Pussy Riot—the Youth that Knew

Revisiting a Nenets Family

A Cold War Visit to Borodino Battlefield

plus book reviews and SRF News
This issue of *The FORUM* has been edited by Jenny Carr, SRF chairperson until February 2019.

Dear readers

I hope you will like my last effort at editing the SRF magazine—to my surprise the sixth issue I’ve been responsible for (nos. 17, 35, 36, 38-40), though I’ve had the support of Sheila Sim for two recent issues. Sheila will be taking over as Editor from Summer 2019 onwards and I wish her well. I’m sure she would appreciate ideas for content and offers of contributions: contact info@scotlandrussiaforum if you’d like to get involved.

The articles in this issue cover a wide range as usual. We begin with reflections on the role of Pussy Riot prompted by their appearance in Edinburgh this summer. We’d hoped to interview them but were turned down at the last minute as their schedule got busier with a lot of press interest. The author is Tatyana Jakovskaya who will be familiar to many of you as director of the Glasgow-based *Sharmanka*. Thanks to Summerhall and to photographer Jacinta Oaten for the photographs accompanying this article.

The intrepid Bryan Alexander gives a fascinating verbal and photographic account of recent changes in the life of the Nenets in northern Siberia—a part of Russia few readers will have visited though many will now be interested to. Including me.

And Dairmid Gunn, prompted by Sheila Sim’s recent article on the Museum of Kulikovo Field, delves into his archive and gives us a vivid description of his own visit to Borodino in 1965.

We have more book reviews than usual and I hope there is something for everyone. Very many thanks to our expert reviewers.

And, finally, I have used the back cover to remind you what the SRF is trying to do, hoping to prompt you to suggest other ways of realising our aims, or to offer help with our existing activities.

Very best wishes,

Jenny Carr
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January 2019
SRF News

More information on the SRF: www.scotlandrussiaforum.org

Events since Summer 2018

Talks: Quality not quantity – we’ve only organised two talks since June but both attracted more than capacity audiences and were very well received. In August we launched the late Marjorie Farquharson’s Moscow Diary, a vivid description of the opening of Amnesty’s first Russian office in 1992 and life in Moscow at that time. Speakers from Amnesty International and the Quakers spoke movingly about Marjorie. We are very grateful to them and to the Edinburgh Amnesty Bookshop for hosting this event.

In December we invited financial journalist Oliver Bullough and academic Elisabeth Schimpfoessl to talk about their books Moneyland and Rich Russians. A joint event with the University of Edinburgh Business School, this attracted our largest ever audience and a lively discussion of the issues afterwards. Thanks to UEBS for their support, organisation and generous hospitality. Moneyland is reviewed on page 12 of this magazine.

Social: The Chain Chat group goes from strength to strength—their meetings are very jolly, interesting and friendly with a mixture of Russian-speakers and others just interested to know what is going on. Recommended! The group meets from 11am on the first Thursday of every month (with summer and Christmas breaks) in the downstairs room at Café de la Poste, 41 South Clerk Street, Edinburgh EH8 9NZ.

Schools: Very little to report as I was away for much of the Autumn Term but I plan to attend the SCILT Business Brunch for schools in Aberdeen on January 31. In June I made a start on the project funded with the Future of Russia grant mentioned in our last magazine but had no time after that. The school exchange we’d hoped to spend the money on foundered on lack of interest from Scottish schools (with no Russian on the curriculum they cannot spare teacher time for Russian) so we will be working with the British Council on a “Russian language and culture” site for their SchoolsOnline pages. Both they and our sponsor are enthusiastic about the new project and very supportive.

Other:

GDPR and the SRF bulletin. In view of new GDPR (Data Protection) legislation we conscientiously made all our bulletin subscribers re-subscribe expressing positive understanding of GDPR in the early summer. This had the depressing result of reducing numbers from well over 1000 to around 400. I am pleased to report that numbers have risen steadily since then (currently 510) - but I’m sure there are still some people out there wondering why they have not received any bulletins in the last 6 months. If that is you please click the link at the top of our home page (or https://bit.ly/2rhcKQT) and re-subscribe.

The Library. Apart from one or two keen borrowers there has been very little interest from members in our library since we moved to Summerhall in 2013 so the committee and Librarian have reluctantly decided to dispose of the library. We hope that a well-publicised Book Sale (16 Feb 2019) will at least ensure the books go to interested readers. We have just started to publicise the Sale as I write—and our Facebook notice broke all our records with nearly 4000 views in the first two days plus lots of shares and enthusiastic comments! I am expecting queues from Summerhall to the Meadows at least.

Options for the Future. In December all SRF members received a discussion paper from the trustees setting out our financial options for the Future in view of falling membership donations (though actual member numbers are fairly steady) but healthy reserves. These options will be debated at the AGM on 21 February—all welcome but please let us know if you are coming so that we have enough chairs / food and drink for everyone.

The Future

The financial situation of the SRF and its organisational consequences will be discussed at the AGM. I would just like to comment here on two personnel changes:

Jim Patterson, our excellent hardworking and conscientious Treasurer for the last two years, resigned due to ill health at the end of 2018. A huge loss and I’d like to thank him publicly for all his work and support during his term of office and indeed as a member for some time before that. We are delighted to report that Peter Harvey has stepped into the breach and will take office shortly.

I am standing down from the committee after the AGM—after 16 years in post (as Hon. Sec. then Chair) I feel it’s time for some new ideas. I will continue (and develop I hope) my work with schools on a freelance basis. We have excellent candidates for the chair—Margaret Tejerizo—and for the editorship of this magazine—Sheila Sim—so you can rest assured that the SRF is in good hands for the future. We hope other members will consider applying to serve on the committee this year—please think about it!

