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## Feature

### Velimir Khlebnikov and 'The Radio of the Future'

By Dr Caroline Wilkins

Poet and inventor of *zaum* (заумь, meaning 'beyond sense'), an experimental linguistic creation based on sound symbolism, Russian Cubo-Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov was born in 1885 near Volgograd. Markedly different from a parallel movement of Futurism in Italy championed by Marinetti during the early 1900s, Cubo-Futurism took as its impulse the rise of Cubist art in Europe, coupling it with the material formality of Constructivism. Khlebnikov's prolific writings reflect a visionary prediction of society, culture and technology, some of which are compiled in a collection entitled *Projects for the Future*. Among these is a remarkable essay 'The Radio of the Future'<sup>1</sup> (1921) that anticipates the development of global communication networks to the present day.

By 1922 the Soviet Union had seen the first continuous wave transmissions from the

Shukhov radio tower in Moscow, whilst in Britain BBC Radio had just begun broadcasting. The BBC Radio centenary in 2022 saw a celebration in the form of an audio drama by contemporary British poet Paul Farley, dedicated to Khlebnikov and bearing the same title as the Cubo-Futurist's essay.<sup>2</sup> It was broadcast on 30 October in the programme series *Between the Ears* on BBC Radio 3. Farley's work focuses on how the writings of a *Futurian* from the past come into play with a radiophonic work that links past, present and future into a simultaneous, imaginary conversation, one made possible by this very medium of communication.



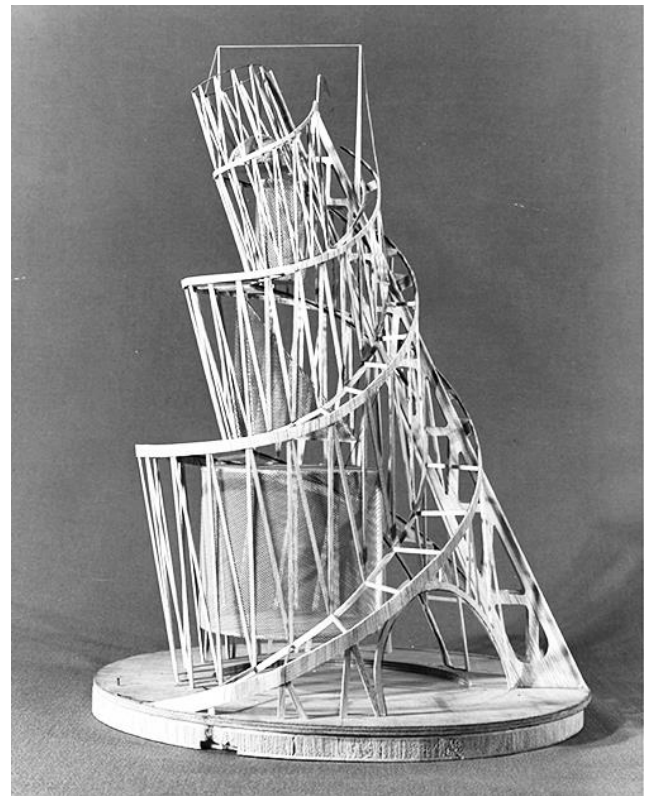
Velimir Khlebnikov, self-portrait 1909  
(SCRSS Library)

In his own essay Khlebnikov envisages vast "radio reading walls" that resemble huge books turning their pages for an assembled public to read outdoors in every town. These

extend to the transmission of images from art exhibitions made accessible to all. He predicts the existence of a radio auditorium carrying a "Mussorgsky of the future". Such visions find their equivalent in our late twentieth and twenty-first century street media of advertising screens, radio concerts, outdoor cinema, installations and the network of television. Khlebnikov proposes "radio clubs" and "radio reading rooms" communicating through "metallic voices and eyes" by means of transmitters, all of which have now been realised through the World Wide Web and our access to digital resources such as virtual reality, email, online video games, artificial intelligence, synthesized sound and electronic cameras. His imagination takes a leap into a magical world of "The Great Sorcerer" who can produce sensory illusion – transmitting, for example, the sense of taste – and thus "deceive the brain". At the same time, such discoveries will offer healing aspects in the form of psychosomatic treatment, hypnosis or sonic frequencies acting on the muscles of the body. Sounds of Spring, such as birdsong, will be transmitted as a joyful sign of the future to come. Most importantly for the author, however, is the possible role of radio in bringing education to all.

It should be remembered that such a fascination with new technologies stemmed from a context of massive change in the industrial world of Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century and its consequence on developments within the arts. A former striving for narrative and meaning in poetry was replaced by explorations into the raw materials of vocal sound, juxtaposed with non-semantic word-blocks. The rapid evolution of printing and signage gave rise to an enormous freedom with the layout of a page or poster and this, in turn, affected the way it was read, whether out loud in performance or internally. Machine noise produced by mechanical and electronic means played an increasingly important part in the urban sonic environment. In 1920 Lev Termen invented the *theremin* (originally called the *aetherphone*), an electronic musical instrument consisting of sensor rods that respond to hand movements of a player

controlling the pitch and dynamic of pure sine tones.

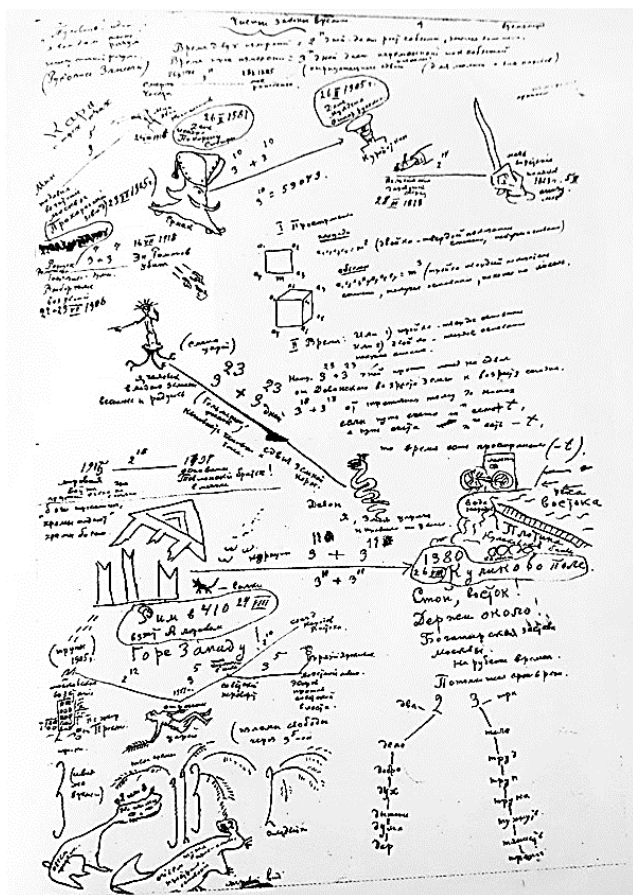


Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third Communist International*, 1919–20. The structure was intended to be electrified and would also have functioned as a communications tower (SCRSS Library)

