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Feature

Russians and the Russian Language in the Post-Soviet Space

A personal view by Dr Nataliya Rogozhina

On 8 December 1991 the Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was signed by the heads of the three Soviet republics of Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia at the Viskuli hunting lodge in the heart of the Belovezha Forest in Belorussia¹. This was to become the first step towards the disintegration of the USSR. On 21 December the Agreement was joined by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldavia, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, confirming once and for all that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist as a unified state.

While it would be untrue to say that the peoples of the union republics of the USSR were oppressed, national consciousness was stifled. Languages and peoples had been forcibly mixed together across a huge territory equivalent to 15% of the globe. Following the Belovezha Accords, a new reality began to be built on this territory – with sometimes unpredictable consequences.

Geographically speaking, the republics of the former Soviet Union formed four groups united by greater or lesser ethnic similarity, cultural and religious traditions: Baltic, East European, Transcaucasian and Central Asian². What linked all these groups was having Moscow as the state capital, Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication and Russians constituting a significant proportion of the population of each republic. Attitudes towards this were ambiguous: if the Baltic peoples always felt they had been forcibly annexed, the Georgians never considered themselves deceived or enslaved, having become part of the Russian Empire voluntarily in the early 19th century.

During the Soviet period a strict system existed by which every graduate of a higher educational institution was required to work for a three-year period wherever the relevant ministry sent them. When they arrived in these new places, they were given accommodation by the state, started families and often ended up staying for the rest of their lives. While some graduates managed to avoid being resettled, government policy dictated that very many young people ended up thousands of kilometres away from family and friends. For some this was an ordeal and tragedy with which it was difficult to come to terms.

For others it was a chance to start a new and, possibly, happier life. In this way the planned economy and its provision of trained personnel created a whole new social group – the so-called ‘young specialists’.

For some regions the arrival of doctors, engineers and scientists became a major catalyst for development. Furthermore these educated people, predominantly Russians, stimulated the growth of the local intelligentsia. Many years later a professor at Baku University told me with a sigh that the Russian intellectuals had been extraordinarily interesting and their departure was a huge loss to Azerbaijani society. Russians born and raised in Tashkent, Yerevan, Kishinev and other cities of the ‘near (but now out of reach) abroad’ experienced the same pain of separation from what had become their native cities, as they left behind homes, friends and memories.

The mass exodus of Russians at the beginning of the 1990s resembled flight. Nikolai Sventitsky is founder and president of the Russian Club, an international cultural and educational organisation. He was born in Tbilisi and adores that city, but says that this period was very painful for him and many other Russians born and raised in Georgia: “There were slogans such as ‘Russians – get out of Georgia!’ and people were frightened.”

No reliable information exists today on the number of Russians living in the former Soviet republics. One thing only is clear: many less people remain than have left. Thus, the Russian diaspora in Azerbaijan has decreased two-fold. In Armenia Russians are an ethnic minority, constituting around 15,000 people or 0.5% of the population of the republic, although their numbers were never particularly high here. According to the Georgian census of 2001 Russians constituted the fourth largest ethnic minority in that republic. Yet their numbers have decreased from 10.1% of the population of Georgia in the early 1960s to 1.5% today. At present the Eastern Slavic community in the republic, comprising

Russians and Ukrainians, numbers some 50,000 people.

There is no direct oppression of Russians in Transcaucasia today. However, Russians are virtually unrepresented in both central and local organs of government, while the adoption of national languages for public administration hinders Russians in finding work in government institutions. Education in Russian is being cut back, TV broadcasting in Russian has been reduced to a minimum, and books, newspapers and journals are in very short supply. Nonetheless, in Baku, Tbilisi and Yerevan Russian communities continue to be active, Russian theatres are open, newspapers are published in Russian and Russian continues to be taught in higher educational institutions.

However, the situation in Central Asia is somewhat different.

Russians have played an important role in all aspects of Uzbekistan’s life from the moment they arrived on the territory of the future republic in the final quarter of the 19th century. This was particularly the case during the Soviet period and – primarily – in Tashkent, the capital. Today the number of Russians has decreased from 15% of the population of the country in the early 1960s to 2% (or less). The 1989 census gave the number of Russians living in Uzbekistan as 1,660,000, yet by 2006 no more than a million remained³. The exodus of Russians continues today. The reason why so few Russians or Russian speakers remain is the republic’s strict policy of Islamisation. “I’m a *giaour*⁴ to them [...] and I’ve no future in this country,” says Vyacheslav, a postgraduate student at Tashkent University. “There used to be a lot of families of Russian engineers and doctors living in our block, now there’s no one left apart from us. As soon as I finish my studies, my mother and I are leaving for Russia.”

The Russian diaspora in Tadjikistan is one of the smallest in the CIS after Armenia. In 1989 some 398,000 Russians lived in the republic, representing 8% of the population and the third largest ethnic group after

Uzbeks. Today 60,000 remain and these have only postponed their departure. Marina, an attractive second-generation native of Dushanbe, says: "I would have left as well, but at the moment my career is more successful in Tadzhikistan. My knowledge of the culture and traditions of this country is valued here, as well as my European manners and Slavic appearance." Marina has a flat in reserve outside Moscow. She says that sooner or later she will have to return to Russia for the sake of her young son, but will continue to live and work in Dushanbe for as long as the situation allows.

