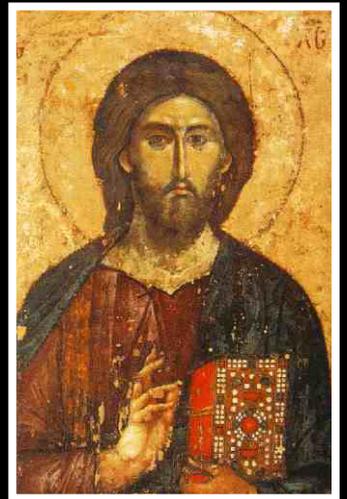
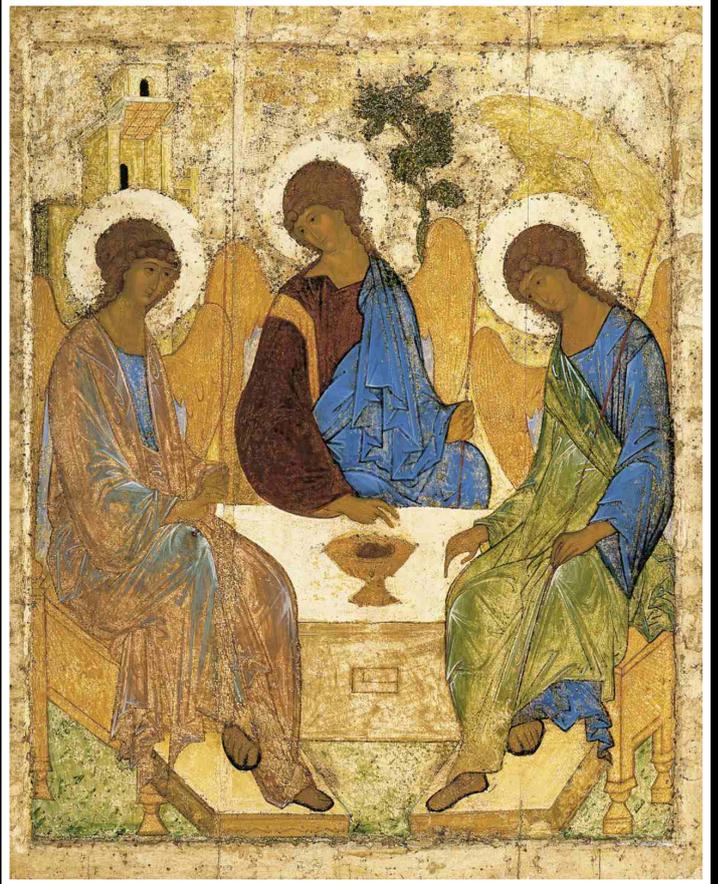
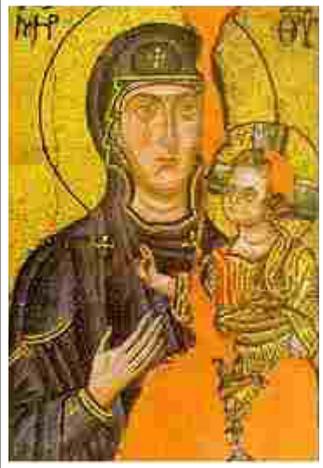




The Scotland-Russia Forum

# Review



No. 26, January 2012  
£1.50

[www.scotlandrussiaforum.org](http://www.scotlandrussiaforum.org)

## Contents

Chair's report **3**

Letters from Kachkanar **4-5**

Power of a female pensioner **6-7**

### Reviews

The Possessed  
by Elif Batuman **8**

An Awkward Age  
by Anna Starobinets **9**

Deathless  
by Catherynne M. Valente **10**

The Enchanter  
by Lila Azam Zangeneh **11**

Yuri's Day  
by Andrew King, Peter  
Hodkinson and Piers  
Bizony **12-13**

Solzhenitsyn House  
of Russia Abroad **14**

Protests in Edinburgh **15**

Dear Readers,

Our front and back covers feature pictures from an upcoming exhibition at the Scotland-Russia Institute. *Byzantium: Gateway between East and West* showcases 1000 years of the Byzantine Empire, focusing on its adoption of both Hellenic traditions and Oriental mysticism. Do visit the Institute on South College Street between February 4 and March 17, and see the SRF website for more details.

This edition of the Review features intimate, personal interpretations of Russian life and culture, as experienced both by actors and audience.

SRF member Doris McCann has kindly allowed us to print her touching diary entries from her time working in schools in the Urals. Fellow SRF member Andrei Rogachevskii tries to get to the bottom of the success of *Podstrochnik*, a simple, no frills documentary of the life of a little-known translator, shown to great acclaim in Russia. Svetlana Romanova tells us about the work of the Solzhenitsyn House of Russia Abroad, which strives to preserve the culture and memory of Russian emigre society.

Our books section features interpretations of Russian literature, in *The Possessed* and *The Enchanter*; interpretations of modern history in *Yuri's Day*; and interpretations of Russian myth and folklore in *An Awkward Age* and *Deathless*.

Russia is an exciting place now. Towards the end of last year, there were large crowds across the country demanding fair elections. In Edinburgh, too, there was a modest gathering on December 24, and we publish the photographs from that day.

My warm thanks to all the contributors. Without your time and efforts, the Review would not exist. I am sorry for the late publication of the Review. I hope you find that it was worth the wait.

With best wishes for the year ahead,

Chris Delaney  
editor

Editor: Chris Delaney  
Reviews editor: Samantha Sherry

The Scotland-Russia Forum,  
9 South College Street,  
Edinburgh, EH8 9AA  
Tel: +44 (0)131 668 3635  
info@scotlandrussiaforum.org  
Registered charity no. SC038728

The SRF Review is published by the Scotland-Russia Forum. The opinions expressed are those of the contributors, and not necessarily those of the committee or the editor.

# Challenges and success at the SRF

Report from SRF chairperson, Jenny Carr

## A successful year

**M**EMBERSHIP was 333 at the end of our subscription year in August – continuing the annual increase since our foundation nearly nine years ago. Other indicators of interest and support were also very healthy: over 3,000 people came to events or visited exhibitions, the e-bulletins go to 800 addresses, language course numbers doubled, and we had more press interest this year than before including our first TV news interview.

Highlights of the programme included a very varied and interesting exhibitions programme and associated events, most of it generously sponsored by the Russkiy Mir Foundation.

The exhibitions have attracted considerable interest. The Voitsekhovskiy exhibition in August was chosen for the Edinburgh Art Festival (and the artist met Culture Minister Fiona Hyslop at the Festival launch), Ken Reynolds' exhibition of theatre photographs attracted 60 people to the preview, with an opening address by Richard Demarco, and no less than four consuls general attended the opening of our Gagarin exhibition in September, as well as two press photographers.

We also tried to reflect important anniversaries in 2011. Two lectures addressed aspects of social change since the fall of the USSR in 1991 and a variety of events including a spectacular exhibition from Novosti centred on the 50th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's space flight.

If I had to choose one event which stands out for me personally, it would be the week we hosted former cosmonaut Anatoly Artsebarsky in June as part of the Rossotrudnichestvo "Space Odyssey" programme. 2011 was the 20th anniversary of his flight on Mir with British astronaut Helen Sharman, thus neatly combining both our anniversary themes, with a UK-Russian theme thrown in for good measure. Artsebarsky visited primary and secondary schools in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Orkney, enthralled them with tales of life in space. He also paid homage to the Gagarin stone at Skara Brae and addressed a packed audience of some 600 people at the Scottish Space School hosted by Strathclyde University.

