www.scotlandrussiaforum.org scotrussforum@blueyonder.co.uk

Readers are encouraged to provide feedback on the Forum Newsletter; to submit comments on, and provide proposals for, content and for the Forum's events programme; and to correspond on issues likely to be of interest to the membership. All such contributions may be sent to the address below or to the Director, Jenny Carr, at scotrussforum@blueyonder.co.uk.

Please advise omissions and errors to the editor ; these will be rectified where possible.

This issue (No 16) is going in hard copy to all, because of the inclusion of the annual report and inserts from organisations of interest to members. (Proposals for further relevant inserts are welcome; commercial ones on the basis of payment for postage, charitable at no cost.)

In this issue :

A striking mixture of content this quarter: an important article about Anna Politkovskaya by Martin Dewhirst; a vivid review of 'Murder in Samarkand' by Craig Murray, who will be talking to the Forum in March; two articles about little-known aspects of Russian history and culture: the almost forgotten writer Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky (1887-1950) brought to us by the publishers of GLAS, who came to the Forum in October; and a review of Harold Shukman's 'War or revolution: Russian Jews and conscription in Britain 1917', which recovers a fascinating corner of our common past

What other periodical gives you all this ? Thanks to those who have written for the SRF Newsletter. Keep those articles coming !

This newsletter 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.

Email:annscaldwell@gmail.com

SRF SPRING PROGRAMME 2007

We offer a varied programme this spring and summer: the literary theme of our autumn talks is replaced by travellers' tales of exotic places, the politics of Uzbekistan, an insight into some less known aspects of Russian society, and a party. What more could you want? P0Most events are in Old St.Pauls which has good parking and is easy to reach by public transport (bus or train). There is plenty of time to meet the speaker and other members informally over a glass of wine after each talk. All talks £2 members/students, £4 others.

Thursday 11 January – Meg Luckins "Tadjikistan: 'Living in a town called Monday – some impressions of life in Tajikistan'

Lying at the heart of Central Asia, and in the middle of the ancient Silk Road, Tajikistan borders Afghanistan, China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. More than 93% of its area is mountainous and over 50% of its territory lies above 3,000m. A disastrous civil war in the 1990s further impoverished this region and the lingering effects can still be felt in economic -/and political life. More than 60% of the labour force is employed in low-productivity agriculture (particularly the cotton-growing sector). Tajikistan's proximity to Afghanistan is a key strategic and geo-political factor for the international community.

Meg Luckins, honorary consul in Scotland for Kyrgyzstan and a founder and first chairman of the Scotland-Russia Forum, has been working in Tajikistan (and places even further east) for the last two years as Team Leader of a 3 year project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). This is a chance to find out what she's been up to and to hear about a little visited and fascinating part of the world.
7.30pm. Royal Over-Seas League, 100 Princes St., Edinburgh. The Prince's Suite.

Friday 16 February – Maslenitsa Party

Joint event with the Edinburgh University student Russian Society.
Details to be arranged – but you can be sure of lots of blini! Members will receive an invitation with full details. Others please contact 0131 662 9149
7.30pm Old St Paul's Church Hall, Jeffrey Street, Edinburgh
Tickets on sale in advance and entry by ticket only.

Friday 16 March – Craig Murray "Murder in Samarkand"

Craig Murray was the controversial British ambassador in Uzbekistan 2002-4, equally unbeloved by the FCO and Uzbek authorities: Jack Straw said he was "a deep embarrassment to the entire Foreign Office", President Karimov's opinion is not on record. His crime was to report the human rights abuses he found during his period of office and the US and UK acceptance of intelligence obtained under torture. His recent book Murder in Samarkand (Mainstream 2006), which is reviewed in this issue is a moving description of his time in Uzbekistan, his courageous stand on human rights issues and his complicated personal life.
The paperback edition of the book will be available for sale after the talk.
7.30pm Old St Paul's Church Hall, Jeffrey Street, Edinburgh

Friday 20 April – Svetlana Stephenson "Homelessness in Russia Today"

