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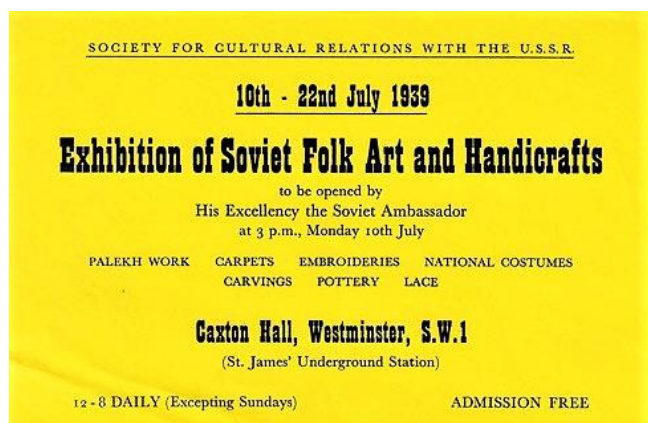
Lulling Fears About Satanic 'Reds': The Soviet Folk Art Exhibition, 1939

By Assiya Issemberdiyeva

In its earlier days, the Society for Co-operation in Russian and Soviet Studies (SCRSS) strove to connect the peoples of two worlds: capitalist Britain and the communist USSR. Despite the Society's efforts, however, we can see from the case of the Exhibition of Soviet Folk Art and Handicrafts (1939) that individuals' narratives were shaped and interpreted by the opposing systems.

The SCRSS was founded in 1924 as the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) and was one of the key soft-power organisations connecting the USSR and Great Britain. Cultural activities organised by the Society garnered considerable press coverage, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. These reports and reviews contributed significantly to the popular debate about the USSR. While the activities

of the Society are under-researched, its archive contains a rich history. Among the aspects deserving attention is the tension between right-wing and left-wing press coverage.



Invitation to the opening of the SCR's *Exhibition of Soviet Folk Art and Handicrafts*, Caxton Hall, London SW1, 10 July 1939 (SCRSS Archive)

One of the events that attracted wide publicity was the Exhibition of Soviet Folk Art and Handicrafts held by the Society between 10 and 22 July 1939 at Caxton Hall, London. SCRSS Archive materials, including press cuttings, reports and pamphlets, shed light on the significance of this show. According to the SCR's Annual Report that year, the Exhibition was "one of the most successful activities ever undertaken by the Society" with a "constant stream of visitors, reaching occasionally 800 per day" (SCR, 1939). It coincided with the SCR's 15th anniversary, was opened by the Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maisky, and the event was televised and appeared in the newsreels.

The Exhibition

The exhibition showcased 127 pieces of embroidery, fifty-eight wooden carvings, toys, pots, boxes and carpets from all over

the Soviet Union, impressing reviewers with the “considerable richness and variety of material” (Gordan, 1939). It included lacework from Ukraine, carpets from Turkmenistan, Armenia, and Kazakhstan, fish skin costumes and ivory from the Far North, and daggers from the Caucasus.

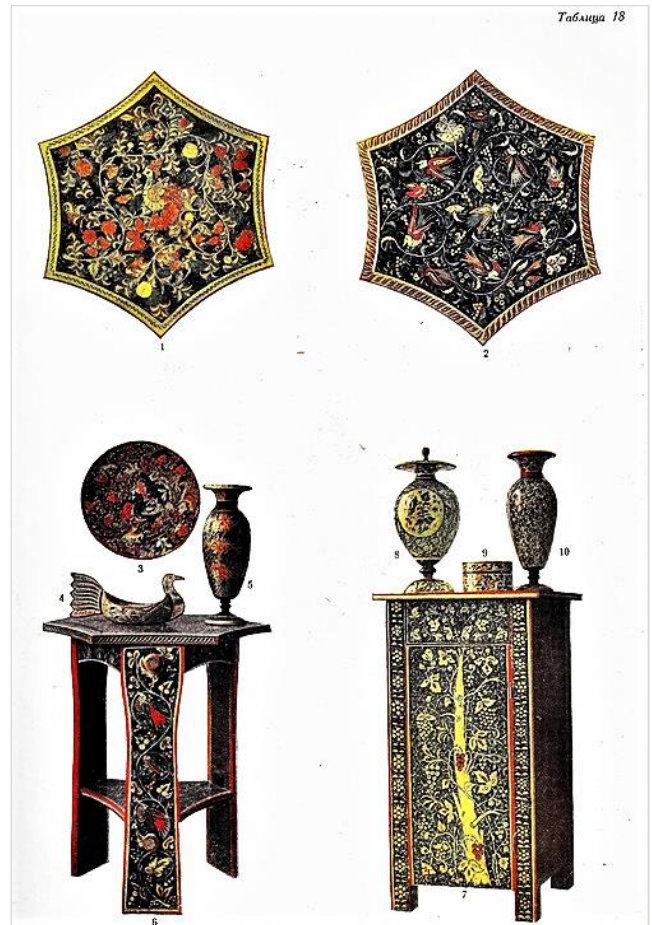
Interestingly, the British press attempted to both exoticise this content and make it relevant. One aspect that did not escape their attention was the peculiar habits and the multitude of Soviet nations.

