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Feature

The Song of the Giant (1942): Negotiating Kazakh Identity in Wartime Soviet Cinema

By Assiya Issemerdiyeva

During World War II, as bombs fell on Moscow and Leningrad, the heart of Soviet cinema moved east. Film studios were hastily evacuated to Central Asian cities like Tashkent, Samarkand, Ashkhabad and Dushanbe (then known as Stalinabad). But it was Almaty, then capital of Kazakhstan, that briefly became the film capital of the Soviet Union. Both Mosfilm and Lenfilm – Russia's two most important studios – were relocated there and consolidated, along with the newly established Almaty Studio, under a new name: TsOKS, the Central United Film Studio.

Kazakh officials recognised a rare opportunity in the upheaval of wartime: to lay the foundations for a national film industry. In a spirit of co-operation, they

offered wide-ranging support to evacuated film personnel, providing housing, studio facilities and local infrastructure. In return, they proposed the production of a major feature film that would highlight Kazakh contributions to the war effort. Yet the reality of Soviet cinema proved far less flexible than hoped.



The mythical giant Tolagai, based on Kazakh legend, speaks with his mother about what he can do to help their drought-stricken *auyl* (village). Scenes from *The Song of the Giant*

Unlike literature, theatre or opera, where individual republics' cultural agencies retained a measure of influence, cinema remained highly centralised. Key decisions regarding content, personnel and messaging were made in Moscow, often

with little room for regional variation. Wartime only sharpened these priorities: as propaganda needs intensified, narrative focus narrowed, overwhelmingly centring on Russian and Soviet European experiences. Particularly after the Battle of Stalingrad, when victory appeared increasingly certain, the war was framed in terms of a win for Russia. Other republics, including Kazakhstan, were expected to contribute quietly, their roles sidelined.



The death of Kazakh soldier Koregen (right), whose final request is for “a handful of soil – my soil”. Scene from *The Song of the Giant*

Within this framework, efforts to build a national cinema in Central Asia faced profound structural constraints. Any gains were hard won, achieved not through systemic support but through the tenacity of local Party officials navigating the tight ideological boundaries set by Moscow. In early 1942, at the outset of the evacuation, TsOKS promised to produce fifteen films focusing on Kazakhstan.¹ The promised ‘Kazakh film collection’ was to be completed within three months; in reality, it took nearly two years. By 1944, only two short fiction films – *The Song of the Giant* and *The White Rose*, later grouped together under the title *Brave Warriors of the Steppe* – and one concert film had been completed. This gulf between ambition and outcome speaks volumes. Soviet cinema, even in its most inclusive moments, remained largely resistant to individual republics’ cultural agendas. Of the two short fiction films, *The White Rose* is now considered lost, leaving *The Song of the Giant* as the sole surviving piece of that wartime effort. Its very

existence is, in many ways, a testament to cultural negotiation: a nuanced Kazakh film realised within the constraints of a rigidly centralised Soviet ideological apparatus.

Mother-land and Motherland

The Song of the Giant is no ordinary Soviet war film. On the surface, it conforms to the genre: a heroic Kazakh soldier, Koregen (played by Kapan Badyrov), sacrifices his life in battle, while his mother Aina (played by Rakhila Ospanova) draws strength from thoughts of the Motherland and the future embodied in Koregen’s newborn son. Moreover, it draws loosely on the biography of Tolegen Toktarov, a real-life Panfilov Guard and Hero of the Soviet Union who was killed in 1942 on the frontline. But rather than following a straightforward biographical narrative, the film shifts toward a mythical register, drawing on Kazakh oral traditions and symbolism. Koregen’s story is blended with the Kazakh legend of Tolagai (played by Zhagda Ogizbaev), a mythical giant who carries a mountain to bring rain to his drought-stricken homeland. Tolagai’s legend, originating in the Tarbagatai region where Toktarov was born, seamlessly weaves Kazakh history and mythology into the film’s narrative. Thus, the message becomes more nuanced: fighting for the Soviet Union is portrayed not merely as an act of patriotism, but as the fulfilment of an ancestral duty.

This depth of representation – rare for its time – was no accident. The script was written by Abdilda Tazhibayev, a celebrated Kazakh poet, who subtly embedded cultural practices into the narrative. *Qumalaq* divination (featured in the film’s opening scene) not only illustrates traditional spiritual knowledge but also foreshadows the hero Koregen’s fate, providing a symbolic underpinning to the plot. Horseback herding, central to Kazakh pastoral life, becomes a testimony to Aina’s bravery. Scenes of the *auyl* (village) are not reduced to exotic spectacle, but are treated as integral lived spaces. The film starts with a mournful *kui* (instrumental composition) performed by legendary Kazakh *kuishi* (musician) Dina

Nurpeisova (1861–1955), playing a piece by composer Qazangap (1854–1921). This sets a tone of grief and introspection. While there are familiar visual tropes in the film – caravans and stylised shots of the steppe – there is also a striking inclusion: a *baqsy* (shaman) playing the *qobyz* (a stringed instrument). Scenes such as this, evoking



Aina, Koregen's mother, weeps as she holds her newborn grandson, having just received the news of her son's death. Scene from *The Song of the Giant*

religious and spiritual practices, were exceedingly rare in Soviet cinema, where 'superstitious' content was typically censored. Directed by Vera Stroyeva with remarkable cultural sensitivity and supervised by artistic director Grigory Roshal, the film resists the common Soviet impulse to reduce Central Asian culture to decorative folklore. Instead, Kazakh symbols, songs, and legends shape the film's emotional arc and narrative logic.