Svetlana Stephenson is Senior Lecturer in International Comparative Sociology at London Metropolitan University and author of Crossing the Line. Vagrancy, Homelessness and Social Displacement in Russia (Ashgate, 2006). She has researched urban social organisation in Moscow and written on disadvantaged social groups in the informal economy (sex workers, street children and homeless people). She will describe current problems in urban Russia.
7.30pm Old St Paul's Church Hall, Jeffrey Street, Edinburgh

Tuesday 29 May – Simon Roberts "Motherland: a pictorial journey through Russia"
Simon Roberts is a professional photographer and has been Sunday Times Young Photographer of the Year, and NUJ Photo Journalist of the Year. In July 2004 he moved to Russia and spent a year travelling the country working on a book and exhibition project with his wife (a Russian speaker, teacher and writer). They travelled over 75,000 km, crossing eleven time zones, visiting almost every region of the country and over 100 towns and cities from the forgotten extremities of Russia's vast territory, journeying to the Far East – Sakhalin Island, Magadan and Chukotka – through the Siberian provinces, across to Russia's western-most point Kaliningrad, down to the Caucasus, along the Volga River and to the Altai Republic where Russia borders China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan.
Copies of Motherland (Chris Boot, March 2007) will be on sale after the talk.
7.30pm Old St Paul's Church Hall, Jeffrey Street, Edinburgh

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Edinburgh University Russoc

January
13 Jan – Old New Year's Party (sponsored by Scottish &Newcastle) – fancy dress, Baltica, Russian disco, future telling, Russian party games! Free for members, small charge for non-members.
17 Jan – Conference for students studying Russian in Scotland
(jointly with the Russian Dept)
Film screening + Debate (jointly with the Film Society)

February
Meeting with Vladimir Malygin, the Consul General of the Russian Federation in Scotland + Reception
16 Feb – Maslenitsa Party (jointly with SRF – see above)
23 Feb – Meeting with Jock Dempster, Chairman of the All-Scotland branch of the Russian Convoy Club, WWII veteran

March
Meeting with Victor Suvorov, former KGB colonel, who lives in the UK since 1978 and who was sentenced to death by the Soviet Court. Author of many controversial books on the history of Russia.
Other events and dates will be finalized shortly.

Wishing all of you a Happy New Year and a wonderful time at home!
S Novym Gogom!

Contact details for the above: russian.edinburgh@googlemail.com

To find past SRF notices: http://russian-scotland.blogspot.com/

For London events: www.pushkinclub.org.uk -

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ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA, 1958 – 2006

The subdued and tactful demonstration of grief and horror outside the Russian Consulate in Edinburgh last October after the brutal killing of the independent journalist Anna Politkovskaya was just one of scores – probably hundreds – of similar gatherings in dozens of countries around the globe. It isn't easy, some people find, to explain why this particular murder caused so much distress. After all, assassinations in Russia have become an almost literally everyday event in Russia during the last fifteen years. For me, some light was shed on a few of the reasons for the powerful reaction to Anna's death by a mysterious, almost mystical, apparent coincidence. The silent, twilight, candle-lit vigil opposite the Russian consulate in London on October 10 overlapped with two of the most important Russian cultural events in Britain this year: the U.K. premiere in the Barbican of the St. Petersburg Maly theatre's production of King Lear and the opening event, on the South Bank, in a series of readings from a new anthology, called War & Peace, of contemporary Russian prose (some readers of this newsletter will have attended the Edinburgh meeting with three of the young contributors to this collection). Two days later, watching Lev Dodin's interpretation of Shakespeare's tragedy (one of several very recent Russian stagings of this work), it was difficult not to reflect on the miseries of a country with an apparently strong 'power vertical' when the man at the top makes a terribly wrong and badly informed decision and when a young lady (in this case she is called Cordelia) declines to play by the usual rules of the game and says what she really thinks and feels. One knows only too well what Anna Politkovskaya thought, felt, said and wrote about Mr. Putin. I left the vigil early to go to the War and Peace event, bought the book and noticed that the section on war in contemporary Russia is considerably longer than the section on peace. This reminded me of Anna's conviction that the first and second recent wars against and in Chechnya have had and will have a disastrous impact on the whole of Russia. By now over a million and a half soldiers who have served in the federal army in the North Caucasus and physically survived have returned or relocated to towns and villages all over Russia. The devastating impact of the carnage on these young men's psychology can make one extremely pessimistic about the future health of their society, even to a Russophile like me.

