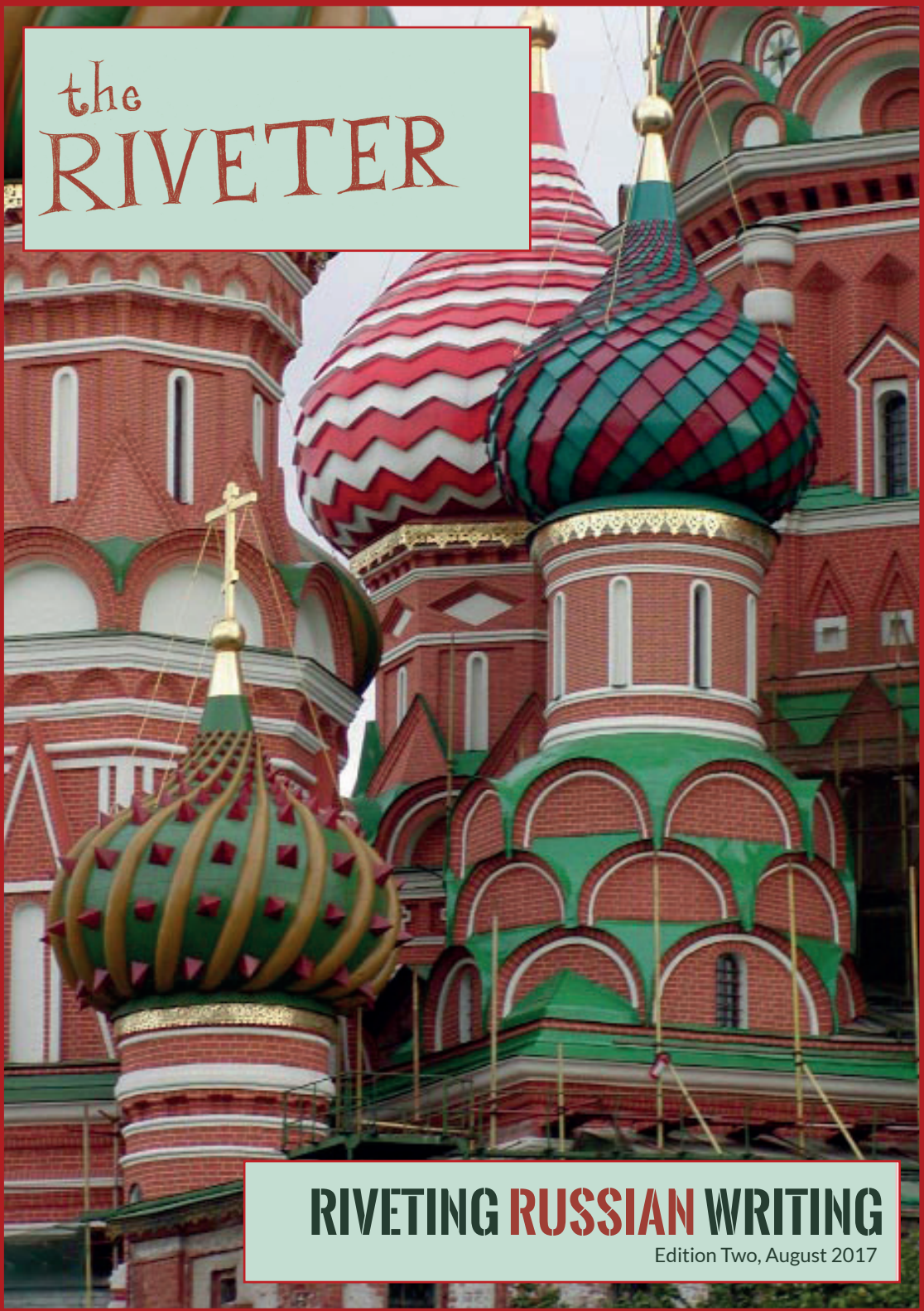

the RIVETER

RIVETING RUSSIAN WRITING

Edition Two, August 2017

the RIVETER

EDITORIAL
BY ROSIE GOLDSMITH

Can you remember your first time? Mine was with *Dr Zhivago*. I was fifteen, seduced into reading my first Russian literature by Omar Sharif. Then came *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, Turgenev's short stories, *The Master and Margarita*, Chekhov's plays, the poetry of Pushkin and Akhmatova. I was a teenager galloping through the Russian Classics, drunk on their depth, breadth and ambition, devouring the descriptions of imperial cities, tormented aristocrats, glittering ballrooms and brave, down-trodden peasants; of war, death, love, religion, of battles for the soul. Russian writers seemed to me to aspire to something nobler, deeper, darker, richer. The Russian Revolution, two world wars, the Cold War, Stalin followed, my mind opened to pain and suffering through Solzhenitsyn and Irina Ratushinskaya.

Then, as a student and later a BBC journalist, I read mainly prescribed books and newspapers. With the collapse of the Soviet Union I began a career tracking down "stories", not literature. Real-life Russia was more exciting, trips to Moscow and Vladivostok better, Gorbachev and Putin more challenging. And in this atmosphere, I found myself asking: Where had all the writers gone? Who was writing the great Russian novel now?

It took me years to reconnect with Russian literature, to ditch the news and the nostalgia and to tackle the modern thrillers, sci-fi, satire and surrealism by men and women from all parts of the Russian-speaking world which were, thanks to a parallel wealth of translators, available in English.