Aina, Koregen's mother, is a striking figure, introduced as a dignified, independent woman who challenges Soviet stereotypes of passive 'Eastern' women. More than a character, she gradually emerges as a living symbol of the steppe. In the opening scene, she remarks, "A good son misses his mother first of all," while Koregen says, "Why did your mother beget you, if you cannot bear the trial?" – lines that reverberate throughout the film. Koregen speaks longingly of Aina; the mythical Tolagai seeks his mother's blessing before his fatal journey. In their final moments, both call out "*Apa*" ("Mother"). While sacrifice for

one's native land is central to Kazakh cultural discourse, the dual invocation of biological mother and symbolic homeland also aligns with Soviet wartime ideology. The figure of *Rodina-mat'* (Motherland), which dominated Soviet visual and rhetorical culture – from posters to propaganda films – is subtly reimagined through the indigenous concept of *tugan zher*, or native land, which is seamlessly translated into the Soviet ideal of the Motherland.

In the film's final sequence, Aina walks into the steppe with her grandson. Her figure slowly dissolves into the landscape, her voice fading into Koregen's song. The image collapses maternal bond, national identity and imperial belonging into a single emotional register – visually equating the mother with the sacred land and *tugan zher* with the Soviet Motherland. The film thus weaves a rich metaphor linking motherhood, land and sacrifice, blending official ideological tropes with deeply rooted Kazakh cultural codes.



The end of the film where Aina (left), Koregen's mother, carries her new grandson out into the steppe. Scene from *The Song of the Giant*

This symbolic convergence sets the stage for Koregen's final act. While the film delivers the expected Soviet message – heroism, sacrifice, and unity – it does so through a distinctly Kazakh lens. Koregen's final request for "a handful of soil – my soil" draws not on standard Soviet patriotic rhetoric, but on Kazakh traditions that regard the land as sacred and intimately tied

to identity. Historically, Kazakh communities displaced by conflict or upheaval would carry soil from their homeland in amulets or bring it to the graves of fallen loved ones. In this context, Koregen's plea becomes more than a symbolic gesture – it is both a cultural act of rootedness and an ideologically crafted expression of Soviet belonging. By treating the Western Front, far from his native Kazakhstan, as sacred land worth dying for, Koregen embodies a seamless fusion of local tradition and imperial loyalty – a message of patriotic assimilation artfully delivered through culturally resonant imagery. In this way, the film participates in the project of Sovietising the republics – absorbing local identities into a singular Soviet whole.

Despite its cultural richness, *The Song of the Giant* suffered from poor technical conditions. The film stock was low quality and delays stretched production into 1943. Yet it resonated deeply during its release in Kazakhstan. Actor Kapan Badyrov, who played Koregen, later reflected: "It was a truly tragic role. I knew I could not afford to make mistakes or be inaccurate, as soldiers going into battle would be watching me."² The film was taken on tour by Nurtas Undasynov, Chairman of the Kazakh SSR's Council of Ministers, and screened in villages and towns across the republic. According to officials' reports, one scene – where Koregen kills a German officer with the butt of his rifle – elicited cheers from audiences: "Bravo, beat the dog!"³

In official Soviet records, *The Song of the Giant* is a minor production, largely overlooked in postwar histories of Soviet cinema. Yet it stands as one of the rare wartime films in which a centrally controlled, ideologically rigid system succeeded – however briefly – in speaking through the cultural language of its subjects. The film does not reject Soviet propaganda; rather, it reinterprets it, delivering its message through Kazakh symbols, stories and emotional registers. In doing so, *The Song of the Giant* becomes more than a vehicle for ideology: it is a site of negotiation, where state narratives and indigenous worldviews

converge artfully on shared cinematic ground.

Assiya Issemberdiyeva holds a Collaborative Doctoral Award with Queen Mary University of London and the SCRSS, funded by the London Arts and Humanities Partnership. Her PhD thesis explores the representation of Central Asia in wartime Soviet cinema. Assiya is a member of the Association of Kazakhstani Film Critics. She has contributed to Apparatus, KinoKultura, and The Calvert Journal, as well as edited volumes, including 'Gender and Kazakh Society' (Almaty, 2022) and 'Kazakh Cinema: Cultural Matrix and Trends' (Almaty, 2023).

Footnotes

1 Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Fond 1708, opis' 1, delo 127, list 44.

2 K. Badyrov, 'Vremia trevozhnoe, vremia schastlivoe', *Novyi film*, 7, 1975, 3.

3 Archive of the President of Republic of Kazakhstan, Fond 708, opis' 7–1, delo 708, list 134–7.

Watch the film

Assiya Issemberdiyeva's talk about *The Song of the Giant* at the SCRSS on 17 May 2025 featured a rare screening of the 35-minute film. Never previously released in the UK, the screening included new English sub-titles created especially for the event by an SCRSS team of Professor Jeremy Hicks, Assiya Issemberdiyeva and Diana Turner. This sub-titled version is now available to view on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCultr_vfes.

SCRSS News

Latest news by Jane Rosen, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS

COSEELIS Conference

The Council for Slavonic and East European Library and Information Services (COSEELIS) kindly invited the SCRSS to speak at its Annual Conference in June 2025. As part of a panel that included presentations from librarians from the

Herder Institute in Germany and the Bibliothèque Nationale in France, the Society was in good company. The SCRSS Honorary Secretary and Chair attended, with the former giving a short presentation on our history and collections, accompanied by the slideshow shown during our Centenary Exhibition openings. The reception was warm, and it was good to speak to an audience of librarians!



SCRSS Honorary Secretary Jane Rosen (right) speaking about the Society's collections at the COSEELIS Conference

Library

Talking of libraries, the cataloguing continues apace. Regular Tuesday sessions for volunteers are seeing an increase in the number of books represented in the online catalogue. This has meant increased interest in the SCRSS Collections and has attracted new members wanting to access our holdings. Do explore our online catalogue at <https://scrss.soutron.net/Portal/>. Most books are in Russian, but there is plenty of English-language material too. For in-person visits, we are open on the first Saturday of each month from 11.00 to 16.00. If you want to use the SCRSS Archive or look at specific items, please do let us know in advance, so that we can be prepared. We also provide refreshments and a welcoming smile!

