Society for Co-operation in
SCRSS
Russian and Soviet Studies

Digest

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Contents

Feature

A British Engineer in Nineteenth-Century Russia

By Bessie White

Arthur Toulmin Smith was not at home with his family in Highgate, London, for Christmas 1869. As a young engineer, aged just 21, he was working for the Siemens brothers, installing sections of Indo-European Telegraph in the Caucasus. Thus began his career as a British engineer in the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire. The first letter home to his sister that survives is dated 26 December 1869.

Life in the Caucasus was rough – poor roads, long hours, challenges with horses, the extremes of the weather, difficulties with his boss. His letters home to his sister include requests for items not available at all or only at high cost, for example boots and trousers that fit, but also, interestingly, string. However, Huntley & Palmers biscuits were on sale in Tiflis (Tbilisi) one Christmas.

In 1876 Arthur took a position managing the Moscow Gas Plant which had opened ten years earlier for the provision of street lighting. He noted the change of climate: “I long for the month or six weeks of winter we used to have in Suchum [Sukhumi].” He also faced the problem of finding somewhere clean and affordable to live. “It is not an elevating occupation exploring the scenes of past festivities, now given up to spiders, dust, and papiros [cigarette] ends,” he writes.

Photographs by Arthur Toulmin Smith. Top: Listviano chapel in winter, 1897. Bottom: Pushkino railway station, the nearest stop to Listviano, 1899

The centre for the British community in Moscow was the Anglican Chaplaincy, the responsibility of the Russia Company.

Arthur was from a Unitarian family, with fairly independent views on religion. However, he sang in the choir and celebrated national events, such as Queen Victoria's Jubilee, with fellow Brits. A proud British expat, he despaired over the initial failures of British forces in the Boer War (the annual bazaar and ball were cancelled), as well as the hostility and derision of both Russians and Germans to the British action.

Timofei Evdokimov and family, Arthur's landlord in Listviano. Photograph by Arthur Toulmin Smith, 1898

A new church building was consecrated in 1885, called St Andrew's in recognition of the number of Scots in the congregation (there not being a separate 'dissenting' church, as in St Petersburg). The chaplains of the church in Moscow had a hard time exerting their authority over the congregation.

Peasants threshing corn behind Arthur's rented dacha in Listviano. Photograph by Arthur Toulmin Smith, date unknown

Arthur and his second wife Wilhemina spent every summer in their rented dacha away from the noise and dirt of Moscow. They chose the village of Listviano near the small town of Pushkino, thirty miles northeast of Moscow on a railway line so that Arthur could commute to work. There the family could bathe, go boating, enjoy a garden and socialise with friends. He took up photography, leaving interesting photographs of the area. These include one of his landlord Timofei Ivanovitch Evdokimov with his wife Avdotia, sons Fedor and Peter, and infant Nikolai, taken in 1898. One wonders what became of the boys during World War One and of Timofei himself, as a property-owning peasant, in the 1920s and 1930s.

View of Listviano with handmade wooden plough in the foreground. Photograph by Arthur Toulmin Smith, date unknown

Sadly, Listviano no longer exists, submerged under the Uchinsky Reservoir in the 1930s. The name remained for a time in the title of the Listvyanskaya Hydroelectric Power Station, and currently survives in Listviana Street (*улица Листвяны*), a road near the Mamontovskaya Railway Station in Pushkino.

In 1878, anxious about the viability of the French company running the Moscow Gas Plant, Arthur and a Russo-German named Oscar Ludwig set up the firm of Ludwig and Smith (L&S). Described as an iron and copper foundry and mechanical plant, it made weighing machines for granaries and pipework for fire brigades. The firm also contributed components to the Moscow sewerage system. In 1896 the firm exhibited at the All-Russia Industrial and Art Exhibition in Nizhny Novgorod. As well as listing the exhibits, the catalogue for the

event includes this information: “The plant and its production departments are run by the owner, one foreign engineer and 2 Russian technicians. The working day is 11 ½ hours, with an average wage of 1 rouble 20 kopecks per day. The plant employs 400 men and 25 apprentices.” Further on we read: “The plant is insured for 200,000 roubles; it has an accident room with two beds, medical kit and a permanent doctor. The workers are insured against accidents.”[1]

Despite paying average wages for the sector and providing relatively good working conditions, the firm was not immune to the political unrest of the time. A leaflet was distributed to workers at the factory in 1898, stating that they had not yet participated in the struggle against capitalists, and urging them to strike to demand higher wages and greater insurance against accidents.[2]

From 1914 the factory was turned to war production. In a list of companies producing defence equipment, dated 1 July 1915, L&S was recorded as producing aeroplane parts, air and steam pumps for gunpowder factories, and presses for carriage works. In another list dated 21 February 1917, marked confidential, L&S was one of a number of plants that gave notification of cessation of work.[3]


ЧУГУННО-МѢДНО-ЛИТЕЙНЫЙ и МЕХАНИЧЕСКІЙ
ЗАВОДЪ
ЛЮДВИГЪ и СМИТЪ
въ МОСКВѢ. Садовники. соб. д. № 90.
Основанъ въ 1878 году. Адресъ для телеграммъ: Вильдагенъ – Москва.
Спеціальности:
ВѢСЫ: зерновые для мельницъ и элеваторовъ, десятичные, сотенные, возовые и вагонные.
Мельничные постава.
Спеціальности:
Пожарныя трубы, насосы ручные, приводные, паровые, воздушные и ассенизаціонные.
Паровыя машины.
ТРАНСМИССІИ.
СКЛАДЪ, Москва, Мясницкая улица, домъ № 9.
Иллюстрированные прейсъ-куранты и смѣты по востребованію безплатно.

Advertisement in a Russian journal for Arthur Toulmin Smith’s company Ludwig & Smith, 1909

The engineering plant continued into Soviet times in the same building at 90 Sadovnicheskaya Street. It was taken over in 1930 by the Mossredprom Trust, in 1931 by the Mosmet Trust, and in 1933 became the Experimental Machine-Building Plant ‘Krasny Blok’, which produced lifting equipment, pulleys and winches for Metrostroy. Until recently it was an office building. Manhole covers with the firm’s Russian initials (*ЛиС*) remain in a few isolated corners in Moscow.

