

THE FORUM

The Scotland-Russia Forum Magazine
No.49: January 2026



Belarus Central Asia Velvet Revolution Yesenin

PLUS

- Reviews
- Research
- Biography



Front cover: Necropolis
Samarkand. Photo:
Morag Steven. Right:
Baiterek Tower, Astana.
Photo: Alice Ashcroft



The Forum No.49 Winter 2025/26.

Published on behalf of the Scotland-Russia Forum.
Available online and in print.

All opinions expressed are those of the contributors, and do not necessarily coincide with those of the trustees or the editors.

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Design: Paul Fisher Cockburn.

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Registered charity No. SC038728

The Scotland Russia Forum is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation. Charity no. SC038728
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The aim of the Scotland-Russia Forum is to promote interest in Russia and its neighbours in order to improve understanding of those countries in Scotland.

Editorial Graham Dane

Our journal continues to publish articles which we hope are of interest to readers, covering topics from language to history to sociology.

The dramatic pictures of the Prague revolution are monochrome only as they were developed in the photographer's house to avoid official censorship. Coming right up to date is the article on the treatment of opponents of the autocratic Belarusian government. We hope to publish more reports of present day life in former Soviet republics.

Militsa Eduardovna Greene is the second "Great Scottish Slavist" to be covered in our series, and future articles will continue the theme, including Terry Wade in Issue 50.

A new departure, from this issue, is the inclusion of articles by students at Scottish universities. Either abstracts of research or full articles may be included in future issues and more information on this can be had by emailing: info@scotlandrussiaforum.org.

As it happens, two of our contributions relate to the Central Asian former Soviet republics, giving an interesting perspective on their trajectories as independent states.

We have historical articles and contemporary ones, biography, poetry and politics and our scope will be no less broad in future issues of *The Forum*. We hope you enjoy reading issue 49. ●

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Militsa Eduardovna Greene (1912-1998: University of Edinburgh, 1952-1979) Elspeth Christie Reid

Militsa Eduardovna Greene (née Gartier) enjoyed a long and distinguished career in the Edinburgh University Russian Department, but not all of her students appreciated the extraordinary and arduous nature of the journey that had brought her to Scotland.

She was born in 1912 in St Petersburg, where her father was Professor of Paediatrics at the Imperial Military Medical Academy. Claiming Estonian citizenship, the family emigrated in 1921, settling in Riga, where her father continued an eminent career in paediatric medicine. Militsa Eduardovna later studied law at Riga University, embarking upon a legal career after graduation, and marrying a fellow lawyer, Juris Grinbergs, who lectured in Law at the University and also worked as a legal advisor to the Latvian Ministry of Finance.

However, after successive Soviet and German occupations of Latvia during the war years Militsa Eduardovna and her family escaped the country in 1944, moving first to Austria, and then, as the war ended, to Germany. Meanwhile her sister, Irina, had already settled in Scotland with Irina's husband, the artist Eric Prehn, who was teaching at the Edinburgh College of Art. It was therefore to Scotland that Militsa Eduardovna, her father, her husband, and their young daughter Marina turned to establish a new home.

Initially Militsa Eduardovna found work teaching Russian to servicemen and on local authority courses but, in 1952, she began her enduring and fruitful association with the Edinburgh Russian Department, at first as an assistant lecturer. Notwithstanding the demands of teaching during that time, she completed a PhD thesis on *Some aspects of Scottish authors in Russian literature in the first half of the nineteenth*



century, receiving the degree in 1954. Her early publications went on to develop themes from the doctoral thesis, in particular showing the impact of Walter Scott's writing upon Russian writers. Subsequent work included a student reader and student texts of early twentieth-century literature, but perhaps the most significant of her academic output was her major contribution to the study of Bunin. A long-standing friendship with the writer and ethnographer Leonid Zurov led to Militsa Eduardovna's acquisition of the archives of Ivan and Vera Bunin, which Zurov had inherited on Vera's death. Her tireless work on this important archive led to a number of publications, including the magisterial three-volume edition of the Bunins' diaries, *Ustami Buninykh*, published in her retirement to great critical acclaim.

Militsa Eduardovna became a lecturer in 1955, and was later promoted to senior lecturer, remaining at Edinburgh until her retirement in 1979. Her commitment to the teaching of Russian was evident from the very beginning, as she worked with Dennis Ward to establish the

Honours School in Russian in 1956. Thereafter she was to become the mainstay of the teaching of Russian language and literature at Edinburgh, as Dennis Ward acknowledged in his tribute to her after her death. For generations of students she was the central figure in the department, providing a remarkable link with the Russian culture of her birth, and communicating her deep love of 19th and early 20th century literature.

A lecturer like no other, teaching was for her a vocation, and her classes were never routine. She wasted no time, sharing her insights with her students, but also encouraging them to develop their own views. (Half a century later, the present author can still hear Militsa Eduardovna's unbending exhortation to "go on", when in her view the student had not done full justice to a particular point in the seminar!) The energy of her teaching might initially have seemed intimidating, but class members quickly discovered that her directness combined with unfailing concern and affection for her students, continuing into their future careers, whether in Russian studies or in entirely different areas. And indeed the intellectual rigour upon which she insisted in Russian studies was often an invaluable preparation for those careers in other disciplines.

Militsa Eduardovna was unquestionably one of the key post-war figures in establishing standards of excellence in the teaching of Russian in the Scottish Universities. It goes without saying that the subject is of no less importance in the twenty-first century. She would no doubt share our regret that those who currently work so hard to maintain that tradition do so against a background of the rationing of personnel and resources, and of course fewer Universities teaching Russian. ●

Elspeth Christie Reid:
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Central Asia's Story of Soviet Collapse Told through Urban Space

Alice Ashcroft

This article explores how the urban environment of three of Central Asia's biggest cities – Almaty, Tashkent and Dushanbe – has been shaped by the different relationships of these countries with Soviet power.

The history of Eduard Kazarian's huge mosaic *Okean* (Ocean) says a lot about Almaty's relationship with its Soviet past. The mosaic was originally intended to go in an Armenian-run café beside Lake Sairan, which is reflected in its marine theme and Armenian signature. However, once the café was remodelled, Kazarian bought the mosaic back and put it up at the Alma-Ata Art Centre, which later became a Toyota dealership. This is the end of the story you can find online; however, upon reaching the dealership on the outskirts of town, the mosaic was nowhere to be found. My friend and I undertook some internet digging to try to locate it, unearthing the Instagram account of Kazarian's gallery. Luckily they got back to my message and told me the new location of the mosaic (at another car dealership called Mycar Almaty) in time to see it that very same day.



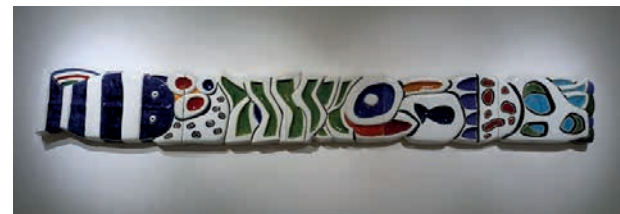
This page: Above: Part of *Okean*, Almaty (April 2025). Above right: Part of the smaller version of *Okean* in Kazarian's gallery, Almaty (April 2025). Below right: Baiterek Tower (February 2025). Photos: Alice Ashcroft

However, the story still doesn't end there. The person running the Instagram account informed me of Kazarian's upcoming art show at the gallery (that is also his house). We were mostly interested in *Okean*, rather than his more recent sculpture work, so I didn't think we would stay long. However, alongside his sculptures, Kazarian had also produced a scaled-down version of *Okean* and exhibited it in his basement room. He told the story of the original mosaic to all the visitors, and how he had had to buy it back (with the support of an interested businessman) from the Toyota dealership and find a new home for it to stop it being destroyed. The existence of this huge mosaic was now relying on the goodwill of the current car dealership, and the funds of patrons.