For instance, the *Sunday Chronicle* reported that some Soviet people consumed mammoth meat preserved for thousands of years under ice, and the review was fascinated by exhibits made from the fossilised ivory tusks “of these monsters” (1939). Other commentators attempted to summon better-known cultural references. Recalling Italian Cassone paintings, *The Times*, for example, commented that one of the Russian Palekh wooden articles executed “in the fanciful manner of Piero di Cosimo” might be a “triumph” and noted occasional “Chinese flavour” (1939). Gordan also noted Oriental influence and mused that “pottery village toys from Kirov look amazingly like similar articles from Portugal, and one might confuse the bold ceramics of Kazakistan (sic) with peasant earthenware from Valencia”.

Socialism: Party Rule, People’s Art

Folk art and handicrafts would appear to be the least politicised subject for an exhibition, but that was hardly the case. The Soviet Union supported folk arts, particularly because their authorship was unstained by bourgeois influence: they were the culture by and for the toiling masses. This narrative was promoted by nearly all pro-Soviet papers covering the exhibition. Some reviewers even drew a contrast between two coinciding London shows: the “individualist art” of Cezanne on the one hand and the Soviet Folk Arts Exhibition by a “multitude of anonymous people” on the other (Walwyn, 1939). The motive behind Soviet support for folk arts, however, was

more complex. As Herzog indicates, folk art was held in respect in the USSR because it was “national and socialist, it was communist propaganda and ethnic self-expression [...] – all at the same time” (2010).



Reproduction from a Soviet folk art album published by Gosizdat Iskusstvo, 1940 (SCRSS Library)

Some newspapers, especially labour-oriented ones, stressed that the exhibits were made by “peasants” – in their spare time, “particularly through the long winter evenings” (*The Manchester Guardian*, 1939). Some tried to compliment the works by imagining unfavourable conditions for these “simple craftsmen”: “with primitive tools and materials, the peasant housewife has [...] contrived work of surprising dignity” (*Birmingham Mail*, 1939). Though this rhetoric of “real folk art” was forwarded by Ambassador Maisky, *The Times*, for one, was not convinced, suspecting at least a “collaboration between trained designers and peasant[s]” in the creation of the objects displayed.

This sceptical attitude towards 'all things Socialist' was highlighted particularly well in the comments on 'de-nobilitated' chess figures. The *Nottingham Journal* commented that "propaganda occasionally rears its head" and the author was "amused" by the "non-Royal" chessmen: the figurines of the "Eskimo and his wife" replaced the usual king and queen, tents replaced castles, reindeer replaced knights, and "savage hunters" replaced bishops (1939). The *Evening Standard* interpreted the Soviet king and queen chessmen as "Communist Party leader and his wife" and noted Russian life's "excessive standardisation" (1939). "The one characteristic that runs through all the exhibits [...] is the elimination of all connection with the old regime", noted the newspaper (ibid.).

'Decolonisation' of Oppressed People and Industrialisation

This obliteration of the old regime was also emphasised in the Soviet 'anti-colonial' rhetoric. The press rephrased Maisky's speech on the liberation of minorities from tsarist oppression and the opportunities created for the "fullest possible development of national cultures" (*Greenock Telegraph*, 1939). The *Edinburgh Evening News* explained the Soviet Government's objective as the development of "each race [...] through its own culture [...] the [Soviet] policy may now be called National Socialism" (1939). Clearly, the exhibition invited references to the Union's multiethnicity and its nationalities policy, but this issue was presented in accordance with the Soviet government's official lines.

References were also made to the Union's "increased material well-being" (*The Times*). *The Manchester Guardian* went further, stating the "tremendous successful efforts for industrialisation" and the parallel support of peasant artists' age-old crafts. On a similar note, describing the USSR's modernisation policy, the *Daily Worker* was "struck" that "archaic local cultures [...] are fostered and safeguarded" (1939). However, this juxtaposition of old and new was not

always interpreted positively. Some reviewers commented on the potential adverse effect of modernisation on the 'soul' of folk art: "I shall be surprised if, once the moujik gets a decent road, a car to run about on it, and a radio to listen in to, the Soviet does not find itself whistling for its lovely Folk Arts, or even its still vigorous descendants, in vain," declared Gordan.



Reproduction from a Soviet folk art album published by Gosizdat Iskusstvo, 1940 (SCRSS Library)

As indicated, although a folk arts exhibition might appear to be an apolitical topic, in this case it shed light on the politics and ideological differences between the two countries. The exhibition reviews referenced a bigger picture, touching on contemporary debates about the nature of the Soviet regime. The timeframe is also important: following the strained 1930s, by 1939 nearly all British papers "demanded the British Government form an alliance with the USSR against Hitler's aggression" (Nanson, 1997). Gordan's comment that the British "are now deliberately trying to get into more intimate touch with the USSR" confirms the rising interest in Russia at the time, which

climaxed during the war. Some reviewers noted that the Soviet Folk Arts Exhibition had been shown in Liverpool in May 1939, where it was visited by as many as 20,000 people (Earp, 1939), and recommended it “as the ideal show to lull fears about Satanic ‘Reds’” (*Nottingham Journal*). Indeed, what event could do it better?