Publishing in the Age of Putin is not easy. Pussy Riot and homophobia, Crimea and Ukraine, have exposed the limits of Kremlin tolerance. Bookshops and libraries are closing, and more writers are emigrating online. It's the same all over the world, but according to *The Moscow Times*, in the capital only 226 bookshops cater for a population of 12 million; in Paris, a city with a population five times smaller, there are 700 bookshops.

But what of creativity in adversity? Thanks perhaps to the harsher spotlight directed at Russia today, possibly also thanks to this year's centenary of the Russian Revolution and the accompanying exhibitions and new commissions, I see a greater interest in Russian writing. There's been an explosion of poetry, of ebook reading. Today you can read not just about Moscow and St Petersburg but about Kiev and Makhachkala. Today, novels, stories and poems feature oligarchs and drug addicts, prisoners and poets, political activists, corrupt policemen and soldiers, office workers and farmers, and as many women as men.

For my own reawakening my personal thanks go to the indefatigable literature programmers of the British Council in the

UK and Russia (see one example of their work here: literature.britishcouncil.org/project/the-uk-russia-year-of-language-and-literature-2016) and to the Translation Institute in Moscow: institutperevoda.ru. Download their wonderful Read Russia Anthology for free here: readrussia.org/anthology/read-russia-anthology (courtesy of Read Russia).

Personal thanks too to my fellow riveters Anna Blasiak and West Camel for helping make this *Riveter* possible.

Over the past few years I've been lucky to read, meet and interview some ground-breaking Russian authors, such as Hamid Ismailov, Maria Stepanova, Dmitri Bykov, Ludmila Ulitskaya, Zakhar Prilepin, Alisa Ganieva, Boris Akunin, Andrei Kurkov, Zinovy Zinik, Oleg Kashin and Mikhail Shishkin. They've bowled me over. You too can meet some of them here in this, the second edition of our magazine, our **"Russian *Riveter*"** – a selection of Riveting Reviews, and, of course, Riveting Reads.

