1960–80 was characterised by a move towards "an emphasis on Russian language learning",[2] which was neglected by the governmental-level agreement on scientific, technological, educational and cultural relations signed by the UK and USSR in 1961. Bert and Lydia's professional support for the SCR's Russian language courses in 1961 and 1963, and subsequent reviews of Russian language materials in the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, were undoubtedly part of that.

At Battersea, the innovatory BSc course in Russian Language and Soviet Studies was planned, set up and led by Bert and Lydia, aimed at students with no previous knowledge of the language. The high standard of Russian language learning required of the students was facilitated by Lydia Saharova and other Russian mother-tongue experts. Lydia herself had been born in Vladivostok in 1920, staying in the USSR until after World War Two, and arriving in England with her family in 1959.

Bert and Lydia's combination of Russian language and in-depth knowledge of the Soviet Union complemented each other as staff on the BSc course and, as members of the SCR, they became a significant cultural asset. Bert was a member of the SCR Executive Committee (EC) from 1961–72, its Vice-Chair from 1969–72 and a Council member to 1974. Lydia served on the SCR EC from 1965–69 and 1971–72, also as a Council member from 1969–70 and 1971–72.

Lydia began to contribute book reviews to the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* from Autumn 1961, under her earlier surname *Read*. Her first review analysed the merits of a graded Russian reader and she noted: "The Russian reads like Russian, which cannot be said of a number of Russian textbooks

available on the market at present." Her second review in the Summer 1962 issue favourably endorsed a set of reader texts, and appeared alongside a positive review by Bert Pockney on a set of five Moscow-produced booklets on *Teaching Russian*.

Meanwhile Bert had contributed five reviews over the period Spring 1966 to January 1972, covering a geography of the USSR and a range of history-learning volumes. In January 1968 he proffered a view on an account of the 1966 Daniel and Sinyavsky trial, ending in dismay at the outcome. "Depressive," Bert asserted, "particularly for those who wish the peoples of the Soviet Union well after all their sacrifices."

In a review of the major work *Politics and Society in the USSR*, published in 1971 by David Lane (then a Council member of the SCR, now a Vice-President), Bert provided four pages of critical analysis. Bert was on the Editorial Board of the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* from 1966–74. He and Lydia also served on panels for the SCR's MGU[3] scholarship from 1965–70, while Lydia was a leader on the MADI course[4] in 1973 and 1975. All this outreach work helped their students of Russian to spend meaningful periods of time in the USSR.

Their practice of Russian language learning was innovatory, inspired by the then young Noam Chomsky. It was a great privilege to graduate from Bert Pockney and Lydia Saharova's unique course and to benefit from the way in which their roles in the SCR helped maintain their own professional development.

**Footnotes**

**1** Born Aleksandr Novakovsky in St Petersburg in 1915.

**2** Jane Rosen, *An Unpopular Cause: A Centenary History of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR 1924–2024*, London: SCRSS, 2024, 86

**3** Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet – Moscow State University

**4** Moskovskii avtomobil'no-dorozhnyi institut – Moscow Automobile and Road Construction Institute

*Claire Weiss was in the first cohort to graduate in 1970 from the University of Surrey in Russian Language and Soviet Studies, having been accepted onto the course in September 1966.*

# Reviews

**Babi Yar and Other Poems**
**By Ilya Ehrenburg (translated by Anna Krushelnitskaya, Smokestack Books, 2024, ISBN: 978-1-7394734-1-9, Pbk, 126pp, £9.99)**

This latest volume continues the attractive series of modern foreign-language poets published by Smokestack Books.

The fact that there is a 12-page biography by Joshua Rubenstein, preceding the poems, tells us immediately that there is something special about this writer. My suggestion to the reader is that you read this first before tackling the poems. The author is a unique phenomenon in Russian literary history. He wrote in various genres: journalism, prose, poetry, memoirs and translations. He began to write in the pre-Soviet era and spanned the whole early history of the Soviet state up to Khrushchev and the Thaw. In fact, he was partly responsible for the Thaw himself. It is often said that certain phenomena do not exist until they are given a *name*, and Ehrenburg did so by entitling a novel, published in 1954, *The Thaw*.