By the end of that decade radio was having a profound influence on new forms of sound poetry. The phonograph, the gramophone and the film camera all became a means of creating new media, such as acoustic art or film. In the Berlin of 1930 Walter Ruttmann produced his *Weekend*, a "film for the ear"<sup>3</sup>, as a prime example of the former, whilst a year earlier Dziga Vertov had made waves with his silent film *Man with a Movie Camera*. Later, Khlebnikov's legacy as the inventor of *zaum* language would continue to be acknowledged through the work of sound poets such as Franz Mon or Hans G Helms, and the establishment of radiophonic studios in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s.

This leads to Paul Farley and his radio poem of the twentieth-first century, realised as a conversation between three characters: past – Khlebnikov, present – the author, and future – Heed (meaning to pay careful attention). Whilst the first communicates

from a remote telegraph office consisting of a radio camp with a signal tower in the Caucasus, Farley responds with thoughts on radio in human culture, including his own personal experiences as a small boy with a transmitter. Heed is a displaced person on a planet in crisis who needs radio as a link to other humans and lost histories. Khlebnikov expounds on new ways of developing a universal language which Farley receives in bursts of reception from the lightning rod of a small radio, hearing in turn only half of the conversation between past and future. His idea of the future is as something shiny and new, a cyberspace. Meanwhile, past and future exchange common experiences of evacuation through drought or floods. Dreams are shared through ghost stories; radio becomes a time machine that takes us back to the future.



Manuscript by Khlebnikov with mathematical  
calculations on the laws of historical time, 1922  
(SCRSS Library)

The work is a tribute to our relationship with radio and its potential to connect us across time and space, which in Khlebnikov's terms encompass a vast field existing both behind

and in front of us. Farley recognises the visionary aspects of this 1921 essay, written by an author who imagined all the world-changing possibilities of such an invention, one that could unite the whole of mankind through a sharing of knowledge, ideas and art. Ultimately, Khlebnikov's aim was to set humanity free from the tyranny of history and causality through a universal restructuring of the world, one that would draw its population together into a single entity. Echoes of the 1917 Russian Revolution can be clearly read behind these thoughts, although it remains an open question as to whether such a utopia would have complied with developments after the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922. Sadly, Khlebnikov did not live to witness these, dying in June 1922 at the age of only thirty-six from the repercussions of typhus, malaria and malnutrition.

In summary, 'The Radio of the Future' offers a vital link between Khlebnikov's philosophical theories on the role of early twentieth century technology and our own contemporary digital world, both being ultimately concerned with a manipulation of time.

*Dr Caroline Wilkins is an independent composer and researcher. Her work examines new inter-medial forms of sound, music and theatre performance. She first encountered the writings of Khlebnikov during a period of practice-based doctoral research from 2008 to 2011. This included the opera 'Victory Over the Sun' (1913) by Aleksei Kruchenykh (libretto) Mikhail Matiushin (music) and Kazimir Malevich (scenography), for which Khlebnikov wrote the Prologue.<sup>4</sup>*

## Footnotes

**1** 'The Radio of the Future' in Khlebnikov V, *The King of Time: Selected Writings of the Russian Futurian*, translated by Schmidt P, edited by Douglas C, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, England, 1985, pp. 155–159

**2** *The Radio of the Future*, radio poem in

three voices by Paul Farley. First broadcast on 30 October 2022 in *Between the Ears*, BBC Radio 3, to mark the centenary of BBC Radio. Director: Emma Harding. Producer: BBC Audio Radio, Wales. Available on BBC Sounds: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001dfv5>

3 CD sleeve note, *Weekend* by Walter Ruttmann in *Collection Cinéma Pour L'oreille*, Metamkine, MKCD010, 1994

4 *Victory Over the Sun* was first performed in December 1913 at the theatre of the Luna Park, St Petersburg, by the Society of Artists' Union of Youth and produced by *Futurists of the Theatre*. See also: Railing P (Ed.) & Steiner E (Tr.), *Victory Over the Sun: The Russian Futurist Opera of 1913*, Artists - Bookworks, 2009, East Sussex, UK. This two-volume album consists of photographs, posters, libretto, scenography, score, reviews and memoirs.

## SCRSS News

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*Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS*

### One Hundred Years

Happy Centenary Year to all members and friends of the SCRSS!

As reflected in the title of the forthcoming book on the history of the Society (see extract on page 8), it has not always been easy to support “an unpopular cause”. However, with the backing and determination of members throughout its existence, it has endured.

Our Rules make clear its charitable purpose: “The Object of the Society shall be the advancement of education, learning and knowledge of, and to promote studies in the languages, culture, history and life of Russia and the other countries and nationalities formerly constituting the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”

This basic aim has been at the heart of the Society's work since its foundation all those years ago. To facilitate its work, the Society has amassed a unique library and archive based at its centre in Brixton. The centenary exhibition, planned to coincide with the celebration on Saturday 6 July 2024, will reflect on the many different strands of its work. These went beyond the creation of its Library to embrace exhibitions, publications, talks, courses, visits, concerts, soirees and garden parties, and covered a wide range of topics: from language study and literature, to architecture, education, the arts, sciences and more. These topics are all reflected in its collections – there really is something for everyone within our walls. So do please sign up for our events, come along to a first-Saturday-of-the-month Library opening, and do your best to attend the centenary celebration in July. If you can encourage others who might be interested to check out the website, or come and visit themselves, then so much the better!

### Centenary Launch



SCRSS Chair Philip Matthews (left) and SCRSS Hon Secretary Ralph Gibson speak at the centenary launch (photo courtesy of Karl Weiss)

On 2 December 2023 members gathered at the SCRSS centre to formally launch the centenary year. Chair Philip Matthews referred to the brief period of Ramsay MacDonald's first Labour Government in 1924 and the fulfilment of its election pledge to recognise the USSR, which triggered the creation of the Society for Cultural Relations Between the Peoples of the British



Commonwealth and the USSR on 9 July that year. I reflected on the importance of the Society's members in supporting its work and ensuring its continued existence.