Rosie Goldsmith is Director of the European Literature Network and Riveter-in-Chief.

the RIVETER

Russian

INTRODUCTION BY WEST CAMEL

I first came to Russian literature, as so many native English-speakers have, as a young person – finding myself astounded by Dostoyevsky's ability in *Crime and Punishment* to evoke both terror, when Raskolnikov returns to the scene of his crime, and chagrin for Katerina Ivanova as she brandishes her "certificate of honour". I relished the matro- and patronymics I found in Tolstoy, and vowed to one day write short stories like Chekov's. But, also like so many other English-speaking readers, my subsequent knowledge of Russian literature has been spare. Editing and writing for this magazine has rejuvenated my interest in the vast scope of literature produced by this fascinating region and its diaspora(s). All of us working on this Russian *Riveter* hope that we can prompt the same enthusiasm in you for this Riveting Russian writing.

The reason for our eastward trek in this, the second edition of *The Riveter* magazine, is the centenary of the Russian Revolution, and the commemorative exhibition and programme of events taking place this summer at the British Library. More specifically, two British Library events in collaboration with our very own European Literature Network Riveter-in-Chief, Rosie Goldsmith.

In the afternoon of 3 August the Riveting Russian Translation Workshop brings together expert and aspiring Russian-to-English translators to discuss the literary translation of classical and contemporary Russian fiction, and to indulge in some in-depth text analysis. In the evening Rosie hosts Riveting Reads: Russian Literature Today, with celebrated Russian language writers, the Caucasian, Alisa Ganieva and Russian émigré Londoner Zinovy Zinik, alongside historian

and novelist Boris Akunin and Ukrainian writer and satirist Andrey Kurkov.

Naturally, with such an impressive and varied line-up, reviews of their work take prime position in this, our Russian *Riveter*. We have also taken the opportunity to garner from our Famous Four their Riveting Reads: their recommendations of the books in Russian that are most important to them. We didn't influence them at all in their choices – it was a completely free vote. However, three of them have chosen to recommend a work by Tolstoy!

It will likely come as no surprise to anyone who loves Russian literature that the work of Tolstoy still holds such sway, also demonstrated by the fact that articles from two of our contributors compare different translations of Tolstoy's novels.

But Russian writing is not just about classic nineteenth-century authors, important as they are. We review a range of work, from surreal children's writing of the modern day by the eminently versatile Anna Starobinets, to diaries written in Yiddish by Bella Chagall (wife of the Russian-French-Jewish artist), a collection by the twentieth-century humorist Teffi, Nobel-winner Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*, as well as contemporary crime, gothic and speculative fiction.

The growing range of Russian literature now available to English readers is commented on in an article by Natasha Petrova about her ground-breaking publishing house Glas; and by translator Lisa Hayden's roundup of this year's Russian-to-English translations.

We also have the pleasure of offering our Riveting Reader a Russian fairy tale: *Sister Vixen and the Grey Wolf* by Alexander Afanasyev, translated exclusively for us by Katherine Gregor. We have some poems by Marina Tsvetaeva, too, and an extract from the award-winning novel of our special guest author, Alisa Ganieva.

All this riveting content has been selected, contributed and provided to you, our Riveting Readers, for free. It may be free but it has great value. We therefore hope you will cherish it and recommend it as riveting to all interested in European literature.

West Camel is Editor of The Riveter.

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SISTER VIXEN AND THE GREY WOLF

BY ALEXANDER AFANASYEV

A FAIRY TALE, TRANSLATED AND ADAPTED BY KATHERINE GREGOR

There was once a man and his wife.

The man said to his wife, "Bake some pies, woman, while I go fishing."

He caught a lot of fish – an entire cartful – and was bringing them home, when, on the way, he saw a vixen curled up at the side of the road.

The man got down from his cart and approached the vixen, but she didn't stir. She just lay there, looking dead.

"This will make a fine gift for my wife," he said, and picked up the vixen, put it into his cart and carried on straight ahead.

The vixen, however, took advantage of this time in the cart to start throwing the fish out, slowly, one at a time. Once she had thrown all the fish out, she jumped off the cart.

"Look, woman," said the man . "I've brought you a beautiful fur collar for a coat."

"Where is it?" she asked.

"Out there, in the cart. With the fish."