It would be more tactful to write a short article about Anna Politkovskaya than to write such an article about Anna Politkovskaya and me. However, as I had the privilege of knowing Anna rather well, one of my personal insights into her character may be of some interest. I first met her in 2003 at the extradition hearings relating to Chechen leader Akhmed Zakaev in Bow Street Magistrates' Court just opposite the Covent Garden opera house in London. She was covering the proceedings for her newspaper, Novaya gazeta. I was able to talk with her briefly during the lunch breaks, but I wanted to have a really long conversation with her and asked if we could meet on any of the free days between the sessions (there was frequently a gap of one or more days during these very protracted hearings). I got a polite but firm 'No!'. She told me that she always immediately went back to Moscow if the following day was free because she had huge piles of backlog to work on and there were lots of people waiting there for her to listen to their stories. What a contrast to the many Russians (actually, she was of Ukrainian descent – her maiden name was Mazepa) who try to spend as much time as possible in the West! And I should add that Anna's sister lived (and lives) in London, so Anna could have stayed on for free...

Something similar happened when I had the privilege of interpreting for her at the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2005. She arrived in the evening before her scheduled appearances the next day, and I was not surprised to learn that she would be leaving Scotland early the following morning. On her one full day in town she had some private business meetings (with her publishers, I think, and maybe with interviewers) in the morning, so the only chance to show her the sights was between her two official engagements. However, almost at the last minute Anna was asked to speak at an Amnesty International event during the gap, and of course she immediately agreed – as a result of which she never had the chance to tour and admire the

Scottish capital. She spoke at the AI meeting without any notes or time for preparation (she was one of those people who speak as well as they write), and I think it was the best of her three working sessions that day. Someone in the audience asked her to talk about the occasion in 2001 when she was sentenced to death by the Russian (not Chechen) forces - she didn't volunteer this information and was evidently very reluctant to go into detail about one of her most horrific experiences. I doubt whether those present will ever forget her account of her days and nights in a cold, damp, narrow pit dug deep into the ground when she thought she had at best a 20% chance of survival. Fortunately word of her plight somehow got to her paper and then to the Presidential Administration and abroad, so on that occasion she was saved and managed to stay alive for another five years.

It was apparently Stalin who modestly said that no-one, apparently including himself, was irreplaceable. There are numerous other brave and principled professional journalists in Russia, not least on her own paper, but I doubt whether any of them will become another Anna Politkovskaya. I think she would have liked us to remember her by reading her books and, if we have a sufficiently good knowledge of Russian, by perusing her twice-weekly newspaper, which can be read on-line in Britain for free.

Martin Dewhirst

The address of the on-line edition of Novaya gazeta is
http://www.novayagazeta.ru/

Anna Politkovskaya's first appearance at the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2005 can be heard on http://www.edbookfest.co.uk/readings/index.html

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REVIEWS

Craig Murray, Murder in Samarkand. Edinburgh, Mainstream 2006, pp.400, £18.99

This book had a difficult birth. This was nothing to do with the writing process – Murray possesses an easy and fluent style. The problems came from the endless wrangles between the author and his former employers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about what could and could not be offered for public scrutiny. It is a book that Whitehall would dearly have liked to bury: the story of Murray's pyrotechnic two years as Her Majesty's Ambassador to the post-Soviet Central Asian state of Uzbekistan and the Foreign Office's cack-handed operation to rid itself of this turbulent diplomat.