In Kyrgyzstan Russians are the third largest ethnic group after Kyrgyz (70%) and Uzbeks (15%), and one of the largest officially recognised diasporas of Russians living outside contemporary Russia. Together with Ukrainians, the Eastern Slavic community in the republic numbers around 500,000. Nonetheless, the number of Russians in Kyrgyzstan has decreased by 30% over the past 10 years and, according to the 2009 census, they represent only 7.8% of the population. The majority lives in the capital. Russian speech can be heard on the streets of Bishkek, advertisements are in Russian and Kyrgyz, and young people know and like Russian popular music. The fact that parliamentary discussions were conducted in Russian during the coup d'état of spring 2010 is evidence of the language's wide use in the republic⁵.

Russians in Kazakhstan are predominantly the descendants of 18th- and 19th-century settlers who arrived following the Kazakh state's accession to the Russian Empire or the children of 'young specialists' who migrated during the Soviet period. Together with Kazakhs, Russians form the bulk of the population and are the largest non-indigenous ethnic group in the country (more than 20% of the population). However, even here a decrease in the Russian population can be observed. Firstly, people are leaving for Russia, albeit not in vast numbers. Secondly, the average age of Russians in Kazakhstan is currently 49 years, compared to 27 years for Kazakhs. This is due not only to Russians leaving, but

also to the low birth rate among Kazakhstan's Russian population.

The fate of Russians living in Turkmenistan is the most pitiful. Data sources give their numbers as fluctuating between 100,000 and 120,000. The harsh political regime has turned them into hostages, living in almost total isolation. The Russian community of Turkmenistan has been banned since 1995. There are cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, violation of property rights and freedom of domicile. As one of my compatriots living in Ashkhabad attests, losing one's job is a death sentence for the vast majority of Russians: "Salaries are pitiful, no more than 25–28 dollars, but without that money one couldn't live at all." At the same time sackings are commonplace: over the past few years around 20,000 doctors and 20,000 teachers have been dismissed, predominantly Russians. Not everyone has the financial means to move to Russia: apartments fetch very little on the market, air tickets and removals are expensive, and many are frightened that, having bought tickets, they will be left without any livelihood in Russia. In July 2010 Alexandra Semenova, a journalist with the BBC Russian Service, reported that Russians with dual citizenship had unexpectedly discovered they were unable to leave the country and had been told to renounce their Russian citizenship⁶. This decision is illogical, given Russians' third class status in Turkmenistan, but it seems they are viewed as bargaining chips in relations with Russia over the settlement of 'gas' issues.

The economic decline in the former Central Asian republics of the USSR has led to the mass emigration of Russian and other European populations. However, the key factor influencing the exodus of Russians and the position of those left beyond Russia's borders is the policy of Islamisation, covert nationalism, employment discrimination, unemployment and loss of contact with the homeland.

There can be no doubt that the Russian language space is contracting rapidly and this worries both ethnic Russians and the

Russian state. As Russians living beyond Russia's borders say, in five to 10 years there will be nothing left to fight for – Russian will have fallen into disuse. The disappearance of Russian is associated for them with loss of confidence in the future and loss of a protector in the form of Russia, engendering a bitter sense of insecurity and disappointment.

There continue to be conflicting views about the consequences of the disintegration of the USSR. For example, interviewed in 2006 on the 15th anniversary of the Belovezha Accords, Vladimir Putin, then president of the Russian Federation, called it the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”. Likewise, there are many members of the older generation, in Russia and many other post-Soviet states, who still regret the passing of the “unbreakable union of freeborn republics”⁷. However, we live today in a new reality where the Russian language no longer binds different peoples together in a single family and where Russians themselves at times may suffer oppression or limits on their rights and freedoms. Since independence, the policy of practically all the former Soviet republics has been to build an ‘ethnocratic’ society and exclude, to a greater or lesser extent, non-indigenous peoples from political, social and cultural life. This new reality places a great responsibility on Russia for the fate of its compatriots.

Footnotes

¹ The Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States is more commonly known as the Belovezha Accords.

² This article considers the situation in post-Soviet Transcaucasia and Central Asia.

³ See <http://russian-world.info/russkie-v-uzbekistane/>.

⁴ A derogatory term for a non-Muslim.

⁵ See reports shown on the TV channels EuroNews and CNN.

⁶ See http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2010/07/100705_russia_turkmen_citizenship.shtml.

⁷ The opening line of the Soviet national anthem: «Союз нерушимый республик свободных».

Dr Rogozhina is Professor of Russian Language in the Faculty of Philology at St Petersburg State University and Vice-Director of the Secretariat of MAPRYAL. Her research interests include functional grammar, semantics and pragmatics. She travels widely overseas as part of her work. This article is based on her personal impressions and meetings with Russians living in the countries of the former Soviet Union. She will explore the situation for Russians and the Russian language in the European republics of the former Soviet Union (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova) in a further article to appear in the SCRSS Information Digest later this year.

Translated by Diana Turner

SCRSS News

SCRSS Special Event, 10 December 2010

In December the SCRSS held a special event for members to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the defeat of Fascism in 1945. Throughout the year both the Society and the Soviet Memorial Trust Fund had organised major events to mark the anniversary.

The SCRSS's contribution was an important exhibition *Anglo-Soviet Cultural Exchanges 1941–1948*, based on materials in its archives (see *SCRSS Information Digest: Summer 2010*). The exhibition had opened in St Petersburg at the Russian National Library in April 2010 and in Moscow at the Diplomatic Academy in November 2010, with the inclusion at the latter of materials

from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs archive under the title 'Peace against Fascism'. The SCRSS had received a message from former Russian Ambassador to the UK, HE Yuri Fokine, welcoming the joint efforts of our Society, the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation, the Moscow Association for Contacts with Britain (of which Mr Fokine is president), the Consulate General of the UK in St Petersburg and the British Ambassador in Moscow, in making this exhibition a part of the country-wide celebration of victory over Fascism.