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Assiya Issemberdiyeva is a PhD student in Visual Cultures at Queen Mary University of London, funded through a Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA). She began work on her thesis, which explores wartime Soviet cinema, in October 2021 under the supervision of Professor Jeremy Hicks, a member of the SCRSS Council. In 2022, as part of the CDA, Assiya researched SCR

film-related and other events during the Second World War in the SCRSS Archive. She would like to express her sincere gratitude to Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, and Jane Rosen, Honorary Archivist, at the SCRSS for their support in conducting this research.

SCRSS News

Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS

SCRSS AGM 2023

Many thanks to everyone who attended the AGM on Saturday 13 May, either in-person or online. The meeting began with a brief silence in memory of SCRSS Trustee Jean Turner (1929–2023), who is remembered elsewhere in this issue. We were joined online at the AGM by SCRSS member Charles Buxton in Bishkek, Kirghizia, and later by Margarita Mudrak at the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation in Russia – a truly international gathering!

Elections of SCRSS Council members, as well as President and Vice Presidents, took place (new nominations and re-elections). The President and members of the SCRSS Council act as Charity Trustees and are registered with the Charity Commission. We are delighted to welcome new Council members Wendy Ansley and Meirian Jump, and new Vice President, Professor Geoffrey Roberts. Following the AGM, the SCRSS Council met to appoint the Executive Committee (EC). The full list of the Society’s President, Vice Presidents, EC and Council is as follows. *President and Vice Presidents:* President and EC Member: Professor William Bowring; Vice Presidents: Dr Kate Hudson, Dr David Lane, Dr Rachel O’Higgins, Professor Geoffrey Roberts. *EC and members of the SCRSS Council:* Chair: Philip Matthews; Honorary Secretary: Ralph Gibson; Honorary Treasurer: Jane Rosen. *Members of the SCRSS Council:* Wendy

Ansley, Bethany Aylward, Christine Barnard, Kate Clark, Michael Costello, Jeremy Hicks, Andrew Jameson, Meirian Jump, Christine Lindey (Exhibitions Officer), Charles Stewart (Vice Chair), Diana Turner, Leonard Weiss.

In the afternoon Jane Rosen, the Society's Honorary Archivist, presented a fascinating talk on some of the women involved in the SCR and SCRSS from its inception right through to Jean Turner. Currently a link to the recording of this talk can be found on the website.

Future Role of the SCRSS

There was a good discussion at the AGM on the topic of the future role of the Society. There seemed general agreement that there is still a role for the Society and its library collections. The SCRSS Council will look at the various ideas and suggestions in due course, but if you want to add to the discussion, please get in touch. The Society has reached its centenary thanks to the dedication and support of its members. One idea was the creation of a working group to consider all the ideas and come up with concrete proposals for consideration at Council meetings and possibly future AGMs. More information about this topic will flow following the next Council meeting in the summer. Another issue raised was the question of whether the Society remains in its current building, or looks to find alternative premises. As any of you who have visited the centre will know, space is an issue, as well as the fact that the basement is not ideal for the storage of a large proportion of our book collection.

Gift Aid

Please remember that the Society can claim Gift Aid on all donations made by UK taxpayers (within certain limits). By just completing a simple form, the Society benefits from this extremely valuable 'extra', worth 25 per cent. Although we cannot claim for your membership fee, if you are eligible even a £10 donation magically becomes £12.50! If you are not sure whether we

already have a Gift Aid form on file, or would like a paper copy of the Gift Aid form, simply contact the Honorary Secretary by email. The form can also be found on the website, on the Membership page at www.scrss.org.uk/membership.htm.

Centenary Volunteers

The SCRSS has three main projects planned for the centenary: a book, an exhibition and a celebration on Saturday 6 July 2024 (the nearest Saturday to the Society's foundation date in 1924). All will coincide in the period June / July next year. If you are interested in becoming involved as a volunteer (in addition to various library and collections care tasks, we will need help with events), please drop the Honorary Secretary an email.

Centenary Club

Information about the Centenary Club is enclosed with this mailing. This small group of members has helped to transform the finances of the Society in the last three years and has ensured that it will be able to celebrate its centenary next year. Membership of the Club remains open and if you would like to join them, please complete and return the enclosed form. The financial commitment can be made monthly, annually or in a one-off payment, and each method has been used by our existing Centenary Club members. The positive impact of the financial stability this has given the Society over the last few years cannot be overestimated.

Membership Renewal

It has been very heartening to see the large number of membership renewals since the previous *SCRSS Digest* mailing in February. Well over a third of the membership will be receiving their membership cards with this copy. In addition, a third or more will be receiving a renewal notice. Do please respond as soon as possible, as this reduces administration. And do consider

setting up a standing order to pay your membership fee automatically – this avoids the need for a renewal notice. Finally, if you want to pay for more than one year in advance, then just indicate this on the renewal slip when you return it. If you want to pay by bank transfer, simply email a request for the Society's bank details. Use your membership number as a reference.

