Society for Co-operation in SCRSS Russian and Soviet Studies

Digest

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Feature

The Magic Mirror: Aleksandr Rou, Fairy-Tale Cinema and Soviet Culture

By Deborah Allison

Folklore and fairy tales have long held a central place in the cultural traditions of the British Isles and of Russia and the Soviet Union alike. In the nineteenth century, following the example of the Brothers Grimm, folklorists of both nations – most notably Joseph Jacobs in Britain and Aleksandr Afanas'ev in Russia – embarked upon ambitious projects to collect, preserve and celebrate this heritage.

Generations of youngsters have found both entertainment and moral guidance in their fairy tale anthologies, yet the shared ambition of these projects was further-reaching. They were also designed to establish fairy tales as a significant cultural form through which notions of national identity, collective belonging and patriotic cohesion could be articulated and reinforced. Both national traditions produced a wealth of iconic and enduring stories, ranging from 'Jack the Giant Killer' to 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' and from 'Prince Ivan, The Firebird and the Grey Wolf' to 'The Frog Princess', yet their cinematic legacies are radically different.





Scenes from Aleksandr Rou's film *Jack Frost* (Morozko), 1964, still an audience favourite in Russia

In Britain, few indigenous fairy tales have reached the silver screen, with its most famous feature-film adaptations – such as the Hans Christian Andersen-inspired *The Red Shoes* (1948) or the Cinderella-based *The Slipper and the Rose* (1976) – favouring tales of European origin. In the

Soviet Union, it was a different story. Recognising the opportunity to use fairy tales as an effective pedagogical tool for promoting socialist thinking, in the late 1930s film production joined the wider culture industry in a co-ordinated effort to create a magical repertoire that would captivate and influence child and adult audiences alike.



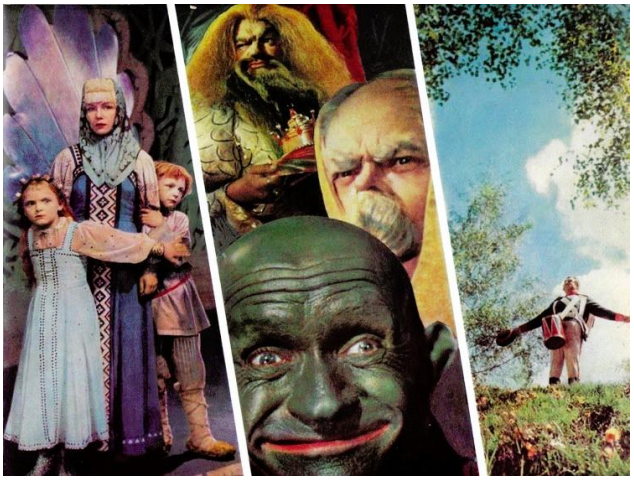
Scene from Aleksandr Rou's film *By the Pike's Command* (Po shchuch'emu veleniyu), 1938

Aleksandr Rou (1906–1973) was one of the most artistically and culturally significant directors of Soviet live-action fairy-tale cinema, and one of the most popularly beloved. His directorial debut, *By the Pike's Command* (1938), was the first Soviet fairy-tale feature film. It launched a 35-year directorial career, during which Rou played an unparalleled role in establishing and repeatedly revitalising the conventions of what would become a flourishing genre within Soviet cinema. His outstanding contributions earned him the affectionate epithet 'King of the Fairy Tales'.

Rou's transformation of his lifelong passion for these stories into a cinematic medium for the masses was enabled by the convergence of several far-reaching developments in Soviet political and artistic policy.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russia's long and rich folkloric traditions had exerted enormous influence on a wide variety of art forms, including literature, opera and ballet, although their impact on early Russian cinema was comparatively negligible. After the Revolution, however, Lenin's commendation of fairy tales' capacity to reveal the "hopes and longings of our people" failed to prevent them from falling into ideological disrepute. Denounced for inhibiting the healthy development of class consciousness, by the mid-1920s an intensifying political crusade made further stage or screen adaptations unthinkable.

This is how things stood until 1934, when, at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, Maxim Gorky championed folklore as "the oral art of the working people". He showed how folklore and fairy tales could be exploited to engage a large, geographically dispersed, culturally diverse, and dominantly rural proletariat population with sugar-coated moral lessons and communist ideals. Open, Sesame! East Slavic folklore shot right up the national agenda.



Scenes from Aleksandr Rou's film *The Magic Weaver* (Mar'ya-iskusnitsa), 1959, reproduced in a 1961 SovExportFilm catalogue of recent Soviet feature films (SCRSS Library)

Stalin's rise to power placed the film industry under similar scrutiny. In 1928, the All-Union Party Conference on Cinema Affairs propounded the benefits of developing a popularly accessible cinema to benefit the communist cause. Production studios were nationalised and the number of cinemas across the country expanded in a drive towards what industry leader Boris Shumiatskii would herald, in 1935, as "a

cinema for the millions". An idea, first pitched in 1930, of creating a studio dedicated to propagandising to young audiences reached fruition in 1936, when two new production companies were launched: Soiuzmultfilm for animation and Soiuzdetfilm for live action.



Scene from Aleksandr Rou's film *The Night Before Christmas* (Vechera na khutore bliz Dikanki), 1960

Aleksandr Rou would spend his entire career at Soiuzdetfilm where, during its previous incarnation as the German-Soviet co-owned Mezhrabpomfilm, he had learned the ropes assisting the seasoned director Iakov Protazanov. When Rou first proposed a fairy-tale feature, the idea met with scepticism. Fairy tales had initially returned to screens in the form of animated shorts (mostly produced by Soiuzmultfilm) and industry veterans warned of the challenges of realising a credible live-action feature on a very modest budget.