At the 10 December event SCRSS members and special guests were given the opportunity to see a visual presentation of the *Anglo-Soviet Cultural Exchanges 1941–1948* exhibition. The SCRSS Hon Secretary, Jean Turner, gave a welcome speech. Cllr Blango, former Mayor of Southwark, formally opened the event.

The highlight of the evening was the playing of extracts from a newly digitised version of a recording made in 1946 by the SCR Writers' Group. The original album included readings of their own poems by such well known poets as TS Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender. The album was presented to the Soviet Writers' Union in February 1947 in tribute to the Soviet Union's contribution to the defeat of Fascism. At the special event, nine of the recordings were played, accompanied by a slideshow of images from the SCRSS photo library.

This moving and enjoyable evening concluded a successful year for the SCRSS. Thanks are due to all volunteers, in particular Jean Turner and John Cunningham for organising the event and visual materials, and Victoria Nartova and Vladimir Kulbachny for the Russian buffet.

Annual General Meeting

Notice is hereby given that the SCRSS AGM will take place at 10.30am on Saturday 21 May 2011 at the Society's premises in Brixton. The meeting is open to SCRSS

members only. Nominations for members for election to the next Council and motions for the AGM should be sent to Head Office no later than Friday 30 April 2011. All nominations and motions must be seconded by another SCRSS member. Refreshments will be served after the AGM and we hope to have a talk by a distinguished guest lecturer (details TBC nearer the date). If you are not on email, please ring the Society early in May to be sent the full agenda.

SCRSS Website Refresh

The SCRSS website at www.scrss.org.uk has been re-launched with a refreshed design and updated content, including new images from the library and archive. We recommend you take a tour around the refreshed site to find out more about the SCRSS collections and upcoming activities.

Next Events

Friday 25 February 7pm

Film: The Youth of Maxim

First part of the classic Maxim Trilogy. The film focuses on how workers organised themselves prior to the Russian Revolution in the face of incredible obstacles. Actors include Boris Chirkov as Maxim, Maxim Strauch as Lenin and Mikhail Gelovani as Stalin. Directed by Kozintsev and Trauberg, USSR, 1935. 100 mins, b/w, English subtitles.

Wednesday 6 April 2.30pm

Event: Reception for Brest Fortress Museum Representatives

Members and friends are invited to meet Mrs Larisa Bibik, Deputy Director of the Brest Fortress Museum in Belarus, and Mrs Irina Katsuba, Senior Guide, at the SCRSS. Please contact the Society if you would like to attend.

**Wednesday 13 - Thursday 14 April 2011
10am – 4.30pm daily**

Event: 5th SCRSS Russian Language Seminar

This is a two-day intensive programme of lectures in Russian on contemporary

Russian society and politics, culture and modern language usage, given by two senior lecturers from St Petersburg State University. It is aimed at teachers of Russian, graduates of Russian and final-year undergraduates. Participants may book a place on one or both days. Each day there are four lectures with a choice of two options per lecture. The names of the lecturers and full programme of lecture topics will be confirmed nearer the seminar date. The seminar fee is being held at 2010 prices: £50 (one day), £90 (two days). Application deadline: 21 March 2011. Payment deadline: 4 April 2011. Download the seminar application form (and full details) from the SCRSS website at www.scrss.org.uk/russianseminar.htm or telephone the Society for a printed copy.

Thursday 14 April pm (time TBC)
Exhibition Launch: Yuri Gagarin – First Man in Space

12 April 2011 marks the 50th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's space flight on 12 April 1961. A website yurigagarin50.org has been set up and many events in the UK will be taking place around this date. To celebrate the anniversary the SCRSS is preparing a photographic exhibition on Gagarin, based on materials in our library and archive. The exhibition will be launched at a reception on 14 April. Bernard Kops, writer and poet, will read the poem he presented to Yuri Gagarin when the Soviet cosmonaut visited the SCR in 1961 (*see report on page 10*), as well as *Shalom Bomb*, a poem calling for world peace. We are also hoping to invite other special guests from the science and space field. Details will be confirmed nearer the date.

Saturday 21 May 2011 10.30

Event: SCRSS AGM

See details under Annual General Meeting entry above.

Events take place at the SCRSS, 320 Brixton Road, London SW9, unless otherwise stated. Admission fees for films and lectures: £3.00 (SCRSS members), £5.00 (non-members). For all other events, see details above.

Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News

Spartak Moscow Fans Pay Respects

Prior to their match with Chelsea last November 2010, fans from Spartak Moscow, led by Dmitry Alenichev, a former captain turned parliamentarian, laid a wreath at the Memorial. The event was organised by the SMTF in co-operation with the British Council in Moscow under the *Football Unites* initiative. The fans met the Mayor of Southwark and a small group of British Arctic Convoy and RAF veterans.

Remembering the Nuremberg Trials

In January 2011 the Russian Embassy hosted a meeting dedicated to the 65th anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials. Alexander Sternik, the Chargé d'Affaires, delivered a brief address. Personal recollections came from veteran Leslie Sutton, who was present for part of the Trials. For more details of the event, see www.rusemb.org.uk.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Well over 150 people attended the annual ceremony on 27 January 2011, organised jointly by the SMTF and Southwark Council. Following a commemoration inside the Imperial War Museum involving children from local schools, the participants moved outside for the Act of Remembrance at the Memorial and adjacent Holocaust Memorial Tree. There were powerful addresses from the Mayor of Southwark, Cllr Tayo Situ, the Chargé d'Affaires of the Russian Embassy, Alexander Sternik, and local MP Simon Hughes, on the need to ensure the Holocaust is never forgotten – and never repeated.