Putting right the dysfunctional and ineffective mission that he inherited as his first (and, as it turned out, emphatically his last ambassadorial posting) would have been a formidable task on its own. But Murray's restless energy was also directed at building the previously neglected commercial and trade side of the embassy's work. And, most dramatically, he began a high profile crusade against the hideous human rights abuses (including, charmingly, the boiling alive of political opponents) of the sinister President Islam Karimov and his ruling clique. Karimov, like other post-Soviet leaders in the region, had glided effortlessly from communist hack to enthusiastic western ally. By playing up a barely discernable "Islamist challenge" and offering tracts of the country for American military bases, Karimov's brutal kleptocracy had been given a free hand to plunder the country's economy and destroy all

internal opposition. Instead of being named and shamed as the vicious despot he undoubtedly is, he was lauded as a key ally in the "war on terror".

The consequence of Murray's outspoken public speeches, angry diplomatic telegrams and face-to-face conflicts with venal and violent officials was the implacable enmity of his American counterparts in Uzbekistan. The word was passed from Tashkent to Washington and then on to London that the ambassador was not merely off-message but out of control. The Foreign Office and allegedly Downing Street itself, in the raw-nerved atmosphere of the invasion of Iraq, were ready to respond to these transatlantic concerns. The vehicle of this response was a dossier of official complaints against Murray's personal and professional conduct designed to force his resignation. They were complaints which seemed for the most part to be grossly exaggerated or utterly trivial when they weren't simply mendacious. Though the accusations faltered and fell in the absence of credible evidence and in the face of the formidable support he was able to muster, the campaign against him caused his emotional and physical breakdown.

Though he returned briefly to Tashkent after the worst of the affair seemed to be over, it should perhaps have been clearer to him than it appeared to be that he would have no future in the diplomatic service. Another series of wrangles with the FCO over his attacks on the regime soon followed. These led to threats of dismissal and, eventually, a reasonable severance package which he had no real option but to accept. His spirits soon rallied, however, and he was to brighten one of the dullest general elections in memory when he ran an obviously doomed but highly colourful campaign against his one-time boss, the then foreign secretary Jack Straw in his Blackburn fiefdom.

Murray perhaps cannot be wholly absolved of all responsibility for the situation he found himself in. He was by any standards an unconventional ambassador, and not just because of his state school and Dundee University background. In fact the FCO is not as Eton and Oxbridge-dominated as it once was. Murray's insistence that nothing had changed in this respect does however provide one of his more amusing images. On the doomed attempt to get him to go quietly, he observed "...the army officer is left with the revolver on his desk and asked to do the decent thing. I picked it up and started shooting at the bastards". Although his approach to his job was intentionally informal and relaxed, one doesn't have to be a Whitehall stuffed-shirt to suspect that it may also have been careless and incautious at times. His penchant for young local women (which, it has to be said, comes across in the book as more Benny Hill than James Bond) was freely admitted, openly pursued and usually alcohol-assisted. Inevitably this provided hostages to fortune. And even those in the diplomatic service who shared his revulsion for the Karimov regime may have felt his head-down, gloves-off attacks on it to be unwise.

But if he can be faulted for misjudgement and naivety, he certainly can't be accused of personal cowardice or lack of moral integrity. He is a brave if flawed individual, a genuine original, and his book has a multiplicity of qualities. It provides an intriguing view of the consequences of Russia's decolonization of its Asian empire – one of the less explored aspects of the end of the cold war. It offers a snapshot of the front-line of British diplomacy during a phase which is unlikely to be recalled with much pride. Perhaps most importantly, it skewers the hypocrisy and moral absurdity which underlies so much of the "war on terror". It is also a very accessible, often funny and always exhilarating read.

Norrie MacQueen
University of Dundee

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Many members enjoyed a meeting with GLAS authors in October. The following article is by one of the editors about an author GLAS has published recently, and for the first time in English.

For more information:
http://www.inpressbooks.co.uk/glas_p038.aspx

http://www.russianpress.com/glas/

Joanne Turnbull - an abridged version of the introduction to the GLAS edition of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky's SEVEN STORIES.