The wife went out to the cart. No collar and no fish. So she began chiding her husband: "You so-and-so! And a liar, too!"

At this point, the man worked out that the vixen hadn't been dead. He got very upset, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Meanwhile, the vixen gathered all the fish she had scattered on the road, piled them up in a heap and sat eating them.

A grey wolf came up to her. "Good day to you, sister."

"Good day to you, neighbour."

"Won't you give me some of your fish?"

"Go and catch some yourself."

"I don't know how to."

"Heavens! I managed. Look, neighbour, just go to the river, drop your tail through a hole in the ice, and the fish will cling to it of their own accord. Only make sure you sit there long enough or you won't catch any."

Alexander Afanasyev

So the grey wolf went to the river and dropped his tail through a hole in the ice. It was winter time. He sat there and sat there, all through the night, until his tail froze. He tried to get up but couldn't. "Heavens! So many fish that they're too heavy to lift," he thought.

He looked up and noticed a group of women coming to draw some water. When they saw the wolf, they began to shout, "A wolf! A wolf! Kill him! Kill him!"

They rushed at him and began to beat him with yokes, buckets and anything else they happened to have in their hands. The wolf tried to leap away and, finally, tore off his tail and ran off without looking back.

"Very well, sister," he thought, "I will certainly pay you back for this!"

Meanwhile, having eaten all her fish, Sister Vixen was wondering if she could pull off another trick. So she broke into a hut where some women were making pancakes and dived, head first, into the vat of pancake mixture, got covered in it and ran away. She came across the wolf.

"A pretty lesson you taught me!" he said. "I got beaten to within an inch of my life!"

"Oh, neighbour," Sister Vixen replied, "you may be losing blood but my brains are leaking out. I got beaten up worse than you did. It's all I can do to stand up."

"You're right," the wolf said. "Where do you need to go, sister? If you climb on my back, I'll take you."

So the vixen climbed on his back and the wolf carried her away. The vixen sat there and muttered to herself, "It's the injured carrying the healthy. It's the injured carrying the healthy."

"What did you say, sister?"

"I was just saying, neighbour, that it's the injured carrying the injured."

"Quite so, sister, quite so."

Alexander Afanasyev

Translated by Katherine Gregor

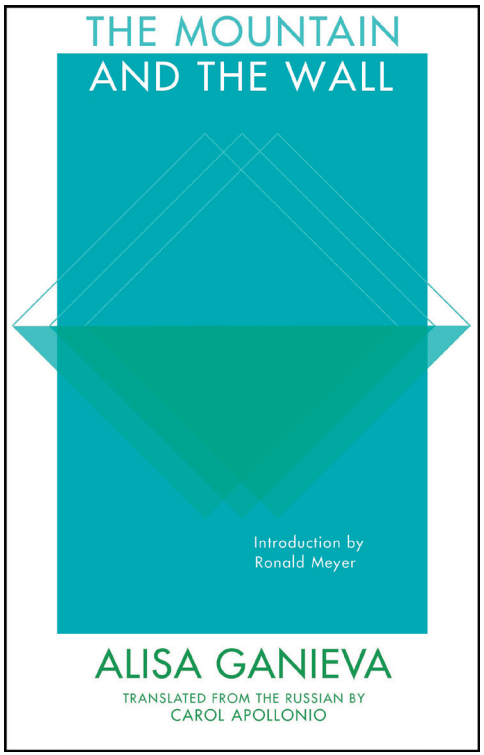
Alexander Nikolayevich Afanasyev (1826–1871) was a Russian Empire Slavist who published nearly 600 Russian folktales and fairytales – one of the largest folktale collections in the world. The first edition of his collection was published from 1855–67, earning him the reputation of the Russian counterpart to the Brothers Grimm.

Katherine Gregor translates from Italian, French and Russian. She is also a writer and blogger at scribedoll.wordpress.com.