Next Events

Monday 9 May 2011

Event: Victory Day

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Nazi German invasion of the USSR in 1941, making the Victory Day ceremony especially significant. Further details will be sent to everyone on the SMTF mailing list in early March. To be placed on the list, please send your details to: Hon Secretary, SMTF, c/o 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB or email: smtf@hotmail.co.uk. The SCRSS website lists SMTF events at www.scrss.org.uk/cinemaevents.htm and includes information about the Memorial at www.scrss.org.uk/sovietmemorial.htm.

The Soviet War Memorial is located in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, (adjacent to the Imperial War Museum), Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ.

Feature

The Virtual Training Suite for Russian and Soviet Studies

By Angela Joyce

The Virtual Training Suite (VTS) is a national Internet service based at the Institute for Learning and Research Technology (ILRT) at the University of Bristol. The VTS provides free online tutorials about higher education subjects, aimed primarily at students and intended to teach them academic Internet skills. It is funded by JISC, a UK government funding agency. However, anyone is welcome to use the VTS and SCRSS members may find some tutorials an interesting source of Russian websites and of tips for better Web searching.

All tutorials are written and updated by a national team of academics, teaching staff and librarians in UK universities and

colleges. There is no need for a login or password, and the tutorials are designed to be simple to use. With the trend towards using textbooks less and the Web more for education, for example for distance learners, students at school or university need to be aware of the pros and cons of using the Internet. VTS can help them to gain vital information skills.



The VTS Home Page (www.vts.intute.ac.uk)

The VTS home page (www.vts.intute.ac.uk) lists all the tutorials available. Simply click on a tutorial of your choice, for example *Internet for History*, and you will be taken to the start page. Each tutorial takes around one hour to complete, or can simply be dipped into and returned to later. They are very flexible and there is no need to log in and out.

Each VTS tutorial has a similar structure, based on four sections:

Tour: This section lists key academic websites or services for each subject. This is probably of most interest to SCRSS readers. You can use the Links Basket to save a list of useful websites from Tour to refer to later.

Discover: This section offers advice on online searching and search tools. It emphasises the difference between a search for ordinary Internet resources and one for academic resources.

Judge: This is the most important section. It provides guidance on how to judge which Internet resources are appropriate for

university work in terms of academic rigour and quality (reliability, credentials and bias). The Judge section encourages readers to think about the following questions: Who has written the information? What is the author's level of expertise in the field? Why have they written it? Are they a useful source for your research? Who has made the material available online? What are the motives of the publisher and how might this affect the quality of the information? In subjects such as government and politics, readers should be aware of political agendas. For example, not all research bodies are neutral, while in certain areas of the world opposition viewpoints are censored or suppressed.

Success: This section features realistic 'stories' of students using the Internet for research – both successfully and unsuccessfully.

Some people may ask why there is a need for these tutorials. With hugely popular services like Google and Wikipedia, is there any call for a directory of websites or for advice about searching the Web? While it is true that these two services can be fantastic for finding information, a note of caution is necessary. Wikipedia is open to contributions from anyone and credentials are not checked. Some entries can be biased one way or another politically, or even be incorrect. Google finds huge numbers of websites, but these are machine generated and not quality checked. The VTS tutorials, especially the Judge section, make users more aware of these issues and remind them not to believe everything they find online. This can be important when looking at history or politics websites in particular.

Google's scope can also vary according to geographical location of the computer user. A search on Google in the UK will yield different results to one in the USA. In addition, only about 16% of net-based information can be found using a general search engine (Sherman, 2001). The rest is part of the so-called 'invisible Web' and can only be found by going directly to websites or databases.

How could the VTS be used for Russian and Soviet studies? In particular, we recommend the following tutorials: *Internet for Modern Languages*, *Internet for History* and *Internet for Government and Politics*. These are not specifically about Russia or the former Soviet Union, but they do contain some interesting resources that cover Russia and CIS countries, including organisations, online archives, language-learning communities, library collections and newspapers. Resources on *Internet for History* and *Internet for Government and Politics* consist mainly of English-language websites. *Internet for Modern Languages*, not surprisingly, lists a few foreign language resources. However, the scope is mainly British, West European and American. Below you will find a selection of suggested websites from VTS tutorials.

Internet for Modern Languages Tutorial
www.vts.intute.ac.uk/tutorial/modernlanguages/

Online Russian Reference Grammar
www.alphadictionary.com/rusgrammar/

Intute Russian Studies
www.intute.ac.uk/russian/
Directory of websites relating to Russian studies. Note: Intute is no longer being developed.

Livemocha
www.livemocha.com
Online language-learning community that offers free and paid language courses, and brings people together online to practise their languages.

Internet for History Tutorial
www.vts.intute.ac.uk/tutorial/history/

Working Class Movement Library
www.wcml.org.uk/search/
The library collections include Communism and the Cold War.

Socialist History Today
www.socialisthistorysociety.co.uk
British organisation that holds events in London and publishes a journal, papers and a blog.

History Today

www.historytoday.com

Magazine with essays by leading scholars, including many on Russian and Soviet history.

Internet for Government and Politics Tutorial

www.vts.intute.ac.uk/tutorial/government/

Marxists Internet Archive

www.marxists.org/

Classic works by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as well as other lesser known figures from Soviet Russia and Latin America.

Global Voices

<http://globalvoicesonline.org/>

International community of bloggers who comment on politics and current affairs around the world. It includes (sometimes critical) blogs about ex-Soviet republics and many responses to them.

The VTS is currently being reviewed by its funder, JISC, and its future will be decided in July 2011. Meanwhile, SCRSS members who work with students may like to tell them about this Internet service.