Arthur's grave at the Vvedensky Cemetery, Moscow, on the day of his funeral, 15 / 28 January 1914

Arthur served as representative of St Andrew’s on the Committee of the Vvedensky Cemetery, also known as the Cemetery for Non-Russian-Orthodox Believers or Foreigners, where he acted for twenty years as Chairman.[4] The Committee dealt with drainage, heating, the greenhouses, ‘forsaken’ graves and reminding the town council of the absence of liability for local taxes. A major project in 1911–12 was the building of a new mortuary chapel, consecrated in October 1912. Less than two years later, in January 1914, it was used for Arthur’s own funeral. Photographs show the decoration of ferns and the quantity of flowers it was possible to produce for a funeral in Moscow in January.

St Andrew's Church was, in due course, commandeered by the Bolsheviks. Harvey Pitcher describes the dramatic escape of the British community, encouraged to leave while they could by the heroic chaplain Rev North, seemingly the last British man of standing in Moscow.[5] One hundred and twenty-six boxes of valuables, deposited for safekeeping in the church tower, were confiscated. In Soviet days the church was used as a warehouse, a school hostel and, later, as a recording studio for the Melodia record label established in 1964.

The first service for over seventy years took place on 14 July 1991. The building returned to the British community the following year, although it was several more years before Melodia moved out.[6]

Image Credits

Please note that all images reproduced in this article are copyright Bessie White.

This article is based on Bessie White's new book 'Arthur Toulmin Smith: A British Engineer in 19th Century Russia', published by Troubador Publishing in 2025, see https://troubador.co.uk/bookshop for more information. The book is a collection of her English great-grandfather's letters from the Caucasus, and then Moscow, to his scholar sister Lucy Toulmin Smith back in England, supplemented by additional research. Arthur's letters, written home by an engineer working in tsarist Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, cast light on the British community in Moscow at the end of the pre-revolutionary period. Arthur's engineering firm, Ludwig and Smith, survived into the Soviet period under a new name, in the early 1930s becoming part of the Metrostroy Department responsible for metro and tunnel construction in Moscow.

Footnotes

1 *Ukazatel' vserossiyskoy vystavki, Otdel' XII: Mashiny, apparaty i mashino-stroyenie* (All-Russian Exhibition Catalogue, Department XII: Machinery, Apparatus and Engineering),1896. Available on the Natsional'naya elektronnaya biblioteka website, URL: https://viewer.rusneb.ru/ru/000199_000009_003942676. See entries for Ludwig and Smith on pages 111, 142 and 201.

2 *Svodnyi katalog russkoy nelegal'noy i zapreshennoy pechati XIX veka – Listovki* (Union Catalogue of Russian Illegal and Prohibited Printed Material of the 19th Century, Leaflets), Moscow: State Lenin Library, 1977. See entry for Ludwig and Smith in the index on page 45, and leaflet no. 996 on page 208.

3 *Moskva v gody pervoy mirovoy voyny, 1914–1917: Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow During the First World War, 1914–1917: Documents and Materials), Moscow: GBU 'TsGA Moskvy', 2014. Available on the Militera website, URL: http://militera.org/books/pdf/docs/sb_moskva-v-gody-pmv.pdf. See item 58 on page 308 and item 10 on page 408.

4 More information on the Vvedensky Cemetery and the British in pre-revolutionary Russia is available on The British in Moscow website, URL: https://elenawatson.weebly.com/, set up by the archivist of St Andrew's Church.

5 Pitcher, H., *The Smiths of Moscow: A Story of Britons Abroad*, Swallow House Books, 1984. See Chapter 22.

6 St Andrew's Church in Moscow website, URL: https://moscowanglican.org/our-mission/the-history-of-st-andrews-church/

SCRSS News

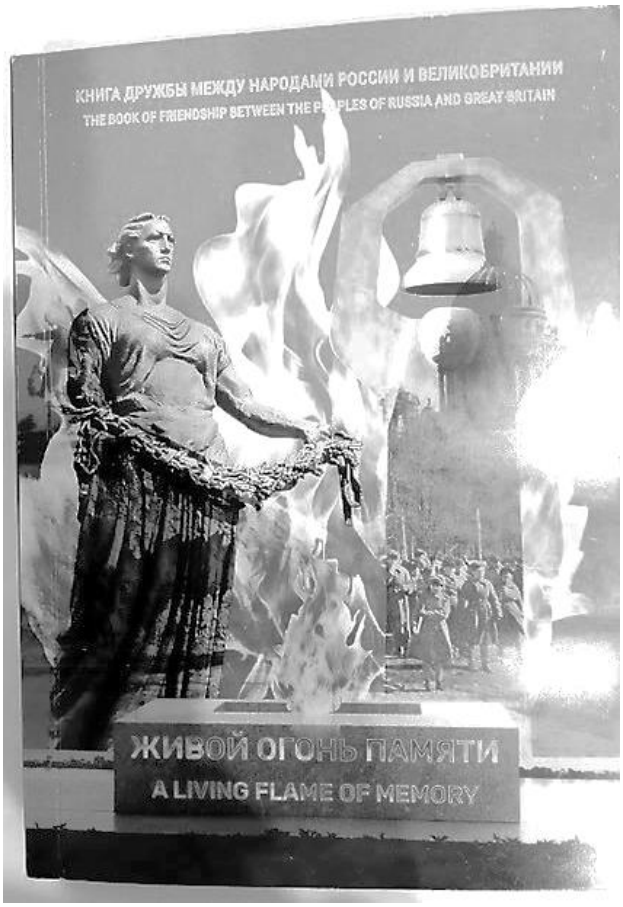
Latest news by Jane Rosen, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS

Reflections on 2025

Congratulations to everyone for helping us to survive 2025. It was a tough year and, unfortunately, 2026 seems to be echoing this. However, the Society did achieve some positive success and, again, this is largely due to the support of our members.

