

THE FORUM

The Scotland-Russia Forum Magazine
No.50: Summer 2026



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PLUS

- Reviews
- Research
- Biography

**Ukraine Report
Latvian & Russian
Armenia Today
Chisinau, Moldova**



Front cover: A flag marking the beginning of ice fishing territory on Lake Peipsi. Photo: Eliza Barbé-Firth

Right: Sunset looking across the Baltic Sea. Photo: Hannah Douglas-Walker.



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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

We are delighted to report that several students at Scottish Universities have written articles for this issue of *The Forum* giving accounts of their time abroad.

These make a real contribution to knowledge in this country of the peoples of former Soviet republics. That is an important part of our mission as an organisation and we welcome future contributions of the same type. All writers are asked for their personal experiences and things they have heard or seen, so this is first hand reporting.

No fewer than eight former Soviet republics are mentioned in this issue.

Our series on Great Scottish Slavists continues with Terry Wade, whose considerable contribution to the teaching of Russian is fondly remembered, and indeed lives on in his textbooks.

In *The Forum 50* we offer reportage, a travelogue, ethnography, scholarly work and reviews, all of which we hope will be of interest.

Anyone wishing to offer an article for a future issue can contact us at info@scotlandrussiaforum.org. We'd be delighted to hear from you. ●



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Impressions of Ukraine Theodore Coloma-Griffin

The author (left) in May 2025, north of Kyiv. Photo: Theodore Coloma-Griffin.



It's in the middle of the night, the day before Christmas Eve 2025, and I'm crammed into the corner of a minibus heading towards Kryiviy Rih. My fellow passengers are mostly soldiers. Hardcore techno blares from the stereo. We all stare with tired eyes at the potholed road that races under the windscreen. Eventually, the bus stops at a gloomy street lined with Khrushchevkas – grim-looking Soviet apartment blocks. It's dark. The streetlights are all out due to Russian attacks on the energy grid. Everybody seems to be disembarking. I don't speak Ukrainian or Russian, so it's difficult for me to know precisely what's going on. The bus driver, a grim-faced boulder of a man, waves me out of my seat. "Finish! Stop here," he says. I am bowled out into the freezing cold. I am waiting to report on the trial of an Orthodox monk. With several hours to go until it begins, I walk in circles in an underpass, rubbing my body to keep warm. A drunk stumbles around, singing. We are watched, not without judgement, by two huddling street dogs.

Glad to see the end of a long night, I meet my contacts at the court. They believe my presence there will help the case of their client, who is accused of espionage. The words "britanskiy zhurnalist" echo around the building, a crumbling provincial courthouse. Talk of the Ukrainian intelligence services, human rights abuses and all sorts of dizzying chat 'strictly off-the-record' is whispered into my ear. I don't know what to believe. Air-raid sirens begin to blare around the city. After much shuffling in and out of wood-panelled rooms, the trial is postponed until January. I return to Kyiv, just in time for a boozy Christmas with other journalists, empty-handed.

This experience was an example of what I often went through in my stints as a young freelancer working in Ukraine. I lacked the institutional

authority to be whisked around the front line accompanied by well-equipped soldiers and military press officers. This makes reporting all the more challenging. If you're to learn anything about the place, let alone get a worthwhile scoop out of it, you need to plumb the depths of what occurs around you. This has led me from nightclubs to monasteries to surreptitious meetings of 'draft-dodgers'.

What nobody tells you about Ukraine is how beautiful it is. The long distances lull you into a respectful calm. I will never tire of watching forests and villages carpeted in snow from a sleeper train window. Somewhere between Lviv and Kyiv, you cross an ancient civilisational boundary. The grandiose, dour Austro-Hungarian apartment buildings are replaced by the pastel-coloured brick of the Russian empire. It's a living cross-section of visible history: carcasses of dead empires, the oppressive Stalin years, slow-burning Soviet decline and finally the cheap sleaze of post-Soviet capitalism.

For a better understanding of Ukraine's living historical trauma, it suffices to take the example of one Kyiv family I am familiar with. My friend Anna (not her real name) is a young graphic designer. She enjoys Kyiv's nightlife, fancy cocktails, cafés that serve coffee mocktails with juice and tonic water but laments a mid-20s tormented by wartime. Living near the centrally located Lukianivska metro station, she endures the constant anxiety of bombings, the conscription of friends and relatives, and her homeland's uncertain future. As a child, in a very young Ukraine, she spent her summers on the steppe in Luhansk, where her aunt lives. It is now under Russian occupation. The aunt, drip-fed with Russian TV, has cut contact with her Ukrainian family. Anna's father was born in Soviet Moldova, educated in Russia and then sent to work in Ukraine as a civil servant for

This page: left: Blown-out windows near Lukianivska Metro Station in Kyiv. Right: Damage from Russian cluster munition use in Kharkiv. Below: St Michael's Gold-Domed Monastery with a memorial to fallen soldiers in the foreground. Photos: Theodore Coloma-Griffin.



many years. Like most of his generation, he spent his youth preparing to live and work in a world that no longer exists. Anna's grandfather disappeared on the front in the Second World War. Few traces remain of his existence. His father endured the famine of the 1930s and was the son of a man who suffered the hardships of the Great War, during which Ukrainians fought in Russian imperial regiments against fellow Ukrainians from Austria-Hungary. Ukraine, despite its abundance of minerals, coal and rich agricultural land,



is a land steeped in world-historical tragedy.

Few outside Ukraine understand the extent to which much of its society is engaged in a crusade against the Russian language, literature and culture. This is subject to great internal debate. It has its extremes. For example, I once extolled the virtues of a soup I had recently tried, *solyanka*, which I am sure many readers will be familiar with. "Yes... I used to like this. But it's Russian," my friend responded.

A minority of Ukrainians, mostly in the east and amongst older citizens, blame Kyiv's leadership for provoking its powerful neighbour. "So now we must all speak Ukrainian and wear vyshyvanka shirts to show we are Ukrainian?" a Donbas deputy once asked me. Nostalgia for Soviet times is another ideological ambiguity. The truth is that older generations spent most of their lives living under a Muscovite



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Latvian and Russian: sharing space

Eliza Barbé-Firth



The space for Russian language and culture in Latvia is a controversial and sensitive topic. The Soviet occupation of Latvia from 1941-1991, in the words of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, "dismantled the Latvian state, defiled the land, and, within half a century, brought the nation to the brink of extinction".

People were forced to speak Russian, replacing the Latvian language. There were anti-illiteracy campaigns set up to make it appear as if Latvia was uneducated before it became Soviet. People were deported from Latvia to distant regions of the Soviet Union during the occupation, and tens of thousands died in transit. Soviet forces left Latvia for the last time only 38 years ago, and on the streets of Riga you can feel the lingering effects of half a century of oppression. The rebuilding of Latvian culture and language from its threatened state has a resounding presence throughout the city,

Above: A flag marking the beginning of ice fishing territory on Lake Peipsi. Photo: Eliza Barbé-Firth

empire, the USSR. Separation was never going to be clean.

It is important to not overstate the extent to which these ideas prevail in modern Ukraine. Look no further than the catastrophe that was the Russian invasion. I once heard a brilliant story from a friend of mine who now works for Al Jazeera. We were sitting amidst the glossy luxury of Kyiv's InterContinental hotel, where you can still smoke indoors and rub shoulders with journalists of a higher calibre. "I was eating at this famous restaurant last week and speaking to the maître d'", she drawled, in between mouthfuls of wine and smoke, "and they told me the most remarkable thing: Russian generals were in their reservation book. These generals had booked a place in their restaurant – they only just figured out who they were – for only six days after the war began." I was stunned. Russian generals had so little understanding of Ukraine that they seriously believed they might have occupied Kyiv and be eating in a restaurant there in less than a week. Even if it turns out to be untrue, this story illustrates the misunderstanding and distrust that abound in this (and every) war. Ukrainian society was very little understood, not just by the West, but by the country that still holds delusions of having a fraternal bond with it.

Nowhere is better to learn more about these ambiguities than Kharkiv. It is a gorgeous city, with a proud population as unique and varied as its architecture. I learned much from conversations with Oleksandr Savchuk, a publisher and scholar of Ukrainian history. He thus summarised Kharkiv's many identities, "I call Kharkiv 'Babylon' – Germans, Jews, Ukrainians, Christians, Orthodox all settled here and mixed with each other. But I don't separate the people from nationality. Ukrainians are a people who want to live in Ukraine, pay taxes there, work there and protect it as a space of freedom."

Such ideas are broadly shared, no matter an individual's origin. In Ukraine, each train carriage has an attendant. Travelling with a Kyiv-based actor to Odesa, I encountered a particularly interesting one. "He's funny and speaks Ukrainian badly, with a strong accent", my companion said. "I'm going to ask him where he's from". He was Kazakh, from Almaty.

"Why did you stay in Ukraine after the war started?"

"I want to stay here, where there is at least freedom. I don't want to move, this is my home now," he said, furrowing his dark brow.

The final lesson Ukraine teaches us is one of adaptability and endurance. Many readers will have seen the brilliant images of Donbas farmers ploughing fields in close proximity to artillery batteries or minefields. The tragicomic absurdity of these photos tells the truth better than most reporting has been able to. Living in Ukraine means witnessing normal life amidst wartime horrors. By night, the skies rumble and whine from ballistic missiles and Shahed-type drones. By day, Ukrainians slurp borscht in cafés and go about their working lives. Even in frontline cities such as Kharkiv the daily air raid sirens go unheeded. This is not due to war fatigue or fatalism, but simply the human will to carry on with life and to prosper wherever possible. May Ukrainians continue to do so. ●

This page: left: Eliza ice fishing on Lake Peipsi. Right: Eliza's friend carrying her dog. Photos: Eliza Barbé-Firth



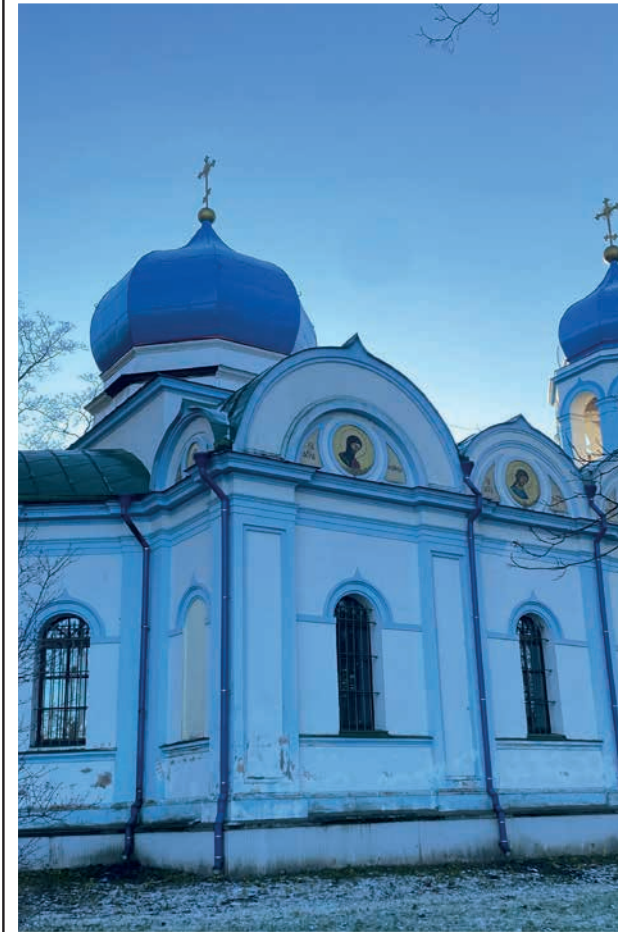
and patriotism is very present, especially in the younger Latvian generation. It would only be expected that the aim of strengthening the Latvian cultural roots that had been weakened during the occupation would not openly accommodate those of their colonisers. So why am I here learning the colonisers' language?