Rou was both resourceful and persuasive (qualities he demonstrated throughout his career, although he wouldn't win every battle; several projects fell by the wayside). *By the Pike's Command*, in which an indigent young peasant teaches an unhappy tsarevna that hardworking rural life brings greater happiness than money and privilege, certainly ticked contemporary policy boxes. Imagination and playfulness are the keystones of its numerous magical effects, diverting attention from their low-budget mechanics. A simple but rollicking storyline, featuring fine comic performances and accompanied by a lively score, ensured an enthusiastic popular reception.

Rou swiftly embarked on a more ambitious fantasy: *Vasilisa the Beautiful* (1939). This was, like his debut, adapted from a children's theatre production that combined and reshaped elements from multiple East Slavic fairy tales to service current ideological needs. The budget was larger – and some of its effects still astonish today. Then, in 1941, Rou completed the Soviet Union's first colour fairy-tale feature: *The Little Humpback Horse*, adapted from Petr Ershov's classic poem. His fairy-tale war allegory, *Kashchei the Immortal* (1945), garnered further acclaim (despite SCRSS founder member Alexei Tolstoy's earlier excoriation of its script).



Scene from Aleksandr Rou's film *The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* (Korolevstvo krivykh zerkal), 1963

The influential British filmmaker and educator Mary Field feted Soviet pre-war children's films for promoting "the kind of conduct that is universally admired", such as "patience, hard work, collaboration, kindness and good temper". These values helped bring *By the Pike's Command* (retitled *The Magic Fish*) and *The Little Humpback Horse* widespread play in Saturday matinées during the early 1940s – although few of Rou's later films received British releases.

In the post-war years, plummeting production levels, a priority shift away from children's cinema and a revised mandate for Soiuzdetfilm (renamed the Gorky Studio)

saw Rou's talents redeployed to other cinematic fields, including documentary and stereoscopic films. Meanwhile, other studios made headway in capturing the fairy-tale market. *Cinderella* (1947) proved a success for Lenfilm, while at Mosfilm the 'Soviet Walt Disney', Aleksandr Ptushko, received a Stalin Prize for *The Stone Flower* (1946) before gravitating towards more epic folkloric works such as *Sadko* (1953) and *Ilya Muromets* (1956). Eventually, the Gorky Studio recognised the value of returning Rou to the fairy-tale genre, beginning with *The New Adventures of Puss in Boots* (1958).





Scenes from Aleksandr Rou's film *Barbara the Fair with the Silken Hair* (Varvara-krasa, dlinnaya kosa), 1969, his biggest box office hit

Through the 1960s, Rou's career went from strength to strength. Possessing a keen eye for emerging talent, he gradually assembled a regular creative team whose combined expertise brought his distinctive fairy-tale world seamlessly to life. He populated this world with a recognisable roster of his favourite actors – among which Georgii Milliar, who appeared in almost all of Rou's films, retains the status of a national treasure.

Partnering with a succession of prominent children's playwrights and screenwriters, including three-time collaborators Mikhail Vol'pin and Nikolai Erdman, Rou astutely adjusted the tone of his works to reflect the shifting sensibilities of the Thaw and early-Stagnation eras, imbuing timeless themes with contemporary cultural relevance. *The Magic Weaver* (1959), *The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* (1963, based on a modern fantasy novella), *Jack Frost* (1964), *Through Fire, Water, and… Brass Pipes* (1968), and his biggest box office hit, *Barbara the Fair with the Silken Hair* (1969), remain audience favourites, with his 1960 adaptation of Gogol's Ukrainian-folklore-inspired *The Night Before Christmas* a perennial festive classic. Rou continued working until the end of his life. His final project, *Finist: The Bright Falcon*, was completed posthumously in 1975 and is dedicated to his memory.

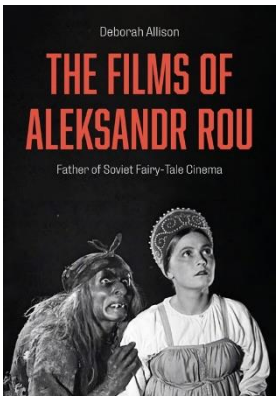
In post-Soviet Russia, fairy-tale films are still immensely popular, with the domestic production boom of the past twenty years increasingly challenging the box-office dominance of American franchises such as *Shrek* through locally made re-imaginings of East Slavic folklore. At a pitching session on 29 May 2026, *ProfiCinema* reported, thirteen of the twenty-seven films seeking finance from Russia's Cinema Fund were based on fairy tales.

The influence of the past masters remains strong. Dmitrii D'iachenko, director of the record-breaking *The Last Warrior* trilogy (2017–2021) and *Finist: The First Warrior* (2025), explicitly acknowledged this lineage, telling the *Hollywood Reporter*: "We want to carry on the screen adaptations of Russian fairy tales, started by such great directors as Aleksandr Rou and Aleksandr Ptushko." A new iteration of *The Little Humpback Horse* stormed the box office in 2021.

Contributing to the commercial success of these new fairy-tale blockbusters is the genre's ongoing capacity to foster a reassuring sense of national unity and pride during tumultuous times. Indeed, this is as true of Ukraine as it is of Russia, where the digitally animated *Mavka: The Forest Song* broke domestic release records in 2023. Nevertheless, personal conversations and online chat threads alike bespeak a widespread feeling that, however much today's digital wizardry and wham-bam

action may entertain the kids, something essential has been lost.