ANOTHER LOST AND FOUND RUSSIAN GENIUS

I'm not alone. Logic is with me.
SIGIZMUND KRZHIZHANOVSKY

Like a character in one of his stories, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky (1887-1950) has returned from oblivion. A prominent figure in literary circles first in Kiev then in Moscow in the 1920s and '30s, he was all but unpublished and, as he put it, "known for being unknown". The author of five short novels, more than a hundred stories, a dozen plays, screenplays and librettos, and dozens of essays, he worked in almost total obscurity. The day Krzhizhanovsky died, Georgy Shengeli, the poet and critic, mourned the passing of "a writer-visionary, an unsung genius." If not for those words, discovered decades later by a young scholar (Vadim Perelmouter) in Shengeli's diary, Krzhizhanovsky's oeuvre might have remained unmined in the archives in perpetuity.

Who was Krzhizhanovsky? No one knew. But Shengeli was known to have been very caustic towards his contemporaries. And the phrase an unsung genius came from a poem by Severyanin in praise of Leskov, another great writer neglected during his lifetime. The ensuing search for Krzhizhanovsky brought to light an otherworldly man of enormous erudition (a student of astronomy, mathematics, literature, philosophy, languages – he knew ten) who was constitutionally incapable of accommodating the coarse commissars of Soviet culture. His terse, metaphorical, even modernist prose was marked by hyperbole, irony, paradox and phantasms. "A fantastical plot is my method," he wrote. "First you borrow from reality, you ask reality for permission to use your imagination, to deviate from actual fact; later you repay your debt to your creditor with nature, with a profoundly realistic investigation of the facts and an exact logic of conclusions."

Not until 1989 could Krzhizhanovsky's subtly subversive writings begin to be published. Only now are his collected works – some 3,000 pages – being brought out in Russian. Critics today compare him to Kafka and Borges, Swift and Gogol. To that list one might also add Beckett.

Born in Kiev to a Polish Catholic family, Krzhizhanovsky was the youngest of five children, the only son, very musical. He might have become a professional musician but instead took two degrees at Kiev University – in law and in classical philology. The Bolshevik Revolution put an end to his career as a lawyer, freeing him to devote all of his time to writing and philosophy. Two earlier summers spent abroad – in Switzerland, France, Italy and Germany – now inspired a pair of essays. Then in 1919, Krzhizhanovsky published what he would later call his

first real story: “Якоби и ‘Якобы’” – a “fantasy-dialogue” between Jacobi, the German philosopher, and “Supposedly”, the sum of all human meanings.

At the same time, Krzhizhanovsky was becoming popular in Kiev as a lecturer – on the psychology of creativity, on the history and theory of the theater, on literature and music. In 1920, he began collaborating with Anna Bovshek, the former Moscow Art Theater actress who would become his lifelong companion. They devoted their first joint performance to Adalbert von Chamisso, the German poet and botanist, and his “Strange Story of Peter Schlemihl” – about an impecunious young man who gives up his shadow to the devil in exchange for an inexhaustible purse.

In the spring of 1922 Bovshek left Kiev for Moscow, soon to be followed by Krzhizhanovsky. Friends had given him several letters of introduction to Muscovites who might help him to find a room. One letter, to Nikolai Berdyaev, the religious philosopher, led nowhere; but another letter, to Ludmila Severtsova, wife of the evolutionist, produced lodgings at № 44 on the Arbat. Apartment 5 was the home of an elderly count. The count invited Krzhizhanovsky (very tall, thin, slightly stooped, with a pale nervous face and wearing a pince-nez) to inhabit a small, dark room at the end of the corridor. Six sq. meters (65 sq. feet), unfurnished. The writer added a wooden bed with a horsehair mattress, a table with two drawers, an armchair with a hard seat, and hanging bookshelves. Rather than take money for the room, the count suggested that Krzhizhanovsky take paid English lessons from him. The lessons were short-lived: the count soon died, the countess moved out, and less sympathetic neighbors moved in to what would become that hallmark of Soviet life, a communal apartment.

It was in that viewless “quadrature” – so small it must once have been a maid’s room or perhaps a larder – that Krzhizhanovsky wrote his philosophical, satirical, lyrical phantasmagorias. It was in that room that he wrote six of the seven remarkable stories in this collection.