References

Sherman, C and Price, G (2001). *The Invisible Web: Uncovering Information Sources Search Engines Can't See*. Medford: CyberAge Books

Angela Joyce is Online Information Specialist at the Virtual Training Suite (www.vts.intute.ac.uk), University of Bristol. She can be contacted about the VTS on angela.joyce@bristol.ac.uk.

Reports

Taking off into Space!

By Irena Brezowski

In 2001 my colleagues and I organised a space extravaganza at North Hertfordshire College (NHC). We had received a letter

from Dr Alexander Martynov, a space expert based in the city of Korolyov outside Moscow. He was offering lectures and demonstrations by himself and the cosmonaut Alexander Volkov on life in the MIR space station and the latest developments in space. It did not take us long to decide to take up the offer – the opportunity was too good to miss. We set about planning a full itinerary and liaising with local secondary and primary schools, as well as the University of Hertfordshire.

The programme was very successful and repeated twice at NHC. The opportunity to meet someone who had been in space and lived on MIR was an unforgettable experience for 7 and 8 year olds, as well as mature, well-informed scientists. Dr Martynov's time at mission control gave a different scientific perspective and, together, their experience was awe-inspiring. They brought many artefacts with them, including a space suit and space food. During their stay at NCU they helped A-Level science students conduct experiments and shared the benefits of their first-hand scientific experience. The programme was also of great benefit to students studying Russian language – and fascinating for school pupils hearing Russian for the first time – as Volkov spoke in Russian while Martynov interpreted.

The city of Korolyov, located north east of Moscow, has been the centre of the Russian space industry for many years. Originally known as Kaliningrad, it was re-named in honour of SP Korolyov, the father of the space industry, in 1998. In addition to promoting space and scientific work in space, Korolyov also organises the International Space Olympics. This is an annual competition for 14 to 18 year old students that aims to increase students' interest in science and engineering, give them some knowledge of space exploration and raise the profile of the Russian space industry. The event has been going for 18 years, with participants from Russia, UK, USA, Australia, Germany and Greece, among others. Over 10 days participants take part in competitions in mathematics, physics and computer science, and

undertake a space-related research project. They also meet Russian cosmonauts and space industry specialists, and visit Mission Control Centre, Star City and the Space Museum which holds Gagarin's capsule and the first Sputnik.

The next International Space Olympics takes place between the 19 and 29 October 2011. This is a unique chance for any student interested in a hands-on experience in space exploration. For more information, visit Dr Martynov's website at www.spacedu.org.

First Man in Space: Yuri Gagarin Visits the SCR, 13 July 1961

Edited by Jean Turner

The following is an extract from the report of the official visit made by Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, to the SCR during his state visit to Britain in July 1961. It was published in the SCR's *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Vol XXII, Nos 3 and 4, Autumn 1961 (Editor: HC Creighton; Editorial Committee: Leonard Cassini, Dr L Crome, Jack Lindsay, Andrew Rothstein, Professor JS Spink).



Herman Titov and Yuri Gagarin (SCRSS Archive)

“For the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR the highlight of Major Gagarin's visit to London in July was his attendance at a garden party at 14, Kensington Square on July 13. This was indeed a great occasion

for the Society, one of the greatest in its history [...] Seldom has a hero been more endearing in his modesty and aplomb than Yuri Gagarin – calm, serene, self-possessed, unflustered in the most trying situations, taking everything in his stride; truly a conquering hero [...] And now he has a ‘twin’, Herman Titov. Another young man cast in similar mould. Soon, as Gagarin said so charmingly at his press conference, there will be others, a growing band of daring, self-controlled spirits [...]

“SCR Chairman Mr Lipmann Kessel, MC, MBE, FRCS, took admirable charge of the proceedings, which opened with a short speech of welcome by Mr DN Pritt, QC, President of the Society.

‘We are very happy to welcome you among us,’ Mr Pritt said to Gagarin. ‘We are a society that is proud to have worked for over 37 years to promote mutual understanding between our two countries. After many long years, we have lately won great successes, but you have done more in your few days here than we can do in months. That is the sort of competition that we welcome.

‘For years we have stressed the value to Britain and British scientists of studying the progress of Soviet science; your flight, giving the crown to the efforts of Soviet scientific achievement, has underlined the importance of this in an inescapable manner.

‘We hope that you have felt the warmth of the welcome to you of the British people. It comes from our hearts [...] You have richly deserved our warm feelings not only by the part you have played in the great achievements of the scientists of your great country, but also because you display all the simple qualities of the truly great – qualities which make a strong appeal to us.

‘You may long to be back at your work; but wherever you are, be sure that our affection and admiration for you will remain strong in our hearts.

‘Thank you for visiting our House. Thank you for all you have done.’

“Following this, Major Gagarin autographed a song dedicated to him by two members of the Society, Mr Miles Tomalin and Mr Alan Bush, Chairman of the Music Section; and was presented with a poem written to him by Bernard Kops.”

Reviews

Tolstoy: A Russian Life

By Rosamund Bartlett (Profile Books, ISBN: 978-1-84668-138-7, Hbk, 544pp, £25.00)

Lev Tolstoy's literary fame rests on his historical novel *War and Peace*, based on his experiences as an artillery officer in the Crimean War, which made him a pacifist.

As a feudal aristocrat, he enjoyed his landowner's privileges. He abused female serfs, gambled away his estates and was a fanatical hunter of wildlife. Yet Tsar Alexander III saw him as a dangerous rebel because of his criticism of the suffering of the serfs and his efforts to educate them out of illiteracy.