One of Rou's most exceptional qualities was his unflagging ability to suffuse his films with an air of ingrained warmth and authenticity, despite the political requirements by which they were constrained, and words such as 'heart', 'soul', 'kindness' and 'sincerity' recur frequently in fan discussion forums. As a locus of cultural connection, the fairy-tale genre remains vibrant, but the infectious passion Aleksandr Rou brought to it is yet to be surpassed or forgotten.



Deborah Allison is a London-based cinema programmer and author. Her book 'The Films of Aleksandr Rou: Father of Soviet Fairy-Tale Cinema' was first published in hardback by Intellect Books in 2025, but is now available in a 2026 paperback edition. For full bibliographic information and to purchase a copy, see https://www.intellectbooks.com/the-films-of-aleksandr-rou.

SCRSS News

Latest news by Jane Rosen, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS

Research at the SCRSS

Our Saturday openings have seen us welcome visitors researching topics such as science, education, Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf and sport. We have also received enquiries from people researching the Society's Bristol Branch in the 1930s, architecture and musical exchanges. This all goes to prove that the Society has an archive and collection that remains relevant and important to all those interested in the history and culture of the former Soviet Union. Our aim, as agreed at the Annual General Meeting this year, is to ensure the survival of the Society and its collections.

Manchester–St. Petersburg Friendship Society

The MSPFS announced its closure in June 2026. A dwindling number of members, combined with the current international situation and the suspension of the friendship links by Manchester City Council with St Petersburg, led to the decision. This is very sad news. The SCRSS always valued its connections with the MSPFS and would like to express our admiration for all its past work.

'The Wallace Collection at War'

The SCRSS recommends a small, free exhibition of photographs and artwork at the Wallace Collection, Hertford House, Manchester Square, London W1U 3BN, that runs until 25 October 2026. The exhibition is devoted to the Second World War when the Wallace Collection was evacuated out of London and its building became a venue for two major exhibitions in 1942 in support of Anglo-Soviet friendship. Our Society helped organise one of these, *25 Years of Progress: Soviet Life in War and Peace*, in conjunction with the National Exhibition Committee in 1942. The exhibition is mentioned in Chapter 4 of the SCRSS's centenary history, *An Unpopular Cause.*

Next Events

Saturday 3 October, 11.00–16.00
SCRSS Library Opening for Members

Monday 19 October, 19.00–20.00
Online Talk: Ben Lunn on *Opera in Soviet Kazakhstan: An Introduction and Exploration*
Soviet Kazakh opera began only in the 1930s. Lunn explores three key Soviet-era operas, their composers, themes, and the context in which they were composed. Tickets: £3 SCRSS members, £5 others, book at eventbrite.co.uk/e/1995981618752. The talk will be recorded.

Wednesday 28 October, 19.00–20.00
Online Talk: Dr Ali Tajvidi on *Iran and Russia: From Rivals to Allies: Past and Present*
Tajvidi examines the evolution of Iranian-Russian relations from the Russo-Persian wars of the 17th–19th centuries, through the 1917 Russian Revolution and 1979 Iranian Revolution, to the present as strategic allies. Tickets: £3 SCRSS members, £5 others, book at eventbrite.co.uk/e/1996252172987. The talk will be recorded.

Saturday 7 November, 11.00–16.00
SCRSS Library Opening for Members

Saturday 14 or Saturday 28 November (time / date TBC)
Online Talk: Olga Tolstaya on *Музей искусства Санкт-Петербурга XX–XXI веков (Museum of XX-XXI Century Art of St Petersburg)*
Talk in Russian for SCRSS members only, in partnership with the Interregional Association for International Cooperation, St Petersburg. Full details to follow soon.

Saturday 5 December, 11.00–14.00
SCRSS Library Opening for Members

Saturday 5 December, 14.30–17.30
In-Person Members' Christmas Party and Fundraiser
An in-person Christmas fundraising party is currently planned, details TBC.

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

Feature

The Chernobyl Disaster, 1986

By Kate Clark

Forty years ago, on 26 April 1986, a terrible event occurred that shook not only the entire Soviet Union, but the world – the meltdown of a reactor at a nuclear power station at Chernobyl in Ukraine, near the border with Belarus. At that time, I was the Moscow correspondent of the 'Morning Star' newspaper, having arrived in the USSR on 19 February 1985, only four days before the Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko died and was replaced by Mikhail Gorbachov as the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). In April 1986, I was still taking in the details of the reform programme approved at the 27th CPSU Congress two months earlier when the Chernobyl disaster struck. This contemporary account is an edited extract from my memoir 'Twilight of the Soviet Union', published in 2023.

Initially the accident was not reported in the Soviet media. But on 29th April the 9 o'clock news programme *Vremya* (Time) gave a brief factual report. Swedish authorities had alerted the world, having detected radiation at their Forsmark nuclear power plant early on 28th April, as the winds had blown radiation from Chernobyl westwards. Only then did I begin to take in the enormity of this tragic accident.



Hosing away radiation, Kiev, May 1986
(Photo: Kate Clark)

The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, comprising four reactors, was about 81 miles (130 km) north of Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, and about 12 miles (20 km) south of the border with Belarus. The nearest town to the power plant was the newly built town of Pripyat', which housed almost 50,000 people in 1986, according to the World Nuclear Association. A smaller town called Chernobyl, was home to about 12,000 residents. The rest of the region was primarily farms and woodland.