Jenny Carr, SRF chairperson

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The Pussy Riot show at the Edinburgh Fringe last summer was under threat of cancellation as the Russian authorities stopped Masha Alyokhina at the airport checkpoint because of her refusal to do 100 days of community service - the punishment she was sentenced to for flying paper planes as a protest against the closure of the popular network service Telegram, whose logo is an airplane.

She was flying the planes in the good company of her former sworn enemy turned her boyfriend, an orthodox activist Dmitry “Enteo”, infamous for destroying works of art which did not please him for ideological reasons.

However, she duly arrived to appear on stage in Edinburgh, claiming that she had crossed the border on the back of magic pony (which probably means a long drive by back roads via Belorussia to Lithuania) - and Dmitry was at her side during the Festival.

The show Riot Days at Summerhall in Edinburgh was based on her book of the same name and would be unthinkable without her own presence on stage. The small fragile girl with a mane of red hair was shouting, rather than singing, her own story of three minutes act of political protest in 2012 for which she paid by two years in jail. The show included the enthusiastic Pussy Riot rock band, video footage and subtitles on two screens – but it was Masha who ignited the dense young crowd standing in front of the stage with pints of beer in hand.

She was like a rapper in battle, throwing abuse into the faces and images on the screens - Putin and the Moscow Patriarch, police, guards, snow, prison walls, snow again, Putin again....

This was not the voice of political opposition that we have heard from Boris Nemtsov or Alexey Navalny – Masha sometimes sounds like a child, cheated by cynical adults – but a system created by cheats makes a child grow into rebellious and menacing youth.

The packed hall was jolly, shouting together with Masha “No pasaran” and “Down with the police”, but there was an uncomfortable pause at the first show. When the guard led her out of prison gates and told her that she was free now, Masha readdressed the question to him – “And are you free?” – and not hearing the answer, addressed the same question to the audience at Summerhall – who were not sure what to answer. A couple of voices shouted “No!”, one added “We used to be!”. Apart from a few hotheads the audience could hardly relate Masha’s experience to their own lives.

Unfortunately, this is the main limitation of political theatre: in the place where it is most relevant, the actors might finish up in prison or just get killed. And in places where the actors are safe, the show risks being seen as an exotic story about hardship in a faraway land – too comfortable an experience.

At later performances Masha did not bother the audience with this question.

The Riot Days show was mainly about Pussy Riot’s actions at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012, with the aftermath – trial and jail – quickly summarised. In the book of the same name, on which is based, the story of that action is a preface to another one – the very personal and very poignant story of Masha’s experience of permanent fight against a crushing system of degradation and humiliation, of how she constantly swam against the cold and dirty stream.

She passed with flying colours, managing to bring the guards to court and even gaining a few concessions for inmates. But before she won, they were all punished for her protest as collective punishment is a classical way of oppression in Russia – in prison, in the army or at school, and even in kindergarten. People are taught from the cradle to hate those who dare to rock the boat or just happen to be different.

Russian jails always were horrible – the harsh regime of 19th century prison, described by Dostoevsky in Notes from
House of Dead, deteriorated under the CheKa and then in the Gulag Archipelago. Cut to size and slightly softened under Khrushchev and Brezhnev (the period which Joseph Brodsky called “vegetarian times”) it is now growing and hardening again. Any prisoner behind walls or barbed wire is a nobody and find himself or herself completely at the mercy of the guards.

Masha had some resources which none of her fellow prisoners had – a lawyer, the press, international attention and funds. It took all of them to get what the women in prison were entitled to – things like warm shawls for harsh winters. Most of Russian’s prisons are situated at the same places as the GULAG – in the Far North, where the climate plays the role of henchman to the gaolers.

That part of Alyokhina’s book is the most disturbing read, offering questions without answers. How – and if – the country can return to humanitarian society after a century of totalitarian regime? Anna Akhmatova predicted this impasse when millions of Gulag prisoners were let out by Khrushchev: “Here the most dangerous moment comes – the Russia of prisoners will come face to face with the Russia of prison guards”.

A lot in contemporary Russia might be explained by a natural fact: the guards were much more successful in spreading their genes and beliefs. Thus eventually the only Gulag museum, near Perm, has now been transformed into a museum celebrating the Gulag guards. More recently memorial plaques “The last address”, placed on the houses where people were taken from during Stalin’s purges, have been considered a means of illegal advertising.

The Pussy Riot rebellion might be the first time we heard the voice of the “unflogged generation” who grew up during the perestroika period.

But the screws are being tightened and flogging is back and since 2012, when the girls in colourful balaclavas jumped into fame with the anthem “Holy Virgin! Drive Putin away!”, a lot of blood has been spilt…

The girls in balaclavas could not know at that time… Or maybe they knew, and it was us, who refused to know at that time where the regime was heading.

Tatyana Jakovskaya is director of Sharmanka Kinetic Theatre (http://www.sharmanka.com).

Riot Days by Maria Alyokhina
Published by Penguin, London, 2018. Paperback £8.99, 208 pages. ISBN 9780141986616. Also published as an ebook and in hardback (Allen Lane, 2017). The Russian language original was published in 2017 and a copy was available for sale after the concert.
It was a picturesque winter scene. At the edge of a forest in the north of Siberia, frost covered branches sparkled in the morning sunshine, while smoke from two reindeer skin tents rose into a clear blue sky. I had just arrived at Sergey Serotetto’s winter camp. He and his family are Nenets reindeer herders from the Yamal region of Northwest Siberia. I had first travelled with them in 1993. Now, almost a quarter of a century later, I had returned, to see how their lives had changed.