THE MOUNTAIN AND THE WALL
BY ALISA GANIEVA
TRANSLATED BY CAROL APOLLONIO (DEEP VELLUM PUBLISHING)
RECOMMENDED BY ROSIE GOLDSMITH

At London Book Fair in March this year I met a charismatic and courageous young Russian author and literary critic called Alisa Ganieva, introduced to me as a "literary sensation". She wore a red dress and chatted away fluently in English. I learned that she came from Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan in Russia's North Caucasus, but today lives in Moscow. She grew up on Russian literature, as Dagestanian languages weren't taught at school, and today proudly identifies herself as Russian and Dagestanian Avar.

Alisa Ganieva is a well-known public figure, writing essays, short stories, reviews, and, so far, three novels about Dagestan and its people, the Avars, Laks, Kumyks and others. Her novella *Salaam, Dalgat!* was published in 2009 under a male pseudonym and won Russia's literary Debut Prize. The judges called it "brilliant", and it caused quite a stir: not only was it rare to read about this part of Russia, but there was reportedly "some anger among radical Islamists at this negative portrayal of their homeland by one of their own". Alisa reacted by saying, "I don't see any negativism in it, it's the opposite. I'm trying to soften what's really happening there, and I have a great sympathy with almost all of my characters. I let them speak and don't insert my author's opinion and impose it on the situation."



Here in the UK we know too little about young authors from any part of Russia, and it was clear to me that Alisa Ganieva was a bold and gifted champion of new writing. I was delighted when she accepted my invitation to appear at August's Riveting Russian Reads evening at the British Library.

The Mountain and the Wall is Alisa's first novel to be translated into English, and has been shortlisted for all three of Russia's major literary awards. Her second novel to be translated, *The Bride and the Groom*, comes out this autumn.

Thank you to her English-language publishers, Deep Vellum, for permission to print this plot summary and extract from *The Mountain and the Wall*.

Rosie Goldsmith

Rosie Goldsmith is Director of the European Literature Network. She was a BBC senior broadcaster for 20 years and is today an arts journalist, presenter, linguist, and with Max Easterman a media trainer for Sounds Right.

THE MOUNTAIN AND THE WALL
EXTRACT

A rumour spreads through Dagestan's capital city, Makhachkala: the Russian government is building a wall to close off its Caucasus republics from the rest of the country. Ethnic and religious tensions mount – no one is spared the consequences. But like a vision in the midst of this nightmare, the image of a "Mountain of Celebrations" appears, a refuge for all those who are tired of the intolerance and violence.

This remarkable debut novel by a unique young Russian voice portrays the influence of political intolerance and religious violence in the lives of people forced to choose between evils. The Mountain and the Wall *focuses on Shamil, a young local reporter in Makhachkala, and his reactions, or lack thereof, to rumours that the Russian government is building a wall to cut off the Muslim provinces of the Caucasus from the rest of Russia. As unrest spreads and the tension builds, Shamil's life is turned upside down, and he can no longer afford to ignore the violence surrounding him. With a fine sense for mounting catastrophe, Ganieva tells the story of the decline of a society torn apart by its inherent extremes.*

Seeing a group of men and women on the square holding big posters with photographs on them, Shamil thought, "Not again," and decided not to stick around. But something held him back; this was different from the usual demonstrations. There were more posters than before, and the people holding them seemed more aggressive. An unruly crowd had gathered around the poster-bearers, everyone was nodding, waving their hands, yelling. The women, practically all of them veiled, were holding photographs of naively smiling young men and shouting: "Bring back our brother!" or "Bring back our son!" There wasn't a single policeman in sight, which was especially strange.

A man in a warm-up jacket, gesticulating, was talking into several video cameras: "My cousin's name was Nazhib Isaev. He was killed in March of this year, right in front of my eyes. We were walking down Lenin Street toward the computer centre, and suddenly this blue sedan with tinted windows pulls up next to us. Some guys in ordinary sweat suits get out and head our way, and as they're walking they pull on masks and just start shooting, basically."