If SCRSS members would like to volunteer, there are various library-related tasks that do not require Russian language skills, such

as classmark and shelf labelling. In addition, do not underestimate the value of shelf tidying and dusting! There is no better way to find out what books we hold. We also need more 'Guardians' willing to help with welcoming visitors to the building, dealing with book loans and guiding researchers. If you are interested, please get in touch with the Honorary Secretary by email.

Finally, one of our regular volunteers is in the process of organising the Russian language teaching collection and several duplicates have been identified, particularly dictionaries. A selection of these will be available at the library opening on Saturday 6 September for a small donation.



Views of the SCRSS Library Collections. *Left:* Literature Loan Library. *Right:* The catalogued and classmarked Theatre Collection (reference only)

Membership

Your support as a member is vital to the future of the Society. As an educational charity, the Society continues to fulfil its charitable object, namely: "the advancement of education, learning and knowledge of, and to promote studies in the languages, culture, history and life of Russia and the other countries and nationalities formerly constituting the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." A membership reminder should be enclosed if your membership has expired or will do so by the end of December 2025. We send reminders in advance, with the *SCRSS Digest* mailing, to save on postage. Please help our administration by responding as soon as possible. If you wish

to set up an annual standing order to avoid such reminders, or to pay by bank transfer, simply request the SCRSS bank details. And please remember that, if you renew before the end of this year, your subscription will be at the old rate!

Help to Promote Us

It was clear from the COSEELIS event that our Society is still relevant, that access to the SCRSS Collections and our events programme are still valued, but that they need to be promoted. So please come and visit us on one of our open Saturdays, attend our events, whether in person or online, and read the *SCRSS Digest*. And share information about us to other people and organisations.

Next Events

Saturday 6 September 2025, 11.00–16.00
Event: SCRSS Library Opening

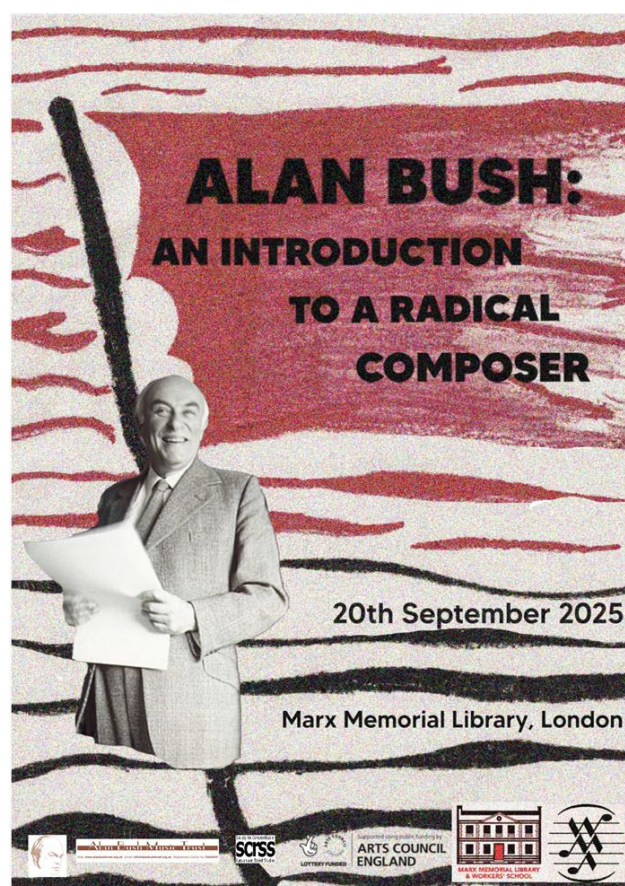
Saturday 20 September 2025, 10.30–16.00
In-person Event at Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School: *Alan Bush (1900–95): An Introduction to a Radical Composer*

Joint SCRSS–MML event, in-person at MML, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London, EC1R 0DU. 2025 is the 125th anniversary of the birth of British composer Alan Bush, who also founded the Workers' Music Association in 1936, and was SCRSS Vice-President 1968–1995. Ben Lunn hosts a discussion on Bush's polemical work, followed by an archival radio production of Bush's opera *The Sugar Reapers*. There will be a small display from MML's Archive. Booking: free but booking essential on Eventbrite at <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/1524497837069>

Saturday 4 October 2025, 11.00–16.00
Event: SCRSS Library Opening

Saturday 18 October 2025, 14.00–15.00
Zoom Online Lecture: Dr Elena Soboleva on *The Kunstkamera Museum in St Petersburg*

Talk in English for SCRSS members and affiliates only – live from St Petersburg. The Kunstkamera was St Petersburg's first museum, established by Peter the Great, to house his collection of anatomical rarities, war trophies and historical military equipment. The museum moved to the current Baroque building on the River Neva in 1729. Today the Kunstkamera houses the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. Dr Soboleva is a Senior Research Fellow at the Kunstkamera Museum. Booking: free for SCRSS members and affiliates. Event booking details to be available soon on the SCRSS website.



Saturday 1 November 2025, 11.00–13.30
Event: SCRSS Library Opening

Saturday 1 November 2025, 14.00–15.00
In-person Talk at the SCRSS: HGW Davie on *Everything for the Front! Resource Management in the Red Army During the German-Soviet War 1941–1945*

In-person at the SCRSS centre. The usual tale of the USSR during the Second World War is one of successful mobilisation with arms and weapons produced in large quantities from the new factories in the

Urals. However, other industries were less well developed, therefore ammunition, fuel and food were all in short supply, and the 'Rear of the Red Army' had to make the system work. This talk discusses how they did it. HGW Davie is a postgraduate student at the University of East Anglia who is studying the logistics of the Red Army 1941–1945. Booking: £3.00 members, £5.00 others. Either reserve an advance ticket on Eventbrite at <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/1557398192919> (booking opens 1 September), or tickets available on the door from 13.30.

Saturday 6 December 2025, 11.00–14.00
Event: SCRSS Library Opening

Saturday 6 December 2025, 14.30–18.00
In-person Event at the SCRSS:
Christmas Party for SCRSS Members
 Details to follow later in the autumn.

Please always check the SCRSS website and our member e-newsletters for the latest details of our events.