Back in 1993, Sergey had been the head of a group of nine reindeer herding families who worked for the local State Farm. Together, they managed a herd of 4,500 reindeer. At that time, ninety per cent of the reindeer belonged to the local State Farm, with the remaining ten per cent were privately owned. The herders spent each winter in the forests south of the River Ob, and then in the Spring, they would begin their migration to their summer pastures in north of the Yamal Peninsula, a journey of around 1000 km. They would spend the summer there, and then at the end of August, they would begin their long journey south again.

Today, Sergey and his family no longer work for the state farm. They look after their own private herd of about 2000 reindeer and migrate half the distance. “For us it’s better than in 1993,” Sergey explained, “there is less stress with a smaller herd.” Sergey is in his early sixties, so much of the hard work involved in reindeer herding is done by his son, Leova. On my first visit Leova had been in his late teens. Now in his early forties, he is married with four children. He, his wife Raisa and their three youngest children, live with his parents in their tent.

At first glance, it didn’t appear that much had changed. All the tents at the camp were reindeer skin and everyone was dressed in traditional Nenets skin clothing. However, the soft hum of a portable generator and two snowmobiles parked nearby, indicated that there had been some changes in reindeer herding.

In 1993 we only had oil hurricane lamps and candles for light, while nowadays most reindeer herding camps have portable generators. These provide light and also power for TVs and computers. The herders and their families can relax and watch a movie in the evening after work and the children can watch cartoons before bedtime.

On my first trip everyone at our camp travelled by reindeer sled. There were no snowmobiles. Nowadays, almost every reindeer herder has their own snowmobile, enabling them to travel faster and transport heavier loads.

In late August 1993, I was staying with Sergey Serotetto and his family at their summer pastures, when the school year was about to begin. One afternoon, a helicopter arrived to collect the children over the age of seven and take them to the boarding school at the village of Yar-sale. The children wouldn’t see their parents again for several
months and there were sad faces and tears. Taking the children away from their families for such a long time struck me as harsh, particularly for the youngest kids, who were going to school for the first time.

During a recent visit to the Yamal, I decided to try and find some of the children that I had photographed in 1993. I wanted to hear how they had managed at boarding school and see whether their education had benefitted them. Most are now in their thirties and seem to have done well at school and in their careers. Several had followed a traditional path and returned to the tundra and become reindeer herders, others had chosen modern professions. Sasha’s Serotetto’s eldest daughter, Nadia, is a doctor, while his youngest, Christina, is a lawyer. Sergey’s children have also done well. His daughter Olesya is a nurse, and her younger sister Neseynya has a university degree in cultural management and now works as the director of an ethnic park. Despite having modern careers they haven’t lost contact with their culture. They all still own reindeer and often spend their vacations with their parents on the tundra.

The development of oil and gas in the Yamal has brought mobile phone coverage to many areas. Nenets reindeer herders have come to depend on mobile phones and will often select a location for their camp where there is the strongest signal.

Back in 1993, the development of the region’s vast gas reserves was just beginning. I thought it likely that within a decade reindeer herding in the Yamal would die out, but that hasn’t happened. Although some herders have lost a considerable amount of their traditional reindeer pastures, surprisingly there are now more reindeer in the Yamal than there were in 1993. Today, there are around 700,000 reindeer looked after by 3,000 families. Whether reindeer herding and the gas industry can co-exist in the long term remains to be seen.

Bryan Alexander is a photographer and writer. He has spent many years in the Arctic and, with his wife, runs Arcticphoto.com. Bryan contributed information on the Arctic to our children’s website www.findoutaboutrussia.co.uk/northern-peoples.html.
In her most interesting and informative article on the museum of Kulikovo Field in the summer number (No 39) of The Forum Sheila Sim was full of praise for the modern complex that offered so much to the visitor to that famous battlefield. Her mention of important battles fought on Russian soil brought back to me a vivid memory of a visit I had made to the battlefield of Borodino in 1965, at a time when, generally speaking, visitor reception centres for battlefields throughout Europe had not reached the level of sophistication offered by those of today.

In the summer of 1965 I had taken up my post as a naval attaché at the British embassy in Moscow. At that time the contacts between military attachés and the department of external affairs in the Soviet Ministry of Defence (SMOD) were confined to requests on the part of the Western diplomats to travel beyond the confines of Moscow and discussions, both formal and informal, on subjects of common interest. This state of affairs made an invitation from SMOD to all attachés and their wives to visit the Battlefield of Borodino a departure from the normal. Buses were provided by SMOD for the three hour drive from Moscow in the direction of Smolensk. This unexpected excursion was regarded in Western diplomatic circles as a 'Sunday school treat'; advice was given on several counts including what footwear to take for walking over a battlefield and what to bring in the nature of snacks in what promised to be a long and exacting day.

The date chosen for the excursion was 7th September, the anniversary of Russia's great battle against Napoleon's 'Grande Armée' in 1812. The weather was tolerably kind although a strong breeze from the north had a distinct chill within it. On disembarking at the northern side of the battlefield we were met by representatives of SMOD and the local museum collective. In a speech of welcome to the area a formidable lady from the collective gave a spirited address, in which we were told that any military incursion from the West would always be doomed to failure. With that message ringing in our ears we were handed over to a retiring schoolteacher put forward the view that the Battle on the Ice in 1242 was the first of three battles in defence of the homeland although the victorious Alexander Nevsky was fighting for Novgorod long before the expansion of Muscovy and the emergence of the Russian state. It was a small affair but it had immense symbolic significance as it represented a victory of a Slav army over an invading force from the West. In this context he mentioned Eisenstein's famous film Alexander Nevsky (1931). The theme of defence of the homeland against invaders from the West was relevant to the battles of Borodino in 1812 in the Napoleonic War and that of Prokhorovka in 1943 in the Second World War. Both these wars had earned for themselves the epithet of 'Patriotic' with the latter one earning the additional epithet of 'Great'. The adjective for patriotic for both wars had been derived from the Russian noun for fatherland, otechestvo. My Russian interlocutor conceded that the Battle of Borodino had been a tactical victory for Napoleon but asserted most strongly that it had been the beginning of a strategic defeat for the great Frenchman. Kutuzov may had to accept the resultant loss of Moscow to the French but he had kept his army intact to threaten and harry the French in their inevitable retreat from Russia in the winter of 1812. That war had been instrumental in fostering a feeling of nationalism within Russia and encouraging a period of cultural creativi-
ty later in the 19th century through the written work of Ler- 
monov and Tolstoy and the music of Tchaikovsky.