Apart from our programme of events the SRF is also working hard in the wider community, and the cosmonaut visit was a vital and successful part of this. We regularly attend meetings with the other cultural organisations and education authorities, visit schools, and I have recently had two invitations to address community groups about our work and aspects of Russia. We are delighted that the student Russian Societies of Glasgow and St Andrews Universities have started working with us on the schools programme and I hope to be able to report progress on that next year.

A major part of our success this year is due to our administrative assistant, Flippanta Kulakiewicz, who started working for us one day a week in March (thanks to

sponsorship by a member), and two days from April when the Russkiy Mir grant started. She has been efficient, resourceful, imaginative and always cheerful and calm. And has voluntarily worked a lot of unpaid overtime. She left us in December and I am sure you will all join me in wishing her success in the future.

## The challenge ahead

**T**HE NEED to understand Russia has never been greater: the level of public interest and awareness is low, commercial and cultural opportunities are huge and largely untapped, political challenges remain. And yet there will be no Scottish school exams in Russian after 2015 and our government seems unconcerned.

The range and scope of SRF activities is growing all the time as we try to improve this situation. We cannot continue this growth if we continue to run on volunteer labour alone. We need more help. This year for example there has been no time to fund-raise or to continue the successful business events programme we offered in 2009-10. And we need to professionalise. The contribution of our professional administrative assistant this year has shown me how helpful that can be, although two days a week (one day after December) only scratches at the surface of the problem. Running the SRF takes at least 14 man-days a week, not counting the hours put in by our volunteer receptionists.

So the challenges ahead are:

- To raise public interest in Russia and her neighbours more effectively;
- To keep Russian on the school timetable;
- Money – for staff and to ensure we can keep our premises;

Please continue to volunteer for reception work, clearing up after events, and helping out; think about offering regular administrative assistance; and, if you can, consider offering financial assistance.

Jenny Carr  
SRF chairperson

## STOP PRESS

As we go to press we've just heard that the Russian Embassy will be presenting our chair, Jenny Carr, an award (Почётный знак Россотрудничества) for the SRF's contribution to international cooperation.

The presentation will take place on Monday 16 January when John Swinney and other representatives of the Scottish Government will be meeting Russian companies at the Embassy and briefing them on the investment climate in Scotland.

# Letters from Kachkanar

by Doris McCann

*Doris McCann is an SRF member from Cromarty, a retired nurse, grandmother of 11, keen footballer and intrepid traveller. She answered a request in the SRF Bulletin for an English speaking teaching assistant in the Urals town of Kachkanar and is now visiting schools all over that area for the second time. The following are short excerpts from her letters home.*

## 21 September

**D**EAR ALL, Thought I'd better let you know that I've arrived in what some Russians are now calling my second home ... and it rather feels that way to me, too. I left London on Monday pm and arrived in Kachkanar 14 hours later. The following day, I was straight into school and met the mayor, who was there to present books to the children.

"Doris! How lovely to see you again!", said Victor, the photographer from the local paper, The Kachkanar Worker. He was pulling children into a group and prodding me to join them. I was asked to help with distributing the books and was pushed into place for some photos of the occasion and one of them has appeared in today's issue of the paper. Just as breathtaking as being pushed into a real deep end.

On Saturday, we went in a bus up the mountain, stopping for a look at the crater of one of the mines, of which there are several. It covers a vast area and is ringed with roads, known as horizons. When the ore has been extracted from one level, explosives are set and excavations begin again. We carried on to near the top, to where a Buddhist monk set up a place of meditation 16 years ago. He lived by himself for many years, but now has followers, two of whom were young women with shaven heads, novice nuns. One of them spoke good English and, after giving us tea, she took us round and explained that they planned to build a monastery, but it will take 300 years to complete. What a pity, I said, I was going to suggest I'd come back and see it when it was finished.

In the meantime, the style of construction could be called Russian Ramshackle. They have two bulls, three goats with kids, some rabbits, five chickens, one cockerel and a dog, not far removed from its wolf ancestor.

I have learned to say in Russian "mosquitoes love me!" to explain the seven lumps on my face. They attacked at night, even when the window was closed. Then the heating was switched on, so it became a toss-up between being eaten or cooked.

## 2-3 October

**I**N LOBVA, Nadia came for us and drove to the town square, passing many people headed in the same direction. They were going to take part in the National Cross, a 2km run in which, I was told, everyone in the country was involved. I gasped at the idea, but was being naive, as that may have been the ideal, but was far from the fact.

There was a good crowd milling about, however, with music playing from speakers giving the place a fine carnival atmosphere. I was standing at the front with Nadia when a man approached and she introduced me to him. He was a sort of mayor of Lobva and he stood in front of the crowd and made a speech to start them off. My heart sank when I heard him say *Schotlanka* and Nadia gave me a shove out in front of everyone. "Say *oodatchy*", so I did (it means good luck) and scuttled back into the crowd with burning cheeks. They gave me a commemorative medal, even though I did no more than walk about 100 yards with Vera, before she



Doris in Kachkanar with Mount Kachkanar in the background

decided we'd done enough. Her pupils ran up to speak to her and hugged her, so many that she was clotted with children. She held their coats for them when they went off to run.

...

In Kachkanar there was a concert at the Music School and Anya was to play a Georgian Dance. Svetlana had made the costume for her and it was stunning as well as elegant. The fly in the ointment here was that she had asked me if I would read a poem by Pushkin so I said yes and then found that she confidently expected me to read it in Russian.

After several run-throughs, she said it was fine and, after Anya's solo, I was announced and escorted out in front of a packed audience of fond parents. What is it about this place, I wondered. Nothing on earth would induce me to behave so irresponsibly at home. I didn't make too many mistakes, as I massacred poor Pushkin's verses and was given a round of applause that was probably more sympathetic than anything else.

## 21 November

I visited School No 2, new to me, and met Oksana, who introduced me to several enthusiastic classes (including, on Saturday, her class of beginners). The room was packed with pupils and a dozen parents and grannies sitting at the back, including some stern looking men.

The children had started learning English only in September and were keen to show how much they could do. One boy, who has some learning difficulties, stood at the front and counted to 100 and, when he got stuck at "ainty", Oksana encouraged the class to help him over the difficult bit and he finished in triumph to applause from us all. After this, the parents pushed desks



together and covered them with cloths; someone boiled the kettle and others ladled sweets, biscuits and cakes onto the desks. The children tucked in, with me sitting amongst them, in front of a plate filled with more calories than I'd normally see in a week. "Was that a tasty lesson?" Oksana asked them, when they'd finished, and they all yelled "Yes!"