My time spent in Riga whilst studying at a Russian language school has been characterised by a growing awareness of the political and social tension between Latvians and Russians. When I tell Latvians of my endeavour to master the Russian language in Latvia, I often cause a lot of confusion, especially amongst the younger Latvian generation. They were born in an independent Latvia, many of whose parents fought for its freedom from the Soviets, and their patriotism does not leave much space for Russian language and culture. They are more interested in why I am not learning Latvian. At the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, I read on an electronic display the following: 'it is important to understand that flooding the native population with foreigners dilutes the Latvian cultural environment, destroys the collective memory, individual self-confidence, and the moral strength to resist.' These days there is a significant minority of Russians living in Riga: approximately 38% of the city's population, many of whom have lived here all their lives and many born generations after the Soviet occupation. Is it fair to consider their presence a threat?

Many Russian immigrants were brought to Latvia from Russia during the Soviet era, lowering the population percentage of ethnic Latvians to 52% by 1989. Generations later, Russians make up more than a quarter (26%) of the Latvian population. I hear Russian spoken on the street wherever I go. I am always careful to ask, "можно по русский?" ("can we speak in Russian?") when I enter a shop, because I know there's a chance the shop assistant won't want to (or won't know

how to, in case of the younger Latvian generation) speak Russian, I can most of the time be sure that the answer will be, "да, можно" ("yes, we can."). I have realised that it is important to be sensitive to the situation. I was unwise to assume that my new Latvian friends would share in my enthusiasm for the Russian language. This reverie of mine was quickly discarded; I realised that my curiosity about the Russian side of Latvia had addressed a big taboo, especially amongst the younger generation. I recall a Latvian girl at a carnival telling me, "We hate the Russians," and that she found it sad that Latvia was representing Russia for my studies. Another situation occurred outside a bar where three Estonian men told me that they were "hunting the Russians" whilst dressed in Native American headgear (because they were going to a rock concert, they told me). Sometimes the first response from Latvians hearing that I am studying Russian is, "Are you also going to learn Latvian?" I have with quiet guilt learnt a few words in Latvian, but it made me think: if I am feeling the burden of seeking Russian culture and language in Latvia, what is it like for those native Russian speakers who live here?

There has been a steady process of removing Russian language and culture from Riga. Shops changed from Russian to Latvian signage during the years following independence, and over the next decade Latvian became the day-to-day language of communication, switching from the otherwise prominent Russian. I still hear Russian spoken on the street, but I am told it is a lot less than before. At the National Library of Latvia, I was led to a small section of shelves after asking where the books in Russian were. The library hosts around 8 million books, and so I was surprised to see a meagre collection of literature which did not even include the Oxford Russian Dictionary. I made a friend who shares Latvian and Russian nationality. She feels that she cannot express her fears surrounding the growing sense of uneasiness

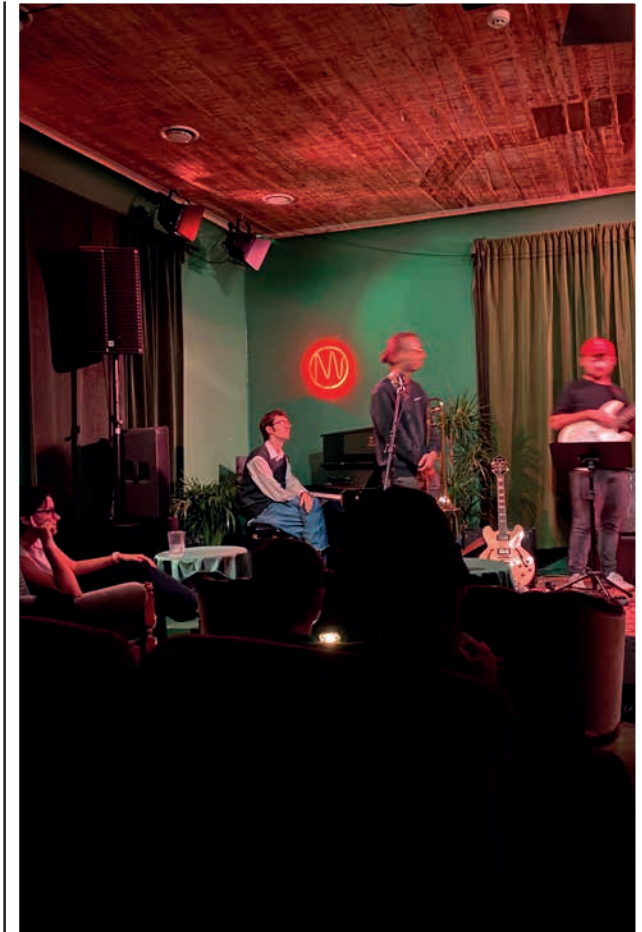


surrounding Russians, and the gradual displacement of their culture and language. She avoids the subject with her close Latvian friends because it is the best way to deal with a sensitive issue.

In 2022 a Soviet monument in Pārdaugava was pulled down because it was 'an ideologically charged symbol of totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union and the Soviet army', according to the Riga City Council website. But it was also a monument commemorating the lives of Russian soldiers who fought against the Nazis in 1945. My friend told me that Russians used to gather at the monument every year on May 9 in commemoration, and when deliberations on whether to pull it down started, there were protests to preserve it from the large minority of ethnic Russians who valued the monument. She expressed to me that whilst she did not feel sentimental towards the memorial, she did not believe that it was the right thing to pull it down, because for many Russians living in Latvia it represented the acknowledgement of the suffering and sacrifice of Russian soldiers who had families and lives and were not just homogenous faceless representatives of the Soviet Union.

My time in Latvia has led me to reflect a lot upon my reason for studying Russian. It is a tumultuous and complicated language, not only in grammar, but in the weight that it holds as the language of an extremely controversial country whose government is responsible for atrocious crimes against humanity. At first, I did find it hard to understand why the Latvians I spoke to were so resolute on pushing out Russian language and culture, but I wonder if this is the necessary process of healing a previously oppressed country must take in order to separate itself from its coloniser. Living in Riga for the past 6 months has shown me how two dissimilar but equally vibrant and determined cultures exist during troubling times in a shared space. ●

This page: left: A Church in Cesis, a small town near Riga. Right: Musical event for St Michael's Day celebrations, marking the beginning of winter. Below: Street scene in the Old Town of Riga. Photos: Eliza Barbé-Firth



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Right: Christmas fireworks. Photo: Haakon Reynolds

Armenia Today

Haakon Reynolds

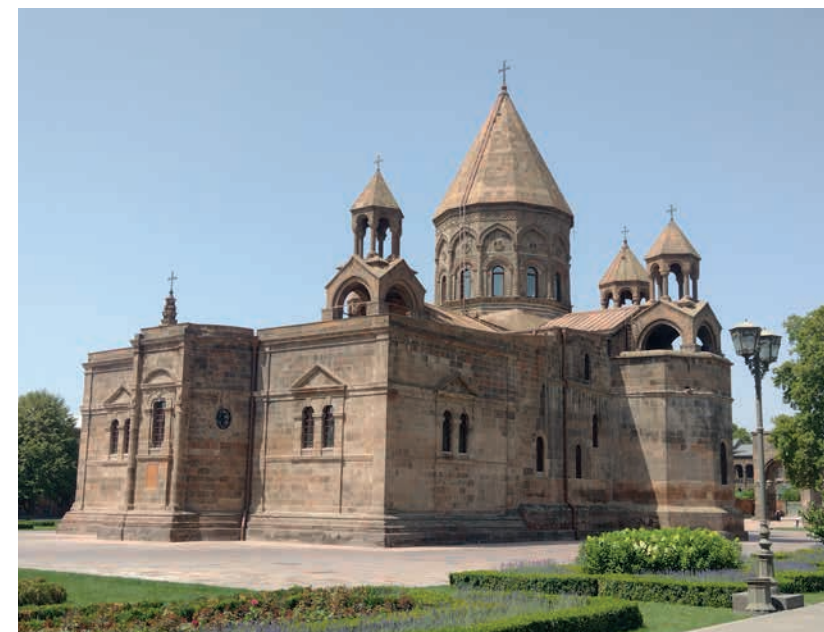


Living in the South Caucasus, Armenia's history has long been defined by its interactions with the three great imperial powers whose territories enclose the boundaries of Europe's highest mountains: Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Without a sovereign state of their own for the better part of a thousand years, the Armenian people were variously under the rule of the Russian, Ottoman, and Persian Empires, their condition alternating between periods of repression and tolerance by these foreign governments. To a large extent, Armenia's relations with the modern successor states of those empires are influenced by its experiences under their rule; thus, rancour persists in its dealings with Turkey, due to that country's perpetration of the Armenian genocide and continuing denial thereof.

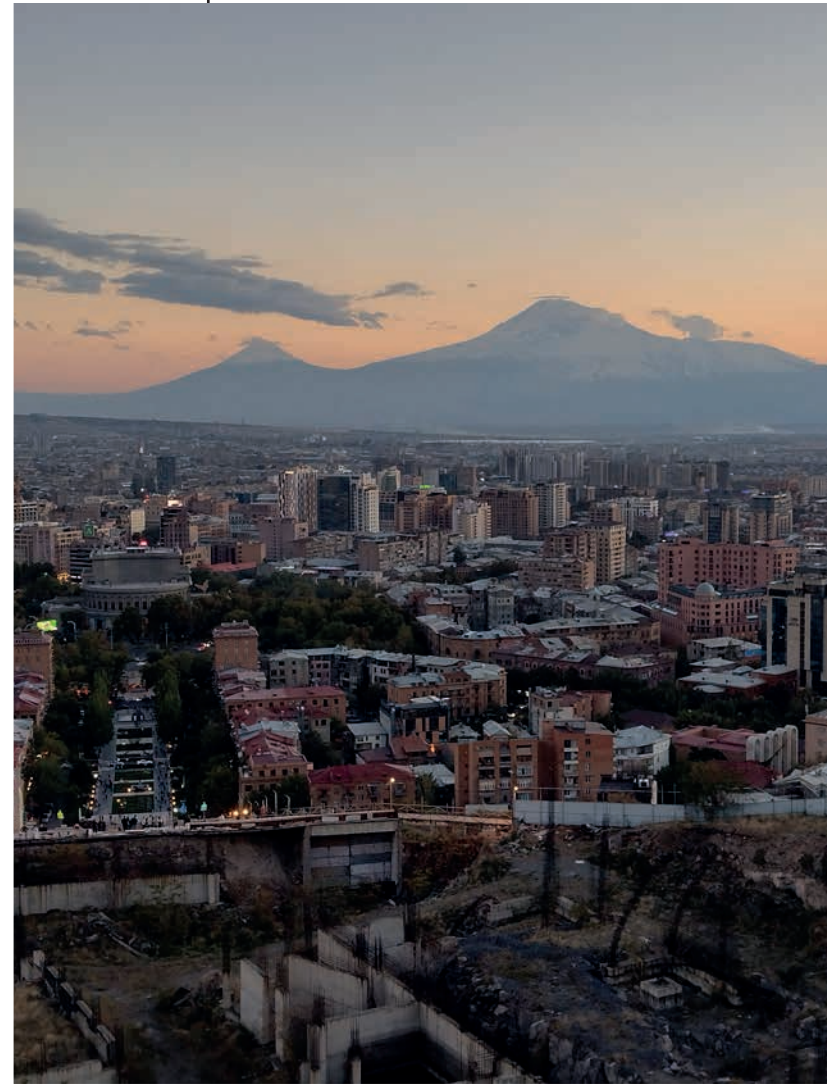
However, Armenians and Russians have traditionally enjoyed friendly relations, dating from the time of the Russian Empire's expansion into the Caucasus in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. At that time, many Armenians viewed Russia as the least of three imperial evils. As a Christian minority in the predominantly Muslim Persian and Ottoman empires, Armenians suffered discrimination and often persecution, and saw the fellow Christians of the Russian Empire as their potential protectors. In the 17th century, many in the Armenian élite sought the help of Russia in their quest for sovereignty, and were willing to accept Russian rule, believing Armenia might be autonomous within the Russian Empire; however, such hopes were to be disappointed, with Eastern

Armenia simply absorbed into the Tsarist autocracy by the mid-19th century, and subject to repression.