My discussion with my Russian schoolteacher had made 
me unaware of an animated discussion that had been taking 
place round the model and sand table. This had been pro-

voked by the head of the French military mission to Mos-

cow, a major general, who had queried the accuracy of 
some of the assertions made by our hosts. One of the 
causes of this lively but friendly debate was a questioning of the 
ability of the Russian commander-in-chief, Mikhail Kutu-

zov. His detractors criticised his decision-making ability 
whilst according some praise to his subordinate command-
ers Prince Michael Barclay de Tolly and Prince Pyotr 
Bagration for their instinctive and effective responses to 
the aggressive tactics of the French army. Barclay de Tolly, 
an officer of Scottish extraction, was to become command-
er-in-chief of the Russian army on Kutuzov’s death in 1813 
and led the victorious Russian army into Paris in 1814. 
What was not in dispute was the decision made by Kutu-
zov to effect an orderly withdrawal from the battle, in what 
eventually turned out to be an inspired move.

After three to four hours of walking and visiting the muse-
um and being bombarded by facts and figures we were glad 
to find ourselves being entertained by representatives of 
SMOD to an ample lunch in a restaurant in the neighbour-
town of Mozhaysk. Zakuski, borschch and beef stroga-
nov washed down by wine and vodka rounded off what 
been an unusual but interesting day. The presence of the 
French general had done much to enliven the proceedings 
and create a more comprehensive understanding of the 
battle and its implications. Those of us who were seated 
next to the room in the bus on the return journey to Moscow were 
to hear him bemoan Napoleon’s failure to use his fresh and 
unused, crack Imperial Guard to pursue the withdrawing 
Russian army to effect a defeat on it and achieve a treaty in 
France’s favour. At that moment it had seemed appropriate 
to keep the atmosphere of the day alive by singing the Mar-
seillaise. Yet in retrospect, it would have been more fitting 
and diplomatic if we had sung some of the verses of an old 
Scottish song based on the inconclusive battle between the 
Hanoverians and Jacobites at Sheriffmuir in 1715, of which 
the first two lines go like this:

Some say that we wan and some say that they wan
And some say that none wan at a’man.

Books

Portraits without Frames by Lev Ozerov.

Reviewed by Peter France.

This is a most attractive book and an inspiring read. It’s a collection of 50 
sketches in free verse, each devoted to a man or woman personally known to 
the author. With the exception of one 
heroic soldier, the Ukrainian partisan leader Sydor Kovpak, they are all artist-
ic creators, poets, prose writers, film-makers, artists, musicians, dancers, actors... Almost all were born before the 
Revolution and lived in the Soviet Union through the Stalinist years; some found a way of living with the new or-
der, others defied it. Most suffered under the regime (Shalamov, Pasternak and others), and not a few, such as 
Babel and Tabidze, came to a tragic end. Many of the sub-
jects, like the author, were Jewish and there is a particularly moving set of portraits of the four Yiddish poets, Leyb 
Kvitko, Dovid Hofsteyn, Perets Markish and Shmuel 
Harkin, all of whom except Harkin were executed on Au-
 gust 12, 1952, the Night of the Murdered Poets.

A good many of these poems are laments then, and satiri-
cal or indignant depictions of an oppressive order. Thus 
the sketch of the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold 
ends starkly:

“Meyerhold has lost
his theatre, lost
his house,

lost
his life. The world
has lost
Meyerhold.
How simple,
how deadly simple”.

Tragic in a different way is the writer Alexander Fadeyev, 
who as head of the Writers’ Union was deeply compro-
mised with the regime and finally committed suicide; here 
Ozerov’s poem, rather than denouncing an easy target, is 
marked by ‘pity and compassion,/ pain and respect’.

All of these poems were written towards the end of 
Ozerov’s life, in the 1990s, in many cases several decades 
after the death of their protagonist, and they are reckoned 
to be his crowning achievement, after a life spent in litera-
ture as poet, journalist, translator and editor, giving much-
needed support to other writers. The poems, written in a 
supple and fast-moving free verse, combining wit and 
emotion, are remarkable for the immediacy with which 
these often celebrated figures from the past spring into 
new life. A few pieces attempt a sort of overview of their 
subject’s life and work, but mostly they are records of one 
or two meetings. The one on Zoshchenko, for instance, 
described as ‘no portrait. Only/ a first sketch’, begins with a 
scene where the author reads some Zoshchenko to fel-
low-patients in hospital (‘Everyone was transformed./
Everyone was reborn.’), then moves to Ozerov’s ‘lucky day’, when he actually meets the story-teller and attends a reading of stories. These have the audience convulsed with laughter, while the poor author ‘with a shrug of despair’ wonders why they are all laughing – ‘I’ve told them terrible things’.

This vividness, the shaping of the poems (with occasional rhymes), the shifts in tone, the humour and the emotion, all this is successfully conveyed by the four translators. True as it is to the original, the translated volume differs in view of the world around them. According to some more wonders why they are all laughing – ‘I’ve told them terrible things’.