Not all Soviet art in Almaty has been so lucky though. My friend and I often found mosaics locked behind gates,

covered over, or destroyed entirely. The most heinous example is an incredibly beautiful blue fairytale mosaic locked behind the high gates of the Chinese consulate, with no way in (despite much pleading). Although much of Almaty's urban space bears reminders of its Soviet past, populated with khrushchevskas and brezhnevskas (the blocks of flats typical of the eras of those leaders), the local government clearly does not want the city to look like a Soviet one any more. Sadly, this has meant artworks erected in former public spaces have been the victim of spatial privatisation and locked up or torn down.

The most fundamental difference in post-Soviet Almaty however, is titular not spatial. The city's capital status was revoked in 1991 and the new capital, whose name literally



means capital in Kazakh, is Astana, over 1,000 km from Almaty. Walking around the two cities, they couldn't be more different. Although it has some physical remnants from its pre-capital Akmola days, central Astana is a shiny new city, still unfinished, that claims to represent everything that independent Kazakhstan is: international business, money-making and distinctly separate from the Soviet capital. This is somehow more powerful than destruction: rather than tearing Almaty to pieces in an attempt to be rid of its history entirely, the government instead chose to start again.

It is hardly surprising that Kazakhstan's relationship with its Soviet history is tenuous, when some of the most difficult chapters happened on its soil. The main Soviet nuclear test site, located in Semei, poisoned the Kazakhs



living close by for 40 years, and the city still bears the monuments, museums and memories to prove it. The gulag system relied heavily on Kazakh land, with one of the largest camps being the Karlag (Karaganda gulag), extensively documented in the Karlag museum in northern Kazakhstan. Even the Soviet space cosmodrome was located in Baikonur, which would perhaps be a more triumphant claim if the land wasn't still leased and controlled by the Russian government. This remains a reminder of Moscow's long legacy of domination on Kazakh land, including the violent forced sedentarisation of the nomadic people as Stalin collectivised Soviet agriculture. Who can blame the Kazakhs for wanting to move on from this traumatic, imperial era by removing the evidence left in its cities?

In contrast, in Tashkent the mosaics were desperate to be seen. Once armed with the government-sponsored Tashkent Mosaics app, the only thing stopping us from seeing all the mosaics in the capital was its slightly complicated user interface, a much more benign obstacle than a locked gate. The most spectacular one was quite far out of the city, a pair of huge, plane-themed mosaics decorating the side of a towering apartment block. Aside from being some of the most powerful and spectacular mosaics I've seen, they had an unexpected bonus: they neighboured a colossal socialist-realist palace of culture decorated with a golden Icarus. Although it seemed quite closed off, it was the perfect place to look for mosaics so we found a gap in the fencing and followed some music until we found a way in. Inside, we were greeted with a blue mosaic and several Uzbek men. We were prepared to be asked to leave, but instead they insisted we took pictures of the mosaic, and one man offered to take us on a tour of the abandoned building.

While he took us round a dusty old theatre and a lobby decorated with more mosaics and remarkable metal lighting features, he told us the story of the building. It had been a cultural centre reserved for the workers

at the nearby aircraft factory, who lived in the block decorated with plane mosaics. Here, they could enjoy music lessons performances and community events all



for free. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the palace of culture had fallen gradually into disrepair, mostly used now for private music lessons and a hangout spot for these Uzbek men who didn't seem to have much else to do other than show tourists around. Despite its dilapidation, our tour guide promised a brighter future for the palace and told us to return in a couple of years, by which time the government-sponsored reconstruction would be finished and the palace would have returned to its former glory. Who knows to what extent this will be realised, but the keenness and openness of these men made a huge impression on us in comparison to some of the less-than-friendly interactions we had had in Almaty.

Aside from mosaics, the Soviet apartments of Tashkent were also decorated with the names of Soviet countries such as Ukraine and Belarus. We stumbled across many of them as we wandered through residential neighbourhoods searching for mosaics. At first they puzzled us, until we found the monument to the 1966 earthquake and put the pieces together: these buildings had all been donated by various Soviet republics to Tashkent in the wake of

This page: Left: The Karlag museum, Karaganda (November 2024). Below: Plane mosaics, Tashkent (June 2025). Photos: Alice Ashcroft



the total destruction of the city after the earthquake. Because of this earthquake, Tashkent is a relatively new city, owing its complete reconstruction to Soviet recovery efforts. These included contributions from across the Soviet Union, from materials to workers, realising the aspirations of cross-Union collaboration in times of crisis.

The country's huge tourism industry also owes a lot to Soviet power, as the massive madrasahs and mosques that had fallen into disrepair were reconstructed in the 1980s by the Soviets. None of this is hidden by the Uzbek government, making the Soviet story of their ancient cultural heritage clear in the museums housed in the madrasahs. Thanks to the positive contributions of Soviet power to Uzbek urban space, their relationship with reminders of the Soviet past seems much better. This is not to say that Tashkent has not had its own share of independence-era refashioning, but the echoes of the Soviet city still remain. Perhaps the more constructive Soviet history explains our generally positive interactions while trying to see the mosaics and buildings, like the aircraft palace of culture, and maybe even the recent government steps to officially protect Soviet mosaics across Tashkent.

But some of the most fantastic mosaics to be found are in the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe. These mosaics make up a shadow map of the old Soviet city, marking the former textile factory, printing house and puppet theatre with motifs reflecting the buildings' function, although the first two had fallen out of use. The most spectacular mosaic decorates the side of a confectionery factory, taking up the entire façade of the factory building. Although the building is within the private territory of the Shirin confectionery company, the security guards were happy to let us in to see it (probably we were far from the first asking to see the mosaic). The Soviet identity of the city has thus been enshrined in its art; one apartment block on the western bank of the city bears an image of the Kremlin to celebrate the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It was certainly one of the most blatantly Soviet art pieces preserved in Central Asia.

Dushanbe's history is not nearly as long as the other cities' though, because it only received capital status under the Bolsheviks and much of it was built in the 1920s. This is not to say that the city remains the same as it did under Soviet rule, as it is currently undergoing extensive construction work (the whole city feels a little like a building site), taking on a shiny new modern style. However, the central Rudaki Avenue remains much as it was under the Soviets and the west side of the city doesn't feel much changed, home to some beautiful



Soviet mosaics and buildings. This may reflect that the collapse of the Soviet Union came at a bad time for Dushanbe. Tajikistan, as the poorest Soviet republic, was at the time benefiting from economic equalisation policies and enjoying its peak quality of life, despite unrest in the capital. In the wake of the collapse and left without these benefits much of the city has now fallen into disrepair. This means that, despite a few notable exceptions (such as the Rohot tea house) much of the Soviet bones of the city remain, as without them, modern Dushanbe has little else to fall back on. Maybe this is why the Soviet mosaics have retained their splendour: a lack of funds to tear them down, or even a lack of willingness to forget Dushanbe in its prime.

The stories of these three cities, told through their buildings and mosaics, represent a powerful and diverse history of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ways in which independent governments and private actors have altered (or preserved) their Soviet spatial environments reveal the different experience these cities had under Soviet rule, and how it has shaped their independent identities. It is important to consider these stories to texture our understanding of the chaotic period surrounding the Soviet collapse. They not only give us a better understanding of the huge variety in Soviet life far from centralised power in Moscow, but help us identify and comprehend the modern and historic spatial environments of each city, unlocking them for both the casual tourist and the scholar. ●

Places to start your Central Asian mosaic hunt:

- <http://www.monumentalmaty.com>
- <https://mosaic.tashkent.uz/en?page=1>



Far left: Inside the aircraft workers' palace of culture, Tashkent. Left: Shirin factory mosaic, Dushanbe (June 2025). Below: Art celebrating the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Dushanbe. Photos: Alice Ashcroft

Alice Ashcroft is in her fourth year of an undergraduate course in Russian Studies and History at The University of Edinburgh.