Library News

Our dedicated library volunteers continue to make progress sorting, cataloguing and classifying the collections. Over 5,500 items can now be searched on our online catalogue. Check out the link from our website home page, where you will find other resources and information about the Society and its collections. The aim is to get the library in good shape for the centenary next year. Work on the History Collection is nearing completion and great progress is being made on all our theatre-related books. Volunteers are continuing work on the Society's vast pamphlet collection. And the Art / Visual Aids room is being systematically sorted, revealing all sorts of interesting items that may well find their way into our centenary exhibition.

Keeping in Touch

In addition to the *SCRSS Digest*, members receive a regular e-newsletter with information about events, member offers and other news. If you are not receiving it, please make sure we have your current email address. Simply email ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk with 'Update' as the subject.

Next Events

Our first-Saturday-of-the-month library openings continue to the end of the year. The summer and autumn programme of events is currently being planned. For full and up-to-date details of all events, including library open days, visit the SCRSS website at www.scrss.org.uk.

In Memoriam

Jean Turner (9 November 1929 – 22 February 2023)



Jean Turner with her portrait by Vaughan Melzer at the London–St Petersburg: City and People Photo Exhibition, 2014, organised by the SCRSS and St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation (copyright Vaughan Melzer)

The SCRSS mourns the loss of our colleague and friend Jean Turner who died in February 2023, aged 93 years. Jean served as Secretary, Honorary Secretary and Honorary Treasurer of the Society from 1985 onwards. In addition, Jean was a Director and Company Secretary of SCR House Ltd. From 1997 to 2006, Jean was also Honorary Secretary of the Soviet Memorial Trust Fund (now the Soviet War Memorial Trust), continuing as a Trustee until her death.

Tribute by Phil Matthews, Chair, SCRSS

Jean Turner was Secretary, Honorary Secretary, then Honorary Treasurer of the SCR/SS for nearly forty years, as well as Company Secretary of SCR House Ltd. In 1985 she arrived at the Society (then called the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR – SCR) highly recommended by Andrew Rothstein, one of the SCR's founder members.

It did not take long for Jean to get to know the workings of the SCR and then there was no stopping her.

I remember how during the 1980s the SCR ran its annual Easter Russian Language Courses in London. The Soviet teachers would visit my home town of Wilton in Wiltshire for a weekend, under the auspices of the SCR Wessex Branch, to learn about Wilton's Russian connections, and Jean always came with them.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in late December 1991, there was uncertainty for the Society, but Jean, with Chair Bill Bowring, led the way forward. As Jean described in her article 'Survival and Renewal: The SCR / SCRSS 1991–93' in the *SCRSS Digest*, Spring 2022 issue, the decision to carry on was cemented at the Society's AGM in May 1992, with a name change, a new set of Rules, but without changing the Society's original purpose.

The next key event in Jean's work at the SCRSS was the establishment of the Soviet War Memorial. The inspiration for the Memorial came from a commemorative event for the 50th anniversary of VE Day at the Tidworth Military Cemetery and the Shaftesbury Town Cemetery, Wiltshire, in 1995. These two cemeteries held war graves for four Soviet soldiers. The event was organised by the SCRSS Wessex Branch, together with the Russian Embassy, and attracted much local support and press coverage. Following the success of this event, I visited the Russian Ambassador and suggested a memorial in London, to which he agreed. Jean and I then spent many meetings at the Embassy, and the SCRSS – with Jean's vital input – established the Soviet Memorial Trust Fund in 1997, which raised the funds to create the Memorial. Eventually the Memorial arrived from Russia and Jean oversaw its erection in time for the official unveiling on 9 May 1999, a ceremony supported by the Russian and UK Governments,.

In June 2003, as a result of our work on the Soviet War Memorial, Jean and I were invited to attend the Lord Mayor of London's

official banquet for President Putin at the Guildhall, London. This was quite an event to remember! Later that year the Foreign Office agreed to release the wartime telegrams between Churchill and Stalin, which until that time had been secret. Jean and I were invited to attend, along with Mary Soames, Churchill's daughter, and Anthony Eden's Private Secretary. Afterwards Jean and I had lunch and tea with Mary Soames.



Jean Turner with Vladimir Molchanov, First Secretary, Russian Embassy in London, at the Soviet War Memorial in the early 2000s

As you all know, in January 1924 the Labour Government recognised the Soviet Union and the SCR was founded in July of that year. It is a great sadness to me that Jean did not live long enough to witness the SCRSS's centenary in 2024, but we must all be grateful for what she did for the Society.

Tribute by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS

Jean Turner arrived at the SCR, as it was then, in 1985, around the same time as Mikhail Gorbachev became Soviet leader. His policies relating to *glasnost* (openness)

and *perestroika* (restructuring) brought a resurgence of interest in the Soviet Union – people wanted to know more, study the language, travel there and arrange exchange visits.

And the Society was there, once again, to fulfil its role as a bridge in knowledge and understanding between the two countries. Its library and resources, in the days before the Internet, were a vital source of information for anyone interested in finding out more. And Jean was there to get things organised. The phone calls, letters, and faxes flowed from its centre in Brixton.