The Return of Munchausen by Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky. Reviewed by Natasha Perova

Recently I needed to reread Krzhizhanovsky’s The Return of Munchausen in Russian and was overwhelmed anew with the wealth of his original ideas and images, his fertile imagination, exquisite metaphorical language, and his extraordinary power of observation. Luckily this book exists in a fine English translation which does justice to this outstanding author.

With his Swiftian talent, brilliant mind, and phenomenal erudition Krzhizhanovsky had no chance of winning official recognition in the new Russia ruled by “the dictatorship of the proletariat”. And yet even in his lifetime his genius was recognised in the literary circles as an equal to Hoffmann and Chamisso, Swift and Poe, Gogol and Dostoyevsky. I could add that despite his apparent unlikeness to Andrei Platonov (both described the same post-revolutionary situation in Russia) what they have in common is a virtuoso treatment of the language, which becomes a protagonist in its own right, and an unusual view of the world around them. According to some more advanced critics of the day “any world literature would be proud to have such an author.”

Krzhizhanovsky felt like an alien in his own country and in his own age. This is what we find in his notebooks: “I live in a distant future and my own future appears to me as my past, long lived out and outdated.” He was a Gulliver captured by Lilliputians who tied him up hand and foot before he had a chance to come to.

The Return of Munchausen is Krzhizhanovsky’s longest narrative, almost a novel, his magnum opus you might say, surely one of them. It is the sharpest among his works and the most satirical towards the Soviet rule. This philosophical-phantasmagorical satire was written in the year of the tenth anniversary of the revolution when it became abundantly clear which direction the Soviets had taken.

The choice of protagonist enables the author to show the whole of Russia in the throes of violent change, to take a bird’s eye view on its post-revolutionary transformation, and reflect on many things in this connection providing relevant historical references. Baron Munchhausen has always been a household name in Russia, he is almost perceived as part of Russian folklore (films and cartoons have been made about him, and there are even monuments to him in Moscow, Kaliningrad, and several other Russian cities.)

The historical Baron Munchhausen really did travel around Russia, as a soldier in the Russian army against the Turks, and after retirement wrote a number of extraordinary tales about his adventures. His stories were so incredible (but probably verging on reality, that is, the Russian reality of the time, more than people thought) that eventually his name became a synonym of a tall-tale teller. No wonder he had great appeal for Krzhizhanovsky whose favourite means of expressions were hyperbole, irony and paradox. For Krzhizhanovsky a fantastic plot was certainly not an end in itself, he needed fantasy for a perfectly realistic analysis of the surrounding reality. He made the baron travel around Soviet Russia of the 1920s, the time of radical re-shuffle and severe class clashes which made redundant high culture, and Krzhizhanovsky himself.

His Baron Munchhausen is a philosopher and dreamer who “fights facts with fantasies”. His business card says: “Baron HIERONYMUS von MUNCHAUSEN, Supplier of Phantasms and Sensations. In and Out of This World. Since 1720.” However, by resorting to the fantastic Munchhausen conveys the spirit of Bolshevik Russia better than any documentary narrative.

The Return of Munchausen falls into three parts: before Munchausen’s trip to Soviet Russia, his travels around Russia, and return to London where he sums up his experiences. Thus the novel satirically presents not only the Russia of the 1920s but also the West in the wake of the First World War. Here are some glimpses of Russia as she appears to the baron:
"The Russian saying about letting the cat out of the bag needs correcting: the cats were all eaten long ago, and when they tried not to let the hunger problem out of the bag, it fought back, furiously rumbling from all stomachs and threatening, if not given bread, to swallow the revolution."

"The soup kitchens set up by the Soviet government could not combat the scourge of hunger: they gave out one poppy seed per person so that no one could say that no food had passed their lips; this prevented grumbling, but left stomachs empty. I suggested they enlist the help of rat charmers: they mobilized every last one. Every soup kitchen received a piper who lured the rats hiding in cellars and under floor-boards: led by the melody the victuals marched themselves single-file — nose to tail, tail to nose — straight into the kitchen kettles and rats."

"As everyone knows, in that ruined country the position of the hard-working highwayman is extremely troublesome and not to be envied. By day he must hide in the forest for fear of meeting Red Army rifles, and only on moonless nights may he engage in transferring valuables, so to speak, in pocketing stray coins as an entomologist nets butterflies. By the same token, all moonlit nights are without profit."

From the letters Munchausen receives from Russia he comes to realize that no matter how absurd and fantastic his inventions are about the land, they invariably come true or have even actually taken place somewhere in Russia.

As for pragmatic Europe, it has no place for his fantasies. He feels redundant everywhere, he is excluded from any time and any society. It is obvious that Krzhizhanovsky, a writer without readers, partly associates himself with the Baron; they both share the fate of all creators who fail to win recognition in the crass world of pragmatic values.

See more reviews of the book here: http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/soviet/krzhizs3.htm

Natasha Perova’s recent anthology “Slav Sisters” is reviewed on pp13-14 of this issue of the magazine.


**Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and media from Gorbachev to Putin by Daphne Skillen. Reviewed by Martin Dewhirst.**

On page 507 of her splendid biography of George Orwell, Mariya Karp suggests that he might well have been the very first person to use the term 'cold war', just a few months after the end of the Second World 'hot' War. He was thinking mainly of a new type of warfare between states, but, as we know from his 1984, this would necessarily mean that in some countries there would inevitably be a Cold War against 'dissidents' as an essential part of those states' internal policies. By the time the novel appeared, China was about to begin its great communist experiment. The United States, as the most powerful democratic country, was outnumbered two to one, and Orwell was dying.