Jane Rosen gave us a glimpse into the centenary history she is writing and some of the fascinating characters who have played a part in its story. The book's cover design was on display, showing its title: *An Unpopular Cause*. Many members pledged support towards the production costs by paying in advance for a copy and making a donation (see enclosed flyer for more details).



SCRSS Hon Archivist Jane Rosen talks about her forthcoming history of the Society, *An Unpopular Cause* (photo courtesy of Karl Weiss)

## AGM, 18 May 2024

Notice is hereby given that the SCRSS Annual General Meeting will take place at the SCRSS premises on Saturday 18 May 2024, starting at 11.00. The meeting is open to SCRSS members only. The deadline for motions and nominations of members for election to the next SCRSS Council is Friday 5 April 2024. All motions and nominations must be seconded by another SCRSS member. The Agenda will be available from early May.

Following lunch, Christine Lindey will give an illustrated talk on *Alexander Deineka (1899–1969), People's Artist of the USSR*, the fourth event in our 'USSR 1920s' series, reflecting the decade of our foundation.

## Jean Turner Memorial Event



SCRSS Council member Christine Lindey (standing) speaks about her friendship with Jean at the memorial event (photo courtesy of Helen Turner)

The Society and Jean Turner's family held an event in memory of our late Hon Secretary and Hon Treasurer (1929–2023) at the SCRSS on Saturday 11 November 2023. Some twenty-two attendees listened to warm memories of Jean given by SCRSS Council members Philip Matthews, Christine Lindey and Diana Turner, followed by a toast.



SCRSS members and Jean's family at the memorial event (photo courtesy of Karl Weiss)

Jean's daughters, Diana and Helen Turner, had curated an exhibition that covered the almost forty years of Jean's work for the SCR / SCRSS, including photos, contemporary documents and journal articles. There was also a memorial book and buffet. Thanks to Jean's family and

SCRSS volunteers Ralph Gibson, Wendy Ansley, Len and Claire Weiss for help with planning and running the event.

## ***Twilight of the Soviet Union* Book Launch**



Kate Clark talks about her new memoir *Twilight of the Soviet Union* at the book launch at the SCRSS (photo courtesy of Karl Weiss)

SCRSS Council member Kate Clark launched her new book *Twilight of the Soviet Union: Memoirs of a Moscow Correspondent* (Bannister Publications, 2023) at the SCRSS on 18 November 2023. Some fifty attendees, including a number of distinguished guests, listened to Kate talk about her experiences as the *Morning Star* correspondent during the Gorbachev years.



Some of the audience at Kate Clark's book launch at the SCRSS (photo courtesy of Karl Weiss)

This was followed by a lively Q&A session and, finally, a successful book-signing. A small exhibition of illustrations from Kate's book was also on display, and the audience

was treated to wine and mince pies. Thanks to all the SCRSS volunteers who helped make the event a success – Diana Turner, Ralph Gibson, Len and Claire Weiss, and Billy McKee – and to Kate Clark for choosing the SCRSS for her book launch.

See page 14 for a review of the new memoir.

## **The Future**

This year will naturally focus on the rich and fascinating history of the Society, but just as important from my perspective is the future of the organisation. From conversations with many members, and witnessing the incredibly generous support they give, it is clear that the SCRSS has an important role to play, in relation to its Library and Archive of materials related to the Soviet period, its ongoing events and exhibition programme, and also its willingness to co-operate with other institutions. Despite the current difficult circumstances, the Trustees continue to develop 'Strategy 100', a 13-point plan covering all aspects of the Society's work – finance, the building, archives, governance, events, volunteering and so on. If you are interested in joining the SCRSS Council (that is, becoming a Charity Trustee) or the growing band of volunteers working on Library cataloguing and sorting, the events programme, Library openings, the maintenance of the building, and everything else that the organisation needs to function, then do please get in touch.

## **Membership**

As I have said before, the SCRSS exists today solely because of the incredible support it receives from its members. The Society *is* its members. So thank you to everyone who has renewed their membership since the previous mailing – a new membership card should be enclosed with this *SCRSS Digest*. And to everyone who receives a renewal reminder, please respond promptly so that we can focus our energies on the centenary! If you have any questions regarding your membership,

do not hesitate to get in touch, preferably via email.

## Soviet War Memorial

Although the Soviet War Memorial Trust's programme of formal annual ceremonies (on Holocaust Memorial Day, Victory Day and Remembrance Sunday) has been put on hold due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Memorial remains a focal point for personal remembrance of the 27 million Soviet citizens and service men and women who died for the Allied victory over Fascism in the Second World War. On behalf of the SCRSS, flowers will continue to be laid at the Memorial on 27 January, 9 May and Remembrance Sunday in November, whether or not a formal ceremony takes place.

## A Personal Note

As Hon Secretary since May 2013 I have had the privilege of building on the foundations laid by my predecessors, particularly, of course, Jean Turner, who was Secretary (paid) and later Hon Secretary (unpaid) from April 1985 to the date of my appointment. Subsequently, as Hon Treasurer, Jean continued to be involved in the day-to-day work of the Society until her death in February 2023. I very much regret that she will not be there at the celebration of the centenary in July 2024, but know that without her the Society would not have reached this landmark.

I am looking forward to working on the three key centenary projects this year – the book, the exhibition and the celebration – and supporting all the other initiatives that this special year will undoubtedly generate. However, I want to take this opportunity to inform members that I plan to step down as Hon Secretary at the Society's AGM in May 2025. I intend to continue as a Trustee, if the members so desire, and hope to support my successor and the important and ongoing work of the Society for many years to come.

## Next Events

*The theme of our February–May 2024 lecture programme is '1920s USSR', reflecting the decade in which the Society was founded.*

**Saturday 3 February 2024, 11.00–16.00**  
**Event: SCRSS Library Opening**

**Tuesday 6 February 2024, 19.00**  
**Zoom Online Lecture: Professor Bill Bowring on *Lenin, Self-Determination of Nations and the 1924 Constitution of the USSR***  
Book at [eventbrite.co.uk/e/781501290397](https://eventbrite.co.uk/e/781501290397)

**Saturday 2 March 2024, 11.00–16.00**  
**Event: SCRSS Library Opening**

**Wednesday 20 March 2024, 19.00**  
**Zoom Online Lecture: Andrew George on *Andrei Platonov's 'Chevengur' (1928) as a Marxist Novel***  
Book at [eventbrite.co.uk/e/797849478267](https://eventbrite.co.uk/e/797849478267)

**Saturday 6 April 2024, 11.00–16.00**  
**Event: SCRSS Library Opening**

**Wednesday 24 April 2024, 19.00**  
**Zoom Online Lecture: Professor Jeremy Hicks on *Oedipal and Incendiary: Revisiting Pudovkin's Adaptation of Gorky's Mother (1926)***  
Book at [eventbrite.co.uk/e/797858515297](https://eventbrite.co.uk/e/797858515297)

**Saturday 4 May 2024, 11.00–16.00**  
**Event: SCRSS Library Opening**

**Saturday 18 May 2024, 11.00–13.00**  
**In-person Event: SCRSS Annual General Meeting**  
SCRSS members only

**Saturday 18 May 2024, 14.00**  
**In-person Lecture: Christine Lindey on *Alexander Deineka (1899–1969), People's Artist of the USSR***  
Tickets available on the door. Free to SCRSS members attending the preceding AGM at 11.00, otherwise normal ticket prices apply.