But during the Armenian genocide (1915 – 1917), several thousand Armenians fled the crumbling Ottoman Empire for the safety of Russian-controlled Armenia. Thus, there has indeed been a long historical sense of Russia as a protector, or a "big brother", as one Armenian put it to me. It forms something of a counterpart to the role played by the Turks and Ottomans – the deniers and destroyers of the Western Armenian nation (a role which many say continues today in the form of Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh). Even nostalgia for the USSR (and accompanying pro-Russian sentiment) is somewhat coloured by this: one of my professors suggested to me that, in the Armenian case, such nostalgia is less to do with economic or social life under communism, and more connected with the



Above: A typical view of the Lesser Caucasus mountains from a hiking path near the resort town of Dilijan in north-eastern Armenia. Below: Etchmiadzin Cathedral—the Mother Cathedral of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the oldest cathedral in the world, dating from 301 AD. Photos: Haakon Reynolds



Above: Mount Ararat and Yerevan - a view from the capital of Armenia to the double-peaked Mount Ararat, an enduring symbol of Armenian national identity - and of national trauma, given it today lies in Turkey according to borders agreed after the Armenian genocide.
Photo: Haakon Reynolds.

simple fact that Armenia was then at peace, and unthreatened by its neighbours. Despite sporadic outbreaks of ethnic tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Soviet times – notably over the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh ASSR – the two peoples lived side by side across the two union republics in relative harmony.

In the era of modern Armenia's independence, it has been aligned closely to the Russian Federation, joining the various regional organisations which sprang up across the former Soviet states, notably the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and then the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). It and the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Artsakh) received military and diplomatic support from Russia against Azerbaijan.

In spite of a long history of political and military closeness between the two nations, and of the "big brother" status, however, my conversations with Armenians suggested that the country is approaching a turning point in its relations with Russia. After centuries of domination and co-operation, it seems that many Armenians are no longer willing to continue their friendship with a Russia exhibiting increasingly intolerable behaviour. The beginning of this turning point was probably the Armenian "Velvet Revolution" of 2018, when, as in other post-Soviet states, popular protests forced the pro-Russian élite from office and resulted in the installation of a more

pro-European government. Since then, under prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, the quality of Armenia's democracy has markedly improved, with press and personal freedoms expanding; importantly, its system has moved closer to that of a European liberal democracy, away from the authoritarian models of its erstwhile allies Iran and Russia.

I was in Armenia at a time of flux: the continuing Western pivot following the Velvet Revolution, the painful incremental steps towards a tenuous peace with Azerbaijan, changing relations with Russia as Armenia grappled with the invasion of Ukraine. Notably, the first two points have also impacted the Armeno-Russian relationship, one that has been described by the Kremlin as 'fraternal'. My arrival was in August 2024, after the fall of Artsakh the previous year. Memories of Artsakh, and the trauma of yet another lost Armenian homeland, were everywhere: the traders in Vernissage market were selling wooden carvings of Artsakh landmarks, subway walls were adorned with portraits of soldiers, the newspapers carried breathless coverage of the border situation, and I spoke to several refugees who had come to Yerevan from Karabakh. At one point, a friend and I were staying in Goris – a town in southern Armenia, close to the border with Azerbaijan – and we heard several loud shots during the night. Upon inquiring about this with our landlady, she said it had been a quiet night, before finally recalling that there had been a wedding, at which fireworks had been launched. She then, completely gratuitously, asked us if we thought the Azeris were invading (even though we had not brought this up at all). Such was the entrenchment of conflict along the border.

The Azerbaijani capture of Nagorno-Karabakh marked the end of three thousand years of Armenian civilisation in the region, and was accompanied by virulent anti-Armenian rhetoric by the Baku government (which still sometimes lays claim to the rest of Armenia as 'Western Azerbaijan'). If the peace agreement holds, and stabilises the situation in the South Caucasus, many Armenians view it as a peace paid for in blood. For that, some said to me, Russia will partially have to answer; they say the Kremlin betrayed Armenia. Contrary to collective and bilateral security arrangements, it was argued, Russia (and the wider CSTO) failed to provide Armenia with the force and firepower it needed to win, and thus allowed its ally to be defeated, and Artsakh to be destroyed.

One Armenian – a young man involved with the Erasmus affiliate in Yerevan, and so perhaps more inclined to support a Western diplomatic orientation – said that Russia's actions globally proved its untrustworthiness as an ally. Not only, he said, was there the aggression in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, but Russia had even failed to maintain its ally Bashar al-Assad in power in Syria. With Moscow's imperial project expanding, even Armenia could eventually be at risk, in his eyes. Across the world, he maintained, there was proof that friendship with Russia was simply not worth it.

The Armenian government seems to feel the same way, and has indicated it will seek EU membership soon (a move which has earned it several warnings from the Kremlin). Despite the public and political popularity of seeking EU membership, many

Armenians are sceptical about the process of obtaining it. A woman in Dilijan told me she thought the "Europeans would never accept Armenia" as it is currently, and cited the quality of driving as exemplifying the obstacles to admission. (Driving licences can be simply purchased in Armenia, and seatbelts are uncommon in cars, though I found the driving to actually be quite safe, especially in the mountainous areas). One of my professors was excited by the prospect of EU membership, as it would allow her easier travel to Vienna, Rome, and Paris (currently a visa is required), and more generally move Armenia closer into the orbit of "European civilisation". More seriously, she opined that Armenia was a European country, but had been prevented from properly becoming part of the continent due to its geography and history of subjugation by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Especially given Armenia's warm relations with France, Cyprus, and Greece, she said, it made sense to move away from the political orbits of unstable and authoritarian nations like Iran and Russia and towards the democracies of Western Europe.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is not popular in Armenia. The government has distanced itself from it, and has signalled its intention to leave the CSTO; although that organisation's failure to assist Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh is the main reason for doing so, Yerevan is also reluctant to risk being drawn into Russia's imperialistic wars. On the ground in Armenia, opposition to the invasion is widespread: one woman even refused to speak Russian to me – a phenomenon commoner in Georgia – in solidarity with Ukraine (though she relented upon finding out I was British). The Russian language remains the most widespread second tongue in Armenia, and I used it much more often than English; but the latter is gaining popularity, especially among the younger generation. This is due in part to the global trend towards the internationalisation of English; but in Armenia's case, Russian may increasingly represent a world with which it does not wish to be associated.

This shift has already occurred in other post-Soviet countries, and has a deeper political and cultural resonance than merely representing the growing global dominance of English: it indicates a desire to emerge from the shadow of centuries of Russian rule, and the violence of Russian foreign policy. The same woman who declined to speak Russian pointed out that although English is also a foreign language, it is at least not the language of an imperial overlord (from Armenia's perspective – I did not ask her about the fact that the spread of English also owes a great deal to imperialism.)

There is also the question of Russians in Armenia, of which there are a few thousand. Starting in 2022,



rents significantly increased in Yerevan due to the influx of Russians fleeing their country, a fact which has caused some resentment among the Armenians I spoke to. One told me that many of these Russians make no effort to learn the Armenian language, and complain that they cannot have the same kind of lifestyle in Armenia (those with the means to flee Russia tend to be middle-class), whilst putting strain on the country's resources. He found it particularly galling that these Russians were seeking refuge in a country that their government had "sold out", though he also said he counted some Russians among his best friends.

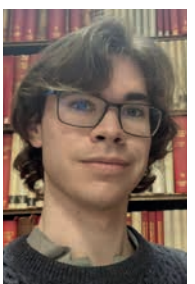
It seems the Armenian people are largely ready to leave their country's friendship with Russia behind. Some even say that they only ever supported the alliance with Moscow for pragmatic reasons, such as military and economic support. Now that those have gone, along with any credibility Russia may have had as a responsible global power, Armenia is looking West for its political future, and has received a warm reception in Brussels. I would expect English to supplant Russian as the principal second language within a few decades, whilst Armenia's post-2018 political trajectory has been decidedly Western-oriented. In three centuries of mostly friendly dealings with Russia, the majority of it as part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Armenia seems to have reached a breaking point at last. Perhaps summing up the sociopolitical shift in relations with Russia, one of my professors – well-read in Russian literature and a regular visitor to St. Petersburg – once remarked:

"The Russians," she said, "form a nation which takes great joy in suffering. They have produced some of the world's finest books, films, and symphonies on the subject.

"The problem," she went on thoughtfully, "is that too often they try to inflict it on everyone else." ●

Republic Square - the central plaza in Yerevan, lit up at night
Photo: Haakon Reynolds.

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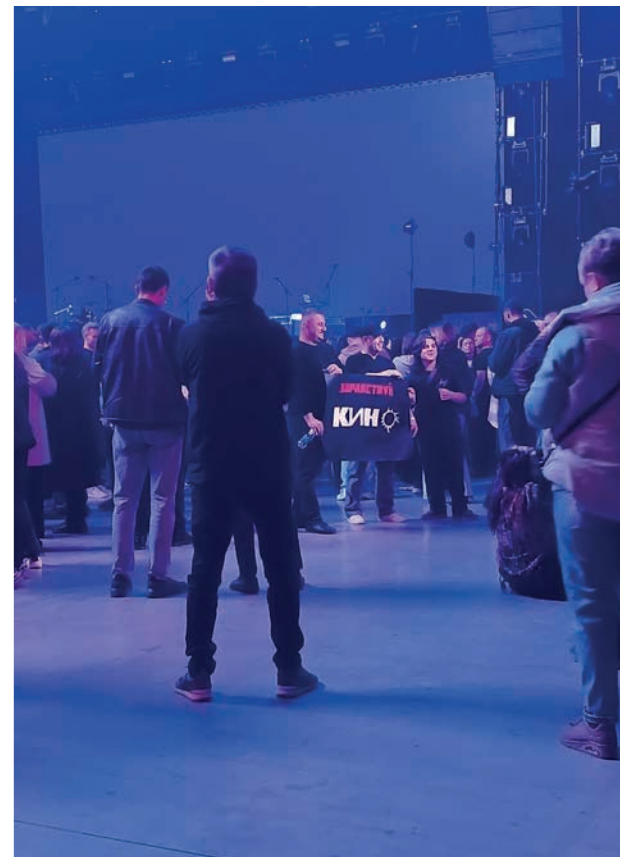


This page: right: Kino in concert. Below: Street signs are in Romanian, Russian and English. Photos: Magdalene Berg

Chisinau, Moldova Magdalene Berg

Would you travel to one of the least-visited capital cities in Europe to see a band whose lead singer died over thirty years ago? Legendary Soviet rock group "Kino" performed at Chişinău Arena, Moldova on the fifteenth of March 2026 – at least, some of their remaining members did: Yuri Kasparyan and Igor Tikhomirov, alongside Alexander Titov, who had originally been the bassist for a different band. Despite lead singer Viktor Tsoi's absence, the show was phenomenal. Recordings of Tsoi's voice were played while the band performed and a unique, creative video sequence was shown on a large screen – sometimes animations, sometimes old videos of the band in the 80s, sometimes a projection of the performers on-stage, and often a mixture of all three.

The atmosphere among the crowd was extremely high-energy, and the cry "Он жив!" or "Цой жив!" (meaning "Tsoi is alive!") could be heard frequently before, during, and after the show. The range of people attending the concert was huge; Romanian, Russian, German, and English could be heard among the crowd, and fans of all ages could be seen, from elderly couples to groups of young teenagers – there were even some children watching the show. The band has been iconic within (but not limited to) the Russophone sphere for decades, and their popularity is far from waning. Tsoi is a huge cultural icon, comparable arguably to Freddie Mercury of Queen, and even after his death



the influence of his music and his band is strong. New generations of fans are discovering Kino every day and the band is gaining popularity in the West too, in part due to the growing opposition to the wars in the Middle East and the invasion of Ukraine among left-wing young people in particular, with whom Tsoi's lyrics resonate.