Eleven Days in November

Moira Dalgetty



By the summer of 1989, the transformation over the previous four years of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev was reverberating throughout the countries of the Eastern Bloc, an almost tectonic plate shift unfolding so fast there was little time to process it.

What had become apparent very quickly was that given the right set of conditions, a little snowball rolling down a mountainside can soon turn into a mighty avalanche. It was as if history just could not wait to sprinkle its surprises over Eastern Europe like fairy dust.

The governments of Poland and Hungary had all but collapsed over the summer, and Leipzig had been the epicentre of demonstrations in the GDR. Change seemed unstoppable.

Most remarkably, the Berlin Wall had come down—the culmination of the flood of East Germans through Prague all summer into autumn, taking refuge in the West German embassy, abandoning little Trabants all over the city.

Meanwhile, Radio Free Europe was reporting that the Soviet government had warned the Czechoslovak leadership to get a move on with the implementation of reforms.

What Gorbachev said, addressing students in Moscow, on Wednesday 15 November 1989 was pivotal, changing the rules of the game once and for all: "It's time to remember that the modern world does not consist of two mutually exclusive civilisations, but of one common civilisation, in which human values and the freedom of choice are supreme."

If that didn't constitute a nod and a wink, what would?

Monday 20 November 1989

We went to meet Marie for a drink at the International Union of Students office where she worked. We were completely oblivious to the fact that we were about to witness, in the space of an 11-day whirlwind, the collapse – after 41 years of one-party rule – of the Czechoslovak communist regime.

From the bar at the top of the building, you could see across the River Vltava to Hradcany Castle.

Careful to keep our voices down, we spoke about the march we'd taken part in a few days earlier on International Students Day (17 November) the annual commemoration of the killing of a student during the Nazi occupation.

This year, however, after the official end of the march, the students had continued towards Wenceslas Square. Tensions were running high and when word spread that confrontation was brewing and we should get out while we could, we swiftly took our leave.

The riot police kettled the marchers in Narodni Street, closing all escape routes before attacking them with batons. News that one of the students had been killed spread like wildfire around the city – this was later proven to have been rumour, not fact, but by then it had lit the touch paper of what was already coming to a head.

Two days later, dissident playwright and human rights activist Vaclav Havel and his fellow activists formed the organisation Civic Forum in protest against the government's policies and the brutal treatment of the students.

Noise drifted up from below and Tim went to the window.

"Get over here—this is amazing!"

Above: Wenceslas Square Demonstration.



Above: Letna Plain,
November 1989.

From the opposite embankment a massive crowd waving national flags was marching across the bridge.

Then, just as they arrived at the end of the bridge where it met the road, they stopped. The traffic lights turning red had brought this wave of humanity to a halt. When the lights turned green, the march resumed. The startled traffic policeman on duty watched, astonished, as this tide of demonstrators flowed past, unstoppable.

Even four floors up you could feel the energy in the street below. Marie had to stay behind, so Tim and I joined the crowd as it swept along. When we got there, Wenceslas Square was packed solid, the atmosphere so highly charged you could almost feel it crackling.

When one of the speakers addressing the crowd had finished, the crowd pulled keys and keyrings out of pockets and bags, held them high above their heads and rattled them hard in unison. The racket made by several hundred thousand keys jangling will be forever stored in the audio library in my brain, filed under weird and wonderful sounds.

It was explained to us that the keys symbolised the jangling of the bells on a jester's costume, signalling contempt for the clowns – as they saw them – governing their country.

When the speeches had finished, and after the rendition of the national anthem, everyone began to leave.

Tim had been snapping away nonstop, intending to develop the black and white film at home in the cupboard he'd converted into a darkroom.

We watched people leaving, wondering where all the electric energy of a short while ago had gone. Well, we were in civilised Europe, after all, in the former heart of the Austro-Hungarian empire, so decorum was obviously the order of the day.

Then a sight that amazed me—teams of young people armed with bin bags, trawling the square from

top to bottom, picking up litter.

Impressed by this manifestation of civic responsibility, I had to ask why. The young man smiled at my question. "We are doing this because it's our litter—the street cleaners shouldn't have to take on this extra load tomorrow morning."

Not much you can say to that, is there? Socially responsible, environmentally aware, non-violent revolutionaries!

While Havel was announcing at a newly-formed Civic Forum press conference: "We are at a time when there are beginnings of real opposition in our country," the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Milos Jakes, was assembling the People's Militia in Prague and issuing them with weapons and ammunition.

Tuesday 21 November 1989

Marie lived on the eighth floor of a drab apartment block with an unreliable lift that scared the daylight out of me. Every time I got in the thing I prayed and crossed my fingers.

After we'd eaten we ran out of beer. Off-licences didn't exist so people bought beer from their local pub, decanted into any container they had—jugs, kettles, jars, cooking pots. Armed with three pots and a jug, Tim and I went down to the pub outside the building.

It was quite a feat getting the beer back to the flat in that lurching, juddering lift without spilling too much.

Marie switched on the TV. General Secretary Jakes was due to make an announcement.

Jakes duly appeared and proceeded to tell the nation that socialism was the only way, there was no alternative, it was the duty of the people to protect socialist values, and warned against further protests.

"Well, chums, there you have it," said Marie. "Our way is the only way, comrades, and if you don't like it



Above: Photographer
Tim Williams in
Wenceslas Square.

then you know what the alternative is—and trust us, you really wouldn't like it."

Things were hotting up.

Wednesday 22 November 1989

When I went into work next morning, at the office of *The Democratic Journalist* magazine, you could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. When the Chief Editor walked in, I couldn't believe my eyes. Normally dapper in well-cut suits that had certainly not been made in Czechoslovakia, he was wearing a duffle coat—think King Charles in a bomber jacket, ripped jeans and trainers.

What was this? Candidate member of the working class?

Five minutes later he called a meeting. His precise words were later translated for me by a colleague. He addressed us quietly, with a sad, wistful expression—perhaps genuine, perhaps not. Given the enormous fright the party had been given with the recent anti-government activity, it appeared that a charm offensive was now the preferred strategy.

Yes, he knew all about what had happened, he said, and while he understood that there might well be some people unhappy with the current state of affairs...

"—What everyone has to bear in mind is that whatever the party has done – and whatever mistakes we may have made in the past – decisions were always, always, made with the best interests of the people at heart at all times."

Parroting his leader Jakes' pronouncement the night before on TV, he went on to advise us what was in the best interests of the country, told us not to attend any public gatherings since they were undoubtedly provocations by anti-socialist elements designed to destabilise the country, then wished us a good day.

So that was what the duffle coat was all about. Man

of the people, indeed.

Things were moving at breakneck speed on the political rollercoaster.

The fact that what was happening could now be seen on television was the game-changer.

Suddenly, the medium that had been used solely for the dissemination of state propaganda had thrown open a window to let in fresh air. The power of mass civil disobedience was now visible to the entire population in their own homes.

Turning on the TV to watch the news became something to look forward to. Over the past 40 years, the country had been fed a diet of turgid reports packed with statistics about the fulfilment of agricultural and industrial quotas, the standard fare of news broadcasts in all socialist countries.

Now, though, the country was riveted by the never-ending stream of surprises on the news bulletins, breathlessly awaiting the next episode of this fast-moving drama.

Thursday 23 November 1989

The lead story on the evening news was a treat. It showed the hitherto totally unimaginable sight of the hapless Prague Communist Secretary, Miroslav Stepan, being heckled by angry factory workers.

We were still trying to digest that when another official appeared on the screen: it was a spokesman from the Ministry of Defence, informing the nation that the army would not act against the people, but calling for an end to the demonstrations. Surreal didn't even begin to cover it

Friday 24 November 1989

Before anyone had time to catch their breath, the next instalment of this high-stakes game played out once again on TV.