Rosamund Bartlett has drawn on key Russian and post-Soviet sources in this exhaustive and fascinating biography. She comes down on the side of Tolstoy's long-suffering but devoted wife, Sonya, drawing on her diaries, letters and autobiography. The latter was written to exonerate Sonya from the defamation by Chertkov, Tolstoy's protégé, in his biography of Tolstoy. Bartlett writes of the tussle after Tolstoy's death between Sonya, Chertkov and his fellow 'Tolstoyans' for the rights to his early manuscripts and diaries. She won, but died two years after the October Revolution.

At first the Bolsheviks attacked the Tolstoyans for their pacifism and their anarchic rejection of the state. They briefly arrested Tolstoy's daughter, Alexandra, who had taken over from her mother in caring for the Tolstoy archive and his estate at Yasnaya Polyana.

After much theoretical argument, the 100th anniversary of Tolstoy's birth in 1928 was made a Soviet Jubilee. A full edition of Tolstoy's works was to be published at this time, but it only appeared in 1958. By then Tolstoy was venerated as a true Russian writer but, as Bartlett points out, the Soviet Government had separated 'Tolstoyism' from Tolstoy.

Tolstoy's views are still controversial in post-Soviet Russia, particularly as he was excommunicated by the Orthodox Church for his rejection of its rituals and its support for the Tsarist state.

Jean Turner

Mayakovsky: 22 Postcards (Redstone Press, 2010, ISBN: 978-1-870003-65-0, 225mm x 162mm, £9.95)

Redstone Press (www.redstonepress.co.uk) has again turned to a Russian theme for its recent series of 22 large-format postcards featuring text and images from the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky. It seems somehow appropriate that this ever innovative publisher should draw its inspiration from one of the great 20th-century artistic revolutionaries.

Ground-breaking in style and genre – including book illustrations, examples of the famous ROSTA posters, and his perhaps less well-known contributions to children's literature – the majority of the images reflect the political themes that were such a significant part of Mayakovsky's oeuvre. The vibrant colour, bold lines and sense of movement typical for art of the time serve not only to strengthen the urgency of the message, but also underline Mayakovsky's commitment to producing work that conformed to the most rigorous artistic standards.

£9.95 may appear expensive for a set of postcards. However, the 22 cards are of the high quality that we have come to expect from Redstone Press and bound into a rather lovely book. As such they can be sent

individually or retained complete. I rather like the large format that not only offers more space than is usual on a postcard, but also evokes Mayakovsky himself. This was a man who, as the title to one of his poems reminds us, never settled for anything less than the expression of his artistic and political convictions 'At the Top of My Voice'.

Jill Cunningham

Red Plenty

By Francis Spufford (Faber & Faber, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-571-22523-1, Hbk, 434pp, £16.99)

"This is not a novel. . . . But it is not a history either." So says the author of *Red Plenty*. The extensive bibliography and copious notes indicate that he was some way towards his intended academic tome when he switched the form of his book to something that treads an interesting line between fact and fiction. It begins with a 'Cast List' that includes actual personalities such as Leonid Kantorovich, famous for his 'linear programming' and winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, and Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet leader from the death of Stalin until 1964. But these are joined by imaginary characters that the author uses to move his narrative forward. We join the 'cast' at various times in their lives, from the 1930s to 1970, though the book focuses on the 'golden era' of the late 1950s and early 1960s when Khrushchev boasted about overtaking the USA within a generation.

The rapid recovery from the devastation of WWII and the huge advances in so many areas of science and technology, epitomised by the launch of Sputnik in 1957 and Yuri Gagarin's orbit of the Earth in 1961, encouraged the belief among many economists that, if only the USSR could sort out the problems of centralised planning and harness the potential of new technology, socialism really would win the great Cold War battle of ideas.

We witness the early days of Akademgorodok, near Novosibirsk in Siberia, with its artificial 'sea' and beach.

The brightest Soviet scientists from every discipline came here to research and found a perfect setting for dreaming up new ideas. There is a good description of the massive US exhibition in Moscow in 1959 which has a profound effect on one of the fictional characters. And, although the tone of the book is often light and comic, there is also a dramatic account of the 1962 Novocherkassk massacre, when 20 or more demonstrators against rising food prices were killed and dozens wounded. There are many more themes and incidents, such as censorship, collectivisation, Communist party meetings and cybernetics – the new science that promised to transform the lives of everyone. All the topics are covered in a very readable style and the factual background notes provide much food for thought for those interested in considering 'what might have been'.

The part fact / part fiction nature of the book can sometimes be confusing and you may argue with some of the author's conclusions. But it is a fascinating read, delving into that brief era when the USSR seemed on the way to its inevitable triumph over the West.

The SCRSS is mentioned in the acknowledgements. One hopes that authors will continue to use its unique resources to better understand how Soviet society functioned and what lessons from its history might be learned.

You can view or listen to extracts from the book – and read background material – at www.redplenty.com.

Ralph Gibson

The Foundation Pit

By Andrey Platonov (translated by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler and Olga Meerson, Vintage Books, London, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-099-52974-3, Pbk, 224pp, £8.99)

This beautifully designed little paperback is an academic edition of a crucial Russian text from the Soviet era. It was written in 1929–30 but an authentic original text has

only recently appeared, so this translation supersedes existing translations. We see the lives of ordinary people in the period of socialist construction and collectivisation – and come face to face with the chaos and casual brutality of the time for them. The narrative is carried by a number of characters, representative of the period, who pass before us, each trying to survive in their own way. The task into which the main character almost literally falls is the construction of an enormous foundation pit for a Proletarian House. As the story progresses, we see that it will never be finished – a metaphor for the construction of socialism in the USSR. This is not a jolly romp – Platonov's irony is savage, albeit cloaked in some black humour. His prose style is uniquely strange in Russian, alienated, abrupt, with strange word conjunctions. This comes across very clearly in this hard-edged and scrupulous translation.