Thanks in part to a particularly tall person who decided to stand directly in front of me, I also had my first experience of Moldovan hospitality: a man who had stood silently next to me for the first half of the concert told them to move, and to be considerate of the people behind them. He later introduced himself as Stas, bought me a beer, and asked if there was anyone I needed to call (seeing as I was foreign and alone). When the gig was finished, and the scramble for taxis began, Stas and his friends advised me to phone a friend to let them know that I was going to be walking back to my hostel with them, as waiting for a taxi would be hopeless. They reassured me several times that "the guest is the most important person for Moldovans, we will look after you".

We stopped for some Moldovan "champagne" (a delicious, sweet drink which reminded me of fizzy rosé wine) on the way, and they told me about the difficult position that Moldova is in, both politically and culturally. Putin is breathing down the country's neck in the East, and the West seems to be virtually ignoring it, with progress towards EU accession being drawn out. Even the national language is a point of contention. Nowadays, it uses the Latin alphabet and is generally considered to be Romanian – or at least a dialect thereof although the language can be referred to as "Moldovan" in some contexts. Before the 1989 language reforms the so-called "Moldavian" or "Moldovan" language used the Cyrillic alphabet. Many people consider the implementation of the Cyrillic alphabet in the first place to be a part of the Soviet project to Russify, divide, and conquer individual Soviet republics,



giving them a new (or modified) national identity. Others feel that Moldovans are losing their identity and being culturally absorbed by either Russia or Romania.

Stas explained his fear that if Moldova joins the EU, the country might be even more at risk of losing some of its rich culture – but if it doesn't, the country will be more vulnerable to Putin and his imperialist goals. One of my new friends, Alexei, told me about his home: Transnistria, a breakaway region in the east of Moldova which some describe as "the last outpost of the Soviet Union".

"There is so much propaganda about Transnistria in the West. We are just normal people, like anywhere else. We don't want anybody's war."

Chişinău has its own unique atmosphere reminiscent of both European cities like Berlin and cities further afield like Almaty. The Western and Soviet influences blend together in a distinct and very beautiful way; babushkas sell flowers and fresh vegetables on the pavements outside McDonald's restaurants, and abandoned Soviet buildings stand opposite glittering glass shopping centres. You can do all of your shopping in the central open-air market - from food to clothes to cleaning products - or you can visit a western-style supermarket. You can get by speaking Russian or Romanian, and increasingly English too, especially among young people.

In addition to this, the country has a sophisticated wine culture, which can be experienced either through a tasting tour of the largest underground wine cellar in the world, or by sipping various vintages by the glass outside a bar, chatting to locals. People are friendly and kind, and the local cuisine is delicious and varied. From sweet and savoury pastries (plăcinte) to hearty soups and fresh salads (and much, much more) there is something for everyone to enjoy. As a woman travelling alone I felt incredibly safe too, even on the night I arrived, lost, trying to find my way to my hostel with no internet connection. The first person I asked for help – a

young woman selling perfume in an underpass market – gave me very detailed instructions on how to get where I needed to be (including showing me photos), and I was in my bed not half an hour later. Chişinău – and Moldova as a whole – is extremely underrated as a travel destination in my opinion, and if you're looking for a city break that won't leave you bankrupt, it's perfect. If your trip coincides with a performance from a band as legendary as Kino – even better. ●



This page: Left: Magdalene Berg with Alexei and Stas. Below: The Young Communist Heroes monument.

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This page: right: Khrushchevskas. Below: Medieval Town Hall in Tallinn Old Town. Photos: Hannah Douglas-Walker.

Studying in Tallinn

Hannah Douglas-Walker

Estonia, and Tallinn in particular, have pleasantly surprised me after just 5 months of living here. I knew shamefully little about this rather small European country, but I have quickly discovered a place full of innovation, history and unexpected charm. This former republic of the Soviet Union is widely regarded as the most developed of its post-Soviet neighbours, offering a higher standard of living and quality of life. Not only this, but the country prides itself for its quite unique 'e government' and advancement in technology. I have experienced this interesting and wonderful side to the city first hand, during my first VR tour of Tallinn. Along with some of my classmates, I strapped a VR headset and wandered through the streets of Tallinn's Old Town, stepping into a virtual version of the city 100 years ago (I have no doubt I was almost run over by a bike at least twice, but despite the minor hazards, I still gave it a five-star review on Google!).

However, despite the city's modern image and forward-looking lifestyle, I was struck most of all by Tallinn's interwoven styles of life and architecture, existing side by side with remarkable ease. In a mile radius, you will find beautiful medieval preserved buildings, sleek modern skyscrapers and Soviet Khrushchevskas that quietly tell the story of the country's complex past. Some neighbourhoods have changed little in decades and evoke a rhythm of Soviet



life, while just beyond them, a digitally driven, future orientated Estonia moves forward with confidence. Moreover, with my instinctively (rather British) people-pleasing habits, I initially found the more reserved social manner of people here somewhat disorientating. Over time, I have come to feel quietly at home in it. There's a comfort in a culture where people do not intrude but respect. Beneath the reserve lies a genuine politeness, that is less performative, but sincere and felt.

Beyond Tallinn, Estonia reveals a landscape of striking natural beauty. To the south west of the capital lies one of the Baltic regions most unexpected scenes: Rummu Quarry. This submerged limestone quarry is where nature meets face-to-face with a rather haunting past. Nearby stand the crumbling remains of the abandoned Soviet era Murru Prison, whose inmates were once forced to work in the quarry. Over time, natural groundwater has filled the excavation, transforming the site into a beautiful turquoise lake. In winter, the lake freezes over, becoming a place to skate.

At the quarry, an unexpected sight rises: an impressive hill formed from years of mining waste. Standing 71 metres tall, it is a notable landmark by Estonian standards, where I am yet to come across another hill, or any mountainous landscape (having grown up near the hills in my childhood and enduring many reluctant hill walking holidays during that time, it's a memory that often comes back to me!). Yet Estonia more than makes up for its flat terrain with dramatic natural scenes at every turn: from frozen waterfalls in winter to winding bog walks. Outdoor life here is vibrant, and locals embrace traditions such as mushroom picking, a pastime often regarded as a 'national sport.' I enjoyed joining in and discovering that, contrary to what they teach you in British schools, not every bright coloured mushroom you find in a forest is poisonous.

What about Tallinn Old Town itself? It's impossible to do justice to its charm, its fine architecture and



surprise views in this short article but few sights in Estonia are as striking as the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Tallinn. As I wandered through its ornate interior, I found myself surrounded by a mix of curious tourists, like myself, and locals coming for regular worship. Standing at the entrance, you have to crane your neck to see the majestic domes at the top of the Cathedral. You stand small in its commanding presence, while it asserts its imperial influence against Tallinn's skyline. Beyond the Cathedral itself, I was captivated by the contrast of its location. Directly across from the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, Estonia's most prominent reminder of its Russian-influenced past, stands Estonia's modern democratic parliament, draped in Estonian and Ukrainian flags and built in the 1920s in the grounds of the medieval Toompea castle. The Cathedral was erected in the 1890s deliberately opposite the castle as a sign of Russian supremacy. Today, however, I think it tells a different story. It's a potent reminder that language is not simply a matter of politics, that a mother tongue is not a slogan or a political position. Not every Russian speaker is to be associated with Putin's regime, and reducing people to that narrative overlooks a complexity of human nature. For Estonians, reclaiming and protecting their own language and culture remains central to their national mission. Yet at the same time, there is an ongoing challenge of recognising and allowing Russian speakers to maintain their own linguistic and cultural identity. This dynamic is made even more complex by the growing number of Ukrainian refugees arriving in the country, using Russian as a lingua franca.

Alongside learning and appreciating Estonian culture, studying Russian here at a time when it is gradually being phased out of public institutions has felt particularly meaningful. Speaking Russian here and connecting with people has opened doors to a culture that exists quietly alongside the mainstream, but is no less real, nor less valuable. I have had great fun this



semester trying to explain to my Russian speaking classmates what Haggis, Neeps and Tatties are and in return, discovering their own culinary traditions and holiday dishes. There have also been more memorable encounters with people, such as when I dropped by Biblioglobus, the Russian book shop, one day on my way home. I found myself in conversation with a woman who worked there, eagerly sharing stories of her Soviet childhood, showing me her old schoolbooks and the poems and rhymes she had learned. I wasn't quite sure what to say, but I remember, before I left that she turned to me and urged me not to give up, touched that I was learning her language, encouraging me to keep going.

Experiences like these have been some of the most memorable and meaningful parts of my time here. To me, they reveal that beyond the busy streets of Tallinn, there is a country quietly trying to balance history, change and innovation. A small yet proud country; a digital pioneer wrapped in medieval walls. You don't even need hill walking boots to see it all... just an AI headset! ●



This page: Left: Keila Waterfall in Keila-Joa. Right: Estonians in traditional dress giving medals to participants in the 2025 Tallinn half marathon. Below: Estonian cafe bookshop. Photo: Hannah Douglas-Walker.

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Across Embers and Through Masks: Exploring Bulgaria's Ancient Traditions

Antonia Radkova

Bulgaria, a land rich in ancient customs and folklore, preserves unique rituals that continue to captivate both locals and visitors. Among these traditions, two stand out for their vibrant and mysterious character: Nestinari and Kukeri. Both practices are deeply rooted in the Bulgarian cultural landscape, intertwining pagan beliefs, Christian symbolism, and communal rites.

The cultural heritage of Bulgaria is deeply rooted in a history that spans millennia, beginning with the Thracian period and evolving through the Roman Empire (1st century AD - 4th century AD). In the sixth and seventh centuries, Slavic tribes settled in the region, blending with the existing Thracian and Romanized populations. This convergence led to the establishment of the First Bulgarian Kingdom in 681. After the Medieval period the territory was conquered and became part of the Ottoman empire (1396–1878). Finally, the establishment of an Independent Bulgaria took place in 1878. It is from this layered history that the Bulgarian Mystery of Festivals and Folklore emerges.

Nestinari: Dancing on Burning Coals

One of the most profound ancient rituals is the *Nestinari* (known as *Anastenaria* in Greek), a

fire-dancing ceremony primarily associated with the Stranja region in the South-East of Bulgaria. Recognising its unique cultural value, UNESCO has inscribed the ritual on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The ritual is connected to ancient cults, specifically the Cult of the Sun God (Helios) and the Cult of Dionysus, the god of wine. It combines Christian elements—such as processions with icons, church prayers, with pre-Christian roots involving solar fire cults and dance while under ecstatic trances.

The festival usually takes place at the end of May or beginning of June, marking the period before the hard labour of field work begins. The preparations commence early in the morning when the church bell rings to announce the start of the feast.

The central event involves dancing barefoot on embers. Participants often hold the icons of Saints Constantine and Elena, two of the most venerated figures in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Saint Constantine or better known as Constantine the Great was a Roman Emperor in the early 4th century who first legalised Christianity in the Roman Empire. Saint Elena, his mother, was renowned for her piety and devotion.

The participants enter a state of focus and rhythm described as a collective trance. This ritual symbolizes purification, protection, and spiritual renewal. Participants dance to ensure specific blessings: health, prosperity, longevity and fertility. Nestinari dancers sometimes even carry children in their arms across the fire as proof that they will remain unharmed and as a symbol of fertility and health.