Signing a two-year agreement on joint activities, Brixton, 1988 (left to right: Dina Aldridge, SCR Chair; Lord Jenkins of Putney, SCR President; Jean Turner, SCR Secretary; Svyatoslav Fyodorov, USSR-Great Britain Society President)

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of members and visitors have been welcomed there by Jean over almost forty years, including many from the Soviet Union and its successor states.

Jean also represented the SCRSS, and later the Soviet War Memorial Trust, at the highest levels – meeting and dealing with diplomats, royalty, government ministries, and local and national politicians – with professionalism and a fantastic attention to detail.

In late 1991 the USSR was gone – and many people might have expected the Society to go too. But due to the determination of Jean, and others, the SCR survived, transformed into the SCRSS.

I believe Jean was most proud of her role in the creation of the Soviet War Memorial in London – a permanent reminder of the enormous sacrifice made by the people of the Soviet Union in the defeat of Fascism in the Second World War. Of course, she always gave the credit to the Society – but I am fairly sure that without the single-minded determination, dedication and attention to detail which she possessed in abundance, it would not have happened.

One can only imagine the work involved in finding a location, raising the money, liaising with the sculptor, organising the shipment of the Memorial, commissioning the Memorial stone-carver and so on. With less than ten days to spare before its unveiling on 9 May 1999, Jean was there to make sure the installation went smoothly at the site in the park adjacent to the Imperial War Museum in Southwark. And finally, on Victory Day, the triumph of the unveiling ceremony in front of 400 invited guests, including the Duke of Kent, the UK Defence Secretary, diplomats from most of the former USSR countries, military attachés from the USA and France, UK and Soviet Second World War veterans, MPs and local politicians, civic dignitaries, representatives from dozens of national organisations and many of the ordinary people, not least SCRSS members, who helped make the Memorial happen.

Since then, the Memorial has become a focal point for remembrance at ceremonies on Holocaust Memorial Day, Remembrance Sunday and Victory Day. Jean continued to play an active role in the Soviet War Memorial Trust right to the end, helping to guide its work and ensuring continuity.

In the late 1990s, after an abortive search for new premises for the SCRSS, Jean oversaw the sale of land the Society owned next door. The proceeds were used to transform the top floor of the building into usable space. Her architect's eye and attention to detail kept the project on track. The Society became a charity in 2004 and Jean was there to make sure that all the administrative work this involved was properly done.

It does not seem that long ago – a little before the Covid pandemic – when I last accompanied Jean to Waterloo Station on the bus after a long day at the SCRSS – she was still doing a day each week at the Centre as our Honorary Treasurer.



Jean Turner speaking at the book launch of *Russian Presence in Britain* (Русское присутствие в Британии), 2010

I think it is fair to say that without Jean we would not be marking the centenary of the Society next year. We all hoped that she would be there to cut the cake in July 2024 – but it was not to be.

But Jean can rest assured that we will carry on, and we will do our best to ensure that the Society continues to fulfil its important role in promoting knowledge of the history and culture of the former USSR for this and future generations.

A century ago the group behind its foundation recognised the need for a Society dedicated to cultural relations “between the peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR”. That need remains as vital today as it was then.

This is the abridged text of Ralph Gibson’s oration on behalf of the SCRSS and Soviet

War Memorial Trust at Jean Turner’s funeral on 3 April 2023.

Tribute by Margarita Mudrak, Chair, St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation

It was with deepest regret and great sadness that we learnt about the passing away of our dear Jean Turner, the Honorary Treasurer of the SCRSS, and its formal and informal leader for many years.

We fully understand what the SCRSS and Jean’s family has lost – the most caring, kind, wise, clever, energetic leader and colleague, loving mother and grandmother, and definitely friend.

For us here it is also a great loss. Jean will always be in our hearts and minds. We fully understand that, by her passing, our Association for International Co-operation has lost a dedicated friend of Russia, a strong supporter of Russian–British co-operation, and a personal friend. We had the privilege of knowing Jean and working with her on our joint projects.

Jean was a prominent figure in international co-operation and in people’s diplomacy, and put much effort into strengthening links with the Soviet Union and Russia. She gained the respect of all members of our Association, St Petersburg officials, and those Russian language specialists who participated in the SCRSS Russian Language Seminars in London. Many of our members enjoyed Jean’s personal hospitality and at receptions at the SCRSS. Her life experience, knowledge of history, literature and other aspects of culture, her understanding of people, were absolutely outstanding.

Jean – an extraordinary person, a professional with charisma and charm – will be greatly missed by all of us. She will always be in our thoughts and prayers.

This is the abridged text of a letter of condolence sent to the SCRSS on 23 February 2023.

Tribute by Jane Rosen, Honorary Archivist, SCRSS Council

I started working at the SCR (as Librarian) and with Jean in 1989 – it was a bit of a roller coaster for the whole of the fourteen years or so that I was there.

Not only was there her indomitable personality, but during this period as General Secretary she accomplished four major tasks: she navigated the SCR through the break-up of the Soviet Union; she campaigned for and was the prime mover in setting up the Soviet War Memorial; she oversaw the refurbishment of the top floor of 320 Brixton Road so that, at last, her beloved architecture books could have the shelving they deserved (of course, there was shelving for other books but we all knew which section was the one closest to her heart!); and she ensured that the SCR still survives – and that is largely due to Jean's determination, vision and sheer cussedness.