The edition includes an afterword, further reading, textual variants and explanatory notes.

Andrew Jameson

**The Road: Short Fiction and Essays
By Vasily Grossman (translated by
Robert and Elizabeth Chandler,
Maclehose Press, London, 2010,
ISBN: 978-1-906694-25-8, Hbk, 392pp,
£20.00)**

This is an excellent translation of Grossman's short stories, from the 1930s up to his death in 1964. Widely known as the author of *Life and Fate*, that novel was banned in his homeland even during the height of Khrushchev's thaw. The stories in this collection are fascinating for their range of topics and the long time span during which they were written. They offer an insight into what it meant to be a Jewish intellectual, broadly supportive of the Bolshevik Revolution and its aims, living through some of the 20th century's most dramatic and dreadful moments, such as the Civil War, the 1931 famine, the Stalinist purges of the thirties, the Nazi invasion of

the USSR during the Second World War, and the horror and unbelievable inhumanity of the Nazi death camps.

Though conscious of his Jewish heritage, Grossman's humanity and empathy with *all* people faced with daunting challenges in life shine through in his writing. His mother was a victim of the early Nazi Einsatzgruppen massacres in the Ukraine in September 1941. *In the Town of Berdichev*, set in a Ukrainian town with a large pre-war Jewish population, explores the inner dilemma of a woman commissar who gives birth during the Civil War and has to choose between motherhood and her revolutionary conscience. *The Old Man* and *The Old Teacher* both relate episodes during the Nazi occupation when Jews and non-Jews alike were massacred. *The Hell of Treblinka* is a harrowing account of the Nazi death camp of that name.

But amid the 20th-century upheavals and tragedies it was his lot to live through, Grossman excels in describing the foibles and petty ambitions of people, their weaknesses and strengths. In *A Young Woman and an Old Woman* one gets an impression of the randomness of Soviet life in the thirties, when one could find oneself elevated to positions of great authority or, conversely, cast out into the darkness.

His later stories, *The Dog*, *The Elk*, *Mama*, *The Road* and others, are imbued with Grossman's deep humanism. Against the backdrop of the release of hundreds of thousands of prisoners from the Gulag between 1953 and 1956, *Living Space* subtly condemns the indifference of fellow citizens to the fate of those caught up in those often unjust detentions which continued until the death of Stalin in 1953.

In *Eternal Rest*, a story ostensibly about Moscow's Vagankovo cemetery, Grossman muses on life and mortality. On the 1930s he writes: "This period of Soviet life is reflected in the cemetery beside the Moscow crematorium. What a huge number of mixed marriages there were in those years! What wonderful equality between different nationalities! [...] What a lot of

Latvians, Jews and Armenians! What militant slogans on the gravestones!” And he ends: “The living human heart is the most splendid thing in the world. There is true splendour in its ability to love and have faith, to pardon and to sacrifice everything in the name of love. But in the earth of the cemetery even a living heart must sleep an eternal sleep.”

Kate Clark

2017: A Novel

By Olga Slavnikova (translated by Marian Schwartz, Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, 2010, ISBN-10: 1590203097, Hbk, 448pp, £16.99)

2017 is a Russian Booker Prize winning novel from 2006, translated and published in English in 2010. It is set in the future, at a date that coincides with the centenary of the October Revolution. Events take place in a fictional Russian region, the Riphean Mountains, rich in mineral wealth and enveloped in superstition and the supernatural. The novel combines elements of romance, thriller and satire.

The plot centres on a gem-cutter named Krylov living in a large city in the fictional Riphean Mountains. There he encounters a mysterious woman named Tanya, with whom he begins an unconventional liaison. There is a touch of thriller in Krylov's involvement in the illicit gem trade and the intrigues in which his prolonged and bizarre affair with Tanya embroil him. Their affair is so clandestine that they don't know each other's names or why they're being followed. Meanwhile Krylov's ex-wife, Tamara, a wealthy and powerful funeral director who still has her eyes set on Krylov, enters the picture. She thinks it's about time she and Krylov got back together again.

This is a Russia of the future where the country's harsh realities, ecological disasters and criminality have become amplified. Far from the expectations of 1917, the Russia of 2017 is consumer-driven, materialistic and beset with

environmental problems. Rivers are polluted and forests are dying. In the cities a rich elite flourishes while a disenfranchised underclass is kept subdued by low-cost television. Could it be that such circumstances call for further radical change?

2017 is a dense and unpredictable book. It is difficult to get to grips with, especially in its opening chapters. There are many descriptive passages and a tendency towards long sentences that require re-reading to follow. It is best approached slowly and thoughtfully, perhaps on a long journey across several time zones.

Charles Stewart

Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909–1929 (V&A, September 2010–January 2011)

Serge Diaghilev's innovatory ballets for the *Ballets Russes* (1909–29) first shocked and thrilled European audiences in the years leading up to WWI.

Born into the Russian landed aristocracy in 1872, Diaghilev early developed a fascination for the arts of Russia and of the European avant-garde.

At the turn of the century the Russian avant-garde was influenced by the hitherto disparaged pre-18th century icons and the Russian Empire's peasant arts, including those of its Islamic provinces. These non-illusionistic works held a mystery, exoticism and expressive power that paralleled that of other 'primitive' art then being discovered by Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse and other pioneers of modernism.