To collective astonishment, it was announced that the Presidium had resigned along with General



Above: Statue of St Wenceslas with pictures of Tomas Masaryk, Anton Dubcek and Vaclav Havel.

Secretary Milos Jakes, who was replaced by the relatively little-known moderate Karel Urbanek.

More mind-blowing even than that was the screening of footage from Friday 17 November, with a speech from Havel outlining plans for a General Strike on Monday 27 November. Shortly after that aired, Czech TV and radio announced that they would be joining the strike.

It was all systems go.

That day, Havel emerged onto the balcony of the Melantrich publishing house overlooking Wenceslas Square with Alexander Dubcek to declare that Jakes had resigned. The atmosphere was electric, the massive crowd cheering, waving their placards and banners. Havel left the balcony and the crowd began to disperse.

Where were they all going? Wasn't this what everyone had been waiting and hoping for, the climax to the previous weeks and months? Party time, surely?

No. The square slowly emptied, only small groups of people still hanging around here and there.

We were totally nonplussed by this unbelievably staid response to such an earth-shattering announcement from the new national hero, a man who'd been labelled an enemy of the people a matter of what felt like only five minutes ago.

We stood around waiting for something to happen, some hint of celebration. How can you be told that

your country was experiencing cataclysmic social change, with the world as you knew it about to be turned upside down, and just go home? It was totally beyond me.

Shouldn't there be some sort of wild celebration? Huge crowds dancing, singing—that sort of thing? Evidently, that was not about to happen. Why were we surprised? We should have got used to the idea by then that Czechoslovakia would do whatever it chose to in its own quiet, dignified way.

Clinging to the hope that somebody might actually be excited by this astonishing turn of events, I decided to call my friend Jarka from a phone box just off the square.

"Well," she said after I'd given her a breathless report, "that's good news. Now we must just wait and see what happens next."

Was that it? This woman's cool, calm, collected response to the news that the government of her country had just resigned floored me. No outburst of joy. Just that measured, sensible Czech reaction.

We took the metro to our favourite pub. The regulars were at their usual tables, most playing dominoes. Bursting with excitement, we told Petr the barman what Havel had said.

"Are you sure that's what he said? That the government's resigned?"

Of course - we'd just come from the square!

He clapped his hands then announced the news, with the deadpan delivery of a government report on the surpassing of the annual quota for tractor production.

The response amounted to a few raised eyebrows, some nods and smiles, a couple of shrugs, then straight back to the dominoes.

Everything carried on as normal, Petr delivering beers to each table—and he'd just told them that their country had changed forever.

In the absence of any response that we could possibly relate to, we decided that the only thing for it was to get stuck into the Pilsner, marvelling over the sanguine nature of our Czech hosts.

Saturday 25 November 1989

The wind of change was a Force 10 gale by this stage

By the end of the month, the Communist Party's leading role in the constitution of Czechoslovakia would be abandoned and on 10 December 1989, the first non-communist-dominated government in 41 years would be sworn in by President Husak, who himself would promptly resign to be replaced in due course by the people's champion, Vaclav Havel. But that was still to come...

Meanwhile, caught up in this whirlwind, ordinary Czechs were taking things into their own hands to speed up the process—sometimes literally.

I was reading in the living room when Tim shouted from the kitchen: "Come and see this!"

From the kitchen balcony we had a clear view across a park to the buildings opposite.

On the roof of one was a huge sign - "Kommunism = Mir", or "Communism = Peace", lit in red neon at night and visible for a fair distance all around.

Right now there were men on the roof, dismantling the sign, the sounds of hammering on metal shattering the evening quiet.

"Mir" had already gone, as had the "=" sign, and they were on the final "m" of "Kommunism", working backwards.

We watched the embodiment of a metaphor, mesmerised, over a bottle of chilled vodka.

It took an hour before the final "K" had gone.

Sunday 26 November 1989

Guarded by a crowd of young men, the place was buzzing with activity, noise and humanity. For the rally, Civic Forum had commandeered Sparta Prague football stadium which backed on to Letna Plain.

Getting to the stadium was like being caught up on a one-way, packed-solid conveyor belt, with no chance of getting off. Every street and road leading there was jammed with people.

We had entirely the wrong kind of journalistic accreditation to be allowed in. Our press cards would have shown us to be nothing more than lackeys of the state propaganda services and would have gone down like the proverbial lead balloon, so imagination was required.

There had to be some way of getting past the hyper young man with the gap-toothed grin at the gate, and I was banking on sheer brass neck.

Throwing my tartan shawl dramatically over my shoulder, I waved at him while hopping up and down. Affecting confidence would allay suspicion, I hoped.

"Excuse me! Hello? Excuse me!"

After the third shout, he came over.

"Do you speak English?"

He nodded. I put on what I hoped was a winning smile.

"Can you help me, please? I'm a journalist from Scotland, here with my colleague, and we need to get inside—is that possible? What's happening here is amazing and we really need to file a report!"

He stared at me for a few seconds, unable to work out whether I was serious or just a nutcase. Looking me up and down, what did he see? A bespectacled, mid-30s foreign woman sporting a tartan shawl as big as a hearthrug accompanied by a very tall, bespectacled man. Nothing threatening—nothing to cause him any undue concern.

"Do you have any press card with you?"

I spread my arms in an attitude of what I hoped looked like resigned helplessness and shook my head.

"No, unfortunately. I'm so sorry. We left everything in our hotel because we didn't know that this was happening or we would have brought them with us. I can go and get them but I'm afraid that if I do, by the time I get back I'll have missed everything!"

I crossed my fingers in my pocket.

He sighed, said something to the young man nearest him then opened the gate, beckoning us forward and through.

"Hurry, please," he said, meaning: "Get out of my sight before I change my mind."

"Thank you so much!"

Following the people ahead of us, we soon found ourselves on the topmost tier of the stadium stand facing out across the plain.

The sight in front of us was incredible. It totally took my breath away. Even now, I can think of no words that could adequately convey the energy emanating from a crowd of that size—estimated at upwards of 800,000 people!



Above: Statue of Communist leader K Gottwald with hands painted the colour of blood and graffiti *Vrah Naroda* or "Enemy of the People".

If we each constitute a personal electro-magnetic field that gives off its own frequency and vibration, then the collective dynamism to be felt that day was beyond astonishing.

A sea of humanity, flags waving, chanting "Svobodu! Svobodu!" ("Freedom! Freedom!") spread out as far as the eye could see across Letna from the stadium stand on which we stood.

Suddenly there was movement on the tier beneath ours. The crowd erupted into an ear-splitting roar—Vaclav Havel had appeared. When he announced the resignation of the government once again, because it was the ultimate victory, the response from the crowd was a joyful cacophony.

We hung perilously over the edge of the tier above watching Havel, and when he introduced the architect of the 1968 Prague Spring, Alexander Dubcek, the crowd erupted once again.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of speeches, music and an unbelievable level of reaction from the crowd. The only negative reaction was a wave of hissing and booing that broke out when Adamec, the unpopular prime minister appeared.

The rally finally culminated in a rendition of the national anthem, sung at full volume, full of emotion, by almost a million voices. Pure, unadulterated magic.

We went straight home and started developing the rolls of film that Tim had taken. A short time later, the negatives were pegged to the line in the darkroom



and we watched, entranced, as the images of a nation on the rise slowly appeared in black and white.

Monday 27 November 1989

By now, local demonstrations and strikes were taking place all across the country. The symbolic nationwide two-hour General Strike was scheduled to start at noon and, late morning, we made our way to Wenceslas Square.

Even if we were arrested – worst-case scenario – we were in no danger of serious repercussions, unlike ordinary citizens who could face prison sentences. The worst thing that might happen to us was being turfed out of the country on the next British Airways flight, with our passports-of-invincibility clasped to our collaborationist bosom.