You will be amazed that such writers could be allowed to exist in such a turbulent country as Russia, but he did. He moved between Russia and Western Europe, criticising both in equal measure! Another of his achievements was that he was one of the earliest writers to cover Nazi atrocities in the Second World War, alongside Vasily Grossman. Some of Ehrenburg's most brilliant writing is in his memoir *People, Years, Life* with a gallery of famous people whom he knew personally: Babel', Falk, Picasso, Tsvetaeva and many others, Russian and 'Western'. Many were Soviet

non-conformists, and his writing helped with their rehabilitation.

Ehrenburg is not in the first rank of Russian fiction writers, and his poetry is more a reflection of his moods at the time, often using Aesopian language to disguise the 'truth' of what he felt. Other Russian poets argued over whether his poems had merit or not. His Second World War poem *Kill!* is shocking in its intensity. Having said that, another of Ehrenburg's wartime poems, *Babi Yar*, is more poetic than its successor, Yevtushenko's *Babi Yar*, which is quite propagandistic. The editor and translator may have a point in titling this book after the poem *Babi Yar*. Regardless of their poetic quality, Ehrenburg was accorded the honour of two successive publications of his poems in the prestigious *Poets Library* series. His poems may not all have been of first quality, but they are certainly significant in the context of their time.

The bilingual format or this book is equally useful to poetry fans and language students, with the foreign-language texts on the left and the English text opposite on the right, with plenty of space to make notes. What I call the 'apparatus' (biography, notes, background to the texts) is excellent, yet confined to the minimum necessary. The back cover has further useful information about the author and the translators.

**Note:** Readers of this review may be interested to know that the Summer 1957 issue of the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* included a translation of a long article by Ehrenburg entitled 'A Much-Needed Explanation', reprinted from *Literaturnaya gazeta* of 9/12 February 1957. Contact a.jameson2@outlook.com for a copy.

*Andrew Jameson*

**A Misfit in Moscow: How British Diplomacy in Russia Failed, 2014–2019**
**By Ian Proud (Ian Proud, 2023, ISBN: 978-1739543105, Pbk, 296pp)**

Ian Proud was economic counsellor in the British Embassy in Moscow from 2014–19. This is his memoir, published late last year. A highly experienced diplomat, Proud served in Thailand and Afghanistan, organised the G8 summit in Belfast in 2013 and, in 2022, retired from the Foreign Office as Vice Principal of its International Academy – the body charged with the foreign-language training of British diplomats. Perhaps his finest hour was the part he played in the smooth running of the football World Cup in Russia in 2018, when tens of thousands of English soccer fans descended on Moscow and other match venues.

Unlike the vast majority of his colleagues in Moscow, Proud took the trouble to learn Russian and to travel the country far and wide, meeting officials, politicians, academics, students and ordinary people.

A self-professed "realist", Proud believes the core purpose of diplomacy is to manage relations between states and to prevent conflict. In Moscow, he was appalled by the "utmost folly" of attempting to resolve "disputes with Russia through isolation and cancellation".

An admirer of Margaret Thatcher, Proud is no Russophile or starry-eyed Putin admirer. He was perfectly willing to "roger" the Russians if it served a useful purpose: when the Skripals were poisoned in 2018, he hatched a plan to collapse Russia's diplomatic representation in the UK. Many Russian diplomats were expelled from London and other Western capitals but, thankfully, there were no takers for Proud's proposed escalation of the tit-for-tat.

However, in general, Proud advocates engagement and the search for mutual understanding as a far more effective policy. While some Western powers – France, Germany and the United States – continued to make such efforts during Proud's time in Moscow, the British Government opted for "megaphone diplomacy" and to talking with other countries about Russia rather than to the Russians themselves. "You can't be friends with everyone," comments Proud, "but real diplomacy involves talking to those you disagree with the most."