Three of the seven – “Quadraturin”, “Autobiography of a Corpse” and “The Book Mark” – belong to a cycle of stories called What Men Die By. This title recalls “What Men Live By”, a parable by Tolstoy in which an angel is sent down to earth to discover what men live by. He finds that men live (and thrive) not by caring for themselves, but by loving each other: “He who loves is in God and God is in him, for God is love.” In What Men Die By, God is dead: the heroes are intent on looking after themselves and what they think is their own best interest.

Krzhizhanovsky called himself a satirist (in the Swiftian sense) and an experimental realist. The Soviet literary establishment had little use for either. The surreal horror and black humor of a story like “Quadraturin” (about the trials of a man who is given a substance which expands his cramped living quarters ad infinitum) was at odds with official injunctions to portray the “revolutionary reality” in a positive light. Two of the stories included here – “The Runaway Fingers” and “The Unbitten Elbow” – were printed. But they are exceptions. The editors to whom Krzhizhanovsky brought his fictions mostly handed them back: they were “not timely”, they said, “not contemporary”.

Life in hungry, unheated Moscow during the dislocated 1920s was hand-to-mouth for many, let alone an impecunious and ideologically suspect writer from Kiev. Mikhail Bulgakov termed his own struggle for a foothold in the capital “the blackest period of my life”: “My wife and I are starving,” he noted in his diary. “I’ve run all over Moscow – there’s no work. My felt boots have fallen apart.” Kzhizhanovsky, too, would soon be dogged by “Doctor Shrott” – his euphemism for hunger. (In Germany there was a sanatorium by that doctor’s name, which treated hunger victims.) “Doctor Shrott follows me about, but I deftly manage to avoid face-to-face encounters,” he wrote to Bovshek in Odessa. “I do wish that old man would give me the slip, or maybe lose my address.”

In 1932, a friend of a friend approached Maksim Gorky with, among other things, "In the Pupil". An advocate of Socialist Realism, Gorky dismissed Krzhizhanovsky's stories as old-fashioned and irrelevant: "Most of mankind has no time for philosophy." (Fifty years later a Moscow editor would reject them again – because Gorky had rejected them in the first place.)

"A thinker," said Krzhizhanovsky, "is not someone who thinks loyally, but someone who is loyal to his thoughts." He did his thinking sitting on boulevard benches, striding about the streets of Moscow, lying on the couch at Anna Bovshek's. What mattered most to him, she later wrote, was the logic of his conclusions. Many of his stories have the quality of a problem or puzzle: "I am interested," he said, "not in the arithmetic, but in the algebra of life."

Even before Gorky's expressed displeasure, Bovshek had feared for her non-conformist friend: "In the morning I never knew how the night had gone, or if he had woken up in his own bed." The two continued to live apart and to meet in the evenings. Though Krzhizhanovsky's room was small, even by Soviet standards, his neighbors hated him: they found his habits odd, his behavior suspicious, and sometimes a woman would spend the night. Bovshek entreated him to come and live with her in her larger, more comfortable room at 3 Zemledelchesky Lane, but he insisted he needed a room of his own. He also felt, she later recalled, that life in one apartment would destroy the enchantment of their relationship. ("In the Pupil" is in part a reflection of their unusual arrangement.)

Krzhizhanovsky's manuscripts, however, did live at Bovshek's – hidden in her wardrobe under a shroud-like length of gold-embroidered black brocade. She worried about them too. One collection of stories had been accepted in 1924 by a cooperative publishing house, which then folded. In 1928 another collection was being typeset when the censors ordered the composition undone. A third collection met the same fate six years later. In 1941 a final collection (including the anti-utopia "Yellow Coal") made its way past the censors only to be stopped by the German invasion.

With that, Krzhizhanovsky stopped writing stories. He made translations, he gave lectures, and – like the hero of "The Bookmark" – gave away the "themes" with which his imagination continued to fountain in casual conversation. Alcohol became an indispensable crutch. Asked what had brought him to wine, he joked: "A sober attitude towards reality." Dangerously ill, he finally moved in with Bovshek at the end of 1949. The neighbors ranted about this "illegal" resident (he and Bovshek had never married). A stroke soon deprived him of the ability to read. He tried unsuccessfully to relearn the alphabet. On 28 December 1950, Shengeli drew a black frame around this entry in his diary: "Today Sigizmund Dominikovich Krzhizhanovsky died, a writer-visionary, an unsung genius."