The act of firewalking, as practised by the Nestinari, seems almost miraculous at first glance. The surface of the glowing embers can reach temperatures of 500–700°C, enough to cause severe burns under normal circumstances. Yet the participants often emerge unscathed, moving barefoot across the coals with apparent ease. Scientists explain this phenomenon through the thermal properties of the materials involved. Charcoal and ash, the primary components of the fire, have low thermal conductivity, meaning they transfer heat to other objects, like human skin, relatively slowly. Additionally, the brief duration of each footstep plays a crucial role: because the feet are in contact with the embers only briefly, there is insufficient time for the heat to penetrate deeply enough to cause injury. Research suggests that such

practices involve not only physical principles but also a psychophysiological element, where ritual, expectation, and heightened awareness interact with the body's natural responses to extreme stimuli. During the fire-walking ritual, Nestinari enter a trance-like state that allows them to move barefoot across glowing embers with apparent fearlessness. This trance is induced by rhythmic music, dance, and intense focus, combined with religious and cultural exaltation that can reduce pain perception.

The Nestinari tradition demonstrates a fascinating intersection among science, culture, and human resilience, turning what seems like a perilous act into a ritual of transformation and communal celebration.

Kukeri: The Masked Rituals of Bulgaria

The second major tradition highlighted is the *Kukeri*, a festival celebrating the rebirth of nature at the end of the cold winter season. Like the Nestinari, the Kukeri has ancient roots tracing back to pagan festivals of the Middle Ages.

Kukeri are traditional masked performers in Bulgarian folklore whose primary role is to ward off evil spirits. The singular form, "kuker," refers to the individual participant, typically a man, although in

The photographs show a Survakari group from the village of Kopanitsa, western Bulgaria. This group is distinguished by its traditional white costumes: white trousers and a sheepskin coat worn with the wool turned outward. The masks are made of wood, animal skin, and horns. They are not large but must be frightening. Photos: Kopanitsa Survakari group.



modern times women and children also take part.

Traditionally performed at the end of the winter months the rituals coincide with the symbolic renewal of nature, marking the end of the cold season and the beginning of the agricultural year. Over time, Kukeri performances have also been linked to carnival - like festivities and Christian holidays, blending multiple layers of cultural meaning.

The masks and costumes of Kukeri are among the most striking features of the tradition. Early rituals may have involved only simple face painting, but over the centuries, masks became elaborate, often featuring animalistic or monstrous features. Some masks are double - faced, symbolizing the duality of good and evil, while colours carry symbolic meaning. The performers also wear heavy bells around their waists, these clanging sounds are believed to scare away evil spirits and purify the surrounding space. Regional variations in masks and costumes reflect the unique history and creativity of different villages, making each Kukeri performance visually distinctive.

During the ritual, Kukeri move through the village, dancing and clanging their bells. The dances are highly rhythmic, creating a hypnotic effect that enhances both the symbolic and performative aspects of the tradition. Beyond their spiritual function of protection, Kukeri rituals serve as communal celebrations, reinforcing cultural identity and community bonds through music, dance, and shared experience.

In contemporary Bulgaria, Kukeri have also become a public spectacle. The Surva Festival in the city of Pernik close to the Bulgarian capital Sofia, is one of the largest and most famous gatherings, attracting participants and spectators from across the country and beyond.

While many Kukeri and Nestinari performances continue to be deeply embedded in village traditions, serving as vital rituals for protection, purification, and communal celebration, others have gradually evolved into larger cultural showcases and tourist attractions. But in the rural areas, the rituals maintain their original spiritual and symbolic functions: Nestinari walk barefoot on glowing embers during the feast of Saints Constantine and Elena, invoking divine protection and purification, while Kukeri roam villages in elaborate masks and bells to drive away evil spirits and ensure fertility and prosperity.

These traditions have now found a place on the national and international stage. Festivals such as the Surva Festival in Pernik for Kukeri, and local cultural events highlighting Nestinari fire - walking, a tradition from the region near the Black Sea coast - an area popular with tourists - attract visitors from across Bulgaria and beyond, transforming private, sacred practices into public performances. Despite this adaptation, the rituals retain their symbolic and cultural significance, demonstrating the resilience of these centuries-old practices. The continued vitality of Nestinari and Kukeri rituals illustrates how Bulgarian communities have managed to preserve ancestral heritage while engaging with modern audiences, blending spirituality, folklore, and theatrical spectacle in a way that celebrates both history and living culture. ●

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UWED Winter School, Tashkent Thomas Hodgson



Between 5 and 10 January 2025 I attended the University of World Economy and Diplomacy's Winter School in Tashkent, Uzbekistan – a programme the University describes as an “academic initiative designed to deepen young scholars’ understanding of the geopolitical, cultural, and economic dynamics shaping Central Asia today.”

The experience carried particular significance for me as a return visitor. I first travelled to Uzbekistan in summer 2024, during a period marked by democratic reversal and term-extending constitutional amendments. Those events complicated what is often

presented, simplistically, as a linear post-Karimov “thaw”, following that president’s death in 2016.

What proved most striking in January was the tenor and range of discussion in a semi-official setting. Across the sessions I attended officials, established policy figures and younger reform-minded participants engaged in exchanges that were comparatively open and, in some instances candid. The Winter School thus offered a useful vantage point from which to observe Uzbekistan’s unresolved political-intellectual transition: institutional continuity and reformist aspiration coexisting in evident tension.

Above: Participants at
Amir Temur Square.
Below: Delegates
Thomas Hodgson
(left) and George
Naylor, both from
the University of St
Andrews.





Above and next page:
Delegates visit the
International Institute
for Central Asia. Below:
Participants from Italy,
Germany, the UK and
Tadzhikistan.

The conference was distinctive, first, for the heterogeneity of its participants and perspectives. Even a cursory examination of the programme indicated that the western-facing policy intelligentsia associated with “New Uzbekistan” has not yet consolidated into a coherent or stable formation. Senior ancien régime figures appeared alongside a younger cohort whose increasing prominence coincides with the fading of the Karimov cult and the expansion of official reform discourse. Sodyq Safoev - Foreign Minister under First President Islam Karimov (2003–2005) - spoke on the same platform as Mirshohid Aslanov, who co-founded the Center for Progressive Reforms in 2023 and has become representative of a newer generation of policymakers. Rather than a clean replacement

of personnel or ideas, the event reflected a layered environment in which older institutional networks persist even as new ideas of reform seek public expression.

A second notable feature was the forthrightness with which Uzbek academics engaged Afghan counterparts, and the relative ease with which discussion moved beyond a narrowly securitised frame. During the Karimov period, Uzbekistan’s relationship with Afghanistan was frequently expressed through the language of border vulnerability and the feared “overspill” of radical Islamic militancy across the 144-kilometre frontier. This framing also served an external signalling function: by emphasising exposure to Afghan instability, Uzbek officials could implicitly align themselves with Western



strategic concerns through the identification of a common adversary.

In a lecture entitled “Central Asia and Afghanistan: Shared Challenges and Regional Security,” Hamza Boltayev, Head of the Centre for Afghanistan and South Asian Studies, emphasised the emergence of a more reciprocal - at least rhetorically “equal” - basis for engagement between Central Asian states and Afghanistan. As an illustrative case, he pointed to the Qosh Tepa Canal irrigation project, which underscores the extent to which geography compels interdependence. In conditions of acute water scarcity, large-scale upstream interventions entail immediate and consequential transboundary effects. The significance of this discussion lay in its framing: Afghanistan was presented as a partner for positive, constructive engagement, a stance reinforced by references to recent UWED academic delegations that had travelled to Kabul.

A further thematic thread linking policy debate to deeper historical inheritances concerned cotton - once the Uzbek SSR’s “white gold.” Cotton remains a salient emblem of the Soviet political-economic legacy: quota-driven monoculture whose environmental costs remain most starkly evident in the degradation of the Aral Sea. In this context, Aslanov’s remarkable description of cotton as “Uzbekistan’s greatest curse” was most significant for the implications of its public articulation. Given the crop’s deep entanglement with administrative authority and official narratives of stability, such a formulation would have been significantly less conceivable under Karimov. Rather than being plainly rhetorical, such remarks sit alongside substantive progress: Uzbekistan has undertaken sustained reforms in the cotton sector, and

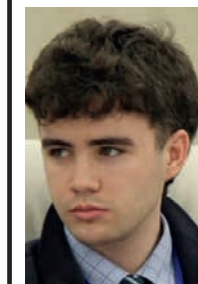
child and forced labour - long associated with the harvest - have been nearly eliminated.

Taken together, these encounters suggest that “New Uzbekistan” is best understood neither as a settled reform trajectory nor as rhetorical repackaging, but rather as a contested and still-forming configuration. The Winter School’s most revealing moments, in my view, lay in the widening of discursive space - the willingness to discuss Afghanistan in terms beyond border threat; to conceptualise water as a transboundary political economy rather than through a national lens; and to name cotton’s historical burdens with a degree of candour previously unthinkable in semi-official settings.

In the immediate post-Soviet period, several security and international-relations commentators predicted that Central Asia would become a theatre of “water wars.” Yet, notwithstanding recurrent frictions, large-scale interstate conflict has largely not transpired. The tenor of discussion I encountered instead suggested - cautiously - the development of habits of bargaining, coordination, and pragmatic engagement, even amid intensifying environmental pressures.

The Winter School therefore provided, above all, a snapshot of transition in progress. Not a decisive rupture, but a tentative reconfiguration of how Uzbekistan narrates itself - both to its own policy intelligentsia and to external audiences. If the event’s eclecticism at times conveyed an improvised quality, that too may be diagnostically significant. In a context in which older networks remain present and new ones are still being assembled, the greater public openness is an important part of the country’s contemporary politics. ●

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Isaac Babel's Tragedy *Maria* Jayanti Dutta

Isaac Babel (1894-1940) is one of the most important writers of 20th-century Russian literature. Among other works, his short story cycles *Red Cavalry* and *Odessa Stories* are widely read and studied by literary critics from various countries. Besides short stories and essays, Babel wrote two plays: *Sunset* (1926) and *Maria* (1935). Unfortunately, both plays, particularly *Maria*, remain relatively unknown. This short article will examine some interesting aspects of the play *Maria*.

The play was published in the magazine "Театр и драматургия" (*Theatre and Dramaturgy*) in 1935 but the first performance took place only in 1968, at the Popular Theatre of Culture in the Lensoviet Palace under the direction of Efim Tabachnikov. It was probably going to be presented at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow soon after its publication, but it was cancelled by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) during rehearsals.

The play, built around 24 characters and divided into eight acts, takes place in Petrograd during the early years of the Revolution. It is a tragic story about an aristocratic family. Maria, the eldest daughter of Nikolai Mukovnin, a former general of the Imperial Russian Army, departs to serve in the First Cavalry Army, leaving behind her sick father and her younger sister Lyudmila. Maria never appears in the play. All information about her is conveyed through the conversations of other characters and a letter that Maria wrote. The play ends with the disappearance of Lyudmila, and the death of the general. Katya, a friend (or relative? Babel never revealed Katya's relationship with the Mukovnins), who lived with this family, also leaves the house. A young working-class family, consisting of a husband and a pregnant wife, moves into their house.

Why Maria?

Gregory Freidin, in his article "Two Babels—Two Aphrodites. Autobiography in Maria and Babel's Petersburg Myth" (*The Enigma of Isaac Babel Biography, History, Context*. Edited by Gregory Freidin, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2009), refers to the famous Red Army officer, Maria Denisova, as the prototype for Maria Mukovnina. Babel never revealed this fact of choice. We can consider another possibility: in several stories by Babel, we find an almost sacred image of woman, an image of the "eternal mother," even if these female characters had different origins, ages, and professions. Maria could also be the symbol of "virtue," "strong," "pure," the "mother of God," or the "eternal mother."

Maria (the absent hero): The hero born from the genre of silence?

In the 1930s, an attempt began to create a new type



of literary hero corresponding to the expectations of the theory of Socialist Realism: this hero has class consciousness (классовое сознание), is compassionate, understands what class struggle is, and he/she is a representative of the people. The hero could not be solitary, detached from society. This new hero had to accept the values of the Socialist Revolution and act (heroically) to bring benefit to the construction of the new society; but even at that time, Babel continued to write in his own way.