# IntouristUK

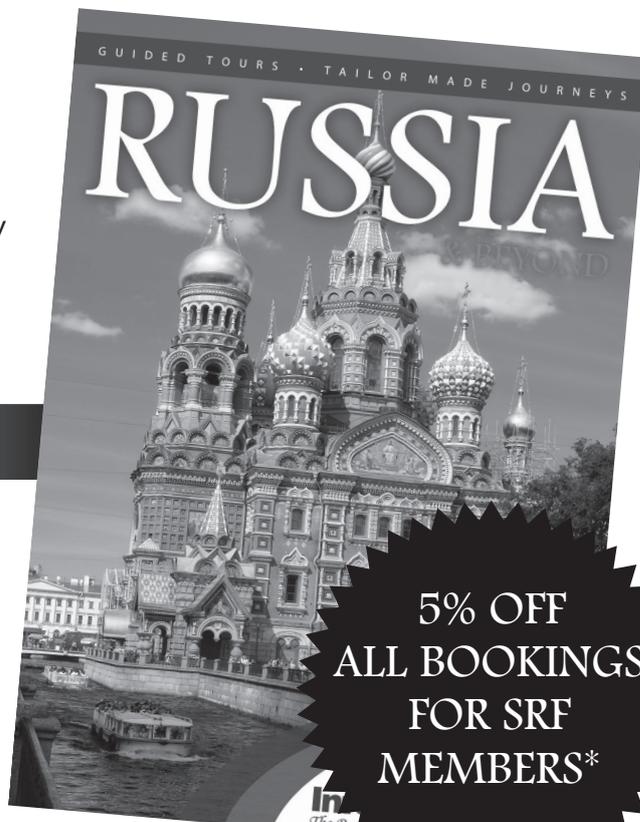
*The Russian Travel Specialist since 1938*

*In our 74th year of business, we present to you our brand new brochure, packed with new and updated products in a user friendly format. Along with our traditional best sellers, we are delighted to provide more fresh ways to appreciate a country that can offer a multitude of experiences and unforgettable journeys.*

## NEW FOR 2012

- One night free on St Petersburg hotels
- Even more River Cruising
- The Three Capitals Tour ft. Kazan

T 0844 875 4026 | E [info@intouristuk.com](mailto:info@intouristuk.com)  
[www.intouristuk.com](http://www.intouristuk.com)



**5% OFF  
ALL BOOKINGS  
FOR SRF  
MEMBERS\***

\*excludes visas & airport taxes

...FLIGHTS...VISAS...TAILOR MADE...TRANS SIBERIAN...CITY BREAKS...

# The power of a female pensioner

## Liliana Lungina in Oleg Dorman's 'Podstrochnik'

*Andrei Rogatchevski, senior lecturer in Russian at Glasgow University and SRF member, examines an unlikely TV sensation in Russia: a low-budget, seven-hour monologue that kept viewers awake late on Saturday nights*

**I**N JULY 2009, in four late-night instalments, Rossiya TV broadcast a seven-hour documentary, *Podstrochnik* (Eng: Word-by-word Translation). It was an autobiographical monologue of a translator, Liliana Lungina, told more or less in her own words.

The film was promptly hailed as the most important broadcasting event of the year and showered with prizes. A full transcript of it was released as a book, also called *Podstrochnik*, which has reportedly sold ten times more than the average print run for non-fiction in Russia.

The success story does not end here. *Podstrochnik* was edited into fourteen 26-minute and one final 43-minute episodes and shown again, in February 2010 on Kultura channel. Who was Liliana Lungina and how did a low-fi, televised monologue of her life hook contemporary television audiences?

Liliana Lungina (1920-1998) was a renowned translator from German, French, Norwegian and Swedish. Her most popular translation was of Astrid Lindgren's children books, but she remained anonymous outside Moscow intellectual and artistic circles. She was the wife of theatre director and script writer Semen Lungin and the mother of the film directors Pavel and Evgeny Lungin.

Liliana was born in Smolensk to Zinovy Markovich, a medium-rank Bolshevik functionary, and Maria Liberson, an educationist and theatre entrepreneur. Her father's job took her to Berlin at the age of five, then to Paris at ten, stopping by British-mandate Palestine in between. She returned to the USSR for good in 1934 and studied at some of the Soviet Union's most avant-garde, and prestigious, schools, including school No. 1 of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment in Moscow, and MIFLI (Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History). During the Second World War, she and her mother evacuated to Tatar of Naberezhnye Chelny, where she worked as a journalist for *Znamya Kommunizma*. She taught French at VOKS (All-Russia Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) and eventually became a member of the Translators Section of the Soviet Writers' Union.

*Podstrochnik* was filmed by Oleg Dorman, a former student of Semen Lungin. Its success came after years of rejections, initially from financial backers and then, when it was finished, from TV channels. It took Dorman eleven years to complete the film and a year to find a channel to air it. Dorman's difficulties with securing a financial backer and a broadcaster are understandable, given that the film consists mostly of lengthy shots of a 'talking head', infrequently interrupted by family photographs and scenes from her husband's films.

It made it on air only after the intervention of Boris Akunin, the popular detective author, and the influential TV journalist Leonid Parfenov, who saw *Podstrochnik* and became champions of it. Parfenov passed it on to Sergei Shumakov, a top producer general at Rossiya TV. Shumakov and his boss Oleg Dobrodeev decided to accept the film and show

it to the public.

*Podstrochnik's* limited appeal was obvious to the TV executives from the outset. Shumakov told *Literaturnaya Gazeta* that the film portrayed 'a very narrow circle of people, who lived not merely within the boundaries of the Sadovoye circular road [delineating the centre of Moscow], but [even more specifically] on the Arbat Street. It was not altogether clear if these people knew what was happening outside their circle'.

Moreover, Lungina's autobiographical monologue, arranged chronologically, did not reveal anything particularly new beyond the details of her private life. At school she studied with the poet David Samoilov, the cultural historian Georgy Knabe and the historian Anatoly Chernyaev, who went on to become Gorbachev's assistant. She was also on friendly terms with the literary editor Aleksandr Tvardovsky but we learn only that he got drunk on vodka after reading the manuscript of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and vowed to go all the way to Khrushchev, if necessary, to obtain permission for its publication – hardly sensational.

Even aesthetically, *Podstrochnik* is also unprepossessing, to say the least. Its austere style made the critic Yury Bogomolov exclaim, 'Where is visual expressiveness? Why are the attempts at reconstruction and memorable cuts (ostrye montazhnye styki) not there?'

**S**O IF Lungina could not say much about the famous people she knew. If her own life, adventurous as it may have been, could not really be termed heroic. If she was neither a media personality nor a popular actress nor a singer, what made viewers look forward to each episode of the Lungina saga?

The film, paradoxically, succeeds in retaining the attention of the viewer precisely by defying the basic strategies of attention keeping. According to Shumakov, 'Two minutes into someone's speech, when it is shown on TV, the viewer gets bored and wants to see something else, even if the speaker has a silver tongue. *Podstrochnik* is inexplicably different, though: Lungina's enunciation and tone of voice mesmerise you, and you cannot take your eyes off the screen,' he told *Rossiskaya Gazeta*.

The importance of Lungina's function as a cultural mediator should not be underestimated either. She was someone who not merely knew several European languages, but had a long personal experience of life in Western Europe, which may have ultimately precluded her from adjusting fully to the worst Soviet values. Although Lungina does not position herself as a role model, her behaviour in a number of situations (such as publicly protesting in the late 1930s against an automatic expulsion of children of the 'enemies of the people' from the Young Communist League) does set an example. In the opinion of one viewer, talking to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 'People like Lungina are extremely

rare, of course, but they do exist and [...] we should be able to see them and hear them, [...] to empathise, think and make a decision about our own situation'.