Harold Shukman. War or revolution: Russian Jews and conscription in Britain 1917.
London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006. ISBN: 0-85303708-6. x, 157p.

A lesser known aspect of the history of the First World War concerns the treatment by the British government of Russian citizens who were already living in Great Britain: in some cases resident for many years. They were a diverse group, including émigré radical intellectuals who had been continuing their political activities from their base in the UK; immigrants from the north western provinces of the Russian Empire (mainly Lithuanians employed in Scottish mines); and the largest single ethnic group, Jews who had escaped the poverty and legal disabilities of the Pale of Settlement to establish a new life in London, Leeds, Glasgow or elsewhere.

Only a few of the Russian nationals resident in the UK had volunteered to serve in the British army before conscription was introduced and when conscription was brought in for British born males in 1916, the issue of these 'friendly aliens' arose. They were regarded as citizens of an allied country who should be liable for military service on the same basis as their hosts, or return to their country of origin to serve there. A 'Convention' was drawn up between the Russian and British governments in 1916, despite the widely felt unease in Britain about the nature of the autocratic Russian state. In fact, by the time the Convention came into force in 1917 the Russian government had changed, which led to greater enthusiasm for the enforcement of its terms in Great Britain and complete confusion about its implementation in Russia.

Harold Shukman's book is the story of the Convention, and its consequences for one group of Russian 'Conventionists' in particular. They were members of the 'Russian' Jewish community in London, many of them engaged in the tailoring business. Before exploring the experiences of these men and their families, Shukman sets out the background and origins of the various émigré groups in the UK and establishes the context in which enlistment was made compulsory in Britain. While this is lucid and interesting, the book comes alive when the stories of the 'Conventionists' themselves are told. Central to these is the story of Shukman's own father David, who returned to Russia on one of the ships that left Liverpool for Archangel in 1917 transporting men from all over Britain. Eventually he found his way back to London in 1920 via Constantinople. Shukman also relates the stories of other 'Conventionists' who survived and returned to their adopted home, shedding light on the strange workings of bureaucracy on Britain (for example, 50% of males of military age who were of Russian origin were able to disappear) but also the confusion and danger of life in revolutionary Russia. The experiences of the minority of men who returned to Russia, were varied: some indeed were never heard of again. Those who did share their experiences with Shukman all told of hardship, confusion and violence.

This account of their adventures and the background to them is interesting and well-written, and the book has much to offer both to the general reader, and to historians interested in Britain's relations with Russia in the revolutionary period.

Helen Williams

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Further recommended reading

A SCOT'S IMPRESSIONS OF 18C RUSSIA

"Voyages and Travels in the Russian Empire, Tartary and Part of the Kingdom of Persia, Complete in 2 Volumes" by Dr John Cook. Originally published 1770. New edition ed. A.L.Fullerton, publ. in a limited edition by Oriental Research Partners 1997. 2 volumes, 449, 503 pages; maps in end pockets.
$60 + $10 p&p to UK (total approx GBP42 at current exchange rate) from Bernardston Books in Bernardston, Mass, USA - email bernbook@comcast.net. Payment can be made with Visa, MasterCard etc.
John Cook, a young doctor from Hamilton, went to Russia in 1736. He worked in hospitals in St Petersburg, in naval hospitals in Astrakhan, was attached to Prince Golitsyn's embassy to Persia, and finally to military hospitals in Riga, from where he returned to Scotland in 1751.
This is a fascinating book, full of interesting reflections on life in Russia and vivid descriptions of bandits in the Caucasus, gruesome executions, bureaucratic obfuscation in St Petersburg, 18C medical practice, the cities and countryside of Russia and the south Caucasus, and much else. All in Dr Cook's very readable English. Highly recommended.

With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year from the SRF committee and officers