At noon the square was packed. Tim took photographs of the equestrian statue of Wenceslas, now bedecked with flags, home-made banners, posters, candles flickering around the base of the plinth.

Nearby, at Mustek metro, we bumped into a British journalist with a camera crew. After a brief chat, he pointed to a queue of women outside a butcher's shop.

"Why's that shop open if there's a general strike on?"

No idea, I replied. He asked if I'd go and ask the shopkeeper why his business was still operating and whether they could take some pictures.

The women in the queue were politely tolerant of the foreigner making her way to the front and asking the butcher in horrible Czech why he was open. Didn't he support the strike?

Yes he did, he replied, smiling.

"But if these ladies cannot get their shopping done in their lunch break, what will their families eat for dinner tonight?"

Okay. I pressed on.

"But with respect, that's not how we understand a general strike in Britain, sir. A general strike means all shops close."

"Well," he replied, tapping the little flag badge attached to his overalls which those who supported the movement for change were now all sporting.

"In Czechoslovakia we'll do things our way, and in Britain you do things your way. Then everyone will be happy! Next, please..."

It was the metro that was the clearest indication that everything was changing too fast to be stopped.

Good organisation is innate to the Czech psyche and the metro was pristine, a gleaming, perfect example of clockwork precision and order.

Now, though, every bit of wall was covered with xeroxed messages, flyers and posters, a mad mosaic of exhortations and statements.

After the demonstration was over, we took the metro home. Waiting on the packed platform for the train to come to a halt, everybody cheered wildly when the driver tooted the horn and waved a flag out of his cabin window, accompanied by a thumbs-up and a huge grin.

It was as if Czechoslovakia had been holding its breath since 1948, just waiting for the green light to let them know that it was now safe to breathe.

We cleared our desks in short order as both of the government-backed magazines we worked for closed down without further ado.

We moved out of our state-provided flat into a friend's apartment.

We saw the statue of Klement Gottwald – the first leader of Communist Czechoslovakia from 1948-53 – with red paint splashed all over his hands and the words "Enemy of the People" painted on the plinth where his statue stood.

We watched a civic, grassroots movement emerge and assert itself through non-violent, popular uprising, showing the power of boycotts and strikes to demonstrate to government how powerful mass civil disobedience can be.

We witnessed the ground-level start of the process of democratisation take place in a country with, until then, an authoritarian government.

We watched the former enemy of the people Vaclav Havel arriving at Hradcany Castle for his inauguration as president with his wife Olga.

We observed the Czechs and Slovaks negotiate an amicable divorce.

We witnessed a country's rebirth, full of enthusiasm and purpose, to build itself anew. ●

Moira Dalgetty was working in Prague as a journalist at the time of the Velvet Revolution, as was her then husband Tim Williams. Thanks to Tim for his input to this article and for taking all but one of the photographs.



Belarus: New Times, Old Oppressions

Ken McBain

I'm sure we have all sat and watched TV news over the years and seen images of foreign streets crowded with protestors, often waving flags, shouting slogans we can't understand, but clearly making a stand for what they believe in. In cases where they are protesting against corrupt leaders, a rigged election, or insufferable living standards we may respect those anonymous flag-wavers and nameless slogan-shouters – respect them for taking a stand. Our feelings may deepen when the next people we see are the security forces, who now seem to have adopted a globally-standard black armoured uniform and similarly uniform casual approach to violence against their own people. Images of flags and shouting slogans are replaced by fear and brutalising batons.

It is rare that we see those shouting faces and flag-wavers again on our screens. Maybe we'll hear a bit about the leaders, maybe a brief interview with a brave protestor before a water cannon douses the street they were standing in. But, what happens to them? Do they go back to their normal lives the day after? How is that flag-waver in the middle of the protest now, years after her short cameo on world news?

In the autumn months of 2020 our British TV screens showed plenty of these protestors in Belarus as the country rose up as never before against the rule of Alexander Lukashenko. Let me tell you brief details of just some of the flag-wavers and slogan shouters we saw on our screens. Even now, the repressions continue so avoiding people's identifiability is prioritised. Names have been made up, and some details adjusted, but be assured that all of the experiences recounted are real.

Because Mikalai stood with a white-red-white protest flag in 2020 and posted a photo on social media he was arrested two years later as the security forces trowled the internet to find evidence of people protesting in the past. Because of that photo he spent months in prison awaiting trial. Because he was sentenced to years of home-arrest, Mikalai fled Belarus and moved to Poland. Because Mikalai continued to hate the regime he continued in protest activities, but knew this could endanger his brother and parents who were back in Belarus. Because Mikalai stood with a white-red-white protest flag, Mikalai may never see his family again, so suffers from depression and panic attacks.

Because husband and wife Svetlana and Ales went on a protest march through Minsk they were arrested. They were both held for 30 days while their own parents managed to take the children and look after them. Because both Svetlana and Ales were arrested they knew that when they got out, the authorities might take their children away from them, deciding they were unfit parents. Because Svetlana and Ales couldn't dare to lose their children they fled to Lithuania for safety. Because Svetlana



and Ales went on a protest march through Minsk their children are growing up without knowing their grandparents. Because Svetlana and Ales went on a protest march through Minsk their own parents rely on their neighbours now to care for them. Because Svetlana and Ales went on a protest march through Minsk their own parents hate their children for abandoning them and taking their grandchildren away from them.

Because Sasha cared for his neighbours and friends, he administered a chat group to keep in touch and help any who had been arrested or needed medical help. Because Sasha posted on social media a comment against the police brutality he was arrested. Because one of Sasha's neighbours was also arrested the police searched his phone and found that Sasha was the group admin. Because Sasha was seen as an organiser he was sentenced to three years in prison and classified as an "extremist". Because he was an "extremist", when Sasha was released, the police

Above: Signing up Kenneth Gibson MSP (Cunninghame North) as a supporter of a Belarusian political prisoner.

visit him randomly every week, Sasha can't get a job and Sasha can't hold a bank account. Because Sasha administered a chat group to help others, he now relies on his neighbours to get by and help support his children. Because Sasha administered a chat group to help others he is an "extremist", so he can't leave Belarus and escape this hell his life has become.

Sadly, since 2020, Belarusians like Mikalai, Svetlana, Ales and Sasha count in the thousands and thousands. The state's brutal violence caused the tragic deaths of protestors in the streets and prisons, plus thousands of cases torture, physical and sexual abuse in security facilities. These are the things we may hear about on the news, but the Lukashenko regime's inhumanity has also led to countless cases of broken families, depression, trauma, isolation, PTSD, unemployment and alcoholism. No-one really knows the number of Belarusians who have fled their country since 2020, but estimates are between 500,000 and 800,000. That's hundreds of thousands of families ripped apart, friendships severed and new lives to be built in a foreign country with a different language, as people struggle to be given a legal status.

Yet, the Lukashenko regime's malevolent attention and displeasure is limitless, and doesn't limit itself to those in the crowds in 2020, or again in 2022 when some protested their country's participation in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Anyone thought to be helping or supporting a protestor, or even the cause for democracy more generally, can also be targeted by Lukashenko.

Because Tanya saw on her social media people from her city who were imprisoned, she felt awful for them and what was happening in her country. She had her own children and family to deal with so hadn't joined the protests or spoken up at the time. But, Tanya knew what these people were doing was right and that sending them to prison was wrong. Because Tanya cares for others, she spent her own money to put some clothes and toiletries into parcels to send to some prisoners. Because Tanya sent the parcels and had to include the senders' details the prison authorities knew Tanya sent them. Because Tanya cares for others she was arrested in early 2023 for "supporting extremism" and is still in prison, separated from her children.