Obviously, all correspondents were desperately trying to find out as much as they could about what had happened and what the dangers were. I rang all my Russian contacts and friends, but no one knew anything more than the official announcement had revealed. Among these, I rang a Ukrainian journalist I knew from *Radyanska Ukraina*, the main newspaper in the Ukrainian language, but if he knew more, he wasn't telling.



Testing locals for radiation, Chernobyl, May 1986
(Photo: Kate Clark)

Five days after the accident, May Day in Moscow was a muted affair. The authorities in Kiev went ahead with their demonstration through the streets as if nothing had happened, and were later rightly condemned for putting showy appearances ahead of people's safety…

In a speech on 13th May 1986, Soviet leader Gorbachov slammed Western news media for the lies they were telling about the accident – reports of "thousands of casualties", "mass graves" and that the entirety of Ukraine had been poisoned…

Soviet TV showed how military helicopters were flying hundreds of missions dropping sandbags on to the damaged reactor. The pilots knew that their lives were in considerable danger. And we saw conscripts and volunteers in long, heavy radiation-proof aprons over protective clothing and headgear working on the reactor site itself, clearing debris and making it possible for robots to work ridding the site of contaminated material.

Though the initial death toll was very small, we knew that the doses of radiation the decontamination personnel were exposed to would probably either be lethal or at least, very damaging to their health in the long run.

In the case of Chernobyl, 31 people died as a direct result of the accident: two from blast effects and 29 firemen died as a result of acute radiation exposure in the days which followed.

Even now, so many years later, there is no consensus on the number of people who were impacted by long-term radiation exposure, but in its 2005/06 assessment 'Chernobyl's Legacy: Health, Environmental and Socio-Economic Impacts' the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that the total number of long-term deaths will be around 4,000…

I was in the first group of journalists allowed to go to the Chernobyl area after the accident. It was a group of correspondents all from Western Communist publications, 'privileged' to be the first to gain access to the region at the centre of world attention. My secretary, Olya, advised me of the dangers of radiation exposure and told me quite honestly that she wouldn't go if she were me. But I felt I had to go… I was the only female correspondent on that trip, and we stayed in Kiev from Sunday 11th May to Wednesday 14th May…

At that time – 2 weeks after the accident – radiation was 0.4 milliroentgens per hour (mR/hr) in Kiev, we were informed…

Party officials… were all keen to stress the ongoing work to decontaminate and keep the local population safe. A 30-km exclusion zone had immediately been established around the damaged plant and residents from that zone had been evacuated, which was no mean feat. But we all knew that it was an exercise in damage limitation and one had to take what was said with a big pinch of salt.

We were taken to Nyemeshayevsky Medical Centre to see radiation monitoring and the ongoing blood-testing of the population. We saw a farm to which cattle from the zone

had been evacuated and met some of the evacuees from the Chernobyl region, who, though worried, seemed very accepting of their situation. We met emergency workers at 'Lesnaya Polyana' [Forest Glade] pioneer camp, which had been commandeered as a residence for the hundreds of emergency staff working 2-day shifts at the nuclear power station...

I phoned this report on 12th May:

The bus stops. Radiation control. We're nearing Kiev. The manual monitor runs over the wheels of our bus. We wait inside. If the needle flicks to red, we're in for a long wait. It stays in the black. We're all right. We breathe sighs of relief.

We're on our way to a Rest Home. But it's a Rest Home with a difference. 'Forest Glade' is where Chernobyl emergency shift workers live after their dangerous work at the damaged nuclear power station. We drove up to the entrance, in the midst of a tall pine forest… We saw some men in track suits, talking in groups. These are the Chernobyl emergency workers… These are the men the nation is depending on…

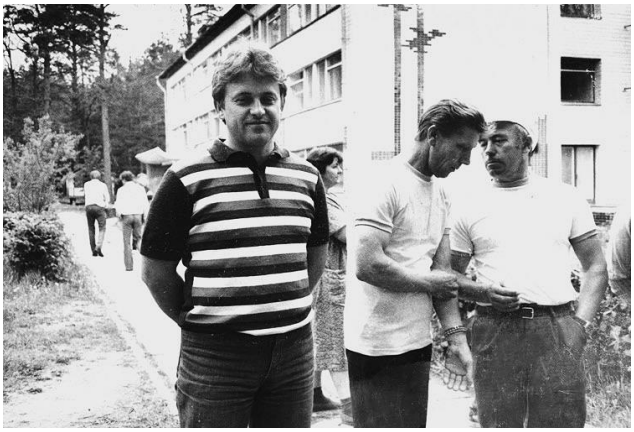
Aleksandr Lukienchenko is 31 years old. He's an electrician at Chernobyl nuclear power station. He wasn't on duty that fateful morning of 26th April. But when he heard of the accident, he reported for duty just the same. He is one of the 150+ volunteers on shift duty at the stricken reactor…

"We're all volunteers here," he told me. "All Chernobyl workers were given the possibility of either transferring to work elsewhere, going on holiday, or simply leaving."

"But the job has to be done. We've got to see to the other 3 blocks of the station, and keep up maintenance work there," Lukienchenko said. I asked him how he felt. "Grief, of course, that's my main feeling after this tragic accident."

"But that's why I'm working there, and why all of us volunteers are working there. To put things right, so that we can get on top of the situation…"

"What precautions do they take on the job," I asked. Aleksandr told me they wore special clothing and breathing apparatus on entering the nuclear power station to do their essential job…



Chernobyl 'liquidators' after decontamination shift, May 1986 (Photo: Kate Clark)

Aleksandr is from Pripyat' - the power station workers' town only three kilometres from the accident. It was evacuated the day after the accident, as soon as radiation levels started to climb. He wants to go back, we were told, as soon as it's feasible. "It's a young town," he told me. "We all went to school together, we all work together, and now we're all scattered…"

Decontamination of the 30-km danger zone around the stricken nuclear power station will take time. And nobody here is saying yet when the evacuees will be able to return home.