Feature

Russia's Centenary of Foreign Cultural Relations, 1925–2025

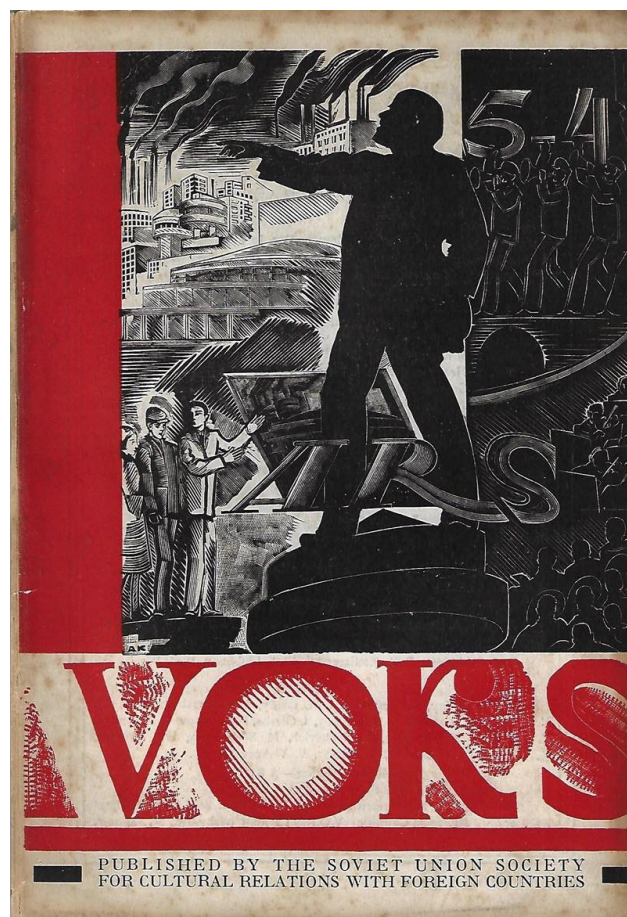
By Margarita Mudrak and Elizaveta Stupanskaya

The development of international co-operation and cultural, scientific, educational, sports, youth and tourist ties with foreign countries was for the USSR – as it remains so for Russia today – one of the most important ways of asserting the country's soft power, as well as an important tool for establishing mutual understanding and dialogue between peoples. This year marks the Centenary of the USSR's establishment of cultural relations with foreign countries in 1925. This article covers the historical background from VOKS to SSOD to RAMS, and looks at RAMS's

continuing work today and the Centenary celebrations in Russia.

Historical Background: VOKS and SSOD

After the October Revolution, the Civil War and the devastation that followed, Soviet Russia found itself in a difficult state, and in political and cultural isolation on the international stage.

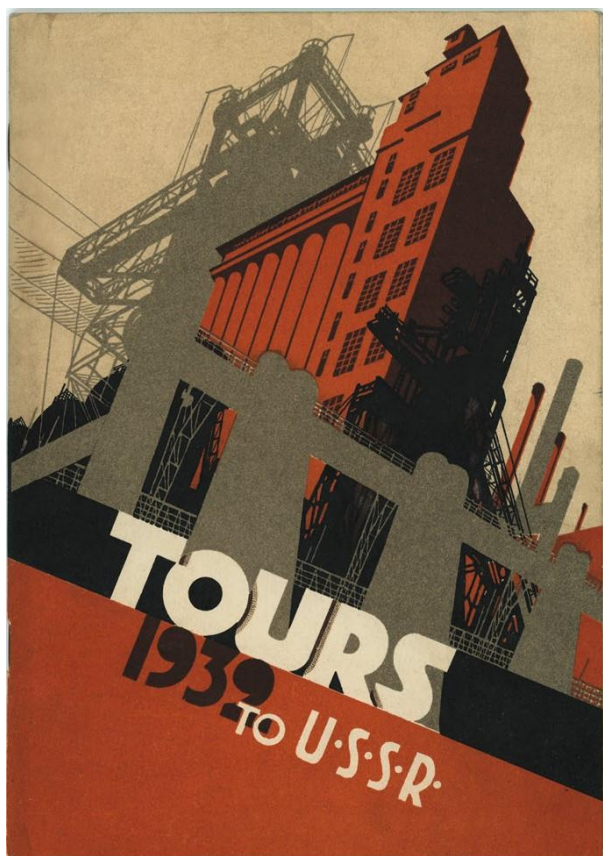


VOKS magazine, Vol. II, No. 10–12, 1931, published by VOKS in English. It was distributed in different languages to over sixty countries worldwide (SCRSS Archive)

In 1923, the Commission for Foreign Aid was established to co-ordinate the efforts of international charitable organisations and private individuals in addressing the humanitarian crisis and challenging the foreign policy blockade. Despite the country's isolation, leading Soviet figures in science and culture visited foreign countries to establish co-operation and pursue dialogue with the global community through cultural and people-to-people diplomacy.

To strengthen cultural and scientific ties abroad, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) was founded in 1925. The first Chair of the organisation was Olga Kameneva, a sister of Lev Trotsky. Under his influence she had been involved in early revolutionary activities and after the Revolution she held several senior positions in government.

Among the founders of VOKS were prominent statesmen, public figures, and internationally renowned representatives of Russian science and culture. These included Anatoly Lunacharsky, People's Commissar for Education, well-known cultural and artistic figures such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Ilya Ehrenburg, Mikhail Sholokhov, Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Eisenstein, as well as scientists Sergei Vavilov and Alexander Oparin, and many others.



Cover of Soviet tour brochure, 1932. VOKS worked with friendship societies abroad to organise specialist visits to the USSR (SCRSS Archive)

The establishment of VOKS also received strong support from distinguished international figures in science and culture,

including George Bernard Shaw, HG Wells, Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, Marie Curie, Henri Barbusse and Rabindranath Tagore, all of whom became active partners in its work.