Characteristically, Lungina's monologue never turns into a sermon. It invariably stimulates an imaginary dialogue with the audience and an impression that Lungina's thought is being born right 'in front of the audience's eyes', as one commentator put it. Film critic Natalya Basina said Podstrochnik reflected Lungina's conversations with Dorman, a friend whom she respected and trusted and who, in turn, understood her very well. Although Dorman's part was excised from Podstrochnik, the film looks as if through Dorman Lungina was communicating with a really wide circle of friends.

**W**ITH Lungina having been dead for a dozen years, her monologue is like light from a cold star, and there is a tangible finality to her personal story and to the epoch it represents. This also contributes to Podstrochnik's attraction. Shumakov likened the impact of Lungina's narration to a resurfacing of Atlantis. 'For me, [Podstrochnik] is one of the first attempts to create an existential programme on television. This is a Russian version of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, albeit in oral form, but similarly epic in its depiction of the XX century. [...] The story is based on a private life of a specific person. There is no ideological agenda [...] and it is not judgemental. This is an everyday experience of a little girl, a young lady, a woman and an old age pensioner. She only talks about what she has witnessed personally. [...] And these particularities, ribbons, kisses, tears and resentments suddenly transform into a gigantic fresco,' he told *Izvestiya* in 2009.

This statement sheds light on a very significant, perhaps even crucial reason for Lungina's unexpected breakthrough into national television, because it provides a recognition of her indispensable role as an old age female witness. It is common knowledge that in Russia women live longer than men. The average life expectancy for a man is 59, for women 73, and the gap is widening. In other words, if the younger generation in Russia wants a lesson in history – not from a book, or a classroom, or the media – they are likely to get it from an old woman, because the old men are, sadly, not around any more.

Sergei Shumakov, taking advantage of a widespread Russian cliché that identifies a female figure (usually of a child-bearing age) with the concept of Motherland and, claimed that in Lungina he suddenly 'saw a crystal clear, highly artistic, incredibly tragic and at the same time exceedingly jovial and distinctive (*lichnostnyi*) image of my Motherland'.

How can this be reconciled with the reaction of a typical TV executive to Podstrochnik, as summarised by Sergei Parkhomenko? 'Eight hours of screen time spent on an old female intellectual (*pozhillaiia intelligentnaia tetka*)? [...] So what if she is an engaging speaker? My grandmother could spin a yarn too – you would not want her to stop'.

A cynic might say that the TV executives had nothing to lose in showing Podstrochnik. It was shown in the middle of summer, when viewing figures are traditionally low anyway. An even more cynical view might draw attention to the film's appearance close to Pavel Lungin's sixtieth birthday, on 12 July 2009. There may, however, be other explanations.

The film might never have been a success had it been shown a decade or so ago, what with the chaos of Yeltsin's last years and the first years of Putin's rule. Audiences then were more absorbed by bigger issues: the non-payment of wages, the 1998 default, the search for a presidential successor, the second Chechen war, the oligarchs, the Kursk submarine disaster, the struggle for the ownership of major TV companies, and so on and so forth. These days, when the Russian mass media are kept on a comparatively strict diet, it is somewhat easier for an individual voice to get noticed.

Also, Lungina, on the one hand, and the Putin-Medvedev media, on the other, coincidentally project a similar, optimistic viewpoint, something that must have helped Podstrochnik to get on air. When comparing two great representatives of labour camp literature, Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov, Lungina says that Solzhenitsyn enjoyed more success because *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was not as bleak as Shalamov's stories. Solzhenitsyn wisely chose a relatively good day in the life of a convict, which pleased a public that tends to prefer happy endings. Lungina's own story has a happy ending, too. Neither she nor her immediate family were arrested, and both she and her family managed to make a decent living on a freelance basis in the face of constant (often anti-Semitic) adversity. As she puts it, she has won a lottery of sorts and insists throughout the film that difficult situations can unexpectedly be turned to one's advantage and that things could always take a turn for the worse.

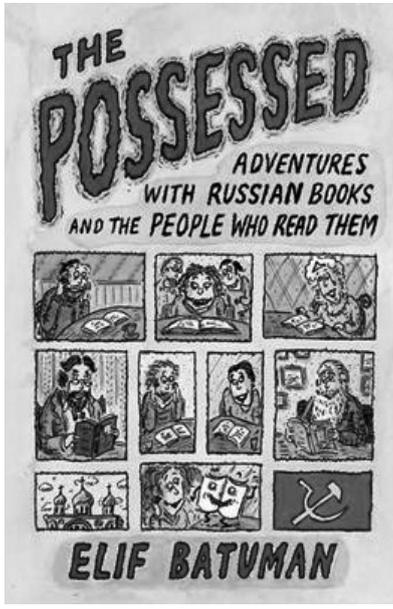
**O**NE OF Lungina's distant childhood memories, before she even left Russia, is of begging her father at a market to buy a little white goat to take home with her. Mr Markovich cannot resist his daughter's request. He buys the goat and brings it home, much to the horror of his neighbours in the communal flat. I do not know if Lungina was aware of an old Jewish parable about a Jew with a large family, who came to a rabbi to complain about the unbearable life in his overcrowded house. The rabbi told him to buy a goat and to keep it on the premises together with the family. The Jew was surprised but followed the rabbi's advice. Several days later he came to see the rabbi again. 'Did it get any better?' asked the rabbi. 'No,' said the Jew, 'in fact, it got worse'. 'Now,' said the rabbi, 'you can take the goat outside'. The moral of this parable is that there is no point in complaining about the present because the future might turn out to be even worse.

This also summarises neatly a logical conclusion of Lungina's story, made on the basis of her personal experience. The part about not criticising the present too much is the message that the state-controlled Russian media want their audiences to hear. If such a message was to come directly from the Russian government via television, the audiences might doubt. Owing to Lungina's delivery, the message acquires the credibility it would have hardly had otherwise. This may be yet another reason why Podstrochnik was broadcast.

*This article was first published in Kino magazine. It is reprinted with the kind permission of Andrei Rogatchevski. 'Podstrochnik' is available to view online.*

# You should read it in the original...

*Elif Batuman's collection of witty musings on Russian literature are fun, insightful and a long way from an academic monograph, writes Martin Dewhirst*



The Possessed by Elif Batuman

Granta, 2011, pp.298, £16.99

**E**LIF Batuman is of Turkish ancestry and was born and brought up in the USA; she regards English as her native language. Like many others, she read translations of some of the greatest works of Russian literature and was so impressed that she not only became interested in Russia but also decided to study the language and visit Russia and the former USSR whenever the opportunity came her way. She was lucky enough to go to Stanford

University and be taught by genuine, perceptive and highly cultured scholars like Professor Grigory Freidin. If you, dear reader, also first read works by Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky or Babel' in translation and suspected (rightly!) that they are even better when read in their original language, this is the book for you. It is very well written and also extremely readable – I devoured the 300+ pages in one day.

was a learned presentation on the role of tennis in his life and work – but again there is some interesting discussion of his play *The Living Corpse* and of the mysterious (Was he poisoned?!) death of its author, 'the greatest crank in world literature'). Much later Batuman refers again to Chekhov and suggests: 'One way to interpret "The Black Monk" is as a cautionary tale about academic scholarship as a form of madness'. One takes her point and realises why she decided not to become an academic herself. Another chapter describes the author's visit to St. Petersburg and its 2006 reconstruction of the original 1740 'Ice Palace', drawing our attention to the novel of that name by Ivan Lazhechnikov and to the Russia of the 1730s; and the concluding chapter, on Dostoevsky's *The Devils/The Demons/The Possessed*, discusses the mysterious and contradictory figure of Nikolai Stavrogin, indicative of the particular danger in Russia (but also present elsewhere, of course) of the 'personality cult' of anyone - except, perhaps, of Christ. There are some very stimulating references here to a French scholar, Rene Girard, who 'developed mimetic contagion into an anthropological theory, using it to explain historically and geographically diverse manifestations of social violence'. True to her focus on 'literature and life', Batuman alternates between trying to grasp Dostoevsky's meaning and describing the tormented life of her fellow graduate students at Stanford, the mentality of some of whom appears to be much closer to that of the Russian underground terrorist extremists in Dostoevsky's novel than one might have hoped.