Among the successes were two events at the end of the year. On 1 November 2025

HGW Davie gave a highly successful in-person lecture, *Everything for the Front! Resource Management in the Red Army During the German-Soviet War 1941–1945*. The event marked the 80th anniversary of the Allied Victory over Fascism in 1945.



Cover of the book *A Living Flame of Memory*, published by the Interregional Association for International Cooperation in St Petersburg in 2025

On 6 December 2025 we held an informal SCRSS Christmas Drinks event for members. This was a lovely gathering of friends for drinks, nibbles and chats, all enlivened by the singing of traditional Russian songs by members of the Society. Everyone enjoyed themselves and it was a real lift to the spirits – and indeed a lifting of spirits in a toast! Thanks to Zinaida, Peter and Irina for their efforts. Thanks also to all the volunteers who ensured that we were able to open the Library and building on Saturdays throughout the year. The next Library opening is on Saturday 7 March 2026. Please think about attending.

The Society was also involved in another project to mark the 80th Anniversary of the Allied Victory over Fascism with our long-term partner the Interregional Association for International Cooperation in St Petersburg. In November 2025 the Association published a new book, *Живой огонь памяти* (*A Living Flame of Memory*), commemorating the Anglo-Soviet Alliance from 1941–45. The book is a dual language anthology (English and Russian), edited by Margarita Mudrak, Chair of the Association, with poet and translator Evgeny Lukin. The first section comprises eleven poems by British war poets, suggested by our Society and translated by St Petersburg students and three professional translators. The second section includes Chapter 3 of the Society's centenary history *An Unpopular Cause*, together with a selection of entries from the 1945 schoolgirl diary of former SCRSS Honorary Secretary Jean Turner (provided by her daughter, Trustee Diana Turner). On behalf of the Society, Diana recorded a short video message of congratulations to the Association for the book launch in St Petersburg on 25 November 2025. In 2025 Margarita Mudrak also received an award from St Petersburg City Council in recognition of her work in promoting international co-operation.

Annual General Meeting 2026

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the Society will take place at the SCRSS premises on Saturday 16 May 2026, starting at 11.00. This meeting is open to SCRSS members only. The deadline for receipt by the Honorary Secretary of motions and nominations of members for election to the next SCRSS Council (as Trustees) is Saturday 28 February 2026. The form and instructions for submitting motions and nominations will be emailed to all members by close of day on 1 February 2026. All motions and nominations must be seconded by another SCRSS member. *Please note: if you do not have email but wish to receive a hard copy of the form by post, please send a postcard with your request to the Honorary Secretary at the SCRSS office as soon as possible, to avoid missing the deadline.*

Development Discussions

The Trustees have been discussing various aspects of ensuring the Society's survival but events beyond their control have slowed progress down. In view of this, the membership meeting planned for February 2026 has been postponed until the Annual General Meeting. Please do try to attend the AGM, details of which are below, so that we have a wide field for discussion and ideas.

April 2026 Saturday Opening

As our usual first-Saturday-of-the-month opening in April falls on the Easter weekend this year, we have moved it to the following Saturday 11 April 2026. Please do come and visit us on one of our open days!

Next Events

Saturday 7 February 2026, 11.00–16.00
SCRSS Library Opening for Members

Monday 23 February 2026, 19.00–20.00
Zoom Online Lecture: Ben Lunn on *Exploring Socialist Realism in Soviet Music through Three Composers*
Building on his article 'Socialist Realism and Music' in this issue of the *SCRSS Digest* (see page 7), Ben Lunn considers how three Soviet composers incorporated Socialist Realism into their work – through quotation in Boris Lyatoshinsky, iconography in Alexander Mosolov, and the rejuvenation of folk traditions in Julius Juzeliunas. The talk will be recorded. Booking via Eventbrite at https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/1979332834791. Tickets: £3.00 SCRSS members, £5.00 others.

Saturday 7 March 2026, 11.00–16.00
SCRSS Library Opening for Members

Monday 9 March 2026, 19.00–20.00
Zoom Online Lecture: Charles Buxton on *Communities Facing Environmental Hazards in Central Asia Today*
Charles Buxton, long-term Central Asia resident and expert on development and civic society, discusses the environmental challenges faced by the populations of the five republics of Central Asia, formerly part of the Soviet Union. He considers climate change and the risks to local communities from natural hazards. Focusing geographically on the republics of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and within this on the Fergana Valley, he highlights the connection between ecological issues on one side and political, social and economic issues on the other, and the two governments' priorities in this field. Booking via Eventbrite at https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/1979321891058. Tickets: £3.00 SCRSS members, £5.00 others.

Wednesday 1 April 2026, 19.00–20.00
Exclusive Zoom Online Lecture for SCRSS Members Only: Dr Ali Tajvidi on *Armenian-Azerbaijani Relations in the Post-Soviet Era*
Dr Tajvidi, Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Westminster University, examines how relations between the former Soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan have evolved since independence in 1992, the domestic and regional challenges each has faced, and where they are heading in the post-West world order. Booking via Eventbrite at https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/1980273294732. Tickets: £3.00 SCRSS members only.

Saturday 11 April 2026, 11.00–16.00
SCRSS Library Opening for Members
Date moved from Saturday 4 April 2026 due to the Easter holiday.

Saturday 2 May 2026, 11.00–16.00
SCRSS Library Opening for Members

Saturday 16 May 2026, 11.00–13.00
SCRSS Annual General Meeting
SCRSS members only. An afternoon event is also planned, details to be confirmed in due course.