This, of course, was wildly optimistic, as we now know. Pripyat' is a ghost town that will never be fit for inhabitation.

This is my last report from Chernobyl, sent with considerable difficulty, as phone lines were in great demand and attending to journalists was not a priority for the officials we met:

Anatoly Amelkin looked tired and strained. The hardest 10 days of his life began at 03.40 am on April 26th. When Chernobyl's Communist Party Secretary answered the phone from his sleep, it was like awakening into a nightmare…

In ten minutes, Amelkin was dressed and at the Party's District headquarters, together with other Party secretaries from surrounding districts. First measures: to organise information to work collectives in the area, to keep discipline and avoid panic. Next, a meeting of Party activists, to hear a full report on the accident.

Meanwhile the Government Commission, formed on the 26th April, the day of the accident, had issued their first instructions based on their initial analysis of the situation at the damaged reactor. As radioactivity continued escaping from the destroyed shell of the fourth generating unit, it became obvious that there was nothing for it but to evacuate the nearest population…

By 2pm on the 27th, the whole operation was beginning: 2,172 buses drove into Pripyat' and up to every block of flats. Starting with women and children, the evacuation lasted 2 hours 45 minutes. Finally, the police went round every block and every flat checking that no one had been left behind. Dogs and cats went with their owners. 50,000 head of cattle were also evacuated in 1,786 lorries.

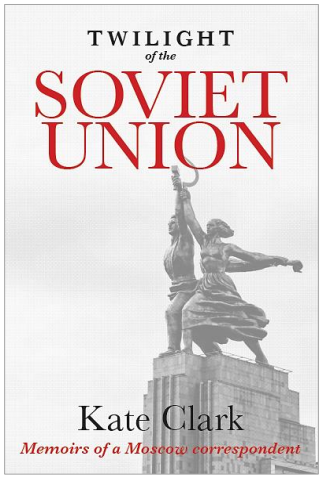
First, the Government Commission… set up a 10-km danger zone around the burning reactor. Then a 30-km zone was established and evacuation started from Chernobyl itself - 18 km from the reactor - and the villages and farms around.

While frantic helicopter sorties were going on to plug the invisible, but steadily seeping, radiation from the fourth block, people in villages round about were having to be persuaded, if not bludgeoned, into leaving their homes… Amelkin told me how older village people had been especially hard to convince…

And that is the abiding impression I have after talking to people in Kiev and Borodansky district in the Kiev region – calm, responsibility, stoicism…

The apparent optimism that I encountered on this brief visit – the first by any Western journalists – was clearly, with hindsight, misplaced. On my return to Moscow, I heard that seven of the 35 critically injured in the accident, most of whom were firemen, had already died.

Forty years on, my abiding memories of this trip are of the efficiency of the evacuation operation, the heroism of the clean-up workers, and the excellent rest and medical facilities provided after their shifts. Chernobyl will always be a warning to humanity of the dangers of nuclear radiation.



Kate Clark's book *Twilight of the Soviet Union: Memoirs of a Moscow Correspondent* (Bannister, 2023, ISBN: 978-1-916823-02-0, £14.99) is available through the *Morning Star* at https://shop.morningstaronline.co.uk/, Amazon or any good bookshop.

Feature

A Musical Trip to the Land of Apples

By Ben Lunn



Painted apple sculpture on the street in Almaty, depicting traditional Kazakh dancers

In April this year, I had the luxury of visiting Almaty in Kazakhstan. The trip was the result of a joint project between Drake Music Scotland, a Scottish charity founded to make music education for disabled people more accessible, and Music Unbound, a relatively new charitable organisation in Almaty that aims to use music for social good. My role with Drake Music Scotland is as Associate Composer, and projects like this are part of my work with them. Across the ten days of our stay, I not only had the privilege of working with some truly wonderful Kazakh musicians, but also of exploring the city and getting a real taste of its current circumstances, as well as its feelings towards its past relationship with the Soviet Union.

Almaty, formerly known as Alma-Ata, was the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. The name Alma-Ata literally translates as 'Father of Apples', as the fruit originates from that region of Central Asia and only came to the West thanks to the Silk Road. Geographically, the city sits as a meeting point between much of Central Asia and China. For me, this was most notable in the Ascension Cathedral in Panfilov Park. For the first time in my life I was able to look at Orthodox icons that portrayed Chinese individuals, as the icons celebrated the first Chinese converts to the Orthodox faith, as well as the missionaries who travelled to China.



Aliya Moldagulova and Manshuk Mametova Memorial on Astana Square, Almaty, commemorating the sacrifice of two Kazakh war heroines who volunteered for the frontline in 1941

A large portion of Kazakhstan's history has been as a travelling people. Despite a truly ancient connection to the land, there are not many historic buildings in the country that predate its absorption into the Russian Empire in the mid-1800s. Almaty has only three key generations of architecture: typical Russian-style buildings of the late 1800s; 20th-century socialist modernist buildings that are very typical of the style, but often

include beautiful Kazakh murals; and typical 21st-century skyscrapers. Because of this, the city is built with cars in mind, with very wide roads on almost every street. However, unlike many car-centred cities, due to the incredible amount of foliage the city is incredibly green, since every street is covered in trees. This was quite unlike any post-Soviet city I have ever visited or lived in.