SCRSS Russian Language Seminar organisers, 2009 (left to right: Jean Turner, Honorary Secretary; Christine Barnard and Diana Turner, SCRSS Council)

During our time working together, which continued past the fourteen years of paid employment, we laughed a great deal whilst working on the Easter Russian Language Courses, or whilst one of us tried to explain to the other why books had to be in a certain order, or why these brown folders and envelopes were so necessary and could not be put away... and were much tidier than a certain someone's desk... The brown folders are central to my memories of Jean.

She believed in order, and in keeping records to ensure that the history of the Society survived. And she kept them in the brown folders. So imagine my delight when I agreed a few years ago to organise the SCRSS Archive. I opened the door to it and there were lots and lots of shelves and a bursting filing cabinet. Four of the shelves contained the Society's archives from 1924–85. The rest, the vast majority, was largely brown folders and envelopes. With her handwriting on them. Opening them is an adventure – you are never quite sure what you will find...

And thank you, Jean, for making sure that every time I tried to leave the Society, I came back and for welcoming me every time with open arms. Be assured I am here to stay...

Jean was not always easy. She was demanding, and angry, and passionate, and fearless. She was often difficult to work with. But she was a good teacher and a friend.

This is the abridged text of Jane Rosen's oration on behalf of the SCRSS at Jean Turner's funeral on 3 April 2023.

Tribute by Diana Turner, SCRSS Council

It is only three months since the death of my mother, Jean Turner, and it has left a large hole in both my personal life and in my work for the SCRSS.

I joined the SCR in 1982, spent 1983 studying Russian in Moscow through the Society, and from 1984 became an active volunteer and later SCR Council member. So, by the time Jean joined the SCR as General Secretary in April 1985, I had already been a member for three years.

For the following thirty-eight years we became colleagues – sitting in SCR / SCRSS Council meetings together, working on a range of Russian language projects (initially the SCR Easter Russian Courses in the late 1980s, then the SCRSS Advanced Russian Language Seminars from 2007), as

well as exhibitions and other events. When I took over the *SCRSS Digest* editorship in 2004, she was my eagle-eyed proof reader, always managing to find one or two errors per issue, but she also contributed many articles and book reviews over the years, the last in 2022.



Celebrating Jean Turner's 90th birthday at the SCRSS in November 2019 (left to right: Phil Matthews, SCRSS Chair; Jean Turner; Ralph Gibson, SCRSS Honorary Secretary)

As I sort through her personal archive, I continue to find details of talks she gave at the Society, to the SCR branches and to many other organisations around the UK who asked the Society for a speaker. Her range of knowledge was phenomenal – there are cassette recordings, typed scripts with handwritten inserts, photographs and other cuttings on Soviet architecture and planning, the Russian Revolution, Russian culture, the SCRSS collections, and more. She embodied the Society's collective memory and had astonishing powers of recall. Our family also has the six medals she was awarded between 1990 and 2015 by Soviet and, later, Russian governmental organisations in recognition of her contribution to friendship and co-operation between our two countries, as well as for her role in the establishment of the Soviet War Memorial. She was modest about these awards, they were tucked away in a box at home, but she valued them and they were well deserved.

Jean was also the hostess *par excellence* for visitors from the USSR and Russia – members of the Society's partner

organisations in Moscow and St Petersburg, lecturers over to teach on the Society's Russian language courses or in connection with the Soviet War Memorial. Her house became a home from home for these visitors, and many became personal friends.

Collaborating with Jean at the Society for more than half my life made for a special mother-daughter relationship – one that was intense, not without friction, but always rewarding. I would like to thank the many SCRSS members who sent kind messages of condolence and shared their memories.

Feature

Highlights from the Archive: Edith Evans and the SCR Theatre Section 1945–48

By Jane Rosen



SCR Housewarming Ball, Kensington Square, London, November 1947, with Dame Edith Evans (right) and Vivian Leigh

The Theatre Section at the SCR was a later addition to the Society's specialised groupings, emerging in 1945. The membership reads like an outstanding cast list for an important production. Amongst its members were Peggy Ashcroft, John Gielgud, Franklin Dyall, Valerie Hobson, Ninette de Valois and Michael Redgrave. And the President was Dame Edith Evans.

In 1946 they put on the successful Soviet Theatre Exhibition, accompanied by lectures from notables of the theatre and ballet world. It opened in London in January and welcomed 40,000 people, before travelling to Scotland. It included stage designs, puppets and models from Moscow. There was extensive press coverage.

The SCRSS Archive holds photographs of the opening ceremony, which was attended by Madame Gusev, the Soviet Ambassador's wife, and Edith Evans (both of whom are wearing extraordinarily beautiful hats!), as well as the theatrical glitterati. There are also shots of visitors, some in uniform, and the exhibits. We have the exhibition catalogue describing the history of Soviet theatre, as well as images of the outstanding theatrical design of the exhibition itself. It is a stunning publication, particularly for the time.

In 1947–48, the Section organised two more exhibitions – on Shakespeare. The second of these, A History of Shakespearean Production in England, was the British contribution to the 9th Annual Shakespearean Session of the All-Russian Theatre Society in Moscow in 1948, and was opened in person by Edith Evans.