"What were they shooting at?"

"Straight at us! So Nazhib jumps one way, and I jump the other. And he just falls over, basically. And with me right there watching, they shoot Nazhib in the head, to finish him off. And then they toss something down next to him …"

"What was it?"

"An automatic rifle, this and that, 'evidence' to make him look guilty. Then they went into the store there, got a bag, came back, collected the empty shells in it, and took off … and that was it."

Shamil walked on. In another group a man in a light linen jacket was giving a speech:

"Murad was abducted this past winter when he was on his way home from the gym. They dragged him into a car and took him who knows where. They were wearing Special Forces uniforms. His parents have been trying to get him back for over six months …"

As Shamil listened to the scraps of stories and the coughs of the onlookers, a strange sense of boredom came over him, and yet wouldn't let him leave. He walked between the groups, looking into the flushed faces of the yelling women, at the high chain-link fence in front of the moribund government building, at his own polished shoes, at the empty faces on all the posters.

Then he noticed Velikhanov, his former colleague from the committee and an old friend of the family, a tall man with greying temples. Velikhanov was explaining something insistently to a few old men in short straw hats who looked a lot like the ones Shamil had encountered in the seaside park after the Kumyk demonstration.

"Hey, Shamil, I've just been going over everything for these guys. Look what's happening over here!" drawled Velikhanov, shaking Shamil's hand. "I've always said that we need to take more advantage of young people. Remember that rally we organised in Mashuk? Vakh, so many people, it was great! We sang the national anthem, organised competitions, Tutkin himself came! This here is nothing, by comparison."

The old men grumbled.

"Shamil! It's a total breakdown in logic! And all because they wouldn't let Alikhan and me organize any educational activities back when the time was right. And we already had this plan to invite guys here from other regions, to take them up into the mountains, to the reservoirs and watefalls, to show them our trades, our traditional arts, our circuses, carpets …" Velikhanov lost his train of thought. "What else? Shamil?"

Shamil smiled. "Yes, sure, we could've taken them up there …"

"But no! All of those so-called journalists! Look at them over there, circling like vultures with their cameras. Just getting in the way! A handful of hired stooges show up –" He nodded toward the random groups of shouting people. "– and they're already putting it on TV: 'People are being kidnapped and murdered here, right on the streets! People are being murdered right in front of our eyes!' The press can't find anything better to cover! Let them come to my village, I'll show them what they should be putting on TV. There's a guy in my village who makes inlaid furniture with his own hands. Or look, they can film my mother, see how she spends her days. Why is it that they're only interested in slobbering over filthy stories like this?"

Alisa Ganieva © Greg Baal

"Who is it that's walling us off, anyway?" asked one of the old men. "Who's destroying the country?"

"So called 'journalists,' like them!" Velikhanov shot back angrily, jabbing his index finger into the stuffy air. "The crooks!"

Shamil turned away for a moment and caught sight of Madina's beige hijab. She was standing half turned away from him, as though taking refuge among the shoulders of her new girlfriends. Some bearded guy was standing to her right and shouting.

"What's he yelling about?" asked Shamil.

"Why waste your time with them?" snorted Velikhanov. "They're all suffering and oppressed, they're being dragged around various dark cellars by the police, they're not being allowed to pray, they're being maimed by hot irons, their chests are being branded with crosses, their beards are being plucked out with tweezers, you name it!"

The bearded man was indeed yelling something to that effect, but all Shamil could make out were fragments: "Alhamdulillah, praise be to Allah, the infidels have retreated … The cowardly murtads … without a functioning government … freedom of the Caucasian Emirate … everyone opposed to filth, injustice, money-grubbing, everyone … Allahu akbar … soon those in hiding will no longer have to hide – now, inshallah, people will no longer be persecuted for their religion …"

Alisa Ganieva

Translated by Carol Apollonio

Alisa Ganieva is the author of three novels, ***The Mountain and the Wall***, ***Bride and Groom*** and ***Salam, Dalgat!***, as well as a collection of stories and essays. She has won several prizes in her native Russia, and in 2015, the UK's the *Guardian* listed her among the thirty most talented young people in Moscow. Ganieva's fiction has been translated and published in several countries.