In 1906 Diaghilev amazed audiences in Paris, Berlin and Venice with a large exhibition featuring Russian icons, peasant arts and avant-garde art. He soon followed this with concerts of Russian contemporary music. By 1909 he had merged these influences with innovatory ballet.

The first productions in Paris in 1909 caused a sensation. Ballet's polite traditions were broken. Gone were the naturalistic sets, melodic music and teetering ballerinas. Here was the virtuosity of the charismatic Vaslav Nijinsky, Mikhail Fokine's innovative choreography, Igor Stravinsky's swirling music, and Léon Bakst's bold, exotic costumes and sets exuding sensuality and eroticism.

Diaghilev created innovative total art works that enveloped audiences in complete audio-visual sensory experiences. Much in demand, the company toured Europe and the Americas until Diaghilev's death in 1929.

With a finger on the pulse of his age, Diaghilev's greatest achievement was to understand expressions of modernity as they were being forged by the avant-garde. He collaborated with the leading artists, designers, composers, choreographers, writers and dancers of his era – for example with Nijinsky, Stravinsky and Nicholas Roerich on *Rites of Spring* (1913) and Picasso, Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau on *Parade* (1917).

The socio-political context of the exhibition is anti-Bolshevik. The introductory display quotes the Tsar's rather than the proletariat's views on the 1905 Revolution. Diaghilev's reasons for not joining the struggle for socio-political justice, as other members of the Russian intelligentsia did, are not discussed.

However, the exhibition conveys the daring and magic of Diaghilev's productions. Information is provided by music, videos, digital projections and films that complement numerous costumes, programmes, posters and designs. The rhythm, scale and mood of the exhibition vary. Having pored over an intimate display of four of Natalia Goncharova's alternative set designs for *The Firebird*, we get the delightful shock of being dwarfed by the gigantic backcloth itself hanging in solitary splendour to Stravinsky's music.

Careful scholarship, thoughtful curating and brilliant exhibition design blend into an entity

that echoes the drama and creativity of its theme.

Christine Lindsey

This is shortened version of an article which first appeared in the *Morning Star* in December 2010

Sheffield 17th International Documentary Film Festival (2010)

The DocFest in November 2010 again featured a few films with a Russian interest. *My Perestroika* (www.myperestroika.com) is directed by a young American woman, Robin Hessman, who lived in Moscow during the nineties. Her film features five Russians, who all went to Moscow School No 57, recalling their perestroika years and comparing their lives then with their lives now. There is a fascinating mix of nostalgia for what was good about socialism – happy childhoods, economic certainties, friendship – with repudiation of that system's hypocrisy and boring official media. Now in their early forties, one is a successful businessman importing French designer shirts, another works for a billiards company, one is a once-famous punk star rebel against the Soviet system who now finds he has no place in a modern Russia driven by money, and the others are a married couple, both history teachers, who have to face the problem of how to teach recent history. Using home film archives, Hessman weaves a sympathetic portrait of people facing the complexities of contemporary life in today's Russia.

The Naked of St Petersburg (www.klassefilm.dk) is a short Danish film worth seeing, if only for the glimpses it affords of this most beautiful of cities. We see sunbathers in their trunks and bikinis, and teenagers on skateboards, interwoven with flashes of the personal drama of a man whose wife has cheated on him. The former Leningrad seems to have metamorphosed into a wonderfully free and refreshingly unorthodox city.

After the Apocalypse is a human-interest documentary tracing the lives of several people living near the Soviet Union's *polygon* (nuclear test site) in Kazakhstan,

some of whom have suffered chromosome damage due to radiation. The film (www.aftertheapocalypsemovie.com) makes no attempt to put the subject in the context of the Cold War, so Soviet governments of the time are seen as uniquely to blame for this human tragedy. But the story of Bibigul, a young woman who has inherited radiation damage from her mother and who is determined to proceed with her pregnancy against the advice of her Kazakh obstetrician, is touching and throws up interesting debate around the whole question of the rights of the disabled in modern society.

Russian Lessons (www.russianlessons.org) is the only Russian-directed film at the DocFest. Two Russian journalists interview people from both sides who were caught up in Georgia's 2008 attack on South Ossetia, as well as earlier regional conflicts. As in any war situation, atrocities are committed by both sides and this film features harrowing stories told by survivors. But the film lacks any analysis or context (for instance, the West's courtship of Georgia and NATO attempts to expand eastwards) and is thus a damning, but one-sided, exposé of the present Russian leadership's actions in the conflict.

Kate Clark

Listings

Events

Gorbachev Charity Event

Gorbachev Foundation: www.gorby80.com
30 March: Major charity concert at the Royal Albert Hall to mark Gorbachev's 80th birthday and raise money for his charities.

Pushkin House

5A Bloomsbury Square, London WC1A 2TA,
Tel: 020 7269 0990, Web: www.pushkinhouse.org
Weds 6 April, 6.30pm: Reception in honour of Larisa Bibik, Deputy Director of Brest

Fortress Museum & Irina Kotsuba, Chief Guide.

Mon 11 April, 6.30pm (time TBC): Lecture and film show: *Brest Fortress*. Talk on the history of the Brest Fortress in Belarus by Irina Kotsuba, followed by a screening of the new film *Брестская Крепость* (no subtitles). The film tells the story of a young orphan enrolled in a military band and sent to the fortress in spring 1941.

Media

Moskva-Britania

Web: www.mosmediacentre.com
New online weekly Russian newspaper linked to *Moskovsky Komsomolets*.

Voluntary Sector

Russian Community Council

www.russian-council.co.uk

Druzhba Friendship Society

www.druzhba.org.uk

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