The Section also organised a series of play readings and was responsible for the Housewarming Ball at the new SCR premises in Kensington Square, London, in November 1947, hosted by Edith Evans with Vivien Leigh as Guest of Honour.

Feature

Soviet Theatre Exhibition, 22 January to 28 February 1946 By Dame Edith Evans

The Exhibition on the Soviet Theatre which was opened by Madame Gusev, wife of the Soviet Ambassador, on 22 January in Dorland Hall, London, was the first of its

kind in this country. The idea of holding such an exhibition came from John Burrell, one of our Vice-Presidents and a director of the Old Vic Theatre Company. When discussing how best to launch our Theatre Section, he said: "There is so much interest in the Soviet theatre, so many of us want to know more about it – let us give people an opportunity of seeing for themselves Russian stage designs for sets and costumes – and launch our Theatre Section at the same time!"



Interior of the Soviet Theatre Exhibition, showing a theatre set (SCRSS Archive)

Our opposite number in Moscow was asked for help. Promptly came their delighted answer and agreement to help as much as they could. True, they countered with a *quid pro quo* – they asked for an exhibition in return on *Shakespeare's England*...

The Exhibition was planned to convey as comprehensively as possible the work of the contemporary theatre all over the Soviet Union. Models of stage sets, original stage designs for sets and costumes, came from sources as varied as the Moscow Arts Theatre and the State Theatre of Armenia. Many of the exhibits, all of which were

specially flown over for the occasion, were taken from museums and had not been out of Russia before.



Cover of the Soviet Theatre Exhibition's catalogue, with a preface by JB Priestley (SCRSS Archive)

"The Soviet Theatre is not perfect. It does not do everything better than any other theatre does. But taking both quality and quantity into consideration, it must be judged the best theatre in the world," wrote Mr JB Priestley in his preface to the illustrated catalogue issued for the Exhibition.

Many of the 40,000 people who saw the Exhibition in the Dorland Hall agreed with him. The visitors' book, with many distinguished signatures, shows that.

The Press too, though less forthright than Priestley, were also of the opinion that we had something to learn from the organisation of the theatre in the Soviet Union. *The Listener* in an editorial said: "Even when allowance is made for the size of the USSR, it is obvious that our own commercialised theatre would do well to take a look at some of the Russian methods – the way, for example, the Russians run their theatres, the care they take over expenditure on production and administration and, more generally, the good plays they put on and the honoured place they give to the theatre in their national life."

In its six o'clock bulletin on the day of the opening of the Exhibition, the BBC commentator said: "I consider that this exhibition is the most important artistic advance that I have seen in creative theatre

design... I am sure it will come as a stimulus and eye opener to us..."

At the other extreme, the ladies' column of one paper recommended a visit to the exhibition for those who were considering new colour schemes for interior decoration. Here, they wrote, is an opportunity for getting some original ideas!

Certainly some of the designs left one breathless before the richness of their colouring – the ones for *Sadko* at the Bolshoi Theatre for instance... Others were chaste and austere. The first part of the Exhibition dealt with the approach to theatre. Here were photographs illustrating the training of actors, amateur dramatic facilities and how the playgoers' taste is encouraged and developed. Examples of design in theatre buildings were also shown, including the unique Central Theatre of the Red Army, built in the shape of a five-pointed star.



Opening of the Soviet Theatre Exhibition, 22 January 1946: Edith Evans (right), President of the SCR Theatre Section) introduces Madame Gusev (SCRSS Archive)

Ensembles, the theatre and dramatic work in factory and farm, the adaptation of the theatre to conditions of war and a selection from the vivid school of Soviet puppetry came next. Posters, playbills, and programmes were shown, together with illustrated pamphlets published by the

Experimental State Laboratory of the Moscow Art Theatre showing the making of scenery, properties, and effects.



Two of the theatrical glitterati at the opening of the Soviet Theatre Exhibition, 22 January 1946: Googie Withers and Michael Redgrave (SCRSS Archive)

Then came the original designs for settings and costumes by some of the leading Soviet theatre artists. These were in two groups, the first showing work by Vadim Meller, Victor Shestakov, Sofia Shevaldysheva and N Medovshikov; the second... M Vinogradov, L Demidova, G Farmanov, Fedor Fedorovsky, Alexander Tyshler, Boris Volkov, Petr Williams, Vladimir Dmitriev, Sofia Vishnevetskaya and Nisson Shifrin.

The next exhibit was a scale model of Vadim Ryndin's setting for *Innocent but Guilty* by Ostrovsky (Kamerny Theatre, 1945). This model was made specially for the Exhibition from the artist's original design shown on a screen in the next hall.