**Saturday 1 June 2024, 11.00–16.00**

**Event: SCRSS Library Opening**

**Saturday 6 July 2024 (time TBC)**

**In-person Event: SCRSS Centenary Celebration 1924–2024**

SCRSS members only. Details TBC.

*Our first-Saturday-of-the-month library openings resume from 2 February 2024. We hope to add two talks in Russian for members later in the spring, in collaboration with our partner SPAIC in St Petersburg. For full details of all events, visit the SCRSS website at [www.scrss.org.uk](http://www.scrss.org.uk). Normal ticket prices apply for events (£3.00 SCRSS members, £5.00 non-members), unless otherwise indicated.*

## Feature

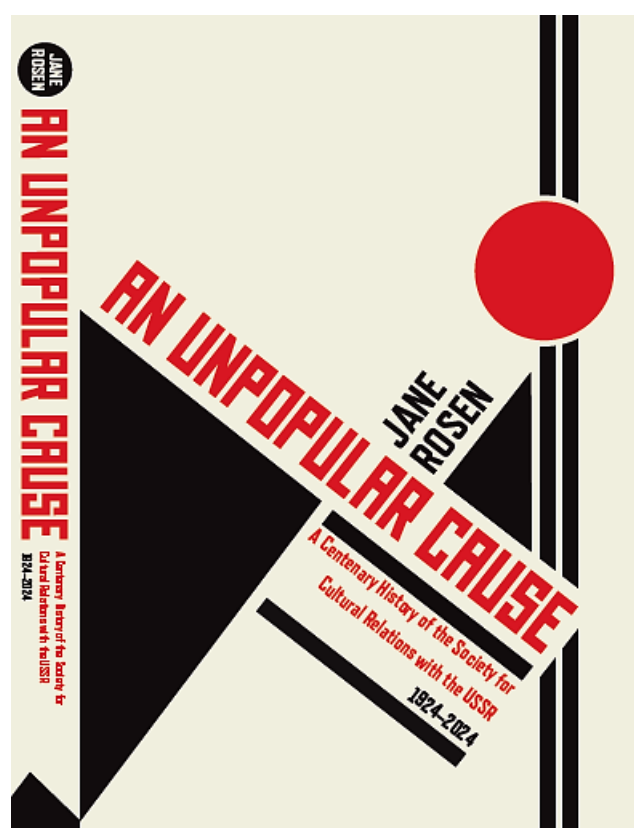
### What Are They Up To? The Formation of the SCR, 1924

By Jane Rosen

*This is an edited extract from Chapter 1 of the new history of our Society being written by Jane Rosen, SCRSS Council member and Hon Archivist. 'An Unpopular Cause: A Centenary History of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR' will be published in late June 2024, ready to launch at our Centenary celebration on 6 July 2024.*

The formation of the Society occurred seven years after the October Revolution of 1917 and Russia's withdrawal from the [First World War]. Many of those who took part in the SCR's establishment had been involved in the radical movements in the UK and there was among those first supporters a general commitment to the ideals of socialism. The tragic events of the First World War also meant that there was a belief that all efforts should be made to stop such a conflict from ever happening again, so supporters of the Society were generally also campaigners for pacifism and international understanding.

As I have written elsewhere: "In 1917, the world turned upside down. After the revolutions in Russia that year, particularly the Bolshevik revolution in October, things were never to be the same again. It is difficult now, after years of Cold War propaganda, to appreciate the reaction around the world at the time. It was the first great victory of the working class. It was the beginning of a new world! There was hard work ahead, but the working class in Russia had achieved the overthrow of the tsarist regime. New ways of looking at things, including education and activism, had to be found."<sup>1</sup>



Front cover and spine design for the Society's centenary history – to be published in 2024

This reaction cannot be underestimated, and it is central to the understanding of the reasons for the formation of the SCR. It was frustrating for all who were interested in this new society that there was so little information. They could not assess what was happening in the field of social sciences, the radical new educational theories being tried out, the new economic system being built, the development of co-operative practices or public medicine. It was, therefore, time to set up an institution



devoted to disseminating this information and encouraging the exchange of professional practice. The year that the Society came into existence was the year that the Labour Government, formed in the January of 1924, finally established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Government on 1 February, and consequently made it possible to form such an organisation.

It is likely that the move to set up the Society began sometime in 1923. Certainly, [Margaret] Llewelyn Davies wrote a letter in January 1924... that she had become the temporary chair of a provisional committee aiming to recruit "the learned + distinguished in every dept of life" and that this was for the purpose of "fostering intellectual relations between the peoples of the USSR and the British Commonwealth"<sup>2</sup>...

An article in the *Daily Mail* of 19 June 1924 was headlined 'What are they up to? The SCR. Mysterious Society'. It goes on to say: "In a little office at 150 Southampton Row, a number of women under the chairmanship of Miss Llewelyn Davies, with Mrs C Rabinovitch as Hon Secretary, are making the preliminary arrangements for the formation of a mysterious society."

Despite the efforts of the *Daily Mail* journalist, further information was not forthcoming, although leaflets and flyers had been issued, inviting those interested to a meeting to form a new Society. Catherine Rabinovitch refused to provide copies of these to the *Daily Mail*. Nonetheless, the paper conjectured that this Society was to represent the interests of the Soviet Union.

Notwithstanding the criticism from the press – *The Manchester Guardian* was a significant counter to the general opposition – an inaugural meeting went ahead on 9 July 1924 at Caxton Hall, Westminster, London, and it was agreed that a Society should be formed. The list of first supporters makes for interesting reading. There are well-known writers and publishers such as EM Forster, HG Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Virginia and Leonard Woolf who, with David Garnett, represent the Fabians and the

Bloomsbury set. The world of theatre and music is represented by the actress Sybil Thorndike and the composer Rutland Boughton. Science provided names such as Julian Huxley, evolutionary biologist, and JBS Haldane, geneticist. There were notables in the fields of architecture, philosophy and the social sciences. These supporters represented many different causes, including co-operation, pacifism, internationalism, women's suffrage, and the fight for public health and public education.