Carol Apollonio is a Professor of the Practice of Russian at Duke University, USA. She is both an accomplished translator and academic, specialising in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Chekhov and the problems of translation.

Riveting Reviews

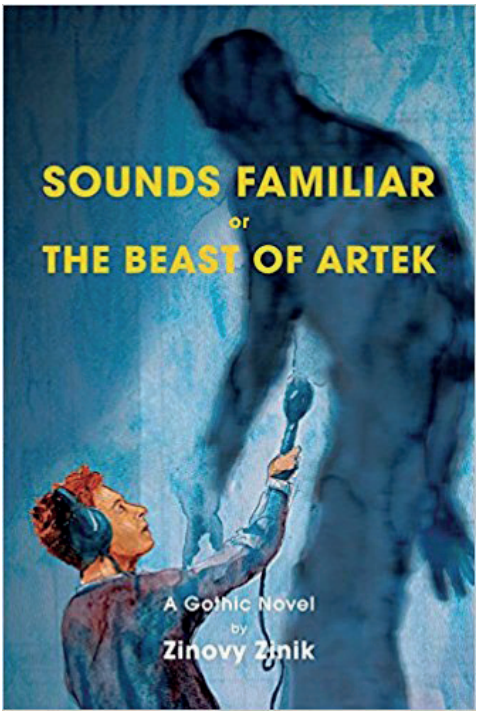
SOUNDS FAMILIAR OR THE BEAST OF ARTEK BY ZINOVY ZINIK
(DIVUS)
REVIEWED BY WEST CAMEL

The latest book from the Russian-born bilingual Londoner, Zinovy Zinik, is consciously labelled "A Gothic Novel"; and it adopts and manipulates the tropes of that genre to impressive effect. The decaying house, on the point of Usher-like collapse, is contemporary London. The vulnerable heroine is in this case male – Sim, a damaged Russian immigrant. His strapping guardian is Greta and she is connected to Sim in ways neither is initially aware of. An uncomfortable eroticism pervades almost every scene, and a monster – the Beast of the title – looms in the backgrounds of all the characters and brings to the book the requisite occult element: a mysterious sect engaged in exploring sound as a means of control. The disparate characters and storylines are brought together by a Janus-faced puppeteer, the smoothly English Archibald Wren, who is either helping Sim, Greta and their associates to fight the Beast, or is inveigling them into assisting the Beast.

Zinovy Zinik © Avraham Osipov-Gipsh

But the best gothic fiction is never satisfied with offering complex plots and imagining unimaginable horrors: it uses supernatural extremes to explore contemporary concerns, employing thrills and scares to describe the apparently more mundane threats present in the real world. *Sounds Familiar* is no exception. The Beast lurking in the backstories of the novel's various players – and threatening to appear in their current lives – is not just a physical being. It is the legacy of Soviet Russia, which has been left not just to Russians, but also to those in the West who were in thrall to the totalitarian state, either worshipping or fearing it.

Archibald Wren, in a passage describing his own experiences in Russia, captures in a few sentences the place that Russia, in both its Soviet and post-Soviet incarnations, holds in the modern worldview: "They used to say that the Soviet Union was the Communist future of mankind" he says; "But I saw it … as everyone's past … as a repository of Western fears and phobias … a trash can full of all the obsolete and dirty aspects of our civilization".



This "trash can" image is pinpointed to a certain place (which, we discover in the author's postscript, was real): the Black Sea summer camp Artek. This was a luxurious resort, purpose-built for the privileged children of the Soviet Union's most honoured citizens and frequented by those "useful idiots" (a sobriquet apparently coined by Lenin) – the Western leftist admirers of Soviet Russia.