The regime's vindictiveness and determination to suffocate any sense of solidarity was demonstrated in spring 2024 when hundreds of the members of the families of political prisoners were arrested in the space of a few weeks. What had caused these families in particular to be on a Stalinesque list of security forces attention? They had received help buying groceries. This might take some explaining... so settle down.

Often political prisoners are the breadwinners in a family. Lock them up and you've lost an income. But, even if it's your own child or a non-working family member in prison then they can cost you money. Families may be allowed to send parcels of 10kg or 30kg twice a year to their loved ones in prison, typically clothes, food supplements and toiletries. That costs money to buy and send. Rarely do the prison authorities care about holding a prisoner geographically close to their family, so if visits are allowed then it can cost the family to travel. Sometimes families aren't allowed to visit, but a

lawyer will. So, instead of the prisoner having no friendly contact from the outside world they'll pay for a lawyer to visit. One way in which Belarus does match the West is in the high price of legal fees. This financial burden on whole families of a loved one being in prison is multiplied by thousands across the whole of the country.

So, families of political prisoners appreciate some help. One organisation, running from exile in Poland, set up a system where families of political prisoners in Belarus could order their groceries online and they'd be matched with someone outside the country who could pay for them. It was a heart-warming glow of solidarity and help in the online world. But, for the Lukashenko regime, this is unacceptable collaboration with the families of extremists so must be stopped and punished. The regime gathered the names and details of the families of political prisoners and got online purchase details from Belarusian supermarkets. Finding which of those online purchases had been made by a foreign credit card was the way of identifying who had received financial help from abroad, and gave the regime a list of people who would keep the security forces busy for a few more months. Such actions, well covered and explained in Belarusian media, obviously have a chilling effect on people within the country.

It's one thing to go through a list of "because"s that starts with the noble and principled "protested", and ends in "imprisoned", but who wants their journey into prison to start with "got groceries paid for by friend in Poland"? Belarus is even revisiting some security practices from the Soviet era and asking job applicants to declare any friends or family abroad that they have contacted in the last five years. This was reported by someone applying for a role which, with all due respect to this person's profession, is far from a job of critical national security.

Yet, as has been explained, the Lukashenko regime's malevolent attention and displeasure is limitless, and doesn't limit itself to even just Belarus. Belarusians abroad, be they recent travellers or long-term established diaspora, also need to be intimidated and their actions squashed.

Because Vital had friends who were protesting, and then some who were arrested and imprisoned, he chose to get involved in some protests in his own country. Vital left Belarus almost 20 years ago, but was still connected to his homeland and was appalled to see the same images on TV as his friends and work colleagues. But Vital knew these streets, understood the chanting and banners, loved the country he saw being ripped apart, and knew some of the faces in the crowd. Because Vital had friends who were protesting, he joined some street protests in his own country and shared photos on social media so his friends could see his solidarity. Because Vital was at a protest and sharing on social media he was interviewed in 2021 by a local journalist about his thoughts on what was going on and what effect the regime's hijacking of the RyanAir flight would have. After Vital visited his Embassy to get some paperwork done he opened the pile of papers he got back from the official. Slipped into the pile of papers was a photograph of Vital at a protest a few months earlier—just to let Vital know that the Embassy knew the kinds of political stuff he was up to. Because Vital was intimidated by the Embassy, Vital doesn't get involved in any protest activities any more.

The Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus No. 278, "On the Procedure of Issuing Documents and Performing Actions" was officially enacted on 6 September 2023. Among other things this Decree stopped Belarus's own Embassies from issuing or renewing Belarusian passports. Passports will now only be issued to Belarusian citizens within Belarus. Of course, for hundreds of thousands of Belarusians returning will mean arrest. So, with one Decree the regime has created a painful headache for the troublesome flag-wavers and slogan shouters. What does one do in a few years' time, living as refugee in a country that's not your own, with an expired passport? How do you prove your identity? How do you travel?

Because Alena had left Belarus she needed to renew her passport. So, with some fear, she registered with the Belarusian Embassy for a visit to hand-in paperwork to apply for a new passport. Because Alena had been public in protests against the regime, when Alena arrived at the Embassy the staff there made it clear she wasn't welcome and there could be problems with her passport application. "For people like you, this process can take a long time". Because Alena felt intimidated by the Embassy staff she left the appointment early and didn't complete the application. Because of a change in Belarusian rules the Embassy now doesn't issue new passports and Alena would have to return to Belarus – where she knows she would be arrested. Because Alena wanted to support her friends who were protesting, Alena has missed family funerals and doesn't know when she'll see her family again.

These stories are the fate of many of the flag-wavers, slogan shouters, street protestors and democracy lovers of 2020. As we looked on as they marched, who knew how things would go? More than five years later, Lukashenko appears to have a firmer grip on a weaker country. Of course, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 complicated things, with Lukashenko having to pay fealty to Putin by allowing Belarus to be used for the initial invasion and also agreeing to stage Russian nuclear weapons. Lukashenko has managed to maintain some autonomy and resisted the Belarusian Army being directly involved in combat, but support for the war is just another reason for grievance that most Belarusians have with the man they marched against in 2020. It's also created another cohort of imprisoned and oppressed. There were Ukrainian flag wavers in Belarus, but there were also "railway partisans" who damaged the railway infrastructure to hinder Russian logistics, and those wanted to cross the border into Ukraine not to invade, but to fight for their neighbours, against Russia.

At times in our lives we may all have reason to reflect on some of our decisions and the choices we've made. While we'll probably all have a few regrets or wonders about what could have been, rarely will many of us have the decisions we make so ruthlessly and diligently pursued to ensure catastrophic outcomes.

Because one dictator wanted to stay in power, millions of Belarusian lives are turned inside out, thousands are tortured, and hundreds of thousands forced into exile from their homeland, homes, family and friends.

The human cost of one dictator's rule is incalculable. ●

Right: Yurt at Son Kul Lake. Photo: Morag Steven



17 Different Beds in 23 Days A Whistle-stop Tour through Central Asia, August/September 2024 Morag Steven

Ken McBain is the UK Representative of LIBERECO, an independent European NGO committed to the protection of human rights in Belarus and Ukraine. Ken has been involved since 2020 when his friends and family in Belarus were brave enough to protest, and he understands the safety he enjoys in being active for human rights in Scotland. ken.mc Bain@libereco.org



The tourist brochure promised an "epic trip" along the Silk Road through five former Soviet republics of central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Given that travel to Russia has become very difficult, if not impossible, since the start of the war in Ukraine, I decided to embark on this tour in the hope of making contact with some Russian speakers. In most "Stans" Russian is still widely spoken, although it has largely fallen out of favour in Turkmenistan. Tourism is an emerging sector throughout Central Asia, and I was attracted by the idea of largely unspoiled lands full of ancient cultures, architectural marvels and spectacular landscapes, all unknown to me.

The Five Stans, as they are commonly called, are all very different. But what they have in common is that they are relatively new states, all gaining independence and sovereignty since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. I don't intend to write here about these countries' complex histories and social development, but rather to offer my impressions of being a tourist and some highlights of my trip.

I was surprised that our tour guide did not speak Russian; she was Romanian but young enough not to

This page: Right:
Necropolis Samarkand.
Far right : Gates of Hell.
Photos: Morag Steven



have been at school when Romania was still a socialist republic. She spoke English with the local guides, but they in turn spoke Russian with our minibus drivers and local hosts. Signs at tourist attractions and museums, as well as restaurant menus, are written in the national language and Russian—not very often in English!

Turkmenistan

Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, is often described as a mixture of Las Vegas and Pyongyang, Korea. The city (population around 1 million) holds the world record for the most blindingly white-marble buildings, because in the post-Soviet era successive Turkmen leaders built them as a show of strength and prosperity. Turkmenistan is the most strictly controlled state in central Asia, major social media platforms are banned, Wi-Fi is patchy, and entry to the country requires a letter of invitation and visa. (I found this a complicated process!) There are strict rules throughout the country regarding photography, and the Islamic religion is also firmly controlled by the state. Ashgabat has its own set of quirky rules: for example, it's illegal to smoke outdoors in the city, all cars within the city limits must be white (and clean), and cars have priority over pedestrians, which makes crossing the road rather hazardous!