Official opening of Friendship House in central Moscow, March 1959. This became SSOD's headquarters and a venue for conferences, meetings with foreign guests and film shows (SCRSS Archive)

VOKS became a vital link and support in breaking down negative stereotypes and fostering people-to-people co-operation. By the end of the 1920s it had established a network of organisations in the Soviet republics and in local communities, and had issued a newsletter (later the VOKS magazine) distributed in over sixty countries worldwide. VOKS organised exhibitions to inform the international public on various aspects of Soviet life, it screened Soviet films, and organised the exchange of books and periodicals. Under its auspices, Soviet artists took part in international festivals and competitions. VOKS started to organise visits of Soviet citizens abroad and to receive foreign visitors in the USSR. Among these contacts was the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) in the UK – today's SCRSS.

During the Second World War, as an expression of solidarity with the Soviet people in their struggle against German Nazism, numerous 'Societies of Friends of the USSR' were established. In 1941, friendship societies appeared in Lebanon, Syria, New Zealand, Australia, Chile and India, followed in 1942 by Mexico's 'Friends of the Fighting Soviet Union'. VOKS helped to transport war aid to the Soviet Union, donated by the public abroad, including medicines, hospital equipment and other assistance. It was through VOKS and SCR channels that the music score of Shostakovich's famous *Leningrad Symphony* was delivered to the UK to be heard for the first time there and later throughout the world.



Foreign delegation visiting Friendship House, the headquarters of SSOD in Moscow, 1985 (SCRSS Archive)

In 1958, VOKS evolved into the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (SSOD), uniting a multitude of Soviet friendship societies. SSOD became a mass voluntary union for Soviet civil society organisations, in which over 50 million Soviet people participated. Branches of the various SSOD departments operated in all the fifteen union republics, between them organising tens of thousands of events each year dedicated to foreign countries. In SSOD's headquarters in Friendship House in central Moscow around 2,000 events took place each year. In addition, the Russian Language Department at SSOD was active in promoting the teaching of Russian as a

Foreign Language through scholarships for foreign students and teachers to study in the USSR.



The Reporter article, 1990, on balalaika virtuoso Mikhail Danilov's visit to Manchester to work with local schools, arranged by the Leningrad Friendship Society (Interregional Association, St Petersburg)

After the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, SSOD was dismantled. However, in 1992, its mission was taken over by the newly established Russian Association for International Cooperation (RAMS), under the leadership of the former cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, who had previously been President of SSOD. RAMS is officially recognized as the legal successor to both VOKS and SSOD, and continues to uphold their founding goals and values today.

RAMS Today and the 2025 Centenary

Today RAMS plays an essential role in fostering co-operation in culture, education, science and modern technologies, and in supporting business, between Russia and partners abroad.

RAMS currently unites more than one hundred societies for friendship with foreign nations, including in partner cities and regions in Russia, and maintains partnerships with over 130 organisations across the globe. Its regional partners operate throughout the Russian Federation, including in St Petersburg (the Interregional Association for International Cooperation), Vologda, Novosibirsk, Pskov and the Republic of Dagestan. Informal RAMS

representations are also active in Austria, Slovenia, Tajikistan and Turkey.



Delegates to the international conference *The Phenomenon of People's Diplomacy*, May 2025, marking the Centenary of foreign cultural relations in Russia (Interregional Association, St Petersburg)

A good example of the work of RAMS's regional partners within Russia is the Interregional Association for International Cooperation in St Petersburg, which implements joint multi-level and sustainable formats of co-operation in many different spheres and countries.

In the UK, its main partner is the SCRSS, with whom we currently run a joint programme of reciprocal online lectures on cultural topics for our respective members. We also continue our co-operation with the English Speaking Union (ESU) in London, as the sole ESU representative for Russia, participating in its cultural and educational programmes. The most popular of these is the Annual International Public Speaking Competition, in which many universities and schools affiliated to the Interregional Association actively participate. In 2024, our student member Marina Latypova of St Petersburg State University won the Russian Final in St Petersburg and was due, therefore, to travel to London to participate in the International Final. Unfortunately, her British visa was not approved in time, therefore the ESU helped to arrange a personal visit for her to the UK.

The Friendship Force, St Petersburg Club, is our most active sub-division. It has been organising cross-cultural, professional and

youth exchange programmes, charity projects and cultural tourism initiatives for over thirty years. The Club is also a member of Friendship Force International.

Each year the Interregional Association, together with the St Petersburg branch of the Russian Peace Foundation and with the support of the St Petersburg City Government's External Relations Committee and Education Committee, organises festivals dedicated to the culture, history and modern achievements of China, India, Vietnam, Iran, Slavic countries, Italy, Scotland and Japan. Within the framework of these festivals, art competitions are held among our school and college students, including 'China Far and Near', 'Mysterious India', 'Discover the Slavic World', as well as contests dedicated to the work of Scottish artists and a Russian-French competition 'Petersburg and Nice – Cities by the Sea'.



Cover of *St Petersburg–Great Britain: XVIII–XXI cc.*, published by Evropeysky Dom, St Petersburg, 2014.

A project involving the Interregional Association, it includes an article by Margarita Mudrak on the role of public diplomacy in developing foreign cultural co-operation (SCRSS Library)



A winning entry in the 2024 art competition 'China Far and Near' by Elizaveta Sokoleva, aged 17 years. Based on the Russian proverb *If you don't have a friend, look for one, but if you have one, cherish him*, it depicts a Russian bear dancing with a Chinese dragon (Interregional Association, St Petersburg)

On a rather different note, we are involved in RAMS's programme for people's diplomacy through the martial arts. Nearly every nation has its own martial art, making this sport a natural foundation for dialogue. RAMS supports this approach through partnerships with specialist organisations such as the Russian Kobujutsu Federation and participation in international tournaments. The St Petersburg Wushu Federation is affiliated to the St Petersburg Russian–Chinese Friendship Society and organises Friendship Wushu tournaments every year, attracting sportsmen from all over Russia and abroad.