After the eruption of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, London's mantra was that Russia had to be punished for its transgressions and

there could be "no return to business as usual". Though, as Proud recalls, there was one British Foreign Secretary who favoured positive engagement with the Russians – Boris Johnson.

As the economics attaché, Proud had responsibility for monitoring the impact of Western sanctions on Russia. For the Brits, those sanctions soon became an end in themselves rather than a policy tool. Proud's economically illiterate colleagues did not want to know when he warned sanctions had inspired a successful Russian drive to economic nationalism and self-sufficiency. Especially important was the way Moscow weathered the monetary instability caused by a combination of Western sanctions and reduced energy prices. By the time Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow was well able to contain the West's tawdry efforts to destabilise the rouble and collapse the Russian economy.

The most spectacular example of the British blundering concerned implementation of the Minsk agreements. This was the deal that curtailed (but did not end) the civil war between the Kyiv Government and the pro-Russia Donbass separatists. Brokered by France and Germany, the agreed compromise was that Ukraine would regain sovereign control of the Donbass in return for granting it constitutionally guaranteed regional autonomy. In effect, the agreement would get Russia out of the Donbass but also give the rebels a veto on the country's membership of NATO – something Ukraine's ultra-nationalists were never going to accept.

As Proud relates, UK leaders in London had contrived to exclude themselves from the negotiations that led to Minsk, which meant the British played little or no role in the various efforts to find ways to implement the agreements. The one major British contribution to the sorry tale of the failed Minsk agreements was to persuade the EU's European Council to agree that sanctions against Russia would not be lifted until Minsk had been fully implemented. Kyiv was delighted, and was further incentivised to stymie the implementation of Minsk as a means of locking in Western sanctions against Russia.

Proud claims that Moscow had no real interest in implementing Minsk either, but it seems to this reviewer that the public record shows Russia was probably the only party to those agreements acting in good faith. Certainly, in the run-up to the Russian invasion, Putin was incessant in his insistence that implementation of Minsk was the only way to resolve the Ukrainian crisis peacefully.

Proud's book was vetted by the Foreign Office prior to publication but the resultant cuts do not detract from its value as both a memoir and a critique of British policy towards Russia.

*Geoffrey Roberts*

**Note:** This is an edited reprint of a review originally published on 10/06/2024 on the *Responsible Statecraft* website (https://responsiblestatecraft.org).

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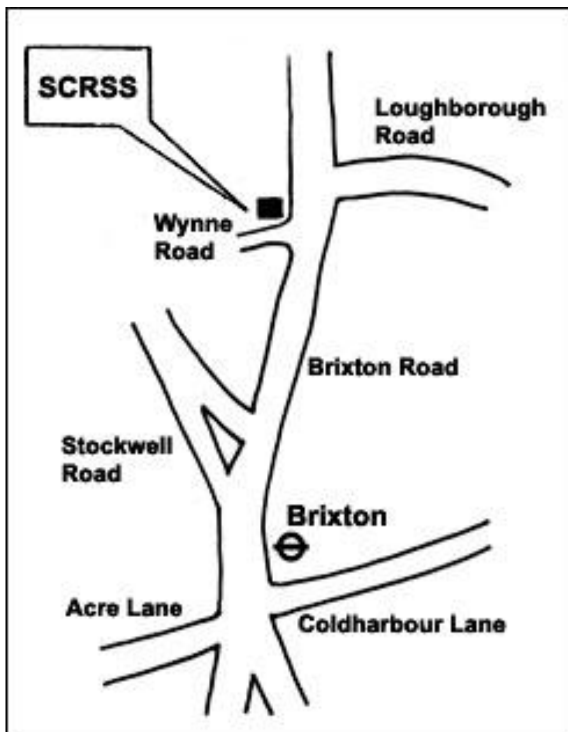


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**Front cover illustration (SCRSS Archive):** Flyer for SCR Library, designed by artist and SCR member Donia Nachshen, 1940s.

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