Within hours of arriving in Ashgabat our tour group set off at breakneck speed in off-road (white!) jeeps into the Karakum Desert, evoking a strong Mad Max feeling. Our trip was to visit the giant Darvaza gas crater, known locally as the Gates of Hell. This major tourist attraction is a burning natural gas field which collapsed into a cavern, and has been alight since 1971. This phenomenon may have occurred naturally, but one popular story is that Soviet engineers drilling for gas caused the collapse, and set fire to the seeping methane gas in the mistaken belief that it would burn off within a few weeks. We stayed overnight in yurts, which allowed us to see the burning crater at night, an unforgettable experience!

Our group also visited the ruins of the ancient city of Merv, now listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage site. Human settlement in this area predates 2000 BC; however, the city was in its prime as a centre of religious study and trade from the 9th to 12th centuries. Merv was devastated by Mongol invaders in 1221 but the ruins, which spread over a huge area surrounded by desert, are still an impressive sight.



Uzbekistan

Tourism here is much more developed and the Uzbek government continues to plough investment into this sector. The famous cities of Bukhara and Samarkand have a vibrant cosmopolitan feel with a wide range of restaurants and hotels, souvenir shops and ATMs. We visited many historical architectural wonders, complexes of mosques, madrasahs (places of study) and mausoleums. My favourites in Samarkand include the world-famous Registan Square with its breathtaking blue-tiled buildings that dazzle in the bright sun and the Gur-Amir complex housing the mausoleum of Amir Temur (Tamerlane).

Uzbekistan officially transitioned from Cyrillic to Latin-based script in 1993, but Cyrillic is still commonly used, particularly among the older generation. A homemade sign at a tourist attraction advertised: "лимнат, шарбати, газли сув" and I was able to work out that I could get a soft drink there.

We also visited the Uzbek part of the fertile Fergana Valley where we saw the cotton fields up close; our guide described how in Soviet times it was compulsory for students to spend part of their summer holidays picking cotton—tough back-breaking toil! Fergana has a tradition of arts and crafts, and we saw demonstrations including silk making (from silk worm cocoons to cloth), pottery making, and ceramic decoration—a great opportunity for souvenirs. In one hotel bedroom a notice with "Кибла" and an arrow puzzled me until I worked out that this was to indicate the direction of Mecca for prayers.

Tajikistan

A visa is also necessary for entry to this lesser-known country and smallest of the "Stans". The capital Dushanbe (population about 1.25 million) still has a very Soviet/Russian atmosphere. Our city tour included the Navruz Palace advertised as the "largest tea house in the world", which turned out to be a kind of empty museum of excess, full of

mirrored ceilings, parquet floors, carved walnut doors and stone carvings. Our guide proudly announced that the Golden Hall was last used for a meeting with foreign dignitaries in 2021!

Tajikistan describes itself as a secular country despite 98% of the population identifying as Muslim, and we visited the huge Dushanbe Imam Abu Hanifa Mosque which can accommodate 120,000 male worshippers. The state has strict control of religion here; women are banned from praying in the mosque and banned from wearing the hijab. About 70% of marriages are still arranged. We drove past a prison in the city centre housing about 1,000 political prisoners and religious extremists. Our guide openly talked about corruption and unemployment being Tajikistan's main problems. The country has substantial mineral resources but remains one of the poorest former Soviet republics due to a weak infrastructure and economic base. And yet, the country's leaders found enough money to erect the world's highest flagpole in Dushanbe in 2011, sadly for them now overtaken in height by others.

Above: Morag Steven and her fellow travellers at Iskanderkul. Below: Osh Bazaar, Kyrgyzstan



Tajikistan uses the Cyrillic alphabet but it’s quite a different language from Russian (more similar to Persian). However, it was easy to guess that “бонк” was where I needed to go to change currency.

Away from the cities, Tajikistan is known for its spectacular remote scenery, dominated by the Pamir and Fann Mountains. Our tour included a night beside Iskanderkul Lake, named after Alexander the Great, situated at 2,200 metres above sea level. There is an uneasy coexistence between the stunning turquoise lake surrounded by magnificent mountain peaks, and ongoing mining for minerals by large Chinese companies.

Kyrgyzstan

Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has a largely rural economy, and tourism is still in its infancy. The picturesque scenery is largely dominated by mountains, gorges, beautiful lakes and wide-open plains. Our accommodation for five nights here was a mixture of yurt camps and home-stays which was an opportunity to get to know what life is really like here for families—as long as you could speak some Russian! Away from the main cities not many inhabitants are English speakers.

Kyrgyzstan was my favourite part of the tour, and I hope to be able to return in 2026. We spent two nights in the village of Arslanbob, famous for its large walnut forest and waterfalls, and then travelled on to the magnificent Son Kul Lake at 3,016 metres above sea level. The lake is situated on a huge plain where nomadic herders still tend their flocks of cattle, sheep and horses. We stayed two nights here in a yurt camp for tourists, which I would describe as “glamping”; my yurt shared with a fellow traveller had comfortable beds, electric light and a coal burning stove which was very much needed during the cold nights at altitude. I tasted the traditional drink of kumis which is fermented mare’s milk: smoky, vinegary with a mild fizz, yet with a creamy aftertaste. The drink is mildly alcoholic but reputed to have a host of health benefits—I’m not so sure!

At Son Kul Lake our group had the opportunity to watch “kok buru”, a traditional team game played on horseback throughout Central Asia, but taken very seriously in Kyrgyzstan with organised festivals and league tables. The English translation is “goat polo” and, essentially, it’s a bit like a tug of war on horseback with the body of a dead goat (weighing up to 20kg) which has to be dropped into a goal to score a point. It’s a noisy and exciting fast-moving game involving a lot of skill and strategy; the horses are especially trained and can change hands for considerable amounts of money.

The grid-locked capital city of Bishkek (formerly known as Frunze) felt like a completely different Kyrgyz world. Bed number 16 in our comfortable city centre hotel provided a great night’s sleep—despite celebratory fireworks to mark some unknown occasion.

I love the name of a café on the Kyrgyzstan border with Kazakhstan: “Тайм-аыр”—just the place to relax with a coffee!

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is by far the largest “Stan” in terms of geographical area and population but, unfortunately, we only had one day here. Our local guide (the sole woman guide throughout the tour) explained that Kazakhstan is the most developed country among its neighbours and exports gas, oil and uranium—but needs to import water from Kyrgyzstan. Although bride kidnapping is now illegal in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the practice still continues, especially in rural areas. Almaty on the other hand seemed very cosmopolitan to me and most young women wore western dress. Same sex and same



gender relationships are illegal throughout Central Asia but, according to our guide, can be quietly tolerated in some Kazakh cities. Her next comment was chilling: “Of course, in Turkmenistan or Tajikistan you would be killed, probably by family members because of the shame.” All the Central Asian states have a long way to go to improve their human rights records.

The streets of Almaty were full of banners in Russian and Kazakh urging everyone to be good citizens, reminding me a little of slogans in the former USSR. This sign caught my eye and I discovered later that these are the words of Abai Qunanbaiuly, the famous national poet (1845–1904): “Верь себе! И опора, и счастье твое: это лишь неразлучные разум и труд.” Rough translation: “Believe in yourself: your stability and happiness are only (the result of) your inseparable intellect and work”.