As previously mentioned, 2025 marks the Centenary of Russia's foreign cultural relations (or 'people's diplomacy'), coincidentally occurring in the same year as the 80th Anniversary of the Allied Victory in the Second World War.

Together with its Russian and international partners, RAMS has already hosted over 150 events across more than thirty countries to celebrate this Centenary, attracting thousands of participants both in-person and online. Some of the highlights include a major public forum *100 Years of People's Diplomacy: VOKS – SSOD – RAMS*, held at Gostiny Dvor Culture and Exhibition Centre in Moscow. There was also an international academic conference *The Phenomenon of*

People's Diplomacy, co-hosted with the Russian Historical Society and the History of the Fatherland Foundation; it included participants from Russia and abroad, with discussions dedicated to the evolution of people's diplomacy and its role in the twenty-first century. An exhibition and lecture series *Geniuses of Civilisation* was organised, showcasing Russia's contribution to world heritage; while one of RAMS's most successful initiatives was a 12-hour online marathon *Space: A Domain of Peace and Co-operation*, which drew significant attention and brought together astronauts, scientists and experts from twenty countries working in the field of space exploration.



Youth members of the Interregional Association with international colleagues at the BRICS Young Leaders Forum *New Opportunities for a Shared Future*, October 2024 (Interregional Association, St Petersburg)

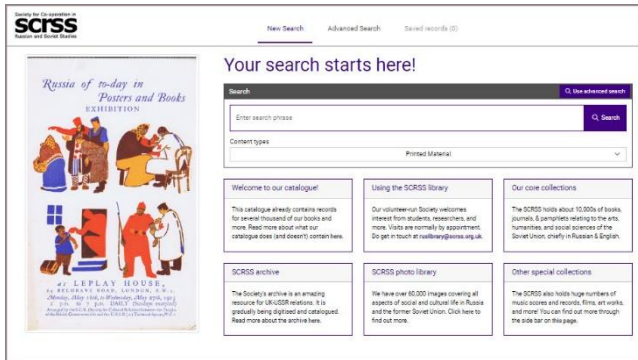
The culmination of this Centenary of Public Diplomacy will be the *World Public Assembly*, to be held in Moscow on 20–21 September 2025. Its main mission is the development of international partnership and unity of people, based on the principles of shared responsibility for the future and respect for the cultural values of every people.

Margarita Mudrak is the Chairperson of the Interregional Association for International Cooperation, St Petersburg, Russia. Elizaveta Stupanskaya is the Deputy Secretary General of the Russian Association for International Cooperation (RAMS), Moscow, Russia.

Feature

Summer Reflections on Cataloguing the SCRSS Art Collection

By Claire Weiss



Home page of the SCRSS online library catalogue

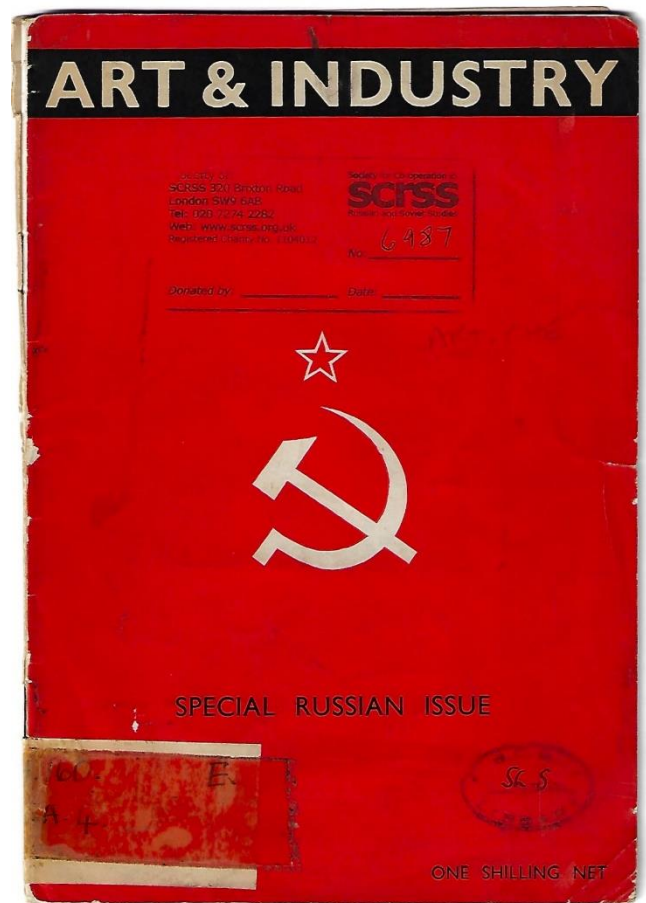
The SCRSS's publicly available catalogue is available to access online at <https://scrss.soutron.net/Portal/> or via the link from the SCRSS website. It has been growing steadily since the introduction of the library management system (LMS) in 2021 when a bulk conversion of earlier outputs of volunteers, including my own since 2011, provided the initial entries on the database. So far, some 7,000 detailed records of books and pamphlets in Art, History, World War Two, Education, Theatre, Cinema and Religion sections are now available publicly to search.

The Art Reference Collection covers fine and applied art from the republics of the former Soviet Union. Its wide range includes painting, sculpture, the graphic arts, theatre design, icons, folk art, textiles and ceramics. The collection of volumes devoted to the works of single artists offers a stunning panoply of creativity and variety across those genres throughout the Soviet period.

While some art books from the Soviet publishing houses do include translations of image captions into English, French, German and other languages, the volunteer cataloguers' prime task is to transliterate into Latin script the main identifying details

of publications in a Cyrillic original (such as Russian, Ukrainian or Belarusian). We also make use of Russian-language summaries often found in books printed in the scripts of Caucasian or Central Asian republics, such as Georgian or Tajik.

Using the LMS, we import from major world listings the data that relate to volumes held by the SCRSS. Many books originally published in the Soviet Union appear on the global listings, but we start a new record from scratch for any that are not found. The LMS assigns each entry a unique number and, in addition, it is our job as cataloguers to give a classification code to each title.