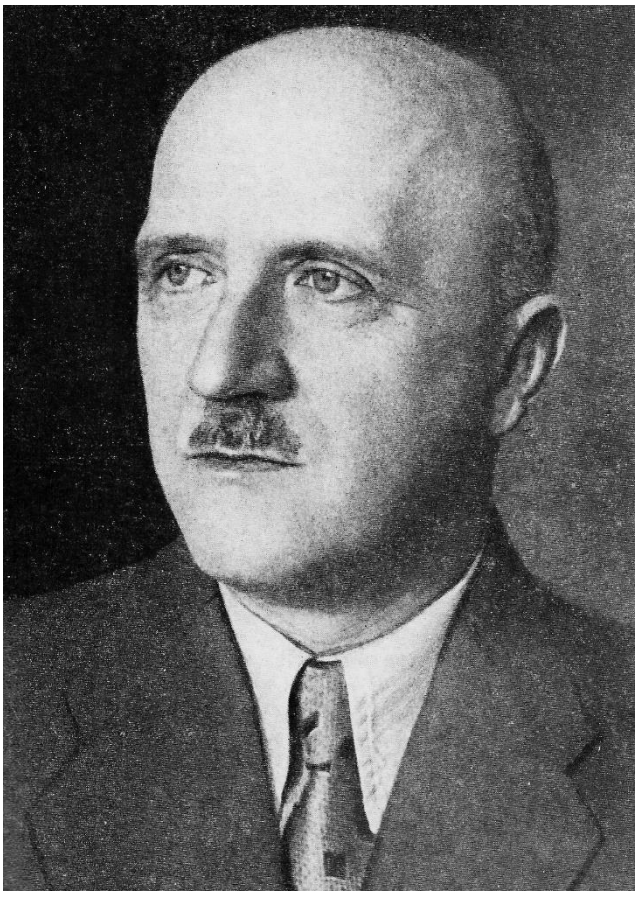
Events for May and June 2026 are not yet finalised. Please always check the SCRSS website and our member e-newsletters for the latest details of our events.

Feature

Socialist Realism and Music

By Ben Lunn

Socialist Realism, like many elements attached to the Soviet Union and the Communist movement during the twentieth century is a highly loaded term, with many anecdotes about the oppression attached to it, but very little in the anglophone sphere actually assessing it.[1] Similarly, within music this issue is arguably even more lopsided as the question of what Socialist Realism is, when applied to music, is hardly discussed,[2] often opting to bemoan how 'Shostakovich was limited by the Soviets'.



Boris Asafiev, Soviet composer and musicologist, 1937. Asafiev developed the concepts of *Intonatsiia* and *Symphonism* that are significant for discussions on Socialist Realism in music (SCRSS Library)

Background to the Idea

To begin to understand how composers engaged with the issue, we first need to quickly analyse what Socialist Realism is and what underpins this concept in music. Originating with Maxim Gorky and other prominent Soviet authors at the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934,[3] Socialist Realism built on the examples of Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens and others, but intended to shift their ideological approach to a proletarian one. This can be understood as responding to reality and showing the proletarian answer. So, in a Socialist nation, it is about demonstrating the promise of the road ahead, while in a Capitalist nation, the idea is to show the flaws of Capitalism and why the proletariat must strive for Socialism. Although this is a significant simplification, it highlights how the approach is much more open than we can be led to believe.[4] The other thing to emphasise is that this approach is not about naturalism, but reality. A common misunderstanding that is also used to argue why music can never be 'realistic' because music is not a naturalistic art form.

There were many discussions about Socialist Realism within the Soviet Union, but similar discussions also took place in Britain.[5] Many of these discussions focused either on accusing certain pieces of failing to achieve Socialist Realism or celebrating those composers who were successful in doing so.[6] What was often lacking, however, were practical considerations of how one might compose in a Realist manner.

There were multiple theorists in the field of music, but one figure of particular significance was Boris Asafiev (1884–1949).[7] Asafiev was a composer and musicologist who made a massive contribution with his writings on composers such as Stravinsky and Glinka.[8] Within the various concepts he developed, the idea of *Intonatsiia*[9] and *Symphonism* are the most significant. Elphick summarises *Symphonism* as the 'ideal symphony',[10] namely a conglomeration of all the various elements that make a symphony feel like a symphony. Ultimately, this pushes it into more ideological questions than simply formal questions of structure. *Intonatsiia* is slightly more ephemeral and has changed over time, but describes "specific musical

elements evolved according to their social significance and wider musical meaning, and in reflection of human speech".[11] This means an influence in the development of a nation or people, both in terms of history and language, that shapes their music and ultimately makes something 'sound' Russian or Ukrainian and so on.[12]

National Character

This, for me, is a fascinating aspect of Socialist Realism. As Asafiev's *Intonatsiia* implies, the music of a nation has a very specific sound to it, due to that nation's history and geography. This can manifest itself in a variety of ways. It can include what instruments are created – music in Scotland would be unrecognisable without bagpipes; it can include language – the way the Russian language is spoken can shape the melodic line, but also the natural rhythm of emphasis is noticeably different to English; it can include religion – due to the role music plays in the Orthodox Church, religious music in Russia or Ukraine is very different to religious music in Italy or France; it can also include economic factors – as Iceland did not have a professional orchestra until the mid-twentieth century, the nation has almost no orchestral music before the 1900s. As Alan Bush observed, this ultimately means one way to approach Socialist Realism is to delve deeper into what makes your nation unique.[13]

Symphonism

Symphonism is much harder to define, since who defines what is an 'ideal symphony'? There are considerations around form, for example a piece inspired by dance music should be something you can dance to; it can imply an evolution of ideas; it can also be in the feelings it stirs up – a piece that does not move you (no matter how perfectly crafted) is not a good piece.

What is interesting about *Symphonism* is that, unlike the avant-garde composers of the 1950s and 1960s,[14] this approach is not a rejection of history or tradition, but a continuation.

Who Are You Celebrating?

In socialist realist literature, the intention to celebrate proletarian heroes, as opposed to bourgeois ones, is an important element. In music, we can see similar processes. The amount of music in Britain written for the various monarchs shows that the simple ideological shift of composing music to celebrate figures such as Robin Hood, Oliver Cromwell or Gerrard Winstanley is a radical shift. The question for artists is, who does your music speak for and to?