Rehearsal with singer Aisulu Turymbek at the Tsilleny Arts Centre

Food was another great adventure. As already mentioned, Kazakhs are very proud that they gave apples to the world. However, their historic dishes are fascinating because these were based on what was available for roaming peoples. This means some surprising ingredients for Westerners –namely horse, which I must say is rather tasty. *Beshbarmak* was a wonderful discovery: the combination of meat, broth, and noodles is simply great. Alongside this, due to the movement of people within the Soviet Union, dishes I had gotten to love while living in Vilnius were also prevalent in Almaty, such as *shashlik*, and fried rye bread.

Having lived in Vilnius in Lithuania, there were lots of very familiar elements (architecture, history, food and the Soviet connection). But one thing that really surprised me was just how much of the Soviet era not only remained, but in many ways felt like part of the fabric of the modern country. My visit coincided with May Day, which is now known as 'Day of the Peoples' and celebrates the various ethnic communities that live in Kazakhstan. But alongside that, there were many celebrations of the Red Army. I was particularly amazed to see schoolchildren in their mini Red Army outfits carrying roses to be laid at the Memorial of Glory.

The Memorial of Glory in Panfilov Park was an extraordinary sight to behold. It is both a memorial to the regiment that fought in the Second World War, but also to the same regiment that fought in the Revolution and Civil War. Plinths marking each city the regiment fought in are contrasted with separate monoliths dedicated to each soldier from the regiment who died in the war. A small corridor in the surrounding park marks all those from the regiment who died after the war finished, treating them with the same reverence as those who died directly in the conflict. The parallels with the Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park, Berlin, are very present. But for me, what made the Memorial of Glory in Panfilov Park all the more impactful, was that the memory is genuinely kept alive. Young people guard the flame of eternal memory and many people visit it.



Students from the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatoire rehearsing the opera *Abai*

The music culture of the city is fascinating. In discussions with my colleagues from Music Unbound, it was clear that they feared their musicians wouldn't meet our expectations. But the standard was incredibly high, especially given the orchestra I conducted was a split of young professionals and students. It was apparent from working with the orchestra members that the infrastructure for music education

was simply excellent. However, despite its many wonderful qualities, it is overshadowed by China and Russia, in part due to the historic prestige of places like the Bolshoi Theatre, or historic greats like Rachmaninoff, or China's current wealth and investment in promoting culture. This means that students often feel they have to study in Russia or China if they are to be treated seriously as artists.

I also had the opportunity of speaking to composition students at the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatoire. Here, I was not only able to meet composers from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – many of whose music I intend to perform with my choir in Scotland – but also see the Conservatoire's excellent facilities for traditional music. The number of kobyz and dombra players was truly incredible, and they were not treated as a niche sub-section but on an equal footing with the typical orchestral instruments.

While in Almaty, I had the pleasure of encountering Kazakh opera. The Abai Opera House is a glorious building from the 1930s, the date coinciding with the composition of the first Kazakh operas. The view of the building on a sunny day, with the mountains in the background, is truly stunning, and that doesn't even take into consideration the beautiful décor and the wonderful music being made. I had three direct encounters with the Kazakh opera world.

Firstly, while in the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatoire, I was fortunate enough to sit in on rehearsals of a joint production, between the Abai Opera House and Conservatoire students, of the opera *Abai* by Akhmet Zhubanov and Latif Khamidi, which is inspired by one of Kazakhstan's great poets Abai Qunanbaiuli. The scene I got to see was where the love interests (Aidar and Ajar) are fleeing from the Narymbet clan, as Ajar is betrothed to another. The conflict is only calmed when Abai himself defends the young lovers. Although, as in many operas, this is not the end of the issue.

The second encounter was at a concert in the Abai Opera House where, as part of the May Day celebrations, the soloists of the opera house performed traditional songs and arrangements for the audience. The singers were excellent, and hearing individuals like Nargiz Satmukhambetova and Bekzat Abitov was particularly delightful.



The Kurmangazy Monument outside the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatoire in Almaty. Kurmangazy Sagyrbayulu (1823–96) was a Kazakh composer, instrumentalist and folk artist

The third encounter was thanks to my friend, and wonderful Kazakh composer, Sanzhar Baiterekov, who surprised me with a stash of scores of various Kazakh operas. What impressed me was not just the amount of them, but how opera feels naturally suited to Kazakh music. This may sound slightly silly but, given that the first Kazakh operas were not composed until the 1930s, one would expect the connection to the art form to feel slightly clunky or at least needing to take time to find the right fit. Opera in the 1930s was shaped heavily by Socialist Realism. This meant that many of the Kazakh operas composed at this time reflected Kazakh society and values, in

many instances showing the backward elements of that society, without completely condemning it, but encouraging all peoples to move forward. You might easily assume this to have been a phase that Kazakhstan would forget after independence, turning to other ideas. But what surprised me is how prevalent these operas are within the calendar, such as the performance of *Abai*. So, despite being a 'young' tradition, it is one that is fully within the musical lifeblood of Almaty.

There is a lot of uncertainty about the future relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia, but there is not the feeling of an immediate and drastic separation. The discussions around language are fascinating to observe, with plans to shift the Kazakh language to a Latin script. At the same time, Russian is still an important language, not only for the ethnic Russian population in the country, but also when interacting with its northern and southern neighbours.

Overall, my experience in Almaty was transformative. I am deeply infatuated with the city and with the Kazakhs, but it was also wonderful to be able to exercise my limited Russian. For readers and supporters of the SCRSS, Kazakhstan is certainly a country worth visiting, be it for food, culture, history, architecture or music. I know for certain that I need to go back as soon as I can!