At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers (1934), where the Socialist Realism method for literature and art was adopted, Babel, in his speech, spoke about the genre of silence: Если заговорили о молчании, то нельзя не сказать обо мне - великом мастере этого жанра.

(If they are talking about silence, then they cannot help but mention me – the great master of this genre.)

(Бабель И Сочинения.Т. 2. Художественная литература. Москва. 1990. стр. 381)

Is that why we have an absent "hero" in the play?

Maria embodies all the characteristics of the new type of hero: she sacrificed her personal life for a noble cause, left behind her family of aristocratic origin, and went to fight to save the Revolution. Maria has a very clear awareness not only of the current events but also of the history of her country and her people. Because of the physical absence, Maria's image is created by the other characters. Thus, we have a fragmented image of our heroine: instead of one Maria, there are several "Marias". Each person speaks of "their" Maria.

For example, the father sees Maria as the saviour of the family, her sister, Lyudmila, despite being jealous of Maria, shares the same opinion as the general. Katya respects Maria, recognizes that she is strong, but is the only one who understands that Maria will not return to protect her family. Viskovsky, a veteran of the White Army, sees Maria as an object of sexual pleasure, but recognizes her strong character. Although Maria had a romantic relationship with Prince Golitsyn, he almost never mentions her name, except once, when talking to Katya, describing Maria as a strong woman. It is a curious fact that Golitsyn remains completely silent about his relationship with Maria. The prince could be an important person to describe her character, because he had had an intimate relationship with her. However, this does not happen in the play. This suggests that the author was creating a new literary genre, "the genre of silence".

So, as we mentioned before, there is not a complete and well-structured image of Maria. The only characteristic of this character is that she is strong, determined to achieve her goals, but, on the other hand, there are no reflections on the morality of her actions – either in the characters' conversations, or on the part of the author.

Maria is the "new type" of Babel hero. Babel did not follow the instructions to create the ideal hero of his time, so it is possible that he tried to build this silent and absent character instead. There are other references to another person several times in the play– Katya's supposed boyfriend Redko. Besides Maria, he is the only person who is directly linked to the Revolution. Redko works at the city headquarters. The only information about his existence comes through the telephone conversations between Katya and Redko and between General Mukovnin and Redko.

In both cases we only hear the voices of Katya and Mukovnin. It could be a coincidence, but it seems that Redko, like Maria, also has no time for a personal life. For both of them, duty to their country is paramount. Two heroes of the new era are "absent" from the play: the heroes of the "silent genre" of Babel.

We are nothing, now let's be all!

If the female characters Maria, Katya, and Lyudmila represent the past in a certain way, we also find images of women of the present and the future. In the last scene, Elena, the wife of the worker Safonov, appears. She is a young woman of humble origins. She is going to live with her husband and child (who is about to be born) in the Mukovnin's house. Elena is satisfied with her current situation. Here we see an interesting situation: those who, until recently, had a comfortable life and a high social status, have lost all of that in the new circumstances of society (the case of the Mukovnins), and those who had nothing have managed to have a more comfortable life. This is Elena's case. She could never previously have lived in a house like the one she can live in now; she can have a more dignified life than she had had up till then. Life brought tragedy to the

Mukovnin family, but at the same time, it brought joy and comfort to the Safonovs.

Gorky, in his letter (Горький и Советские Писатели Неизданная Переписка. Издательство Академии Наук. СССР. Москва. 1963) addressed to Babel, writes that the last act is mechanically linked to the play. According to Gorky, a tragic play could not end with a hope for the future. We may disagree with Gorky. Here we can see some possibilities of why Babel writes the end of the play in this way: the writer himself believed in the future, although he had a critical view of the Revolution. Even in the most difficult situations, Babel never lost his faith in life. Life goes on. It is no coincidence that in the last scene we meet Elena, who is pregnant. Despite death and other tragedies, there is always hope. Death also brings life. This statement by the author is expressed through Golitsyn, when he quotes the Bible:

Scene VII:

GOLITSYN: Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

(*The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, 2005: 830).

As Milton Ehre states: Babel identified the Revolution with life, despite his anxieties and misgiving. As the Jewish tradition untiringly teaches, he chose life, as he understood it, over death. (Isaac Babel, 1986: 114).

The era of Lyudmila and Katya has come to an end. There is no possible way out for these women. However, a new era has begun for Elena and Nyusha (the maid).

The End of the Play

The ending is quite different from other works by the author. The play does not end with the tragedy of the Mukovnins. There is a happy ending for other people. Elena opens the windows and the sun enters, the spring sky appears, and a woman (Nyusha, the maid), standing like a statue, is cleaning the windows.

... ELENA opens the windows, and the sun and the noise of the street come pouring in. Sticking out her belly, she carefully walks along the walls, touching them, peeks into adjacent rooms, turns on the chandelier, and turns it off again. NYUSHA, an enormous crimson-faced girl, comes in carrying a bucket and a rag to wash the windows. She climbs up onto the windowsill and tucks in her skirt above her knees. She is bathed in sunlight. She stands against the background of the springtime sky like a statue holding up an arch.

(*The Complete Work of Isaac Babel*, 2005: 841).

The sun here doesn't have an aggressive red colour as it does in the stories of *Red Cavalry*. The open windows let in the sunlight and the noise of the streets. As if, after centuries, "life" enters this house. The people, who were isolated from current society and reality, have disappeared, and the new tenant of the house opens the windows to the future.

There are no physical descriptions of Maria, Lyudmila, or Katya in the play, but the author portrays Elena in considerable detail. A tall woman, not more than twenty, with a small bright face (*The Complete Work of Isaac Babel*, 2005: 840).

Nyusha, the maid who appears in the last scene cleaning the windows, is portrayed like some characters from *Red Cavalry*:

Nyusha looked like a statue bathed in sunlight against the backdrop of a spring sky. This hyperbolization of human figures is quite characteristic of Babel's style.

The "Strangeness" of the Play

Sometimes, we have the feeling that the play is incomplete. Some cases are not well understood: for example, after being raped and imprisoned, Lyudmila disappears. Until the end, there is no further information about her. We know who all the characters are, but we do not know what is the exact relation between Katya and the Mukovnin family. We do not even know, why she lives with the Mokovnins. It is not clear what fate awaits the old Nanny Nefedovna. Dimshits, the smuggler, who also has a rather important role, disappears without a trace. The author did not develop Maria's love story with Prince Golitsyn. These episodes of Maria's life are as loose and fragmented as her own character.

The play could also be about the "uncertainty" of the time or the "uncertainty" of people's lives during this period. This uncertainty is expressed in Nyusha's song:

"A Cossack galloped through valleys unseen
Into cold and distant Manchurian lands,
He galloped through gardens and orchards green,
A precious ring clasped in his powerful hands,
The precious ring was from his sweetheart true:
Think of me as you ride through those distant lands,
And in a year forever I shall belong to you.
Alas, a year had come and gone..." (*The Complete Work of Isaac Babel*, 2005: 842)

In *Red Cavalry*, instead of heroic acts of soldiers or glorifying the war against imperialism, the author spoke of the lives of suffering caused by the war; he described tragedies that befell the people, he wrote about the feelings, losses, and deaths of many people. After many years, once again the writer chooses the small tragedy of a family against the backdrop of a "great event" - the Revolution.

Maria was an innovative work at the time. While other writers were creating heroes of the new era, Babel created his characters of the "genre of silence." Maria and Redko do not appear in the play. Instead of praising their heroic acts, the author describes the death of the general and recounts how the pursuit of happiness turned into a nightmare for Lyudmila. Maria stayed far away when her family needed her more than ever. ●

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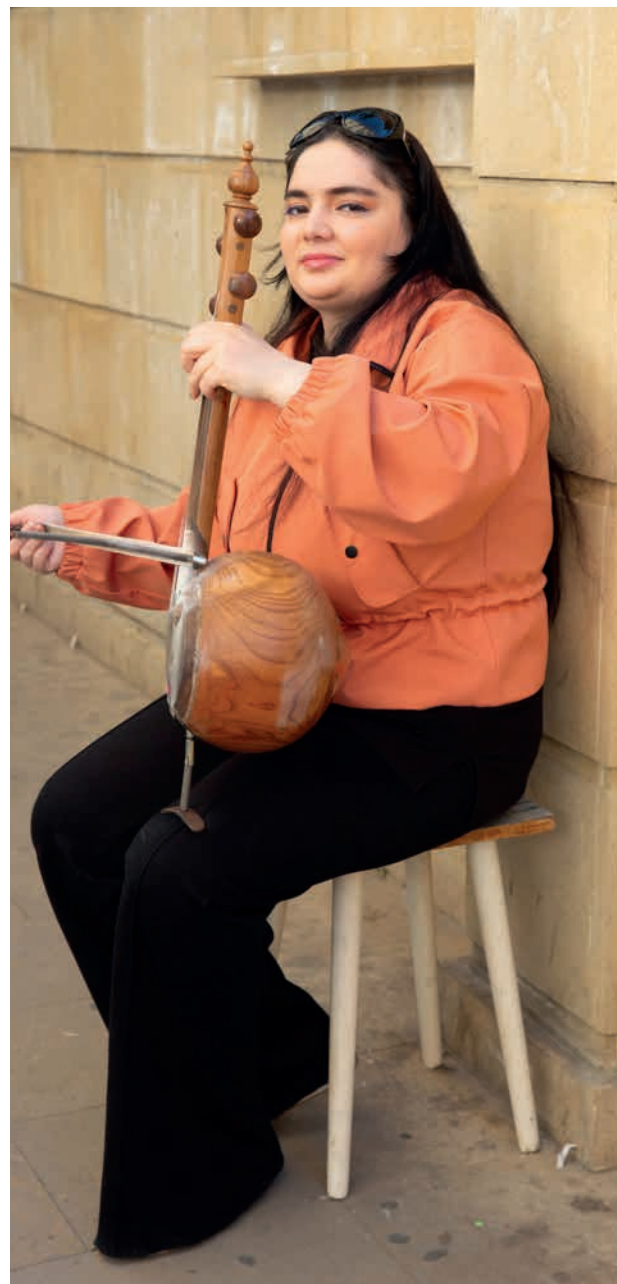
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A Caucasian Triptych Sheila Sim

Forty years ago, while studying Russian at St Andrews University, I was lucky enough to win a British Council scholarship to spend ten months in the Soviet Union. Our group was based in Voronezh, a sprawling industrial city in the south of Russia. Good food was scarce, entertainment was limited, and the winter months were long and drab. To keep us sweet, our minds arranged several holidays for us in warmer parts of the USSR including one in Baku, Azerbaijan, and another in Yerevan, Armenia. Those two trips have stayed in my mind all these years. I had always wanted to re-visit the two cities and also to set foot in Tbilisi, the third of the Caucasian trilogy of capitals, which I didn't get the chance to visit back then.



Baku

In 2025 my plan came together, and in late March I arrived in Baku to meet my Russian pal, Anna, who had flown in from Moscow. Like me, she had stayed in Baku many decades ago and was curious to see how much it had changed.

I had hoped to stay in the Hotel 'Azerbaijan' near Lenin Square, our Intourist accommodation back in 1985. Sadly I found it was long gone, and Lenin Square was now re-named and cordoned off for construction works, making it impossible to re-visit the part of the city I knew best.

Baku was unrecognisable to me. The city has changed enormously over the last forty years, though oil and gas continue to underpin its existence. The most obvious change is the striking architectural additions to the landscape, which might be described as Dictator-Bling. Top name architects have been brought in to make their mark on the city. The two glass-fronted Flame Towers (housing a mix of offices, apartments and hotels) are the most obvious addition to the skyline, being on the highest ground; shaped like two tongues of fire, the national symbol of Azerbaijan, they flicker after sunset with an array of coloured LED lights. But the Heydar Aliyev Centre, designed by the late Zaha Hadid, is Baku's shining architectural star. A fluid white form made of swooping curves, it sits on top of a huge grassy mound like a mad meringue from outer space. I found it immensely pleasing to the eye, but I couldn't help but wonder how many thousands of residents had been evicted and apartment blocks razed in order for this thing to be created.