Cover of the magazine *Art & Industry: Special Russian Issue*, published by The Studio Ltd, London, in May 1943 (SCRSS Library)

The variety of items within the Art Reference Collection is spectacular, and to conclude this brief article I have selected three books and one periodical to offer a glimpse of the impressive range of artists, genres, authors and publication types.



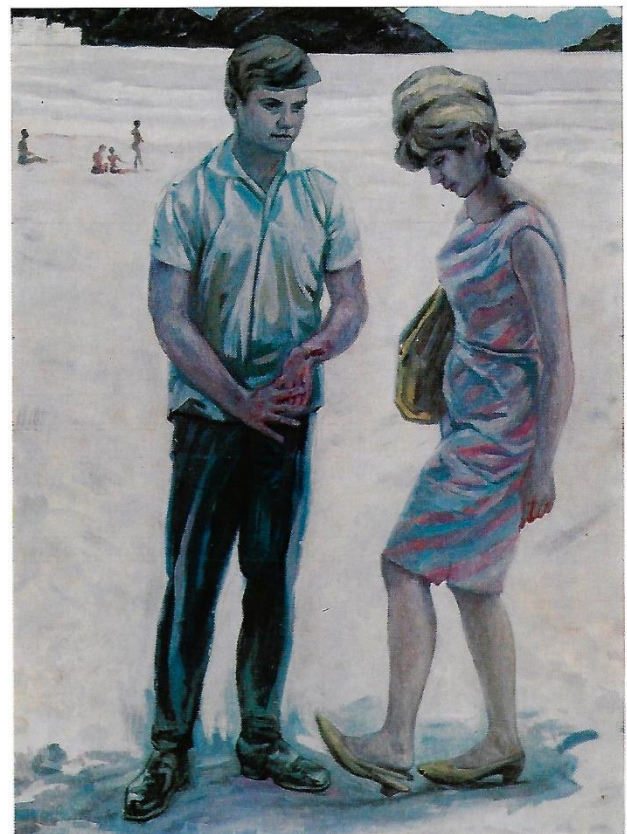
Cover of *Nagim-Bek Nurmukhammedov* by I.A. Rybakov, published by Sovetskii Khudozhnik, 1979 (SCRSS Library)

One of the many hundreds of Art pamphlets and periodicals now boxed in the Art Room is the small-format magazine *Art & Industry: Special Russian Issue* (Vol. 34, No. 203, May 1943), published by The Studio Ltd, London. Its red cover features a hammer and sickle motif in white, with a star. Inside, the issue's editor Jack Chen presents five illustrated articles characterising, variously, the role of art in the Revolution, and the involvement and material survival of artists in the war effort. An acknowledgement (page 146) recognises the "valuable assistance in providing the material illustrating this issue" of Miss Judith Todd, Secretary of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (the former name of the SCRSS). Illustrations featured in the pamphlet include a poster by the satirical artists' collective Kukriniksy, clips from an Eisenstein film, and photographs of public and social architecture.

Turning to the bookshelves, an equally stunning volume is a monograph on the highly esteemed Kazakh painter and art historian Nagim-bek Nurmukhammedov (1924–86). With an eponymous title, the 90-

page book is authored by art biographer I. A. Rybakov. Published in Moscow in 1979 by Sovetskii Khudozhnik, it is one of a score of books dedicated to the works of Soviet Kazakh artists. It features more than fifty full-colour reproductions of the artist's output, ranging from coastal landscapes such as *Seryi den' v Gurzuf* (Grey Day in Gurzuf – Crimea), 1960, to history paintings such as *Kliatva Chernomortsev* (Oath of the Black Sea Fleet), 1975.

Nurmukhammedov was also an avid traveller, visiting Brazil, France, Japan and other countries, where he created vibrant sketches and candid paintings. One of these is the beguilingly informal portrait of two people in conversation on the world-famous Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro: *Vstrecha na Kopakabane* (Meeting on Copacabana), 1963.



Meeting on Copacabana, 1963. Reproduction from *Nagim-Bek Nurmukhammedov* by I.A. Rybakov (SCRSS Library)

The reproductions of Nurmukhammedov's art in this book provide a chronicle of the Soviet era. The combination of Socialist Realism with other styles has since given

him a place among the greats of Soviet and Kazakh art.



Lithuania, 1965. Reproduction from *Aldona Skirutite: Graphics, An Exhibition Catalogue* (SCRSS Library)

By way of contrast, a slim volume, beautifully bound in a textured cover, showcases the work of the Lithuanian graphic artist Aldona Skirutite (1932–2005). *Aldona Skirutite: Grafika, Katalog vystavki* (Graphics, An Exhibition Catalogue) was published by Sovetskii Khudozhnik in Moscow, 1980, under the auspices of the USSR Union of Artists and the Lithuanian SSR Union of Artists. Born in Vilnius, Skirutite's work features modernist, expressive and decorative interpretations of traditional folk art, with motifs based on subjects such as peace, work, nature and motherhood that offer symbolic images of her country.

Particularly notable are a linocut *Kanikuli v derevne iz tsikli 'V litovskoi derevne'* (Holidays in the Village from the series 'In the Lithuanian Village'), 1972. From the series *Krai iantaria* (The Land of Amber)

comes an impressive lithograph *S kambaloi* (With a Flounder), 1965. The artist held frequent exhibitions in Western Europe, some for the promotion of amber sales, and worked in book illustration.