Conclusion

From this brief consideration, we can begin to see how hard it can be to define music as socialist realist. Especially so as a large proportion of this approach is either rather ephemeral or ideological, as opposed to specific musical choices. However, Socialist Realism is much more open than we often give it credit. The most interesting aspect of all the elements discussed is that they build on what has come before. It is not about reinventing the wheel but, instead, reclaiming ideas that historically were not for the proletariat. Therefore, at its core, it is an approach very much akin to the ideas of William Morris. Namely, elevating the artistic ideas of the disenfranchised masses, since they deserve it as much as the wealthy who get to enjoy art like a flippant frivolity.

Ben Lunn has forged himself a unique position within the new music landscape. As a composer, Ben's music reflects such areas as the material world around him, connecting to his North-Eastern heritage; or how disability impacts the world around him; or his working-class upbringing. He has also become renowned for his championship of others, which has seen him create collaborations with musicians from across the globe, and develop unique concert experiences and opportunities for others. Alongside this, Ben's academic pursuits have included music in the Baltics, music and socialist politics, and music and disability. His PhD research focused on how composers incorporate politics into their work, and he previously lived in Vilnius

where he studied at the Lietuvos Muzikos ir Teatro Akademija for his Master's Degree. Since September 2025, Ben has been the musical director of Cappella Slavonica, the Glasgow-based choir that specialises in Slavic music.

Footnotes

1 However, there is an interesting book on how British intellectuals engaged with the topic by Philip Bounds (Bounds, 2012).

2 Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), an influential Soviet politician who shaped a lot of Soviet cultural policy, did discuss music significantly but ultimately failed to talk about what it sounds like (Zhdanov, 1948 (2022)).

3 (Gorky, 1934 (1977))

4 However, it is also worth noting that openness also means a more conservative art enjoyer will have a different idea of the scope of this approach in comparison to a more liberal and daring art enjoyer.

5 Particularly by Alan Bush (Bush, 1949–50) and notable literary figures in the Communist Party of Great Britain (Bounds, 2012).

6 This is most notable in Rena Moisenko (Moisenko, 1949).

7 In this article I will not be able to explore Asafiev's ideas in much depth. However, Dr Daniel Elphick of Royal Holloway, University of London, has written quite extensively on him and is well worth a read.

8 Asafiev won the Stalin Prize in 1948 for his monograph on Glinka.

9 *Intonatsiia* translates as 'intonation'. This can become confusing in the anglophone sphere, as intonation is most commonly used to describe tuning.

10 (Elphick, 2021)

11 Ibid.

12 For Alan Bush, this element was particularly influential in his own work ('National Character an Essential Ingredient in Musical Art Today', in Bush, 1980).

13 Ibid.

14 Namely Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Bibliography

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Note from the Editor

This article forms the background to Ben Lunn's online talk to the SCRSS on 23 February 2026 at 19.00 on *Exploring Socialist Realism in Soviet Music through Three Composers*.

Ben will examine how three composers incorporated Socialist Realism into their work - through quotation in Boris Lyatoshinsky, iconography in Alexander Mosolov and the rejuvenation of folk traditions in Julius Juzeliunas. See page 6 or the SCRSS website for booking details.

Feature

Reading Chinghiz Aitmatov in a Soviet and Post-Soviet Perspective

By Charles Buxton

Chinghiz Aitmatov, 1981 (SCRSS Library)

Chinghiz Aitmatov (1928–2008) is Kyrgyzstan's most loved author of the twentieth century and is similarly honoured in neighbouring Kazakhstan. He has a museum and statue in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek; streets, libraries, literary and school prizes bear his name. Aitmatov first achieved fame in the 1960s and 1970s as one of a new generation of Soviet writers from the non-Russian republics of the USSR. This article considers works from different periods in his life, with particular focus on Aitmatov's best-known novel, *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years*, published in the USSR in 1980 and translated into many different languages; and Aitmatov's last, much less well-known work, *When Mountains Fall (The Eternal Bride)*, published in 2006.

Aitmatov was born in 1928 in Talas Oblast, Kyrgyzstan. His father was one of the first generation of Soviet party leaders but was arrested in 1937, charged with 'bourgeois nationalism' and executed in 1938. Chinghiz, the eldest child, became his mother's main support and when the men in their village were called up to fight in 1941, he became the collective farm secretary and village tax collector. After the war he got a higher education at the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow and began writing short stories in the mid-1950s. Aitmatov's early works were devoted to themes popular in this period, such as women's emancipation and the human tragedies caused by war. Thus, *Jamilia* (1958), one of Aitmatov's most famous works, is the story of a young woman's love for another man, Daniyar, while her husband

Dust jacket of Aitmatov's *Dzhamilya, Povesti* (*Jamilia, Novellas*), illustrated by L. Il'ina, published by Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, Moscow, 1965 (SCRSS Library)