Daphne Skillen’s impressive monograph is concerned with the Cold War within Soviet and neo-Soviet Russia during the last thirty years. Partly as a result of glasnost, the USSR collapsed after the coup and counter-coup in 1991, but the first two Presidents of post-communist Russia were ‘former’ communists and, like nearly all their compatriots, had no tried and tested programme for a transition from a huge one-Party state to a more democratic, liberal, tolerant society. Moreover, how many citizens of the Russian Federation wanted such a society? Perhaps they had other priorities? Was (and is) populism a serious threat to a liberal democracy? (The latter word is sometimes translated as narodovlastye, the power of the people.) Skillen states that under Putin, Russia has moved from a ‘managed democracy’ through a ‘sovereign democracy’ to a ‘majority democracy’ (p. 262). But is the majority, in any country, always right? "The main criticism of a majority democracy is its potential for mob rule, expressed long ago by de Tocqueville as the ‘tyranny of the majority’" (p. 320). This is not just a Russian problem, of course.

Skillen’s book is divided into two parts. Part 1 discusses the theoretical and philosophical problems and limits of freedom and the links between rights and obligations. Milton’s and J.S. Mill’s thoughts on liberty are briefly but usefully explained, as are the problems caused by the fact that Russian has two concepts of truth (pravda and istina) and two concepts of lies (loz’yo and travn’yo). Among the many valid points the author makes about most Russian journalists are that ‘much of the blame for the demise of free speech must be laid at the feet of media professionals’ (p. 56) and that the ‘majority of journalists appear to share with the public the same political apathy, conformism and subservience to the ruling class’ (p. 73). She seems to me to hit the nail on the head when she contends that the 'duality that runs through the heart of Russian culture, its European and Asian heritage, keeps it divided within itself. On the one hand, the highest European learning and culture, which looks to reason and the rule of law; on the other, the Tatar-Mongol yoke and the rule of an implacable and arbitrary autocracy' (p. 76). Her conclusion is that, as a result, 'there has been no healing process and no catharsis' (p. 102).

Part 2 presents a chronological account of what has happened to the Russian media (and thus to Russian society) under Gorbachev, during the coup and counter-coup, and under Yeltsin and Putin, ending with the domination of 'patrimonial media' and the return of a curious sort of Russian feudalism (which was always different from Western
feudalism). This survey will be of great value both to older readers who have forgotten some or much of what has been happening since 1985 in Russia, as well as to younger readers who have become interested in Russia more recently. Tracing this history, Skillen makes many pertinent observations. "Trust tends to focus on personalities rather than institutions in Russia" (p. 218). She notes the clash between 'liberal social values and capitalist economic ones' (p. 243), and sometimes points out the obvious, but often overlooked: "The success of the Putin Project was predicated on controlling the media' (p. 262).

The author comes to a sad conclusion. 'Journalists and trolls who are complicit in creating the “reality” of lies predicated on controlling the media' (p. 262).

The author concludes her study with a final caution. "Have lessons been learned about how to advance free speech when the next occasion arises, or will everything be done on the hoof, without reflection, as it was done this time?" (p. 346).

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Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and media from Gorbachev to Putin by Daphne Skillen.


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Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki by Andrea Gullotta.

Reviewed by Mark Vincent

It is an often-repeated sobriquet that, even in humanity’s most depraved depths, it is possible for beauty and culture to thrive as prisoners look to rid themselves, or even draw strength from, the confines of their external torment.

While individual examples of this can be found from prisoners across a panoply of worldwide detention institutions, Andrea Gullotta’s fascinatingly detailed exploration of the cultural force which came together at one of the most infamous locations of global penalty provides a wealth of evidence to bring this claim to life and with it open some intriguing questions about life and repression in the early Soviet state. The sprawling Solovki prison camp, initiated in 1923 by the Bolsheviks who repurposed the islands from their traditional use as a place of spiritual pilgrimage, was intended to become a showpiece penal institution which would demonstrate to the world the redemptive power of forced labour.

Not only did the camp’s expansion on to the Karelian mainland and link to the enormous White Sea-Baltic Canal Project become a blueprint for the development of the Gulag but they have subsequently been immortalised by the metaphorical title of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s famous Arkhipelag Gulag. As Gullotta skilfully elucidates, the contributions of Solovki inmates would ensure that Solovki would develop a reputation as the ‘capital of the Russian intelligentsia’ and the final bastion for a curious alchemy of pre-revolutionary values infused with the chaos of the years following 1917. Conflicting political views and the nuanced societal tremors were played out on the stage of the Solovki Theatre and in the pages of its newspaper publications, both cultural-educational activities that were initiated with the intention of ideologically-retraining prisoners into becoming productive Soviet citizens.

Beginning with twin complementary chapters on the camp and its literature, Gullotta pays respectful homage to the ground-breaking work of Russian scholars to bring together an incredibly detailed analysis of the camp’s historiography that goes far beyond any previously published English-language work. Combining this with his own meticulous research the author challenges much of the popular mythology about the camp. Most prominently, this includes the potential reliability of memoirists such as S. A. Mal’sagov (p.172) and the various controversies surrounding the visit of famous writer Maxim Gorky (p.140). Some of the camp’s darkest moments including the execution of prisoners are covered in carefully-judged detail (p.64) alongside the torture which would often take place in the isolation block found atop the small mountain ‘Sekirta’ (p.70).

Given the privileged position of ‘political prisoners’, which was more akin to those in Late Imperial exile and hard labour, Gullotta’s vignettes of the Solovki prisoners (continued in his incredibly helpful appendices) help bring this ‘cultural force’ to life. Positioning them alongside famous Gulag memoirists for the depths of their contributions, Gullotta highlights the experience of important figures such as Dmitri Likhachev and Boris Glubokovsky, a former actor who became an integral part of both the camp theatre and its printed publications. The writings of Sofia Okerman (p.213) are also discussed alongside a candid exploration of the experience of female prisoners, many of whom found themselves forced into prostitution.