The 'Russian' chapters are interspersed with three sections about a summer the author spent in Samarkand studying ancient Uzbek poetry (her knowledge of Turkish was a great help, of course). In English translation this poetry seems to be very undistinguished, but it is probably much better in Russian translation and, one can assume, in the original. Given the current attempt by Mr. Putin to make Russia the control centre of a Eurasian Empire, we should be paying more attention to the cultural heritage of Central Asia. In these sections, as elsewhere, Batuman writes well: '... Vice-Rector Safarov, a personage whose refrigerator-like build, rubbery face, and heavy eyelids brought to mind some anthropomorphic piece of furniture in a Disney movie'. And note her conclusion! Despite not pursuing an academic career, she doesn't regret the years spent on reading (Russian) belles-lettres: 'If I could start over today, I would choose literature again. If the answers exist in the world or in the universe, I still think that's where we're going to find them'.

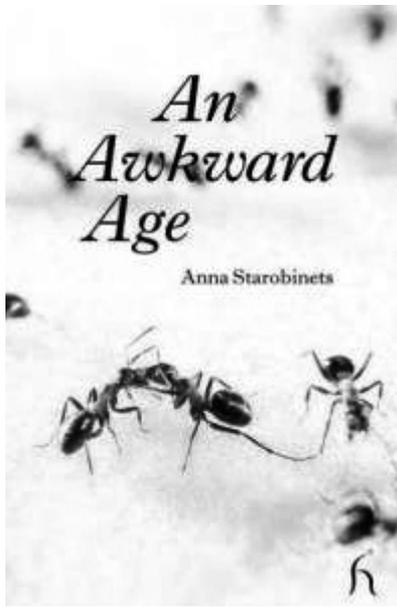
However well you think you remember the works Ms. Batuman mentions, she is likely to draw your attention to details that you overlooked or have forgotten. Take Chekhov's 'Lady with Lapdog', for instance, in which 'Gurov's wife, Anna's husband, Gurov's crony at the club, even the lapdog, are all nameless. No contemporary American short-story writer would have had the stamina not to name that lapdog'. I would add that if this comment makes you want to (re)read the story, you should notice that its last word is *nachinaetsya*: '...the most complicated and difficult part was only just beginning'. End of story. The perfect time and place at which a truly great writer decided to stop.

How much more productive some of Batuman's insights are than many of the papers one might listen to at costly (pseudo-)academic conferences devoted to literary subjects! For me the highlights of this monograph are the skittish sketches devoted to two such international gatherings discussing the life and works of Isaak Babel' (although it must be granted that there were some valuable by-products of that meeting, such as Batuman's comments on concepts of 'the person' and on the relative importance of 'doing' and 'being') and Lev Tolstoy (at which there

*Martin Dewhirst, Department of Slavonic Studies, University of Glasgow*

# Monstrous mundaneness

*Anna Starobinets, Russia's 'Queen of Horror', finds the abhorrent and fantastical in the bland, everyday grind of post-Soviet Russia reality, writes Lewis White*



An Awkward Age by Anna Starobinets

Hesperus Press Ltd, 2010, pp.160, £13.99

**T**HIS Anna Starobinets is an odd one. Having gone into this collection of short stories unfamiliar with the 33-year-old Muscovite's writing, I've come out the other end rather bewildered and not a little revolted. But that's the idea

The bright young thing of Russia's 'horror fiction' scene has been nominated 'the Queen of Russian horror' in her native country, and this collection of six tales published for the first time in English

marks her arrival on the shores of Foggy Albion with a very Russian sense of the macabre. Her work has been described as 'intellectual fantasy', the tag indicating that she is no writer of escapist *fantastiki* for light reading on the Metro to work.

Her skill lies in distorting scenes familiar to many a kitchen-sink drama, twisting the dysfunctional domestic worlds of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya into Kafka-esque nightmares of the grotesque.

The first tale is reminiscent of the dystopian New Russia of Victor Pelevin's *Generation P*; reality is a commodity to be bought and sold, as a mysterious Agent scripts to order accidents, love affairs, lives, deaths on the instructions of a sinister Co-ordinator. The story opens with a vision of Russia so evocatively squalid and visceral that it may have been cut from Vladimir Sorokin and Ilya Khrzhanovsky's film 4.

In the second, a young boy caught in the turmoil of his parents' failing marriage finds order in the obsessive imposition of a series of increasingly dangerous 'Rules' that he must follow in a seemingly never-ending and unforgiving Game.

Her work is not without a certain wry humour – we are introduced to the rather world-weary character of Yasha in an absurd revisiting of the legend of the Wandering Jew, in which he finds himself sympathetically though firmly ostracised by his colleagues and gratefully turfed out by his scheming wife and mother-in-law after one morning, through no fault of his own, waking up dead

The title story is the most potent of the collection: under the genuinely repellent body horror of teenage

Maxim's metamorphosis lies a sensitive observation of a mother, daughter and son rent by desertion, separation, alienation, and loneliness. Dislocation and alienation, bewilderment in the face of change are elements central to this collection. It's easy to read Starobinets's work as metaphor for a post-Soviet Russia in which many have struggled to adapt to the pace and scale of transformation – however, while the scenes and scenarios she portrays are unmistakably Russian, such themes are universal in their familiarity.

Her ability to marry the fantastical and monstrous to rather grim *bytovoe* drama will likely win her fans in the English-speaking world as well. With another collection of short stories, a children's book and two novels published in Russia since the original release of *An Awkward Age* in 2005, we can look forward to plunging further into the unsettling universe of Starobinets in the near future.

*Lewis White is a graduate of Glasgow University's Department of Slavonic Studies*

 **Yakety yak**  
Language Cafe

Improve your foreign language conversation skills in relaxed, friendly cafes in Edinburgh in small groups with experienced native-speaking tutors.

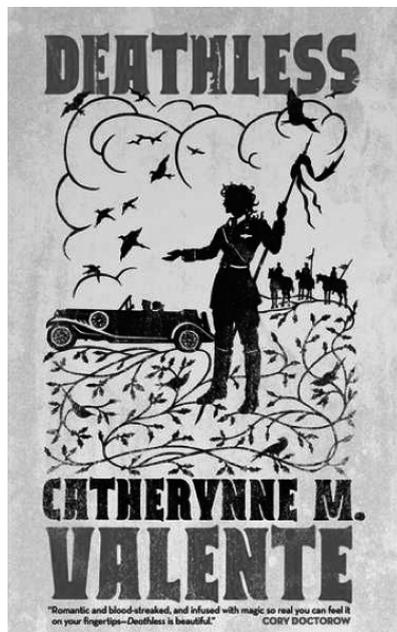
Russian  
French  
Gaelic  
German  
Italian  
Portuguese  
Spanish

Drop in and yak with us –  
no need to book. £7 per session.