Ben Lunn has forged himself a unique position within the new music landscape. As a composer, Ben's music reflects such areas as the material world around him, connecting to his northeastern heritage; or how disability impacts the world around him; or his working-class upbringing. He has also become renowned for his championship of others. Ben's academic pursuits have included music in the Baltics, music and socialist politics, music and disability. His PhD research focused on how composers incorporate politics into their work, and he previously lived in Vilnius where he studied at the Lietuvos Muzikos ir Teatro Akademija for his Master's Degree. Since 2025, Ben has been the musical director of Cappella Slavonica, the Glasgow-based choir that specialises in Slavic music.

Note: All photographs in this article were taken by Ben Lunn. See page 5 for details of Ben's upcoming online talk on *Opera in Soviet Kazakhstan* on Monday 19 October at 19.00.

Gems from the Archive

Huntly Carter Collection: Shungenskaya Electricity Power Station Opening, 1923

By Diana Turner



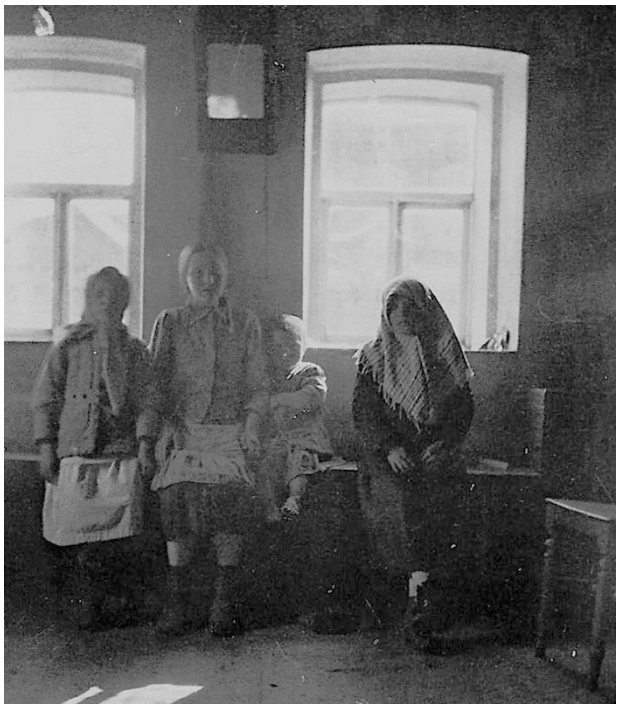
Crowds at the official opening of the new Shungenskaya electricity power station, 10 June 1923. Snapshot by Huntly Carter (SCRSS Archive)

The Huntly Carter Collection in the SCRSS Archive includes photographs and postcards from the early 1900s to 1920–30s, collected by British theatre critic, journalist and founder SCR member Huntly Carter. Most relate to Soviet theatre, several to Soviet architecture, and twenty-two are Carter's snapshots of everyday life in the USSR.

Two of these snapshots were taken on 10 June 1923 at the official opening of the new Shungenskaya Electricity Power Station, located on the bank of the River Kostroma

in Kostroma Oblast. They are glued onto paper with handwritten comments beneath.

This was the first major power station to be built by an agricultural cooperative in Soviet Russia, during the New Economic Policy (1921–28). The project was first discussed in 1918 and the foundations laid in March 1920.



Peasants in their home after the electricity was turned on – the ceiling lightbulb is just visible top left. Snapshot by Huntly Carter (SCRSS Archive)

The event was of national significance and was widely reported in the central Soviet press. A delegation of more than seventy distinguished guests from Moscow attended, including Soviet political and literary figures. The economist and politician Mark Shefler conveyed a message of congratulation from Mikhail Kalinin, head of state of Soviet Russia. In the evening, the electric lights were turned on for the first time in Shunga village, followed by a special event with string orchestra, choir and film show.

The delegation included several English and American journalists, among whom was Huntly Carter. We know from academic Rebecca Beasley's research that he was in the USSR in 1923 (see *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881–1922*, Oxford University Press, 2020, page 230).

Reviews

East of Dreams
By Nastassja Martin (translated from the French by Sophie Lewis, New York Review Books, 2026, 312 pp, ISBN: 9781681379340, Pbk, £16.99)

The book is an ethnographic account of one family of the indigenous Even people of Kamchatka, Russia, describing their personal response to the Cold War and the structural collapse of the USSR in 1991. It is based on field work carried out by Nastassja Martin between 2014 and 2019.

Martin is a French ethnographer who specialises in the study of arctic and sub-arctic indigenous peoples in both Alaska and the Russian Far East. Her first book about Alaska, *Les Âmes Sauvages* (2016), is only available in French. She is better known for *In the Eye of the Wild* (2021), a memoir recounting her survival from a bear attack in Kamchatka in 2015.

East of Dreams is structured in five parts, four of which have separate introductions ahead of two to three chapters providing greater detail. There are eleven chapters in all.

In *Part One: Mirroring Beringa*, the introduction ('Seeking the Ones Who Went') sets the context, giving an excellent account of the author's first visit to the Even matriarch Daria and her family in June 2014. It includes the death of Daria's elderly mother and the funeral rites that followed. This is ethnography at its best – the level of observation is impressive.

Chapter 2 ('Russian Culture, American Nature') compares the historical development of the Even (Russia) and Gwich'in (America) peoples in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including how their respective political systems affected their differing paths. The Even has a more local folklore-orientated culture than the Gwich'in, whose development is driven by national Washington economic policy. However,

Martin acknowledges the destructive effect of Soviet collectivisation on traditional Even culture. Chapter 3 ('The Life and Death of Assimilation Policies') adds to these differences in greater detail.