As Gullotta shows, the birth of the camp theatre led to an ‘uncontrollable dynamic’ within prisoner society which was exemplified through its newspaper organs. Although overarching censorship still existed, Gullotta highlights how the security services allowed more freedom ‘than in Moscow or Leningrad’ (p.282) which led to prisoners discussing taboo topics using Aesopian language and locus fidelitas. Alongside this latitude from the security services and cultural-educational department there was a remarkable awareness to external events demonstrated in the press,
showing a strong connection to the Soviet ‘mainland’ that caused the authorities considerable concern (p.133).

It is in the final chapters of the book, however, where Gullotta’s background as literature scholar really comes to the fore, highlighting tropes and influences amongst the prisoners stretching back to Pushkin. The author situates the powerful images evoked by Kmetskii of Vikings and muses (p.226–7) alongside leitmotifs of Sergei Esenin and Vladimir Mayakovksy (p.244) whilst Iuri Kazarnovsky, the only writer appreciated by the camp administration, also delivers a razor-sharp parody of Aleksandr Blok (p.243).

Gullotta is also at pains to not only demonstrate the common links and influence of Futurism but also some of the more irreverent artistic movements of the NEP era such as the much maligned Biocosmists (p.252).

Gullotta’s conclusion discusses the importance of understanding the common semiotic system among inmates (p.270), linking his work to the writing of Jochen Hellbeck and Irina Paperno (p.275). Discussing the camp as a ‘literary enclave’ the author’s morose assessment that an entire generation was ‘doomed to die in the camps’ (p.280) is particularly poignant. The paradox, he writes, lies in the peculiarity of this political and cultural ecosystem which led to the construction of a ‘bourgeois intellectual citadel’ the likes of which would never be repeated. Suggesting a multiplicity of ways in which his study could be extended, the strong methodological approach and volume of evidence provided in this wonderful book should ensure Gullotta’s hope in the final requiem that his book should lead to further research will surely and quite rightly be realised.

Mark Vincent’s “Criminal Subculture in the Gulag: Prisoner Society in the Stalinist Labour Camps” is due to be published by I. B. Tauris in summer 2019. More of Mark’s writing can be found at cultoftheurka.wordpress.com
"attract the naughty money – privacy, security, deniability – also attract the evil money". Moneyland does not discriminate.

It would be easy to confine blame for all this to Russian oligarchs, wealthy Gulf businessmen and corrupt African politicians. But none of Moneyland would be possible without Western enablers and Bullough portions out blame with gusto. Indeed, a growing network of lawyers, accountants, PR firms and estate agents now grease Moneyland’s wheels, and are particularly adept at turning the ‘steal’ and ‘hide’ into ‘spend’. Whether selling property in London or passports in Malta, it is a reminder that when our governments talk of tackling global corruption and money laundering, the fight very much starts at home.

So what of the solutions to Moneyland’s ills? After all, the book’s subtitle is Why Thieves and Crooks Now Rule the World And How to Take it Back. There is only a single, final chapter dedicated to this question. The answer – essentially a plea for better international regulation and cooperation – feels somewhat lacking when compared to the focused and detailed research that precedes it. Bullough remains pessimistic of such action, too, but appears to be guided more by realistic expectations than a lack of imagination.

“If there is one thing we know about Moneyland, it is that it keeps mutating, it keeps expanding, and the wealthy keep finding new tunnels down into it”.

Moneyland, then, is here to stay. This book is essential to understanding it.

Lindsay Mackenzie is a writer and editor based in Glasgow


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Slav Sisters (The Dedalus Book of Russian Women’s Literature) edited by Natasha Perova. Reviewed by Margaret Tejerizo

_Slav Sisters_ is a new collection of English translations of key Russian women writers starting with Nadezhda Teffi (1872-1952) and ending with Margarita Khemlin (1960-2015); its aim, as noted on the back cover, is to “illustrate the evolution of Russian women’s writing over the 20th century”. With its striking and brightly coloured cover (the cover painting is *Women on the Volga* by Petrov Vodkin, 1915) this excellent compact volume will be a “must” for those with an interest in both the history and development of women’s writing in Russia and also for those who enjoy literature which inspires, challenges and has enormous “impact”. Natasha Perova has succeeded in providing not only a very useful short biography for each Russian writer represented in this anthology – there are eleven in total working chronologically from Nadezhda Teffi through to Margarita Khemlin - but she also gives key information about the ten first-class translators whose work appears in the text itself. Additionally, Perova provides a brief, but most insightful introduction where she notes that while in “... the present anthology the first half of the 20th century is represented by authors of unquestionable genius: Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaye…(...) not for the limits of the size of this book and the number of names I would also have included Zinaida Gippius, Nina Berberova, and Lydia Zinovyeva-Annilal” (“Introduction”, p.21) The writers represented in this collection, in addition to those mentioned above, are Lydia Ginzburg, Galina Scherbakova, Ludmila Petrushevskaia, Olga Slavnikova, Ludmila Ulitskaya, Irina Muravyova and Svetlana Alexievich. On p.22 of the “Introduction” Perova refers to other writers, such as Nina Sadur and Tatiana Tolstaya who are not included in her volume “only for reasons of space or copyright” and stresses too the fact that “(...)turn of the 21st century gave us some young talents...who deserve attention and translation into other languages.”