# S.C.R.

**The Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics.**

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**OBJECTS OF THE S.C.R.**

1. To collect and diffuse information in both countries on developments in Science, Education, Philosophy, Art, Literature, and Social and Economic Life.
2. To organise lectures and an interchange of lecturers, conferences, exhibitions, etc., and to arrange for the publication and translation of papers and books.
3. To provide opportunities for social intercourse.
4. To take any action deemed desirable to forward the intellectual and technical progress of both peoples.

**Office: 23, TAVISTOCK SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1 (Second floor)**  
**Telephone: Museum 5254.**

The Society's objectives in the SCR's first annual report, 1924–25 (SCRSS Archive)

Here was a newly formed revolutionary country that promised equality for all and was determined to put society, rather than the privileged individual, at the centre of everything it did. Yet for seven years these professionals, many of them innovators, had been denied the opportunity to see the advances made by the USSR in their respective fields. Education, housing and medical services were to be for all and not

for those who could afford it. Russia had been a feudal society and had been seen as an opponent to all progressive movements for the betterment of its population. This state of affairs was now emphatically at an end, and the opportunities were endless...

At the meeting the resolution for the formation of the Society was moved by the economist JA Hobson: "The civilisation of the future would be built, not on the standardisation of life, but on diversity of national cultures, each making their own special contribution."<sup>3</sup> The motion was seconded by Longin Gueruss of the Soviet Embassy and was supported by Ruth Fry. There was an attendance of about 120 British and Russian people, and the resolution was passed.

### Footnotes

1 Reynolds K, Rosen J, Rosen M (Eds), *Reading and Rebellion: An Anthology of Radical Writing for Children 1900–1960*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 83

2 Quoted in Cohen R, *Margaret Llewelyn Davies: With Women for a New World*, The Merlin Press, 2020, p. 226

3 SCR Annual Report, 1924–25, p. 4

## Feature

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### Why the USSR Needed 'The Golden Ring' Cities

By Dr James C Pearce

'The Golden Ring' first became a motoring route during the late Soviet era and acquired its name from the journalist Yuri Bychkov. He had written an article in the newspaper *Sovetskaya kul'tura* (*Soviet Culture*) about a road trip from Moscow, around these ancient cities, across the Volga and back. Asked to come up with a title, Bychkov found inspiration in the cupolas of the Kremlin's Ivan the Great Bell

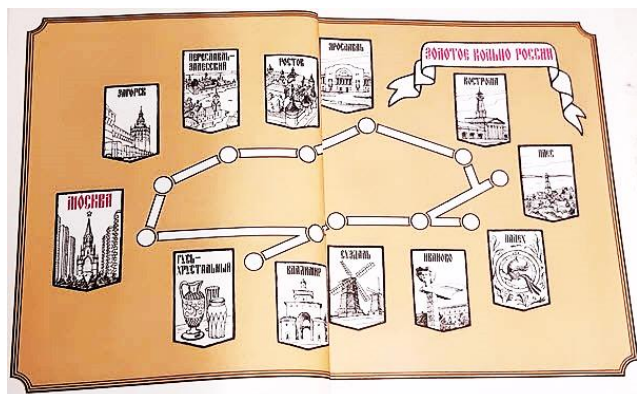
Tower on a rainy Moscow day ("были будто золотым маслом вымазаны" – "as if they were smeared with golden butter"). Its conception as a tourist route came shortly after. The Golden Ring Project became a response to both the Soviet state's initiative to expand tourism and calls for preservation of historic buildings by social organisations. They were reimagined and once again considered the Russian heartlands, both geographically and symbolically.



Saviour Monastery of Saint Euthymius, Suzdal'  
(photo courtesy of S and J Morgan)

However, The Golden Ring represented different things at different moments in Russia's history. In contemporary Russia, it remains one of the most popular routes for both foreign and domestic tourists, marketing a tranquil vision of pre-revolutionary Russia – one with wooden houses, churches and picturesque landscapes. But it is also typical of regional struggles. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was the political, economic and spiritual centre of Kievan Rus'. For the Romanovs and Russian Orthodox Church, it was the source of their political legitimacy – despite being of secondary importance in

every other way. And yet, the greatest paradox of The Golden Ring is that, had it not been for the Soviet Government, the 'cradle of Russian civilisation' as we know it would not exist.



The Golden Ring route in *Золотое кольцо России* (The Golden Ring of Russia), AV Lavrent'ev et al, Profizdat, 1984 (SCRSS Library)

The Golden Ring comprises Suzdal', Vladimir, Kostroma, Yaroslavl', Rostov Veliky, Sergiev Posad, Pereslavl'-Zalessky and Ivanovo. These cities northeast of Moscow were once the spiritual centre of Orthodox Christianity, key to the gradual formation of the Russian state and its historical continuity. Some were ancient capitals and mentioned in the chronicles. Others were important bishoprics, economic hubs or had a peculiar specialness to Grand Princes, Metropolitans or the Tsars. Today it hosts several UNESCO World Heritage sites, yet the socio-political status of the towns has declined and all are in need of socio-economic development. Despite being the cradle of Russian culture, as Bychkov noted, The Golden Ring does not feature prominently in the Russian school history curriculum, national conservations or 'preferred' mainstream national history. Historical enquiry is somewhat limited in English.

Despite its modern popularity, the region's 'golden age' was rather short-lived. It began at the time this easternmost region of Kievan Rus' shifted power away from Kiev, when the latter was unable to control the surrounding regions due to succession problems and steppe invaders. Vladimir-Suzdal' was far away from invading threats.