More designs for stage sets followed, showing examples of the work of V Khorensky, Nikolai Akimov, Ryndin, I Fedotov, M Henke, E Korkina and Isaac Rabinovich, and a large selection of drawings from the Museum of Fine Arts of the Armenian Republic. Opposite these were shown photographs of the theatres of various of the Republics. Then came one of

the highlights of the Exhibition – the model room. Here were models of *Cinderella*, the new ballet by Prokofiev, as staged at the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, 1945, with settings by Williams; *Prince Igor*, Borodin's opera, as staged at the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, with settings by Fedorovsky; *Twelfth Night*, at the Maly Theatre, Moscow, with settings by Ryndin; *Taming of the Shrew*, at the Central Theatre of the Red Army, Moscow, with settings by Shifrin; *The Circle*, by Somerset Maugham, at the Moscow Theatre of Drama with settings by Shestakov; *Mowgli*, based on Kipling's stories, and *Christmas Eve*, by Gogol, at the Central Puppet Theatre, Moscow, of which Sergei Obraztsov is director, with settings respectively by Tuzlukov and Miller.



Some 40,000 people visited the Soviet Theatre Exhibition in London in 1946, including parties from schools, clubs and army training centres (SCRSS Archive)

In the lecture hall a series of 800 photographs showed the work of the Russian and Soviet theatre, from the 1898 production at the Moscow Arts Theatre of *The Seagull*, right up to the 1944 production of the *Last Sacrifice* by Ostrovsky...

The lectures, of which twenty were held during the Exhibition, proved a great attraction.



Opening of the Soviet Theatre Exhibition, 22 January 1946: Edith Evans (left) and Madame Gusev, admire one of the exhibits (SCRSS Archive)

I feel I must mention those who so kindly took part. They were: Miss Peggy Ashcroft; Mr Lawrence Collingwood, Musical Director of Sadler's Wells Orchestra; Mr Franklin Dyll; Mr Arnold Haskell, critic and lecturer; Miss Valerie Hobson; Miss Dorothy Hyson; Miss Joan Lawson; Mr Michael Macowan, Drama Director of the Arts Council; Miss Bertha Malnick PhD; Mr Herbert Marshall; Miss Mary Merrall; Miss Iris Morley; Mr Llewellyn Rees, Secretary, Actors' Equity; Mr PJ Richardson, Editor, *The Dancing Times*; Miss Ninette de Valois, Director, Sadler's Wells Ballet; Mr Geoffrey Whitworth, Director, British Drama League; Miss Googie Withers.

I had the honour of opening the series when Miss Ninette de Valois spoke on ballet, as well as chairing on a number of occasions. The patience and fortitude of the people standing crowded in the gangways of the hall during the lectures was most impressive. People queued for the lectures as they did for the film shows of which there were some five showings every day.

Parties from schools, clubs and army training centres came. Some visitors attended every lecture, many came more

than once, to see the films and brood over the designs.

Requests for the Exhibition poured in from art galleries all over the country. It is at present in Scotland where its success is tremendous. 31,000 people saw it in three weeks in Glasgow, and 5,000 in Aberdeen in twelve days. It is going on to Edinburgh and Dundee.

Of the Soviet theatre as a whole Mr Priestley, who has just recently returned from a visit to Russia, writes: "More masterpieces of world drama are shown on the Soviet stage – Shakespeare, Calderon, Moliere, Goldoni, Sheridan, Beaumarchais, Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptman, Shaw, O'Neill and so on – than on the stages of Britain, USA, France, Sweden and any other country you like, all put together. There are plenty of Soviet dramatists and a good yearly crop of new plays. But it is this production, week in and week out, of world masterpieces that is so impressive.



Interior of the Soviet Theatre Exhibition, with a close-up of the theatre set and the half-scale model in the distance (SCRSS Archive)

"None of the Soviet theatres is run on a commercial basis for profit. But that does not mean that they are all State theatres. Actually, very few of them are State theatres. Some are backed by local authorities, and many by trade unions and the like. The largest theatre in Moscow is run by the Red Army. A few, like the famous

Kamerny Theatre in Moscow, are independent non-profit organisations...



Dame Edith Evans introduces Madame Goussev to open the exhibition. On the left D. N. Pritt, the Chairman of the S.C.R.

SOVIET THEATRE EXHIBITION

The Soviet Theatre Exhibition at Dorland Hall, London. Around the exhibits.



The two images from the Soviet Theatre Exhibition used to illustrate Dame Edith Evans' 1946 article in the SCR's *Anglo-Soviet Journal* (SCRSS Archive)

"But they are all alike in certain features. For instance, they are all true repertory theatres, never playing the same play night after night. Again, each theatre has its own company, usually a rather large company, including an orchestra. (Many of them produced operettas as well as straight plays.) And the larger theatres not only do everything for themselves – building and painting their own scenery, designing and making their own costumes, and so forth – but also have their own dramatic schools. Most of them perform in their own playhouses from early autumn until summer, and then go on tour for a month or two.

"The success of the Soviet theatre is frequently attributed not to Soviet organisation but to some innate histrionic

quality in the Russian character. I cannot accept this view. Russians have no more natural talent for the theatre than we have, and there was great drama in England before Russia knew that such a thing existed. No, the difference is that in Soviet Russia the theatre occupies an honoured place in the community, and the production of plays there is a properly organised communal activity and not as it is here."

This is an edited reprint from the 'Anglo-Soviet Journal' (ASJ), Vol. VII, No. 2, 1946, pages 37–39, illustrated with original photographs of the exhibition from the SCRSS Archive. The ASJ was published by the Society between 1940–92.

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