For more information please phone  
07826 555134  
or visit  
[www.yaketyyak-languagecafe.co.uk](http://www.yaketyyak-languagecafe.co.uk)

# Valente's mythpunk

*Catherynne M. Valente knows intimately Russian folklore and warps it to weave new stories, writes Catriona McAra*



Deathless by Catherynne M. Valente

Tor, 2011, pp.352, £15

**F**ORMERLY a student of classics at Edinburgh University, the New York-based writer Catherynne M. Valente has now firmly established herself as a major player in the literary fields of the fantastic. Her neologism, 'mythpunk', offers one way of encapsulating her eclectic oeuvre, rich textual aesthetic and intertextual strategy, leading to a seamless conflation of genres.

Valente's recent novel, *Deathless*, is set in a fictional version of Stalinist Russia. With engaging, thoroughly researched and creatively reframed references to Russian folklore, Valente retells the tale of Marya Morevna, a well-read young woman who can 'recite two hundred lines of Pushkin from memory', who is willingly captured by the ominously named Koschei the Deathless, a handsome and immortal prince. While previous renditions of this tale, including 'The Death of Koshechi the Deathless' which appears in Andrew Lang's *Red Fairy Book* (1890), have tended to present the male perspective, Valente follows in the

feminist footsteps of such writers as Angela Carter and Kate Bernheimer through retelling a narrative from a young woman's point of view and by offering a more embodied account of her trials and tribulations.

In Valente's version, Marya is the youngest of four sisters who live in Petrograd. One by one she watches as her siblings are swept away into matrimony by a series of rich suitors. Marya is reserved for Comrade Koschei Bessmertny who is enticed by her love of Alexander Pushkin, particularly the epic fairy tale poem 'Ruslan and Lyudmila' (1820) in which Koschei himself makes a cameo: 'There Tsar Koschei wastes away, poring over his pale gold'. She has already been warned of his arrival: 'Girls must be very, very careful to care only for ribbons and magazines and wedding rings [...] They must never read Pushkin; they must never say clever things [...] or they will draw his attention!' Marya becomes his 'volchitsa, medvezhka, koshechka' ('Wolfling, she-bear, wild little kitten'), and though his huntress successfully claims a golden feather from the elusive Firebird for him, he will not marry her. To win her husband, Marya must complete three tasks and discover his death which is secreted in a glass chest. Then she must defeat his brother, Viy the Tsar of Death, and resist the inevitable charms of Prince Ivan.

Further archetypes of Slavic mythology make cunning appearances throughout this tale including the monstrous witch-figure Baba Yaga ('Chairman Yaga') and little domestic domoviye (house-spirit-comrades). It is Valente's imaginative appropriation of these well-known characters, coupled with her feminist

slant on a communist context, which enables one to read *Deathless* as bittersweet rewriting of history. Lenin is likened to an entombed Snow White while Stalin, all too tellingly, has 'the tastes of a spoiled princess'. But far from belittling or trivialising the Soviet-era, Valente effectively deploys the fairy tale genre to expose the nascent fantasy behind this regimented reality.

*Catriona McAra is research assistant in Cultural Theory at Huddersfield University. She recently submitted her doctoral thesis at Glasgow University.*



*Saffrani*

**For the finest Indian Curry & Sea Food Cuisine**

**OPENING HOURS**

*Monday*

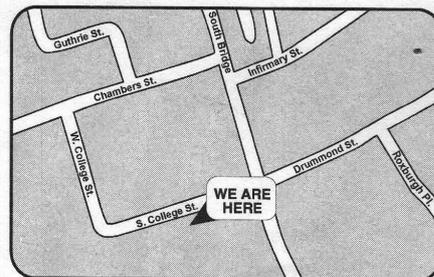
5.00 p.m. - 11.00 p.m.

*Tuesday - Sunday*

12.00 noon - 11.00 pm

*(Lunch available between 12.00 noon and 4.00 p.m.)*

**Special Two Course Lunch  
£5.90 per person**



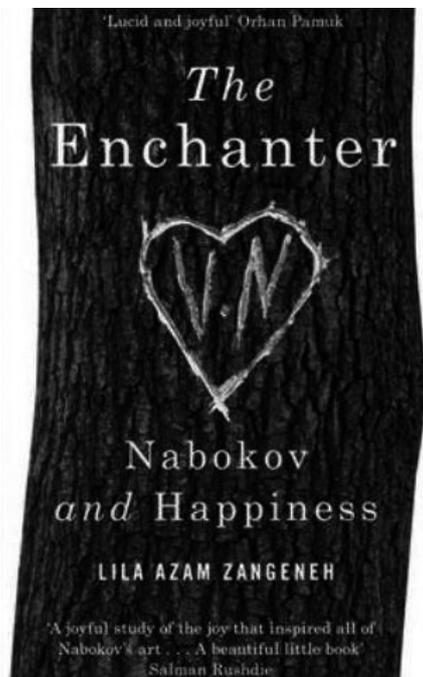
**11 South College Street,  
Edinburgh EH8 9AA.  
Tel.: 0131 667 1597**



**Take-Away Available**

# Nabokov and me, me, me

*Lila Azam Zanganeh's love of Nabokov has mesmerised her, and it could you, too,  
writes Michael Rodgers*



The Enchanter by Lila Azam Zanganeh

Allen Lane, 2011, pp. 256, £20

blending memoir, confession, biography, and criticism, articulates how she has been rapturously overcome by reading Vladimir Nabokov's texts. As such, it will appeal to both the ardent Nabokophile as well as the kind of reader who becomes entranced whilst reading.

Through a mishmash of narrative style, typography, and illustration, *The Enchanter* attempts to explore, and indeed perpetuate, Nabokov's seemingly indefatigable zest for life. Describing aspects of Nabokov's own life, often through the plots and details of his novels and nonfiction such as *The Gift*, *Lolita*, *Speak*, *Memory*, and *Ada*, it seems like Zanganeh has literally fallen into her own frisson-induced rabbit hole and entered Nabokov's textual world(s).

Indeed, the text is as much about Nabokov's pursuit of happiness as it is with her own joyful experience of reading him. When readers discern 'ECSTATICALLY' as a lengthy acrostic running through twelve vignettes for example, it is clear that the theme of happiness saturates not only the content of *The Enchanter* but also its form. Zanganeh's claim that 'a writer's true biography should amount to no more than the story of his style' acts as a pithy synopsis of her project.

The opulent writing, and oddly familiar phrases, are revealed (with the help of a Comprehensive Quote Index) to be Nabokov's own words, woven into Zanganeh's narrative in some kind of masterful bricolage

## W

HEN A piece of written work resists classification, two things occur. Firstly, it makes you think about the rigidity of formal parameters. Secondly, it invites a reaction.

Lila Azam Zanganeh's new book *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness*,

exercise. In this respect, it appears that *The Enchanter* has met his enchantress (a kind of queasy relationship foreshadowed by the initials etched onto a tree on the front cover of the book).