Cover of *Aldona Skirutite: Graphics, An Exhibition Catalogue*, published by Sovetskii Khudozhnik, 1980 (SCRSS Library)

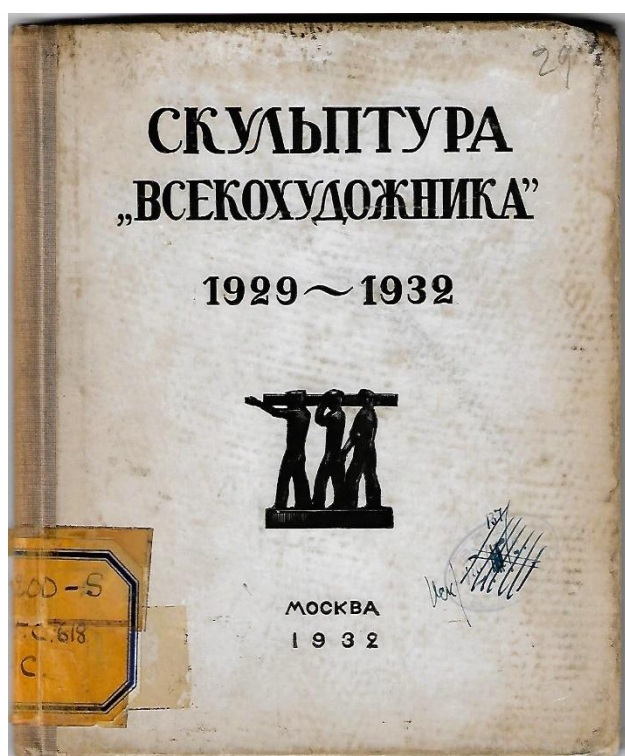
One of the older volumes in the Art Reference Collection is *Skul'ptura: 1929–1932* (Sculpture 1929–1932), published by VSEKOkhudozhnik (All-Russian Co-operative Union of Fine Arts Workers) in Moscow in 1932. The author, A. Bakushinskii, presents the work in three



Design for a sculpture of the Cavalry Division by AS Monannikova. Reproduction from *Sculpture 1929–1932* by A. Bakushinskii (SCRSS Library)

parts: firstly monumental sculptures; secondly designs for sculptures of the Red Army of the Far East; lastly figurines, decorative objects and busts made for

public sale. This little hardback volume boasts eighty plates with a 32-page introduction.



Cover of *Sculpture 1929–1932* by A. Bakushinskii, published by VSEKOkhudozhnik, 1932 (SCRSS Library)

The Art Reference Collection's books on sculpture, including commemorative examples, comprise precious images of works that, for a variety of reasons, may no longer be on public view or may have been destroyed. As works of art, as well as records of history, the images and data of the 3-D items are vital to historical memory. It is a privilege to help in making them more sustainable and accessible.

Of the 7,000 entries on the SCRSS's online catalogue, 2,221 are in the Art Reference Collection and it is still growing. Having completed the Art *books*, several archival boxes of Art *pamphlets* have recently landed on my library desk ready to be catalogued!

Claire Weiss is a Trustee of the SCRSS and has been a volunteer cataloguer since 2011. See also her earlier article 'Bringing the SCRSS Art Library Collections to Life' in the SCRSS Information Digest, Autumn 2013 issue, pages 13-15.

Reviews

Ashes of Our Fathers: Inside the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh

By Gabriel Gavin (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2025, 280pp, ISBN: 9781911723578, Hbk, £20.00)

Many readers may know of the Armenian Genocide (1915–16) but not, perhaps, the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh. Under the USSR, this was an autonomous oblast' inside the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan with an ethnic Armenian population that, in 1988, had voted in a referendum for the region to transfer to Soviet Armenia. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the issue escalated into two full-scale wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan, separated by periods of lower-intensity conflict.

This book is a journalist's account of the 4-year period 2020–23. He is clear that he wants to document the suffering of the ordinary people of Nagorno-Karabakh who paid the price for the failure of their own politicians and all the major powers. His in-depth coverage, recorded while living in Armenia, is balanced by regular contact with Azerbaijani sources.

The book opens with a clear map of Armenia and its neighbours, followed by a one-page timeline of key events. His introduction highlights the significant historical events in the Caucasus from 1800 to 1991. It is worth adding that, at the downfall of the USSR, Armenia was politically more important than Azerbaijan, which did not become a major power until the Oil Boom of 1994.

The book is in three parts.

Part One: A Conflict Unfrozen, 2020 describes, from the point of view of a Karabakh resident, the 44-day conflict in September–November 2020 (known as the Second War) when Azerbaijan took back the Karabakh territory it had lost in 1992–94 (the First War). Gavin then describes the Azerbaijan background – people, politics

and events between 1994 and 2020 – that preceded this Second War.

Part Two: The Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh, 2022-3 is the major part of the book – 144 pages in five chapters. A 2-day war was initiated by Azerbaijan in September 2022, followed by the threat of a further war in September 2023. The latter resulted in immediate surrender and the mass evacuation of Stepanakert, the erstwhile capital of Karabakh. In 2022, all the political machinations in Yerevan, USA and Russia had failed to stop Karabakh being overrun. Shushi, an iconic city known as the 'Jerusalem of the Caucasus' and revered by both sides, was decimated in the process. The humanitarian 'Lachin Corridor', a mountain road in Azerbaijan that was the only link between Armenia and the surrounded enclave of Stepanakert, held out for twelve months. Its blockade by Azerbaijan, despite the attempts of world powers to keep it open, led to the final collapse of the Karabakh enclave and the chaotic withdrawal of 100,000 people in 2023.

Part Three: The Aftermath continues the story of diplomatic efforts by the European Union, France, USA and Russia to quell Azerbaijan militarism (with its attendant risk of full-scale invasion of Armenia). Iran was the only country that would stand up to Azerbaijan. The last two chapters describe the damaging fallout for the ruling elites in both Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Baku there were show trials, repression of dissidents and backtracking on environmental damage, while in Yerevan there was unwillingness to integrate 100,000 refugees and a political coup against the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

The book's final page (p.280) is a sobering epitaph: simmering ethnic tensions from the tsarist and Soviet eras were unleashed by the collapse of the USSR and, once Baku made money from the Oil Boom, it undertook a series of offensives to retake disputed territory lost some thirty years earlier.

Although the story covered by Gavin is relatively straightforward, the overlapping timelines in the background explanations to each section are confusing. However, if you can navigate these, the book is well worth reading and re-reading.

Billy McKee

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