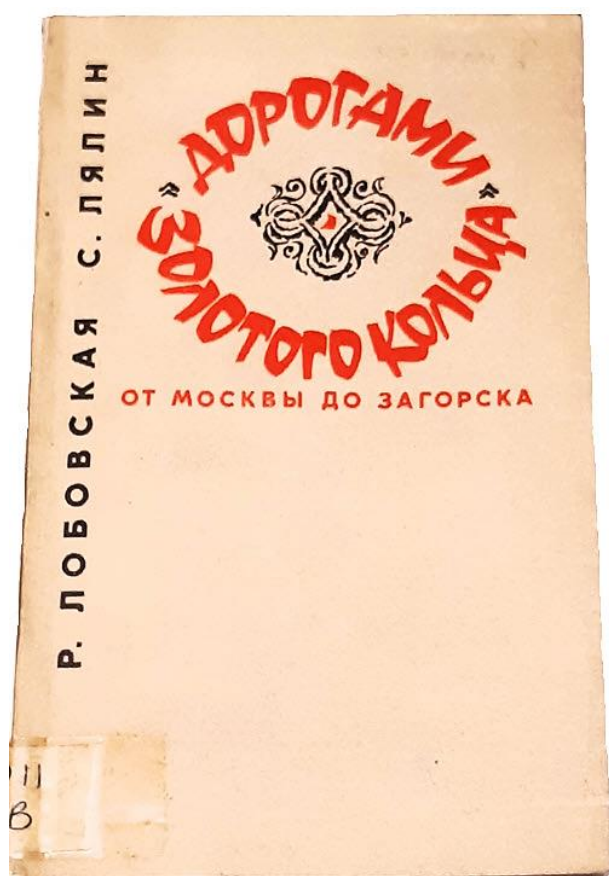
It was ruled by one branch of the Rurikids, the descendants of Yaroslav the Wise. By the mid-1100s, it had Europe's largest military, political consolidation and clear succession lines. Economically, it was thriving – rich in natural resources and ideally located for trade. The Slavs migrated northeast with this economic success. Political power eventually consolidated around the fortress city of Vladimir, after Yuri Dolgoruky sacked Kiev and decided to rule the Rus' from Vladimir. Following the Mongol takeover in 1240, Vladimir's power diminished gradually and, with the line of succession, moved back westwards to Moscow.

Vladimir and The Golden Ring became central to the history of Russian state power and the Orthodox Church. Moscow's legitimacy as the centre of Russian power and spirituality came from Kiev; the Grand Princes and Metropolitans kept 'Kiev' in their title whilst residing in Vladimir. Moreover, in two of Russia's first histories, *The Book of Degrees* and *Tales of Prince Vladimir*, it was written that the Rurikids shared a connection with the Roman Emperor Augustus through the ominous figure Prus. If this was questioned, it was confirmed by Ivan III's marriage to the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor. This claim put the Russian rulers on the same footing as the Habsburg monarchy – as did Constantinople's recognition of the new title 'Tsar'. Vladimir, Rostov and Suzdal' were just as important as all the other ancient spiritual centres, especially as Russia was the last free Orthodox nation and Christianity's most easterly point.

The Golden Ring cities remained important spiritual centres for pilgrimage thereafter and featured prominently in every major event of Russian history right up until the Second World War. In the first years of Soviet rule, they were quite literally taken apart. Street names were changed, as were some of the town names themselves: Sergiev Posad became Zagorsk and Lenin decreed that the town's iconic monastery be converted into a museum of folk art and textiles. The 1920s and 1930s saw many churches and monasteries destroyed or



abandoned, with most new construction being housing. The Cheka took over the monasteries in Suzdal' and turned one into a place for political prisoners. The Vladimir Highway, known in earlier periods for transporting political prisoners into exile, became the Enthusiasts Highway and a different type of political prisoner now travelled along this route. Those religious buildings not abandoned were lucky if they were used for storage. Yaroslavl', Ivanovo and Kostroma became home to important factories in key industries.



*Along the Roads of 'The Golden Ring': From Moscow to Zagorsk*, by R Lobovskaya and S Lyalin, Moscow, Moskovsky rabochiy, 1981, in Russian (SCRSS Library)

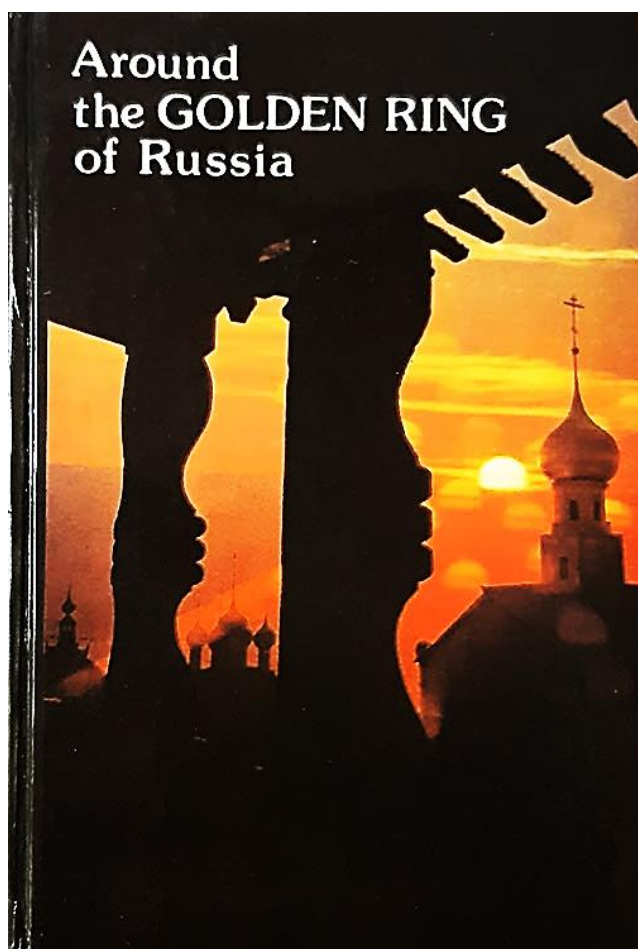
After Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign and enthusiasm for urban modernisation, a lot of valuable architecture was neglected further. It was not until the Brezhnev era when these cities would re-emerge and birth their modern identities. Bychkov worked at *Sovetskaya kul'tura* in the early 1960s, specialising in art history and literature. He became one of the founders of the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Monuments of History and Culture

(VOOPIK), which would take a leading role in the development of what we now understand as 'The Golden Ring'. VOOPIK<sup>1</sup> was a vehicle for mobilising public support for much needed architectural preservation. This mass-membership, voluntary organisation was established in 1965, following a shift in policy towards preservation at the start of the Brezhnev regime. Preservationists, including architects (notably the Moscow Branch of the Union of Architects), writers and artists, had lobbied unsuccessfully for a decade during the Khrushchev era for permission to set up such an organisation. VOOPIK fostered a sense of both local and national belonging, and attempted to carve out and promote these to foreign tourists. However, as Sheila Pattle<sup>2</sup> notes, tourism became a convenient stopgap use for religious buildings.