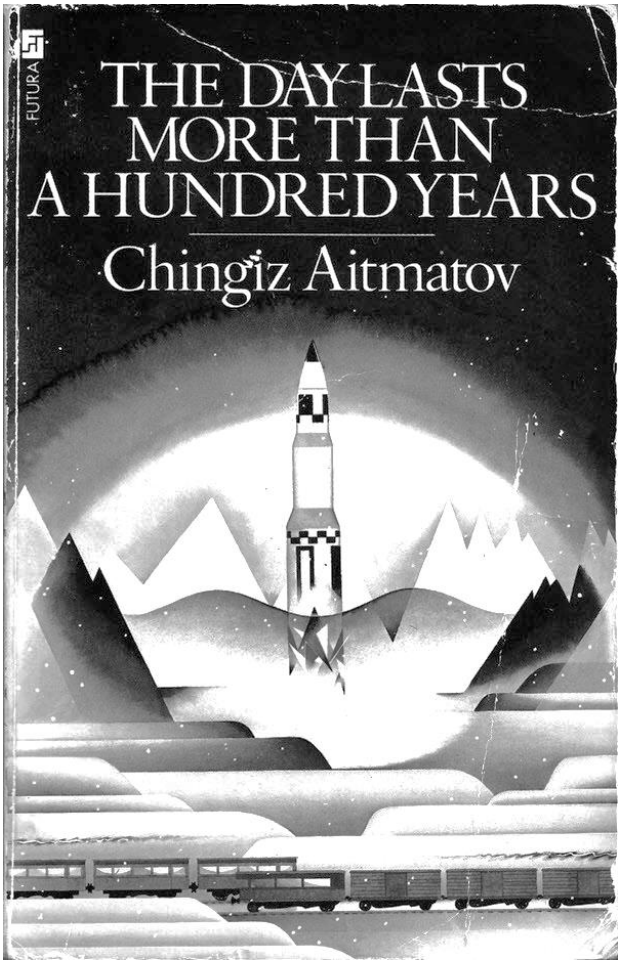
is away at war. The novella broke through patriarchal norms still strong in Kyrgyz society, as well as challenging the prevalent patriotic discourse. For contemporary critic Laili Ukubaeva, Aitmatov's mastery of psychology and plot, as exemplified in

Jamilia, are what set him apart from other writers.[1]

Within Aitmatov's lifetime, the literacy level in Kyrgyzstan rose from five per cent to 95 per cent of the population. In addition, literature written in Kyrgyz went through a steep ascent, helped by its association both with Russian language (Aitmatov wrote in both Kyrgyz and Russian) and Russian literature (many Kyrgyz writers honed their skills by translating Russian classics). In the 1950s and 1960s Kyrgyz literature began to move out of its early confines. This development can be seen in Aitmatov's longer stories *Farewell, Gul'sary!* (1966) and *The White Steamship* (1970) with their critique of the tough social and economic conditions faced by rural communities in the postwar period. György Lukács and André Breton were among foreign admirers of the creative innovations that these stories represented.

Aitmatov's works were politically controversial but gained from two external factors. First, the liberalising trends in the USSR during the post-Stalin 'Thaw' in the late 1950s and 1960s. Second, the opening-up of cultural links with countries from the Third World. In the post-1945 period, writers from Central Asia played a key role in Soviet efforts to support African, Asian and Latin American liberation movements. Aitmatov was active in several important international writers' and artists' events organised in Tashkent and Almaty, as well as the anti-colonial arts journal *Lotus*. It has been suggested that he may have been influenced by the 'magical realism' approach employed by Latin American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, for example in the use of legend, myth and parable (animal heroes, religious symbolism) in a number of his mature works.[2]

The publication of *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years* in the literary journal *Novy Mir* in 1980 marked one of the high points in Aitmatov's career, sparking heated discussion across the Soviet Union.[3] The novel takes place in the deserts of Kazakhstan during the mid-1950s with key political developments such as Stalin's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes in 1956 shown as directly affecting the characters' lives. The novel centres on the efforts of Yedigei, an elderly railway worker, to arrange a funeral cortege to the community's traditional burial site for his



Paperback edition of Aitmatov's *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years*, translated by John French, London: Futura Publications, a Division of Macdonald & Co, 1984 (SCRSS Library)

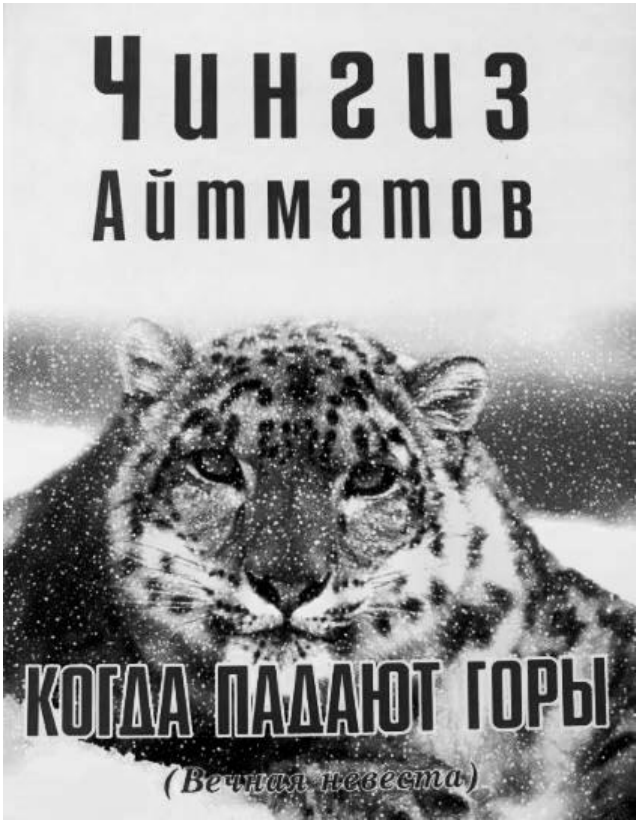
longtime co-worker. There are tremendous descriptions of the arid landscapes under the merciless summer sun and the hard work clearing blizzards on the railway line in winter. As this small procession moves through the desert, Yedigei reviews his life, the hard work on the railway, his relationships with his wife and neighbours. These musings are accompanied by two very different symbolic components.

The first is an ancient Kazakh tale of a mythical figure Naiman-ata. Her shepherd son Zholaman is taken prisoner by warriors

from the Zhungar Khanate who dominated the steppes in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. The Zhungars had invented a torture whereby the skin of a camel's udder was bound around the head of a captive in the form of a skullcap. The skin gradually shrank in size as it dried, causing such agony that the victim – called a *mankurt* – lost his mind. The story of Naiman-ata's search for her son, and her tragic encounter with him, is a powerful expression of what slavery means and how it can lead to the loss of a person's identity. In stark contrast, the second symbolic component is science fiction, recounting how cosmonauts working on a joint Soviet-American space station make contact with an intelligent extra-terrestrial life form and set out with them to a far distant planet. Rockets are launched from Nevada and Saryozek (the Soviet launch site near Yedigei's railway junction) to find out what has happened. However, the investigation is hampered by a lack of trust between the US and Soviet sides, as well as fear of what communication with a more intelligent lifeform may mean for the human race.