As a Russian, Anna had been not at all sure how she would be treated in Baku. Unsure of Azerbaijan's

attitude towards the war in Ukraine, she was initially wary of conversing in Russian with shopkeepers and waiters. As for me, I had learned a little bit of Turkish in the months leading up to our trip (being the nearest language to Azeri I could find) – and it did come in handy now and again. But neither of us need have worried; no one in Baku seemed to notice or care whether we spoke English or Russian; both were met with a fluent and unfazed response. Tourism is a growth industry here, and everyone is used to conversing in the tourists' languages.

Anna and I both wanted to see some of the main sights that we'd first visited back in the Soviet era. I had looked out old photographs, taken on my Soviet-made Lomo camera, of a daytrip to the Ateshgah (Fire Temple) in 1986, and we agreed it was a 'must' for us on this return visit. We hired a tour guide to drive us along the main highway to the Absheron peninsula where it's located. This is an ancient site, whose roots date back centuries to a time when Zoroastrianism was an important religion. The temple's eternal flame, a phenomenon resulting from a constant supply of natural gas oozing up from the ground, remains – as it felt to me 40 years ago – a beguiling place.

Tbilisi

An autumn trip with my husband Andy now took shape. Months of planning and research culminated in our arrival in Tbilisi at the beginning of October. We would spend a week there and then travel by car across the border to Yerevan.

The two of us had slightly different priorities for the trip. Andy's was food related; he has a passion for adjika, the spicy paste originating in Abkhazia and Georgia, and he was keen to explore the food markets to source his

Below: Flame Towers
seen from old Baku.
Previous page: A street
musician in Baku.
Photos: Sheila Sim.



This page: Above:
Street performers
celebrating Yerevan's
2,807th birthday.
Right: Tbilisi Bakery.
Next page: Sheila Sim
outside a bakery in
Tbilisi.



own ingredients for making it at home. My particular interest was architecture; I wanted to see as much Soviet modernist and brutalist architecture as I could.

We flew into Tbilisi on a warm October night. Through the window of our taxi, as our route twisted and turned through badly lit streets, it was impossible to get a sense of the city. My sense of disorientation was increased as we passed by a corner shop selling guns – a huge variety of guns, according to the pictures on display.

The next day we explored the Chugureti district where we were staying. Behind the classical European facades of the main street where our hotel was located was a quiet, rather ramshackle neighbourhood of crumbling houses and hidden courtyards. In any other European city this type of area would have been gentrified years ago, but here it retained an old-world character; at every step we admired intricate stone carvings, wooden balconies and graceful Art Nouveau metalwork.

As we explored the streets we were conscious that Russian was the common language; clearly there were many Russians living here, particularly young ones. Georgia was one of the easiest countries to flee to after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, if you disagreed with his policies and wanted to avoid conscription. Some of the wealthier-looking young Russians exuded a faint air of entitlement. I hoped that they were conducting themselves respectfully, and I wondered what the local population felt about the influx.

Dezter's Bazaar was high on our 'to-do' list for the week. Originally named after soldiers deserting from Russo-Georgian War in 1921 who sold their weapons here, it's a large, outdoor farmers' market selling the best of Georgian fruit, vegetables, dairy and more. Guided by Paul Rimple, an ex-pat American who leads food tours here, we were introduced to dozens of individual stallholders. Here was Luisa, from whom we would later buy blue fenugreek and crushed marigolds, two of the important ingredients for our adjika. Here was Tina, a former cardiologist and Health Ministry official who was sacked by Saakashvili during his clear-out of the



old Soviet guard and turned to selling her homemade plum sauce in order to make a living. And here were two grizzled, rogueish pomegranate sellers, whose eyes told of a lifetime of toil and trouble. All of them insisted that we join them in a swig of chacha – the local firewater, made from grape residue left over from winemaking. It's lethal.

Later in the week we set off on a day-tour of Tbilisi's modernist and brutalist architecture with guide Alex. This was an eye-opening expedition, off the traditional tourist path, that gave us some insight into the real city. Alex showed us around a high rise apartment block now being used to house refugees from Ossetia and Abkhazia in shanty town conditions. From here we took a cable car across the gorge to visit a 1970s housing complex comprising three concrete high-rises on a steep slope, with unique horseshoe-shaped windows, linked together for accessibility by a 'skybridge'. We met the resident caretaker / lift-operator, Mzia, who is now so well known that she featured in a recent Guardian article. We noted the portrait of Stalin displayed proudly above her bed. Other stops on the tour included the abandoned archaeology museum built during the final years of the USSR, where we were able to access the empty, eerie cisterns.

As we drove around the city, Alex was happy to talk to us about the current political situation; like the majority of younger Georgians, he was no fan of the current Russia-friendly government. He talked scathingly about the recent PR push to bring tourists to Georgia. "They paint nice murals on apartment blocks, they build churches instead of schools, they pay Jamie Oliver to come here and make a television programme – but they don't look after their own people."

We packed in as many cultural visits as we could during the week including the Silk Museum, the National Museum, numerous galleries and ancient churches. We wished we could have spent longer in Georgia, but it was time to pack our bags to cross the border into Armenia.

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Yerevan

During my student visit to Yerevan we had stayed in what was an extraordinary building for its time: the Palace of Youth. A cylindrical tower, faceted and futuristic, it was brutalism softened at the edges. Its symmetrical rows of windows shaded by curved balconies were like serried kernels in an ear of corn – and indeed it was affectionately known in Russian as the Kukuruznik, the Corncob. Comprising hotel rooms, function halls and a revolving restaurant at the top, it had been completed just one year prior to our stay and would soon become an icon of socialist modernist architecture. From our rooms we could see the two peaks of Mount Ararat across the border in Turkey.

In recent years I had started to dream about the building. I'd looked online for information about it and learned to my disappointment that it had been demolished in 2006. I became slightly obsessive about it, trying to find as much information as possible to fill the gaps in my memory. Its absence from the world troubled me: had it even been real or had I imagined it? I learned that the architect of the building was Artur Tarkhanyan, who also designed Yerevan's Genocide Museum. It turned out that an architectural museum devoted to Tarkhanyan was due to open in Yerevan. I emailed them, explaining my interest. That was when holiday plans started to click into place.

Andy and I arrived in Yerevan in the second week of a golden October. The autumn sun made the city glow; dappled light, dancing through sparrow-filled trees, flickered all around me. I couldn't understand why I had the impression of radiance coming from inside the very substance of the city's buildings. How was it that these seemingly ordinary streetscapes seemed to blush from within like a glass of pale rosé wine held up to the light? I strolled for hours in wonderment, enjoying the simple pleasure of wandering aimlessly through the city's streets and parks. Yerevan was vibrant with art and culture, lively with bars and restaurants, as comfortable to inhabit as a cashmere sweater. After three days I felt something wrong with my jaw and realised that all this time I'd been walking around with an idiotic half-smile on my face. We enjoyed galleries and museums, a daytrip to Lake Sevan (including Sevanavank Monastery, the modernist Writers' House and the Noratus khachkar cemetery) and plenty of wonderful food.

I arrived for my appointment at the Tarkhanyan Centre early one morning and was greeted by its Director, Anahit Tarkhanyan, the daughter of the man who had designed the Palace of Youth. As we sat down to talk beneath an enormous black and white photograph of the famous Kukuruznik, Anahit started by describing the birth of modern Yerevan in the 1920's – just a few years after the genocide. The city's chief architect and planner, one of her father's predecessors, was Alexander Tamanian. His responsibility was immense.

"What would you do if your people had suffered immeasurable loss? What would you do if they had lost their land, their loved ones, everything they held dear, and you were charged with rebuilding their capital city?" she said quietly, hands clasped in her lap. "Alexander Tamanian had a choice: he could build a city based on anger and vengeance; or he could create something that would lift the people up." Even the basic building materials available to him, the local volcanic tuff and basalt, represented this choice: he could choose black, or he could choose pink. "He chose pink – like a rose, for love."

Now I suddenly understood why Yerevan was so



luminous. The city's colour palette is made up of hundreds of shades of pink, from delicate blush to coral and apricot. And Tamanian had ensured that the city was built on a human scale, filled with fountains and parks and wide, tree-shaded pavements for its citizens to enjoy. It was all designed to be uplifting and comfortable. No wonder I enjoyed it.

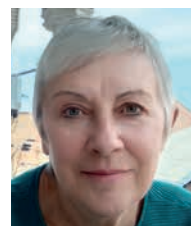
Anahit went on to talk about the Palace of Youth. Although it wasn't completed until the early 1980's it had been designed in 1961. "You know the significance of that year? Gagarin's flight into space! And if you look at the building," she pointed to the photograph above us, "you can see it looks like a rocket! It was built with young people in mind, to lift them up and help them step across the iron curtain."

How fortunate I had been, to be one of the young people who stayed there. I appreciate it more now than I did at the time.

Of the three cities I was privileged to visit last year, Yerevan was the one that stole my heart. The entire Caucasus region is beautiful and endlessly fascinating – but I know that I'll be back in Armenia before too long. ●

Left: A photograph of Kukuruznik in Yerevan.

Sheila Sim studied Russian at St Andrews University and has since explored much of the former USSR sheilasim2@gmail.com She is very happy to recommend reading for any of these countries



Professor Terry Wade (19 May 1930 - 22 November 2005) Margaret Tejerizo

Scotland, not so many years ago, could boast of six very active Departments of Russian in the main Universities around the country. Heriot Watt University had an outstanding Russian Department led by Jim Halliday and team, Jim Forsyth ran an equally successful Russian Section in Aberdeen, Reg Christian and colleagues were in charge of a thriving Russian Department at St Andrews, while Denis Ward and Peter Henry put Russian Studies at Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities respectively loudly and clearly on the educational map, so to speak. The late Professor Terry Wade was in charge of Russian Studies at Strathclyde University and like all the above-mentioned scholars, Terry made his own unmistakable mark of excellence. Before going on to write a few words about Terry's huge contribution to Russian Studies, not only nationally but internationally, it is worth recalling that during term-time, as it was then, staff (and students) of these six Scottish Russian Departments would gather together on a Saturday once a month to share examples of good teaching and research practices and to meet each other socially - those indeed were the days.

As most readers of this short piece will know, Terry Wade was an outstanding scholar of Russian language and his many widely-read and -known books on Russian grammar, usage, vocabulary and language in general are classics studied by those who are learning Russian or by those who wish to explore the complexities of the language at a much deeper level. However, Terry was also a superb teacher who inspired many generations of students not only by the depth of his knowledge. He imparted his learning with a wit and a seeming effortlessness which made all his classes not only enjoyable but truly valuable learning experiences. Readers of this tribute may not be aware that Terry was also an excellent teacher of Russian literature and it is interesting to recall that he introduced his undergraduate students of Russian at a fairly early stage to the novellas of Tendryakov, certainly not "an easy read" for those at the beginning of their "Russian journey"! Tendryakov has now become a writer very much in the "spotlight", with many reassessments of his works, but in those bygone days, Terry explained with both clarity and passion some of the more demanding sections of Tendryakov's writings and his students were thus able to gain a much deeper understanding not only of the language but also of Tendryakov's "world".