Although Zanganeh has chosen a fascinating theme for her book (Nabokov seemed to maintain a joyous disposition throughout his entire life despite losing not only an inherited fortune and his homeland, but also his father to a political activist), there are more than a few caveats. Each of the fifteen, turgidly-titled, chapters all have a subtitle starting with 'Where the writer', eventually making us doubt whether Zanganeh is starting to refer to herself rather than Nabokov.

Also, among the purloined Nabokovian dazzle, the text has its fair share of saccharine cliché: 'And that – simply that – was happiness', 'butterflies exhaled by words', 'You being you'.

It may be argued, however, that such clichés shouldn't be disparaged given our inability to resist conventional phrasing in expressing ineffable joy at all things beautiful. At times indulgent – 'he keeps telling me', presumptuous – 'it was there, in the glades of his hunting adventures, that he found his greatest happiness', infuriating even – 'I am lying a little', Zanganeh's 'monomaniacal fantasy' where she conducts an imagined interview (the back of her head having been superimposed on an existing photo of Nabokov) is arguably the text's riskiest play.

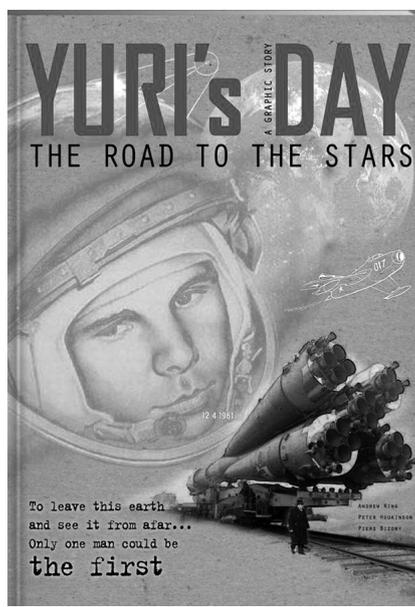
Despite the discrepancies, it was extremely refreshing to read a book on Nabokov that challenged received ideas of what literature should be and should offer, as well as seeing an author mesmerised by what certain writing can achieve. For although *The Enchanter* is likely to jolt conscientious Nabokov scholars out of their wingback chairs, Zanganeh will arguably be as indifferent to any (miserable) critique that comes her way.

*Michael Rodgers is a graduate student at Strathclyde University. He specialises in the relationship between Nabokov and Nietzsche.*

*Michael will be giving a talk on Nabokov at the Scotland-Russia Institute on Friday, January 20. The talk begins at 6.30pm; donations requested of £2 for SRF members and £5 for non-members, payable at the door. Booking essential.*

# Is it a bird, a plane? No, it's

*Legend, icon, souvenir, comic book hero? Muireann Maguire suggests how Yuri Gagarin should not be remembered.*



Yuri's Day by Andrew King, Peter Hodkinson and Piers Bizony

Spaced Design Ltd, pp.175, £9.99

**M**ANY years ago I read a hagio-graphical Soviet biopic (a hagiopic?) of Yuri Gagarin with the startling line, 'On the morning of April 12th, 1961, the sun rose, as usual'. The wording seemed to imply that, in recognition of Gagarin's imminent feat, the sun might well have tried something different.

Fifty years on, publishers are still seeking unconventional ways

to relaunch the Gagarin legend. *Yuri's Day: The Road to the Stars* engagingly retells the story of the world's first manned space flight in captioned, black-and-white cartoons.

It has three creators: illustrator Andrew King, science writer Peter Hodkinson, and Piers Bizony, an experienced popular science author who has written about life on Mars, Kubrick's science fiction, and NASA's lunar programme. All three contribute to the project website – [www.yuri-gagarin.com](http://www.yuri-gagarin.com) – which complements the book. Recent posts include supplementary details on Gagarin, a diagram of his spacecraft, the Vostok, and an ambitious effort (by King) to define 'capitalism', 'Communism', and other 'terms and ideas that were crucial in the Cold War period'.

If I appear to be implicating the authors in a somewhat naive approach to the wider ideological and political context of their subject, I am.

*Yuri's Day* is simplistic, cliched, and cartoonish – and not just because it's a 'graphic novel'. Format aside, there is nothing innovative about this book: even the subtitle, unironically borrowed from Gagarin's autobiography, signals its lack of originality. *Yuri's Day* sketches history as a sequence of melodramatic caricatures, directed by a pop-eyed, ranting Stalin and the Bogartesque silhouette of 'Chief Designer' Korolev, architect of the Soviet space programme.

Gagarin's traumatic wartime childhood, his cliché-littered courtship of his wife Valentina, the intensive two-year cosmonaut training programme

in Kazakhstan, all transpire against a backdrop of bloodthirsty Nazis, hellish gulags, and bullying bureaucrats.

King's expressive illustrations successfully convey the human detail that made Gagarin such an appealing everyman: at pilot school in Orenburg, Gagarin water-skied on one leg to impress the local girls; too diminutive to see over the control panel of his Mig-15, he gained his fighter licence by flying seated on a cushion.

These and many other anecdotes, and even text (such as the 'Chief Designer' sobriquet, or the description of Stalin as 'terrified of intelligent soldiers') are imported unacknowledged from Bizony's earlier monograph, *Starman: The Truth Behind the Legend of Yuri Gagarin* (1998), co-written with Jamie Doran. In turn, *Starman* relies almost exclusively on Western or translated Soviet sources, apart from a few interviews with former cosmonauts and associates of Gagarin.

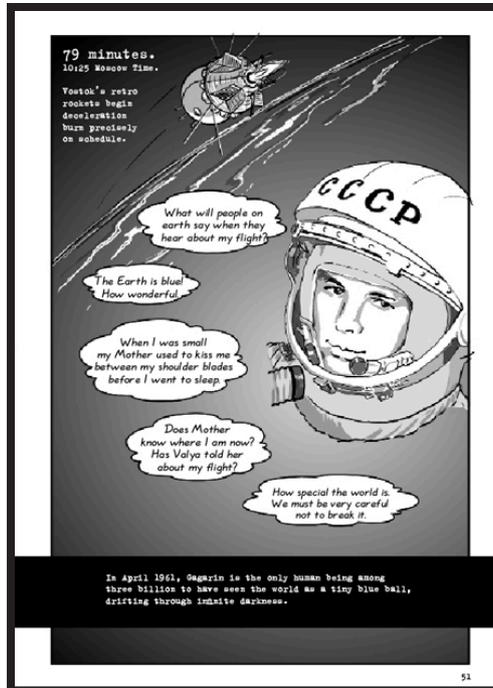
It is particularly heavily indebted to Yaroslav Golovanov's 1978 *Our Gagarin: The First Cosmonaut* and



# just Yuri Gagarin

His Native Land, a hagiopic with section titles such as “Why I Love Him” and “Gagarin’s Immortality”.