After 1991, Aitmatov became Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to Brussels and maintained a high profile on cultural and environmental issues in agencies of the United Nations. His last novel *When Mountains Fall (The Eternal Bride)* was published in 2006 and represents his response to the rapid marketisation of Central Asian society after independence.[4] The novel's hero, Arsen Samanchin, is an independent journalist pitted against a rising star in the new cultural scene, Ertash Kurchalov (also his rival in a love triangle). Aitmatov had put huge store in *perestroika* and in his post-1991 political commentaries he complained bitterly how tawdry showmen like Kurchalov had become rich and famous, while many experienced arts and culture professionals had lost their jobs and the previous social lifts available for young people (such as himself) had been destroyed.[5]

The first half of this book describes the post-socialist transition in terms familiar for people in the region. The questions raised by this are answered in the final sections where Arsen takes a fateful decision to kill Ertash Kurchalov with the help of an uncle who is a forestry worker in a state nature park bankrupted by the new capitalist order – and who is now running illegal hunting trips for foreigners. Alongside this plot there is the myth of the Eternal Bride: the fate of two lovers prevented from coming together by wicked family members. As in several other semi-magical works by Aimatov, there is a non-human hero in the book. Zhaabars, an ageing snow leopard, is trying to reach the high mountains where he can die alone and in peace, but his path lies through the same pass where Arsen is planning to stop the illegal hunting trip. In the fairy story ending "the mountains are falling" and Arsen succeeds in his mission but at the cost of his own life.



Recent Russian language edition of Aitmatov's *Kogda padayut gory, Vechnaya nevesta* (*When Mountains Fall, The Eternal Bride)* published by AST, 2023 (personal collection of Charles Buxton)

Different interpretations of Aitmatov's work are quite possible in the post-1991 period, too. Kyrgyzstan government institutions and society as a whole are hugely proud of his work, which helped to establish the cultural

'credentials' of the newly independent nation. Nationalist interpretations can fit quite well with an anti-Soviet 'decolonisation' discourse, since Aitmatov did indeed lead the way in exposing the gap between official rhetoric and the harsher realities of rural livelihoods and communities in Soviet Central Asia. However, when the myth-parable of the *mankurt* in *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years* is used to support arguments about the lack of political freedom in the USSR, we should surely not forget its more direct reference to the long historical record of slavery in the Eurasia region. Nor should this parable be used to hide the 'mind-expanding' effect of Soviet education and literacy campaigns during Aitmatov's lifetime, indeed the cultural developments that produced the writer himself.

New statue to Chinghiz Aitmatov in Ala Too Square, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (Photo by Charles Buxton)

It is also possible to interpret differently the science fiction tale in the same novel. It can be seen as a critique of the Soviet space programme and its effect on traditional culture and livelihoods. However, Aitmatov's target was wider, focusing on the effects of the Cold War as a whole. In this, his book anticipated the international Nevada-Semipalatinsk civic campaign in the late 1980s to early 1990s to end nuclear testing in both the USA and USSR – a campaign that was successful, in that Kazakhstan took the decision to stop nuclear testing. In the post-1991 period, space exploration opened up with a number of US-Russian collaborations, but who could be sure that, in a similar situation to the one described in Aitmatov's book, during a new Cold War, the outcome would not be the same?

The literary critic Laili Ukubaeva concludes that Aitmatov's humanist vision is aimed at tackling issues of global relevance. The novels *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years* and *When Mountains Fall (The Eternal Bride)* illustrate this very well.

Charles Buxton gained a degree in Russian from the University of Oxford in 1972, followed by an MA in Sociology of Literature from the University of Essex in 1974. In the 1970s to early 1990s he was active in London in the labour movement, but took a break in 1978–80 to work as a translator / editor for Novosti News Agency in Moscow. Since the mid-1990s he has worked in international development and civil society development in the former Soviet Union, has been based in Central Asia for over twenty years and now lives in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. He is the author of three books on the role of civil society in development processes and is Executive Director of the non-profit organisation Books for Development.

Footnotes

1 Ukubaeva, L., *Khudozhestvennoe masterstvo Chingiza Aitmatova* (The Artistic Mastery of Chinghiz Aitmatov), Turar, 2019

2 Djagalov, R., *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and Third Worlds*, MacGill-Queen's University Press, 2020

3 The first UK edition in English, translated by John French, was published in hardback by MacDonald & Co (Publishers) in 1983.

4 A recent edition in Russian is: Aitmatov, Ch., *Kogda padayut gory (Vechnaya nevesta) (*When Mountains Fall (The Eternal Bride)), AST, 2023.

5 Ukubaeva, op. cit., pp.194–203

Note from the Editor

The SCRSS Loan Library holds a large collection of Chinghiz Aitmatov's novels and short stories published during the Soviet period, in both English and Russian. These include *Jamilia*, *Farewell, Gul'sary!, The White Steamship* and *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years.* Having just re-read the latter novel, I highly recommend Aitmatov's works.

Charles Buxton will be giving an online talk to the SCRSS on Monday 9 March 2026 at 19.00 on *Communities Facing Environmental Hazards in Central Asia Today*. See page 6 or the SCRSS website for booking details.

Gems from the Archive

Huntly Carter Collection: Lyubov Popova Pair Reunited

By Diana Turner

The Huntly Carter Collection in the SCRSS Archive comprises original photographs of 1920s–30s Soviet theatre (the majority of the 366 items), architecture and everyday life, collected by British theatre critic and journalist Huntly Carter (1860s–1942). Over the past year or so I have been reviewing the artefacts for physical condition, quality of the digital scans made over fifteen years ago, and factual accuracy of the captions.