Urgent renovations were required, as were new kinds of tourist practices and an investigation into the political consequences of opening up these cities. Anything connected to the Romanovs needed careful consideration – the Ipatievsky Monastery in Kostroma for example. Showcasing the achievements of Soviet socialism and some narrative of a Soviet national identity was also a must. This was rather difficult because The Golden Ring's symbols and images consist mostly of churches and monasteries. The compromise was to introduce different tour categories and this practice remains in place today: historical-revolutionary, cultural, archaeological, folk decorative and applied art, and natural therapeutic sights. Certain Russian heroes from pre-revolutionary times (Alexander Nevsky and Ivan Susanin) were used in local exhibitions to promote Soviet patriotism in scripted narratives handed out to the tour guides, and some tours included stops at factory complexes. Soviet citizens also embarked on different tours to foreigners. In fact, The Golden Ring route was initially set up for foreigners to provide somewhere new and to boost profits. Thus, the tour took on two competing identities, showcasing both Kievan Rus' and Soviet modernity through a controlled narrative. However, this narrative was not always



transmitted consistently to tourists, since each town had to square its history differently.



*Around the Golden Ring of Russia: An Illustrated Guide*, by Yuri Bychkov – inventor of the name for the route – and Vladimir Desyatnikov, Moscow, Planeta Publishers, 1988 (SCRSS Library)

Approved in 1969, the first tours set off in 1971 and The Golden Ring underwent a period of intense cultural and infrastructure growth right through until the end of the 1980s. More factories, schools, higher education institutions, TV and radio stations were opened, along with hotels, cafes, and restaurants for their new visitors, not to mention roads and ferry rides across the Volga to Kostroma. Though hard to get exact figures, interest in The Golden Ring was modest at best. Tourism undeniably increased in the 1970s and 1980s, but to call it an explosion would be misleading. In 1974, the first survey of tourists from capitalist countries cited that “history and culture” was their primary reason for visiting the USSR. It may have had a small impact in encouraging foreigners to increase their

stay but ascertaining that is incredibly difficult. For domestic tourists, The Golden Ring provided somewhere different – as unique as Central Asia or the Baltics. It would become a retreat from the modern socialist world into an authentically restored, pre-modern past, where visitors could re-engage with Russia’s spiritual roots.

Today, these cities and surrounding regions are experiencing depopulation: 75 per cent of Russia’s population now lives in urban centres, with an additional four million migrating to its biggest cities annually. Cities with populations fewer than 500,000 have been the biggest losers in this regard.

The largest Golden Ring city (Vladimir) has a little under 300,000 inhabitants. Moscow’s economic attractiveness and opportunities deprives these areas of modernisation and talent. Average salaries remain low (depending on the city, 20–30,000 roubles a month) but prices are often comparable to Moscow. Public services are underfunded and many local communities are as rural and isolated as they were before 1917. Today, Ivanovo is a town of service industries, engineers, professors and salespeople. Once a town full of merchants, industrialists and workers, when the USSR collapsed its textile industry dried up. Redevelopment funds of \$1.5 billion were promised to Russia’s historic towns for renovation, designed to increase domestic tourism and living standards, but the pandemic and war in Ukraine put this on hold.

The Golden Ring Project was a lot more than its creators intended and tourists realise. It was a textbook case of Soviet memory politics and a reflection of the changing narrative in national history. It also coincided with changes in public opinion. A growth in Russian nationalism associated with the regions, increased church attendance, a general opening-up of the USSR and need for domestic tourism, all occurred alongside it. But the idea of what these cities were simply had to be redefined for tourism. Its creation brought wondrous developments and changed the way the world viewed Russia’s history.

Dr James C Pearce is a cultural historian of Russia. Dr Pearce previously worked at the University of Liverpool and the College of the Marshall Islands, and lived in Russia for almost a decade. He is the author of 'The Use of History in Putin's Russia' (Vernon Press, 2020), and has written on Russian memory politics, historical narratives, education policy and historical anniversaries. He is currently writing a history of Russia's Golden Ring cities and has written for a number of prominent outlets, including 'The Moscow Times' and 'New Eastern Europe Magazine'.

## Footnotes

1 Vserossiyskoe obshchestvo okhrany pamyatnikov istorii i kul'tura (VOOPIK), Web: <https://voopik.ru/>

2 Pattle S, 'Forging the Golden Ring: Tourist Development and Heritage Preservation in the Late Soviet Union' in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 2011

## Book Reviews

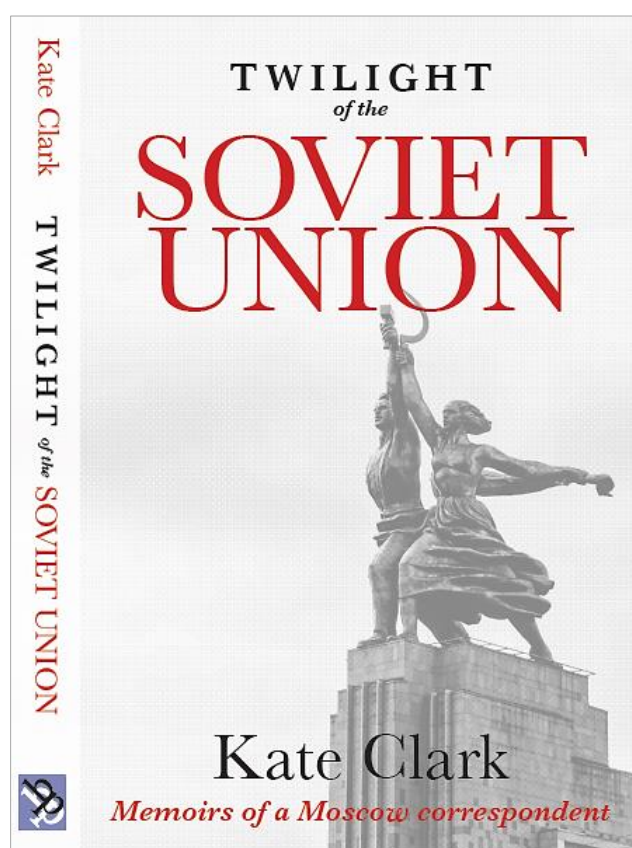
### Twilight of the Soviet Union: Memoirs of a Moscow Correspondent

By Kate Clark (Bannister Publications, 2023, ISBN: 978-1-916823-02-0, Pbk 358pp, £14.99)

This volume offers the reader an extremely rich tracing of the last years of the Soviet Union by the then resident *Morning Star* correspondent. It draws on the author's meticulously kept diary, her reports, on a wealth of documents from all sources, told as a parent of two children who lived in normal Soviet accommodation and attended the main events of Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, following them through to his debacle, as part of the destruction of the Soviet Union.