It is almost impossible to single out just one area of excellence connected with Terry Wade; however, many former students both in Scotland and further afield

recall with immense gratitude and pleasure the "Postgraduate Diploma in Russian" which Terry and his team ran for many years at Strathclyde University. This year-long Diploma offered teachers, graduates and others an opportunity to gain a good enough knowledge of Russian to then go on to teach it - or, indeed, to be able to use the language for other professional purposes. Terry and his team of superb and committed teachers - Sheelagh Duffin-Graham, Nijole White and Anatole Scobie - led students firmly and efficiently into the world of Russian; the

organisation was superb, the pace of work functioned to perfection. At all times Terry "masterminded" this course with the energy, professionalism, humour and care for the students which were always his hallmarks. Apart from the daily hours of intensive Russian language study, an expert on some aspect of Russian culture gave a weekly lecture and many former students will recall too being entertained by Terry and his wife May in their beautiful Glasgow home.

It is tremendously sad to learn that Russian no longer has a presence at Strathclyde University and that apparently the great legacy Terry Wade left behind has now simply vanished. One can but hope that perhaps someone may indeed have the vision to reinstate the wonderful "Postgraduate Diploma in Russian" in the difficult times we are in. Under Terry Wade's expert guidance, graduates gained in a very short space of time a knowledge not only of the Russian language but also of the culture, history and the "ways" of the country. To see this Diploma revived at Strathclyde University would indeed be a fitting tribute to the memory of this outstanding Scottish Slavist, Professor Terry Wade.

Moir Dalgetty (Diploma in Russian, 1988) adds:

There can be no one in the field of Russian language studies in the UK - and internationally - who had not encountered the late Professor Terry Wade one way or another - either directly, or indirectly through his published work.

In a career encompassing a lifetime of dedication to the teaching of the Russian language in particular, his achievements have been recorded for posterity in the many obituaries written after his death.

As someone who had the privilege of studying under him, it was something that he once said that made me realise just how Russian-centric his world was in many ways, and the importance he placed upon the ability to speak Russian. It was almost a character reference, one that superseded every other talent or ability a person might possess.

On applying to study for a post-graduate diploma in Russian language, it was made clear from the very beginning that taking time off would be frowned upon and discouraged, so intensive was the course. I, however, needed a day's leave to get married. Here's how the conversation went with Professor Wade:



PW: Take Friday off, Miss Dalgetty? There's a lot to be covered on Friday. May I ask why?

Feeling guilty and just a little intimidated, I managed to stutter out a reply.

MD: I know it's not good to miss a day of classes, Professor Wade, but... you see... I'm... getting married.

PW: Married? Oh. Well. I see. Married, eh? This prospective husband—what does he do?

This struck me as an odd thing to ask. What did that have to do with me being permitted to take time off? My fiancé was actually working temporarily as a dustman—earning good money that allowed us to afford to get married, in between managing tours to the Soviet Union.

MD: He's... well, he's a dustman, you see, and—

PW: A dustman, eh? A dustman, indeed. Tell me: does this dustman happen to speak Russian at all?

MD: Yes he does, and—

PW: Marvellous! That's splendid! Have a lovely day on Friday and congratulations to you both!

Moral of the story? To Professor Wade, it wouldn't have mattered whether you were an astrophysicist or a yak herder in the Himalayas. The only thing he needed to know was whether you shared his love of Russian enough to bother to have learned to speak it. That was your ticket into a hugely important part of his world.

Professor Wade was an absolute one-off. He used to always take the stairs two at a time and apparently survived on Mars Bars!

My other abiding memory of him was at the end of our first week of Russian. We'd all learned the verbs and vocabulary for the week, and were feeling quite pleased with ourselves because it was a lot of work crammed into a very short period.

PW: These verbs you've learned this week: you've all done very well, I must say. Now, however, I have a little surprise for you regarding those very verbs you've just learned to conjugate – идти, ехать etc."

We innocents just sat there, wondering what the surprise might be, hoping it wouldn't be anything too onerous after all that grammar. With a smile, Professor Wade brought us down to earth with a massive bang.

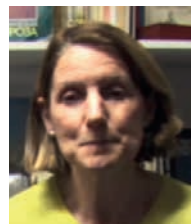
He went on to explain about pairs of verbs that distinguished between unidirectional and multidirectional modes of motion while we sat there stunned.

You could just about hear the sound of our collective hearts sinking at this new bit of information, an indication of the enormity of what lay ahead of us—although as we were later to find out, that was only the beginning of our journey into the complexity and beauty of the Russian language.

Professor Wade took in our shocked, mildly horrified expressions – reactions that must, of course, have been so familiar to him through so many years of delivering this "surprise" to his students – grinned and said:

PW: And that, everyone, is the glory of Russian verbs of motion! ●

Margaret Tejerizo is
Chair of the Scotland-
Russia Forum.



REVIEWS

PECHORIN

by Alessandro del Guado; Faktion Books, Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A., Great Britain, 421pp/£13.99.

If any reader of this short review has ever felt a deep sadness on closing the final pages of Lermontov's great masterpiece *Hero of our Times* then they are in for a literary treat of a quite extraordinary kind. The work under discussion here is by Alessandro del Guado who provides scant information about himself – other than that he is "a translator who lives in Switzerland" and that *Pechorin* is his "first novel".

Readers will be truly enchanted as they are led through over 400 pages which bring "...the enigma of Pechorin back to life, charting his youth, his intrigues at the heart of the haut monde, his duels, his loves and his betrayals, through war and peace, from St Petersburg to the Caucasus and beyond". This is by no means a "further adventures of..." type of volume and it certainly does not try to provide a Part 2 for *Hero of our Times*; instead, it is described on the back cover as a "Romance, a history, an adventure and a mystery... a love letter to Russian literature". It is indeed all these things—and more. We weave our way through facts and fiction, through reality and imagination; all the main characters of Lermontov's novel are present but in a very different order from that of the original. We meet Vera early on, for example, and a great deal of time is devoted to her description and to the relationship with Pechorin; indeed, there is a surprise outcome at the end of the novel. (Readers keen to see links between Lermontov and Scotland will find more than a few tantalising moments with references to Walter Scott, Cromarty and the character Mungo Park, to name but three.) Pushkin, for example, makes a fleeting "appearance" within this work and the careful reader will find, in fact, many clever references to Pushkin's work hidden within the pages.

The book has a Preface and an Epilogue and is divided into four Books, and each Book has 10 chapters. Book 1, as noted, deals at length with Vera, and a nod is made to Turgenev in the title of Chapter 7, "The Fate of Father and Son". Book 2, among other topics, brings the reader back to "Taman" – Chapter 12 and the

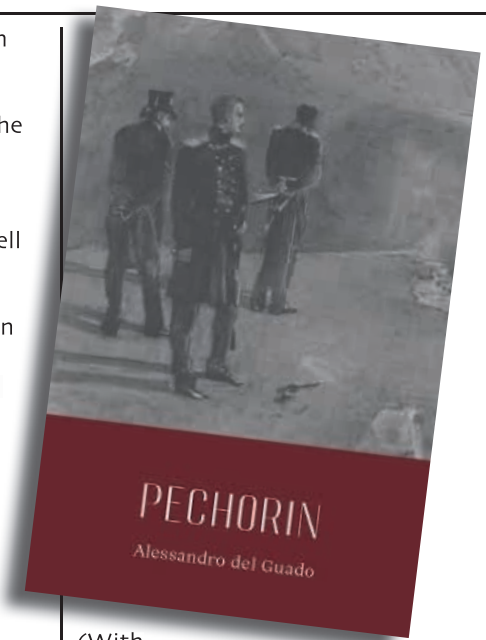
episodes dealing with Gruzhnitsky and Princess Mary form Chapters 16 and 17 respectively. Book 3 takes us to Maxim Maximych (Chapter 21), Bela (Chapter 23) and "The Fatalist" (Chapter 24). Dr Werner, like Vera, makes an appearance early on in this work and we have fascinating insights into his relationship with Pechorin. If, regarding Lermontov's original text, critics have often stressed the overall presence of "fate" and "not knowing" as being two important questions which lie at the heart of the work, then these two notions abound in del Guado's novel, especially in Book 4. So often "we do not know" or "it is not known".

This volume certainly describes many journeys both literal and figurative ones. As in the original we travel to many places but the work under review also takes the reader on a kind of journey through Russian literature in a creative and

a very original way. One so often wants to stop and check a name or a place. There are too many clever references to masks and the revelation of identity, race and religion. Few errors were found – one a date (1935 for 1835), for example – and the book reads well with an excellent style overall. Perhaps, nevertheless, the word "darling" is overused, especially in the dialogues between Vera and Pechorin: it has a kind of cloying effect, seems inappropriate and, indeed, often slows the pace of the action.

Within the limits of this short review all the excellent "virtues" of this work cannot be mentioned. As has often been said, Pechorin's main "virtue" is that he makes readers think; certainly, then, Alessandro del Guado's work has been entirely true to Pechorin. ●

—Margaret Tejerizo



(With sincere thanks to two valued scholars of Russian and Scottish cultures – Alastair Renfrew and Eric Wishart.)

KGB LITERATI: Spy Fiction and State Security in the Soviet Union
by Filip Kovacevic. University of Toronto Press 228pp/£18.99.

The name Roman Kim is unlikely to chime with many readers in the West, and his work has never been translated into English, but he takes up the longest chapter in this short book, is the foundation of the book, and is the founding father of Soviet spy literature. His story is quite dramatic: an ethnic Korean, fluent in Japanese, he went to school in Vladivostok and fought in Kolchak's anti-Bolshevik White Army during the civil war before moving into journalism. In 1923 he was personally signed into the Cheka by Feliks Dzerzhinsky himself, to work in counterintelligence against the Japanese with cover as a professor of Japanese literature and short story writer. Although imprisoned during Stalin's purges, he cleverly managed to avoid execution and on release in 1945 focused on his literary activities, lecturing to the Writers' Union, noting that the detective story was popular in the UK and the USA, but not in the USSR. He undertook to rectify that, and this he did by writing his own novels, imbuing them with socialist realist elements and promoting Soviet life.

The structure of this opening chapter is followed throughout the book. Filip Kovacevic shows how each of the subsequent key writers, Zoya Voskresenskaya-Rybinka, Oleg Grabanov, Ivan Golovchenko,

and Sfibuba Sfiev, each given a mini-biography, had worked in the KGB and often fictionalised actual experiences. He details many of the novels, novellas and short stories showing the writers' specific styles and techniques. Against this, he shows how personnel and policy changes, in the Soviet government and the KGB affected what was published.

The thaw under Khrushchev gave writers and publishers more freedom, and works were reviewed in a range of journals and periodicals. The big change, though, came when Yuri Andropov was appointed chairman of the KGB, and set up the agency's Press Bureau, tasked to popularise the activities of state security and expose the activities of the Soviet Union's enemies at home and abroad. Not only was the Bureau responsible for assessing books, films, radio and TV, it hired writers to work on spy novels, such as Vadim Kozhevnikov and his *Shield and Sword* – the film version of which inspired Vladimir Putin to join the KGB. Also, with the "Soviet Russia" publishing house it inaugurated the "Chekist Stories", a series melding fact and fiction, sometimes interviews and feature items, promoting KGB strategies and operations from the revolution through to the Cold War. The first volume came out in 1970 and the final volume, the eighth, was published in the year the Soviet Union was dissolved. The successor of the KGB, the FSB, keeps up the promotion of

literary activities and set up its own annual competition in 2006, with money prizes for writers praising Russian and Soviet security officers and operations.

This is a meticulously researched book in which Kovacevic marshals literary critical analyses, history, Soviet thinking, cultural background and spycraft to provide a new genre of espionage study. He also sets out a map which directs us to contemporary Russian thinking, and to the current Chekist elite, which the Putin ally Nikolay Patrushev has called the 'new nobility'. Every page of this book is a treasure, and it is a must read. ●

—Vin Arthey



Vin Arthey is the biographer of KGB Colonel William A Fisher, better known by his final cover name "Rudolf Abel": varthey@gmail.com Photo of Vin Arthey courtesy of Andy Catlin Photography.





Akhtala Monastery in
Armenia. Photo:
Sheila Sim