Among others, the collection includes production stills from the 1922 Meyerhold Theatre production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (*Velikodushnyi rogonosets)* by Fernand Crommelynck, directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold and designed by Lyubov Popova. These stills had always included one sepia photo postcard of Popova's costume design for 'Actor No. 4' (see opposite). However, in October 2025, while sorting through a box of Soviet art postcard sets from the 1950s–90s in the Art Room, I was delighted to stumble across a companion postcard – Popova's 'Actor No. 5' (see above). The pair have now been reunited in the Huntly Carter Collection.

Reviews

Russia Starts Here: Real Lives in the Ruins of Empire
By Howard Amos (Bloomsbury, 2025, 320pp, ISBN: 978-1-4729-9134-8, Hbk, £20.00)

Pskov is the most western oblast in Russia. It is sandwiched between Leningrad, Novgorod and Tver regions to the east, and Estonia and Latvia to the west. Belarus is to the south. Pskov is its main city (population: 193,000) but it is dwarfed by nearby St Petersburg (population: 5.6 million). I already knew about the area because of its association with Alexander Pushkin.

When I first read this book, I found it intriguing. Most journalism of this kind is written by outsiders looking in. This book is quite different. Howard Amos is an outsider writing from inside a culture with which he has had long contact. His writing style is exceptional in providing a beautiful balance between immediate details and his insights into their local and broader context. The author first went to the Pskov Oblast in 2007 as a 17-year-old university student volunteer to the Belskoye Ustye Orphanage. He continued visiting until 2023. During that sixteen-year period he lived in Pskov and continued to volunteer. His knowledge of the region is therefore deeply embedded.

The book comprises seventeen stories. I could pick any of them, but for me, a few stood out.

The opening story ('The Last Ones') describes the lives of an elderly couple, Nina and Nikolai, who are in their eighties, have been married for sixty years and live in the village of Baronovo. Amos captures the ups and downs of their long life against the timeline from Stalin to Putin. He handles sensitively their current pro-Putin views but provides very clear reasons as to why they think like that. His love, understanding and respect for them shine through. This approach sets the scene for the rest of the book.

I worked in healthcare, so the stories about Belskoye Ustye Orphanage (in 'Orphanage') and the nearby Psychiatric Unit at Bogdanovo (in 'Ward No 6') work as a pair. Amos tells the story of Mikhail, a boy who was a loner and who later tragically drowned. This is followed by a portrait of Alexander Moskalyov, Bogdanovo's medical superintendent, contrasting his personal views and the role of – and need for – institutions like his.

I have an interest in photography, so the story 'iPhone Artist' caught my eye and is my favourite. The author met Dmitri Markov on the train from Moscow, on his first visit to Pskov in 2007. Markov's mission was to be a photographer, not a helper for orphans. He was a complex individual who wanted to document the underdog. He did this very successfully – Apple used his images internationally to promote their famous *Made with iPhone* campaign. But he was a drug addict and the description of his personality, aspirations and projects to help fellow addicts was both inspiring and disturbing. Sadly he died from an overdose in early 2024. His story describes the complexities of drug addiction in contemporary Russia.

This collection has incredible depth, but to fully appreciate the nuances, you need to read one story at a time.

Pskov may be remote and the stories here are beyond what most tourists might see, but would I visit if the opportunity arose? Definitely!

Billy McKee

Firefly in a Box: An Anthology of Soviet Kid Lit
Translated and edited by Anna Krushelnitskaya & Dmitri Manin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2025, 294 pp, ISBN: 978 1 4968 5658 6, Pbk, 39 b/w illustrations)

Firefly in a Box contains three sections. The first is a collection of new translations of children's poems and stories for the very young by a variety of well-known Soviet

children's writers. Authors represented include Kornei Chukovsky, Samuil Marshak, Agniya Barto, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Arkadii Gaidar and Valentin Katayev. These are familiar names for those brought up on Soviet children's writing, although the new translations will not be as recognisable. The second section forms two essays by the editors on the process of translating the texts, and the third contains academic essays on Soviet children's literature.

In their introduction the editors state (p.6): "For most of the twentieth century Soviet literature, including works for children, was academically investigated through the lens of ideology." This is particularly an issue in the study of Soviet children's literature. The editors' aim is to invite "exploration of Soviet kid lit as a children's literature proper, which is much more than just a vehicle for ideology" (pp.6-7). In fact, ideology is an essential part of any academic investigation of children's literature. However, the major issue in Western studies of Soviet children's literature is that it is seen only through the lens of ideology and the perception of ideology is defined as propaganda, and this ideology as propaganda is only perceived as a socialist or communist 'problem'. Soviet children's literature is rarely seen as fun or good, something that is consistently found in studies of Western children's literature. The question here is whether the book fulfils the aim.

The book is partially successful. The academic essays still concentrate on ideology. Nonetheless, the two essays on translation are interesting for those who have a curiosity for the techniques and philosophies around translation. Manin's essay deals with the technical details of translating poetry. Krushelnitskaya provides a more personal view of the task, looking at the translation of cultural themes for a US audience. These decisions can be controversial: her translation of *baranki* as cookies in a story by Valentin Katayev misses an opportunity for the child reader to learn about other cultures. In her translation of Arkadii Gaidar's *Tale of a Great Military Secret* she makes the decision to call the enemy Tyranny, rather than the original name Bourgeois. A question here of perhaps ignoring ideology rather too much.

The scholarly essays cover a range of subjects, from studies of Soviet poetry and English children's poetry in Soviet literature, to a study of folklore in Soviet children's literature. However, none of the essays really move away from the idea of Soviet children's literature as just a vehicle of ideology.

The real positives of the book are, as usual, the works themselves. Soviet children's literature is good and this comes through, although the translations – in this reviewer's opinion – are not as good as those of the Soviet era. They are accompanied by some of the original illustrations which are a joy. The academic essay on folklore is particularly effective. Where the book fails, is in trying to cover too much and being uncertain of its focus. And 'Kid Lit'? 'Children's Literature' is just fine, thank you very much!

Jane Rosen

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