After the preliminary informative sections, the reader then embarks on a “journey”, starting with *Kishmish* and *Solovki* by Nadezhda Teffi, here splendidly translated by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, and finishing up with _The Jewess’s Farewell_ by Margarita Khemlin, the excellent translation being the work of Arch Tait. Along the way, so to speak, the reader will encounter translations of *Tsvetaeva’s My Jobs* and *Akhmatova’s Autobiographical Sketches*, the former being the work of Jany Gambrell and the latter translated by Andrew Bromfield. (It should be pointed out at this stage that the quality of the translations throughout this volume is excellent and the reader can cross with ease into the creative world of each writer. Notes are provided, where necessary, at the bottom of pages to clarify or to explain any matters that might help the reader to gain a fuller understanding of the text.)

One of the longest pieces in the collection is the enigmatic and thought-provoking _Delusion of the Will_ by Lydia Ginzburg, the most successful translation being the work of Boris Dralyuk. Ilona Chavasse then brings readers two stories by Galina Scherbakova, a notoriously demanding writer for any translator! Chavasse’s versions of the humorous and whimsical _The Lady with the Dog_ and _The Death of an Official_ capture very well both the irony and the parody of the original texts and will serve as excellent introductions to this highly talented writer. Petrushevskaia is ably represented by Joanne Turnbull’s translation of _What a Girl_ and Marian Schwartz offers her excellent version of _The Stone Guest_ by Olga Slavnikova. Arch Tait makes his first appearance in the collection with his clever and successful translation of Ulitskaya’s marvellous story _The Gift Not Made by Human Hand_ which is followed by John Dewey’s version of _Philemon and Baucis_ by Irina Muravyova. However, for this present reviewer, the highlight of the collection was the appearance in the collection with his clever and successful translation of Ulitskaya’s marvellous story _The Gift Not Made by Human Hand_ which is followed by John Dewey’s version of _Philemon and Baucis_ by Irina Muravyova. However, for this present reviewer, the highlight of the collection was the appearance in the collection of Boris Dralyuk’s wonderful translation of Bely’s _Made by Human Hand_.
is Joanne Turnbull’s translation of Aleksievich’s *Landscape of Loneliness: Three Voices*. It is as though lines from this story provide a kind of “common thread” running through this entire volume: “All of Russian culture, everything we see and hear around us, is built on the fact that our best school is the school of misfortune” (p 308) and “Russian women love to adopt unhappy souls” (p 309). As mentioned above, Arch Tait’s version of *The Jewess’s Farewell* ends the collection with its issues of war, race, gender and religion.

This work comes highly recommended. For readers who are already familiar with some Russian women writers there will surely be some new works and names contained in this collection. For readers who are “exploring this territory” for the first time this will be a fascinating and exhilarating venture from which they will doubtless want to return for more. It is certainly to be hoped that Perova may produce a follow-up to this volume in which she will be able to include other writers. As she notes in her “Introduction” (p.22)

“Women’s writing exists because there is a women’s world which differs from the world of men whether people are aware of it or not…Female readers in the West will be surprised to find many more common issues than they expect – the setting is different but the issues and problems are essentially the same”

Margaret Tejerizo, Affiliate Status, Russian, University of Glasgow


**СТУПЕНЬКА-1 Russian as a foreign language for kids. Pupil’s book and Activity book by Natalia Gulamova.** Reviewed by Marta Tomaszewski

*Stupenka* is intended to be a four-part course of Russian as a foreign language, aimed at children between the ages of 6 and 11. There is certainly a gap in the market for suitable teaching material for a younger age group and Stupenka 1, which was published in 2018 in Baku, consists of a pupil’s book and activity book, both of which are highly colourful and bursting with lovely cartoon images and photos of smiling schoolchildren who are of the same age as the target audience.

I was hoping that this could be a course to be used in British primary schools for a language club, or to entice younger heritage learners to learn the native language of a parent or grandparent. Unfortunately, despite the beautiful presentation, I found the methodology of the course rather old-fashioned and very heavily grammar-based. My heart sank when I saw that the first chapter covered the alphabet and the second covered letters and sounds, as these seemed to me not only to be the same thing but also hardly a ‘topic’ in themselves. Sure enough, without any overriding focus for vocabulary or any communication target, students are presented with a random selection of words, such as ‘ear’ and ‘anchor’, are drilled in the difference between voiced and unvoiced consonants, but have nothing meaningful that they can communicate after 50 pages and therefore no clear reason for learning the language. The activity book does, however, contain a large range of well-designed and fun exercises for mastering the Russian alphabet, such as matching lower case and capital letters contained in attractive graphics and joining the dots in alphabetical order to reveal an image. The following four chapters, covering introductions and greetings, birthdays, family and professions, are slightly more promising. Although I question if any six-year-old needs to know grammatical terms such as ‘possessive’ or that the word for beetle in Russian is masculine, there are some sentences and dialogues here that students would enjoy learning and adapting to their own situation so that they could talk about themselves and their family. It is also heartening that the section on professions contains a wide range of careers and involves no gender stereotyping. The activity book provides useful supplementary material, such as a bank of greetings to be matched to a range of images and model sentences to be copied and expanded upon in handwritten Russian.

In addition to its six chapters, the pupil’s book contains an introductory section on ‘interesting Russian language facts’, containing extracts of poetry for children with English translation and a short history of the Russian alphabet, a section on revision material, a ‘grammar bank’, and a selection of supplementary material, which consists mainly of short rhymes intended to be learnt off by heart. Although this material all seems far too challenging for the intended audience, it could prove very useful for children who already speak Russian at home or for introducing Russian to an older age group.

These books are therefore useful as resources to be dipped into by teachers of Russian for students of both primary and secondary school age and, if used judiciously as supplementary material, could prove very useful for motivating a range of students.

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