Highlights of Almaty include the stunning Russian Orthodox Voznesensky Cathedral, built of wood with allegedly not a single nail. By chance, a service was underway and we were able to enjoy the evocative sacred singing for a short time before being whisked away to our next destination. From the top of Kok-Tobe hill reached by cable car, we watched the sun set over the mountains that surround Almaty—a glorious finale to a wonderful tour. It was indeed an “epic” trip. •

Further reading:

- Fatland, Erika: *Sovietistan, A Journey Through Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan*, MacLehose Press, 2014
- Hopkirk Peter: *The Great Game, On Secret Service in High Asia*, John Murray Publishers, reissued 2016
- Frankopan, Peter: *The Silk Roads, A New History of the World*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015

Sign at the Summer Palace. Photo: Morag Steven



Morag Steven is a semi-retired mediator after 25 years helping people resolve disputes. She has a keen interest in Russian language and culture.

НОЧЬ /NIGHT

Sergei Yesenin

This year marks the 130th anniversary of the birth of Sergei Yesenin (right) so, in celebration, here is a new translation of one of his poems from 1911-1912. •



НОЧЬ

Тихо дремлет река.
Темный бор не шумит.
Соловей не поет
И дергач не кричит.

Ночь. Вокруг тишина.
Ручеек лишь журчит.
Своим блеском луна
Все вокруг серебит.

Серебрится река.
Серебрится ручей.
Серебрится трава
Орошенных степей.

Ночь. Вокруг тишина.
В природе все спит.
Своим блеском луна
Все вокруг серебит.

Sergei Yesenin

NIGHT

The river flows quietly on.
In silence the dark wood lies.
Nightingale does not sing
And Corncrake hushes her cries.

Night. It’s still all around,
Except for the murmuring stream.
The moon covers all on the ground
With the light of its silvery beam.

Silvers the spreading river.
Silvers the trickling stream.
Silvers the glistening grass
Making the lush steppe gleam.

Night. It’s still all around,
Nature is settling to dream.
The moon covers all on the ground
With the light of its silvery beam.

Translated by Graham Dane

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Red Money: Soviet "Support" and Transnational "Solidarity" in the Northern Coalfield during the 1984–85 UK Miners' Strike

Research abstract by Thomas Hodgson

My research explores the nature, extent, and meaning of Soviet "solidarity" with British miners and their families during the 1984–85 UK Miners' Strike. Focusing on the Northumberland and Durham Coalfield, the study investigates how material aid and symbolic gestures from Soviet mining communities – especially in Donbas (Ukraine) and Karaganda (Kazakhstan) – were received, remembered, and reinterpreted. Drawing on oral history interviews with former miners, their families, and community activists, alongside archival sources and digital memory forums, the research highlights the lived and emotional dimensions of solidarity. It argues that support from the Soviet Union was not only a geopolitical gesture but also a transnational connection between working-class communities on the industrial periphery. By centring voices often absent from official narratives, this project reframes Cold War internationalism as an exchange of recognition, resilience, and identity, while contributing to broader understandings of memory, labour heritage, and post-industrial experience.

From 1964 until 2000 Martin Dewhirst lectured on Russian literature and history at the University of Glasgow.



Russia Starts Here: Real Lives in the Ruins of Empire, Howard Amos (Bloomsbury Continuum, London)

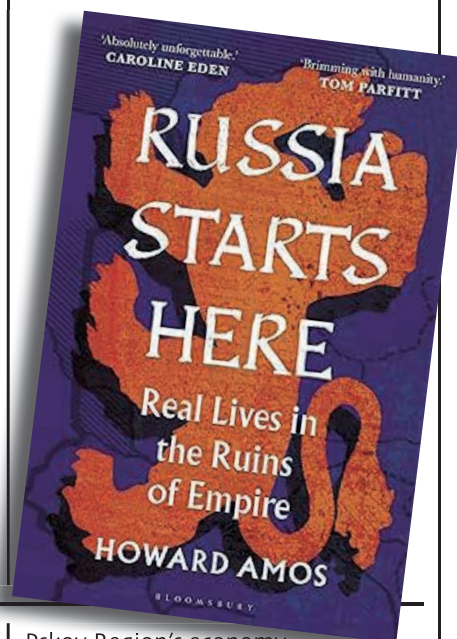
Even if you've never been to Pskov and/or its neighbouring Novgorod (not to be confused with Nizhny Novgorod) and doubt whether you'll ever go there, do read this well-written and very sad book—the best work on the contemporary Russian provinces that I have come across so far.

Its author rightly thinks that it is this area, not Kyiv, where Russia "starts". If only Vasily the Third, well before Ivan the Terrible, had not "ended Pskov's [and Novgorod's - MD] independence and annexed its lands to Muscovy"! (p. 70) But Amos's subtitle is equally important: what is motivating Putin, his so-called confessor Tikhon (see chapter 7, "Director of Religion") and countless others is the panicky desire to stop and reverse the seemingly almost inevitable decline and fall of the Russian Empire, likely to happen far more quickly than the end of the Roman Empire and beginning with the ouster of Gorbachev in 1991.

"The essence of much of Tikhon's thinking revolves around what he sees as Russia's immutable imperi-

alism." He believes Russia can only ever be an empire—if it fails as an empire, it fails as a nation. Russia "should be an empire", he told an interviewer in 2022. "Not because it wants to be, or doesn't want to be—just because it is." (p. 107) Amos may or may not agree with this, but he quotes one "acquaintance" who grew up in Pskov in the 1990s [and] expressed a typical opinion for her generation: "The 1990s were an absolute catastrophe for the country," she told me. "The more time passes, the clearer this becomes." (pp.70-71)

Since that awful period, life in the Pskov region has, for many (most?) of its inhabitants, either got even worse or not got much better, with only one of its high-profile inhabitants, Lev Shlosberg, who appears periodically in this book (which regrettably doesn't have an index) and is currently, as I write this review, under house arrest, doing all he can to help his fellow Pskovians. Amos quotes another participant in local politics as saying that "between 1991 and 1995 annual inflation in Russia averaged 871% (peaking at 2,608% in 1992); life expectancy fell by five years; unemployment doubled; and the number of annual suicides increased by 50%. In the same period,



Pskov Region's economy shrank to half its size. Mikhailov told me the collapse in industrial output in Pskov Region was twice as bad as in Russia overall." (p. 173)

Maybe you have the time right now to read only one chapter of this book, so I've been wondering which one to suggest. After much thought, I've decided to choose chapter 13, "iPhone Artist", about one Dima Markov. "Some said, half in jest, that Dima's Instagram page was the sort of page Dostoevsky would have run if the social network had been around in the nineteenth century." (p. 189) When he could finally afford to buy a house, Dostoevsky chose one in the Pskov region. Pushkin spent quite a bit of his life on a country estate there too.

The author comes to the conclusion (p. 257) that the "confrontation between Russia and the West means Pskov has again taken on its medieval role as watchtower on Russia's western border. It guards against enemies, and, if needed, would be a jumping-off point for military expansion." Into neighbouring Estonia, Latvia and/or Belarus?

I hope this book will be translated into Russian.

—Martin Dewhirst

Tom Hubbard is a distinguished scholar and Trustee of the Scotland Russia Forum who has a particular appreciation of the works of Anton Chekhov.



Chekhov's *The Seagull*, The Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh

This was a nostalgic return to Chekhov at the Lyceum—for me at any rate. I recall a young Gregor Fisher and the veteran John Grieve in *The Cherry Orchard* there back in the late 1970s.

This time it was the return of *The Seagull* and my thoughts turned –



incongruously? – to Wagner. But that German monster's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, all the arts coming together in theatre, is surely and essentially that of Chekhov and all great dramatists.

You have the almost Wagnerian leitmotif of Nina's early "Men, lions, eagles" speech echoed by her just before the play's tragic conclusion.

Further back, Shakespeare deployed such techniques—think of *Macbeth*. In Chekhov, too, his non-verbal signals and silences may be analogous to the rests in a musical score. He offers us more than mere "literature".

—Tom Hubbard