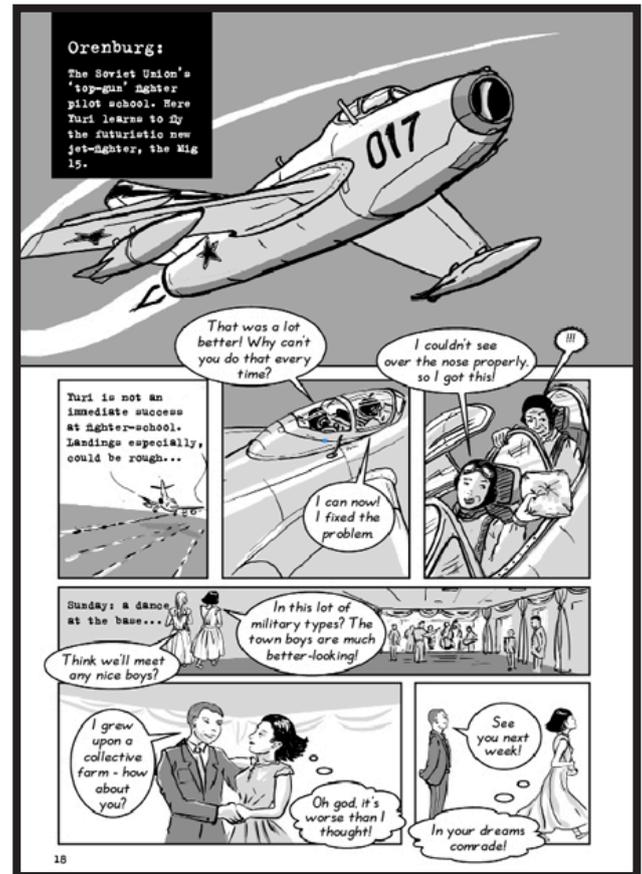
In its final pages, Yuri’s Day dwells on how the post-orbital Gagarin, spoiled by fame, supposedly entered a downward, self-destructive spiral. This view misses an essential point. As Lev Danilkin emphasizes in his considerably more



nanced 2011 biography Yuri Gagarin, from 1961 Gagarin accepted the role of a ‘living souvenir’, representing Soviet Russia not only to the world but to its own people. His highly conspicuous consumption was simply another facet of this gruelling public routine. Along with all the public appearances – what Danilkin calls ‘tree-planting and ribbon-cutting’ – Gagarin’s hedonism reassured ordinary, cash-starved Russians that the Soviet consumer dream might just come true for them, too. Moreover, in sexual matters he observed an old-maidish propriety, even managing to make a real-life clinch with Gina Lollobrigida look clumsily Photo-shopped.

Among the endless iconography of Gagarin opening hydroelectric dams in Golovanov’s book, there is a significant photograph of Liubov’ Kosmodemianskaia, mother of the martyred patriot and Communist icon Zoia, with Gagarin and his eternal understudy, the cosmonaut German Titov. An arm around each man, she tousles their hair as they squirm like boy. The symbolic burden is explicit: Gagarin and Titov were living legends who redeemed the sacrifices of dead heroes. Yet the real Yuri was neither a legend nor a comic book hero, but a courageous, responsible man who made dreams reality. His own dream was to reach the moon; mercifully, perhaps, he died before the Americans beat him to it.

*Muireann Maguire is Career Development Fellow in Russian Literature and Culture at Wadham College, Oxford*



## LEARN OR IMPROVE YOUR ENGLISH WITH A HIGHLY QUALIFIED PRIVATE TUTOR

Friendly tutor available for assistance in general, business or academic English. I have been teaching for over 6 years and have experience of teaching beginners through to advanced students. I am educated to Postgraduate level.

Whatever your reason for learning English, I can help you achieve your goals – from conversational English to exam preparation for FCE, CAE, IELTS’ and TOEFL qualifications.

I provide highly individualised lessons, tailored to your needs and have an encouraging approach to learning.

I am happy to teach all ages and I have full disclosure for teaching young students.

PRIVATE LESSONS - £30 per hour

SMALL GROUPS (UP TO FOUR PEOPLE) - £9 per hour

Please contact me on [susialexander@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:susialexander@hotmail.co.uk) for more details.

# Collecting emigre memories

*The Solzhenitsyn House of Russia Abroad has been trying to preserve the artefacts that hold together the collective memory of the exiled Russian elite. Svetlana Romanova, of the House of Russia Abroad, tells the SRF about its work.*

THE 1917 Revolution was a tragedy for the Russian elite. Despite being scattered across the globe, these people still never lost hope that one day they, or their children or grandchildren, could return to Russia; it is thanks to this faith that they held and hoarded anything – documents, memories, photographs, objects – that was a witness to their former lives.

The dream to return to Russia was fulfilled only at the beginning of the 1990s, and only the children, grandchildren or great grandchildren of the first wave of emigrants were able to see their homeland. Throughout these years much of the priceless heritage of the Russian emigration was lost or ended up in private collections.

The task of collating, storing and studying these objects, this cultural heritage, is being continued by a unique institution: The Solzhenitsyn House of Russia Abroad (*Дом русского зарубежья имени Александра Солженицына*).

It was founded in 1995 by the Alexander Solzhenitsyn Russian Social Fund, YMCA-Press and the Moscow local government.

The centre adopted Solzhenitsyn's name only after his death in 2009. Solzhenitsyn was among the first people to call for the study of the phenomenon of Russian emigration. While an emigre in America, he would ask fellow Russians to send him photos and documents that



could tell the story of the revolution and the civil war.

It's fitting then, that the House of Russia Abroad carries Solzhenitsyn's name. The collection has a large archive of over 50,000 items made up of academic texts, literature, memoirs, letters, postcards and more.

As well as the archive there is a library with over 75,000 items of emigre publications, including contemporary ones.

The Solzhenitsyn House of Russia Abroad has created a museum of Russian emigration, made up of fine art, films, photographs, print.

The library exists thanks to donations from Russian emigres across the globe.

The Centre is cooperating with international archives, libraries, universities and Russian cultural centres. Our book-help programme began in 1995. We send books to international libraries and centres of Russian culture, sometimes building a collection from scratch.

Our goal is to draw a new audience to contemporary Russian literature.

In our 16 years of existence we have achieved great things. So what's next?

We will continue to expand our programmes and develop our centre to create a treasure chest of spiritual and material worth.



Alexander and Natalia Solzhenitsyn  
at the House of Russia Abroad

# Demanding fair elections



**T**HE Russian community in Edinburgh and its supporters joined demonstrators all over Russia on December 24 to protest against the results of parliamentary elections. The demonstration took place at the Russian Consulate and was organised by Sophia Soboleva, Maksim Naumov and Denis Alyshev.

On December 24 tens of thousands gathered in Moscow's Sakharov Prospect. The protest was much bigger than the one held two weeks' previously.





*Russian at*  
 **THE EUROPEAN BOOKSHOP**

*Русский  
язык и  
литература  
~ Книги на  
русском  
языке*

LANGUAGE LEARNING MATERIALS AND LITERATURE  
IN RUSSIAN FROM  
THE EUROPEAN BOOKSHOP

We offer an extensive range of Russian books including textbooks, dictionaries, fiction, poetry, non-fiction, children's books, audiobooks, DVDs, newspapers, periodicals & language learning resources.

We are offering all readers a **10% discount** on all Russian titles.

To benefit from this discount please quote the code **SRFEB10** when placing an order by phone, email or in the customer reference box online.

Tel: 020-7734-5259  
email: [direct@esb.co.uk](mailto:direct@esb.co.uk)  
[www.russianbookshop.co.uk](http://www.russianbookshop.co.uk)

 @europeanbooks  
 /europeanbookshop

[www.russianbookshop.co.uk](http://www.russianbookshop.co.uk)