Part Two: Life Among the Ruins explores, in depth, the life story of Daria, born in 1952, and her youngest son Ivan – from living on a kolkhoz (collective farm) to moving into the forest at Tvayan in 1989. The harsh realities of Daria's life are contrasted with her recollection of her people's history, inner dreams and current reality. This is the core of the book, reflecting many conversations between Daria and Martin over a long period, but is surprisingly short in length.

In *Part Three*, Chapter 6 ('Accidental Cosmology II: The Birth of Thoughts') provides a wonderful account of shamanism before the 1970s when the old shamans died out, leaving no successors. Martin describes the role of dreams, the concept that everything had a soul (people, places, animals), and how that influenced behaviour and attitudes. Prior to collectivisation, the Even people had a strong relationship with their animals, trusting and respecting them, for example allowing the reindeer to decide when to move on to fresh grazing. Shamanism is once again on the rise in Russia.

Part Four: Making the Best of a Commercialised World details how the real world intrudes on the Even, with chapters on sable and salmon commerce.

Finally, *Part Five: Storm* describes how another global problem, climate change, is impacting this seemingly remote place.

Overall, I found this a stimulating, if initially difficult, book. The ethnographic detail is very good, and the parallel stories of American and Russian indigenous peoples, while taking a bit of getting used to, are ultimately helpful. The European-orientated academic analysis in the book is less good. It is surprising that Russian ethnographic literature on the subject is unacknowledged by Martin, in contrast with the work of her fellow French anthropologist Charles Stépanoff.[1] In addition, in the course of the narrative Martin transitions from ethnographic observer to memoir recorder. These are quite different methodologies. At a publisher event in London for the book's launch, Martin herself was unable to explain how the average reader should navigate this transition. Instead, her translator argued, plausibly, that *East of Dreams* was two books in one: the writer's initial position as an outsider and her eventual position as deeply embedded in the Even culture.

At the same book event, Martin showed a 5-minute clip from her forthcoming documentary on the Even people's winter experience in Kamchatka, filmed with cinematographer and sound recordist support. This was astounding and will be a wonderful accompaniment to *East of Dreams*, although there is currently no release date.

Billy McKee

Footnote

1 Stépanoff, C., *Journeys into the Invisible: Shamanic Technologies of the Imagination*, HAU Books, 2025.

Exit Stalin: The Soviet Union as a Civilization 1953–1991
By Mark B Smith (Allen Lane, 2026, 576 pp, ISBN: 978-0-241-400852, Hbk, £40.00)

Mark B Smith's last book (*The Russia Anxiety: And How History Can Resolve It*, 2019) championed a more positive view of Russia in the West. Now he has produced an ambitious work that traces the way in which the changes in character of Soviet rule had a deep effect on popular perceptions and freedoms after the watershed of Stalin's death. However, it emphasises the continuation of looking back to 1917, and then looking forward in order to realise the destiny of a process ignited by the Bolshevik Revolution. Simultaneously, there was a popular sense of the eternal permanence of life constructed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – wherein lay unchallenged power; this eternity is discussed in Chapters 13 and 18.

The task Smith set himself was to assess how far the Soviet Union actually was a civilization. He has done this by a discussion of the state's government, law, hierarchies, languages and writing, extent of technology, shared beliefs, and many more indicators. He issues claims about the USSR up to 1989 that include paradoxes in the areas of periodisation (for example, the 'Thaw', 1953–68), revolution, decolonisation, personhood, normality and culture.

The book's Prologue concerns the authorities' killing of demonstrators in Novocherkassk in 1962. The reaction of a teenager when he heard guns firing was: "They don't shoot people these days." This incident illustrates the author's story from Stalin's Terror to Gorbachev's rejection of violence as a political tool. Smith's view is that Stalin believed "launching the USSR toward communism required terror". The same was required for rapid industrialisation in rural Russia and Ukraine. Khrushchev exposed Stalin's atrocities in 1956. Smith describes Khrushchev's Speech as the "most remarkable political achievement" between revolution and perestroika, but concludes that the USSR was still a police state. Khrushchev, however, recognised the need for an improvement in living conditions and embarked on a housing programme. The Cold War persisted into the late 1980s, but bridges were being built as early as the mid-1950s through cultural exchanges; Smith judges that "resetting the relationship with the West was a necessary feature of de-Stalinization".

The most glittering of prizes under Khrushchev was sending a human into space in 1961. Enormous respect for science and technology, as well as for the humanities, enhanced Soviet scholarship. But Smith recognises that, amidst the glamour of achievement, 1917 was being sidelined. Khrushchev announced that communism would be reached in 1980. However, Khrushchev had to deal with Kennedy's ultimatum on missiles in Cuba. Strangely, this standoff, which nearly led to nuclear war, is summarised in only six lines (p.122, pp.146–147 and p.301). Dissidence emerged later in the 1960s, Sakharov being the most prominent exponent. Other themes are handled in impressive detail: health, transport, literature, theatre and film, censorship, private and public affirmation of Marxism-Leninism, stagnation during the Brezhnev years, the Soviet republics, *Homo Sovieticus*, elections, the teaching of mathematics, the invasion of Afghanistan, the advent and reforms of Gorbachev. Gorbachev's abandonment of perestroika, and embrace of a free market in 1990, leads Smith to conclude: "Soviet civilization now had no obvious content or meaning." In his Afterword, Smith outlines events from 1991 up to the invasion of Ukraine and the death of Navalny.

Gordon Harris

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