She presents the sad consequences of uncertainties created at the very top of the Soviet state and Communist Party that cascaded down to dominate the output of

the mass media. All old editors were replaced to let in advocates of anything that carried the label of 'new', the press and all mass media were thrown open to everyone who had a grouse or complaint to air. Ever more radical appeals were made to ordinary people to seize the reins of power and right the ills, but without first putting into operation and testing previously called-for actions. Anyone who did not go along with throwing all experience to the wind was labelled a conservative, a bureaucrat and the like, blackened with charges of being out to protect alleged privileged lifestyles, and blamed for every perceived weakness in the workings of the Soviet system.



Kate Clark thoroughly records the process of degeneration, witnessed at every level of life and across the national and republican boundaries. The process started with Gorbachev's launching of a shambolic and ultimately nihilistic debate. He and his followers launched ever new calls to abandon aspects of the Soviet system. The 'reformers' won through conferences of all kinds where the central apparatus of Party and Government abdicated all responsibility of leadership, abandoning any fight to implement decisions voted on at

conferences and congresses, including attempts to hold together the Soviet apparatus that made for friendship among the peoples – opening up enmities and bloodshed among nationalistic organisations.

Within five or six years the opportunists, headed by Boris Yeltsin, threw out the baby of socialism with the bathwater. The Communist Party was banned, nationalists broke up the Soviet Union itself and then destroyed public ownership, bringing in the predatory capitalism that rules today under Putin.

Kate Clark covers the whole period in great detail – from the national level down through the different Soviet republics, Party organisations and trade unions, to the commentaries of ordinary people. One suggestion: studying this work would have been helped greatly by the addition of an index.

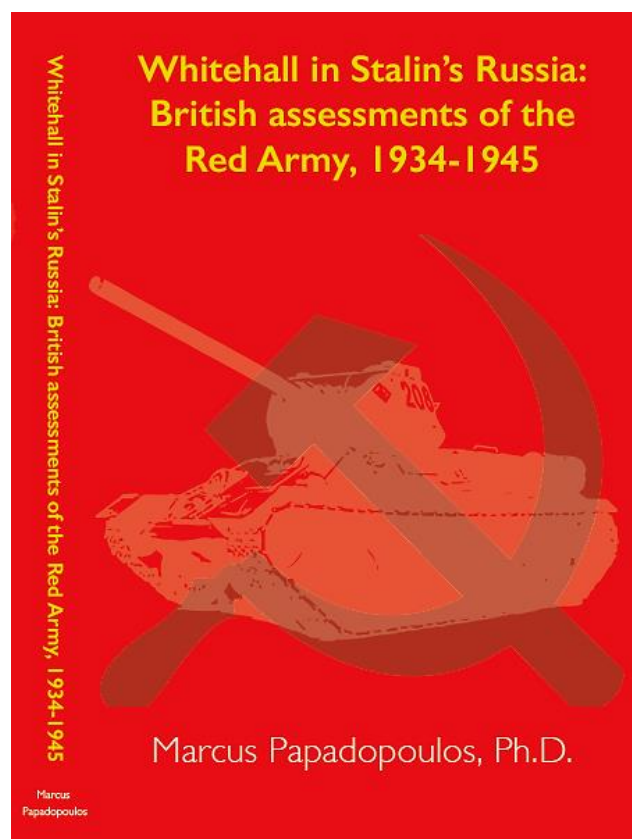
*Mick Costello*

**Note:** Kate Clark was recently interviewed about her new book and experiences for the popular *Cold War Conversations* podcast at <https://coldwarconversations.com/>. Scroll down to find the recording of 'Twilight of the Soviet Union – Memoirs of a British Journalist'. *Cold War Conversations* is also available via podcast apps such as Castbox (Android phones) or Apple Podcasts (iPhones).

**Whitehall in Stalin's Russia: British Assessments of the Red Army, 1934–1945**  
By Marcus Papadopoulos (Tricorn Books, 2023, ISBN: 978-1914615573, 274pp, £8.99)

Marcus Papadopoulos's engaging book focuses on the British military's appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the Red Army from the mid-1930s onwards. Shot through with racism, ethnic stereotyping and prejudice against barbaric, backward Asiatic Russia, these British assessments were invariably negative. According to numerous British military observers stationed in the Soviet Union, the Red Army was good for

defence but lacked the ability to conduct effective offensive operations, its infantry was tough but lacked initiative, it had some good equipment but lacked the educated and trained officers to properly use it. Above all, the Red Army was deemed inferior to Western armies and military technologies.



Papadopoulos traces the Russophobia of many of these British officers to imperial rivalries in the nineteenth century, especially the perceived tsarist threat to India. Ingrained anti-communists, many of them served alongside White armies during the Russian Civil War. By no means were all their criticisms of the Red Army off beam, but they consistently failed to grasp that the Soviets were well aware of the problems of their armed forces and took successful steps to rectify them.

However, British assessments were far from uniformly negative. Some of Britain's military attachés and observers were able to see beyond their prejudices. The impact on British policy of these alternative voices depended on the situation.

In the context of growing threats from Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, the Red Army was seen as a potentially very important military ally. That positive assessment was knocked sideways by Stalin's purge of the Soviet officer corps in 1937–38, providing ammunition for those striving for political reasons to downplay Soviet military effectiveness in the event of a British war with Germany. That negative assessment of the Red Army's military capabilities was reinforced by what seemed to be a poor performance during the Winter War with Finland in 1939–40. Unsurprisingly, when the Germans launched Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, most British military experts expected the invasion to succeed.

The Red Army's successful defence of Moscow in autumn 1941 prompted a reappraisal of that pessimistic view but it re-emerged when the Germans launched their 1942 summer offensive. It was only the German defeat at Stalingrad that finally marginalised overly negative views of the Red Army as an effective fighting force. But the Russophobia and anti-communism never went away. The greater the Red Army's success, the more intense were fears the Bolshevik menace would threaten Britain next.

An interesting sub-story of Papadopoulos's narrative is that British political opinion was often quite positive about Soviet military prowess and quite optimistic about the prospects for a postwar alliance with the USSR. Indeed, Foreign Office officials and British diplomats were so appalled by the anti-sovietism of British military personnel sent to serve in Moscow that they asked for them to be recalled to London!

Papadopoulos is not the first historian to note how these changing perceptions of the Red Army's strengths and weaknesses impacted on British policy towards the USSR, but no one else has done it in such detail. Effectively written and based on an impressive array of sources, the book tells this important story very well.

*Geoffrey Roberts*

## **Note from the Editor**

Due to the work involved with the Society's centenary, we will only be publishing two issues of the *SCRSS Digest* this year. The next issue will be a special centenary issue, published in the autumn of 2024.

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