All the characters in *Sounds Familiar* are connected to Artek in some way, and the spectre that was based there is slowly unveiled as not some esoteric, supernatural power, but a very real, very sinister, human-level horror. Zinik thus reveals his use of the gothic genre to be part of a great tradition; and his masterful application of the elements of the form means this book should sit alongside its very best examples.

West Camel

West Camel is a writer, reviewer and editor. He edited Dalkey Archive's Best European Fiction 2015, *and is currently working for new press Orenda Books.*
www.westcamel.net

Moscow-born British author **Zinovy Zinik** lost his Soviet citizenship in 1975 and arrived in London via Jerusalem in 1976. Zinik has written 14 books of fiction and non-fiction in both English and Russian, dwelling on the dual existence of immigrants, religious converts and political outcasts. His recent books in English include an autobiographical tale ***History Thieves*** and a novel ***Sounds Familiar or The Beast of Artek***. His latest novel in Russian is ***The Orgon Box,*** published this year. Zinovy is a regular contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* and BBC Radio.

THE WINTER QUEEN BY BORIS AKUNIN
TRANSLATED BY ANDREW BROMFIELD (WEIDENFELD & NICHOLSON)
REVIEWED BY MAX EASTERMAN

"On Monday the thirteenth of May in the year 1876 ... numerous individuals in Moscow's Alexander Gardens unexpectedly found themselves eye-witnesses to the perpetration of an outrage which flagrantly transgressed the bounds of common decency."

Thus begins *The Winter Queen* – reminiscent, perhaps, in style and atmosphere of Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel*. And indeed there are some similarities: sudden death, a penchant for disguise, a spider's web of deceit and a cast of high and low life alike. But there the

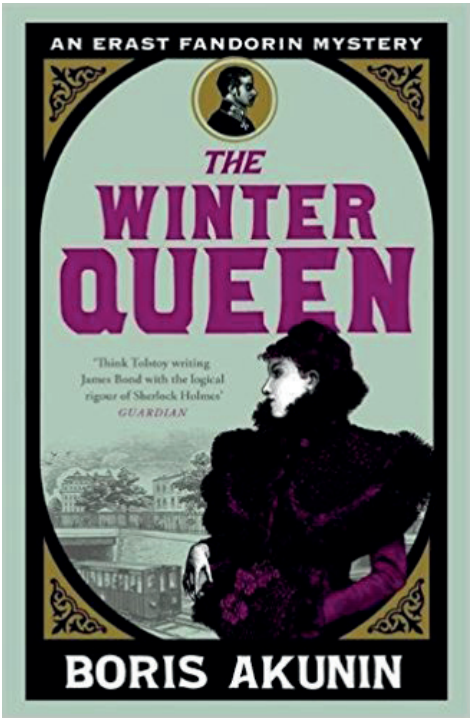
Boris Akunin © A. Strunin

similarity ends: Boris Akunin is no copyist. He originally found fame as a translator and specialist in Japanese literature and as an historian, but turned to writing crime thrillers after watching his wife read one such on the Moscow metro, wrapped in brown paper, so people couldn't see it was pulp fiction. He determined to create a more high-brow, literary version of the genre – with huge success: he is now a towering figure in Russian crime fiction.

The Winter Queen is the first of his crime novels, set in Imperial Russia and featuring Erast Fandorin, a young, impoverished trainee detective – a "collegiate registrar" in the terminology of the time. Fandorin is not your typical dashing police hero: he has blue eyes, black hair, "long, girlish eyelashes" and wears a Lord Byron corset to make him look slimmer; but he also speaks several languages fluently and shows initiative and an ability to work alone – something which persuades his superior, Superintendent Grushin, to take him off report writing and send him out to investigate a suicide. What follows is a wonderful tale of derring-do, involving nihilists, a gambling, duelling count, a beautiful and manipulative vamp and an English baroness and philanthropist (and more ...), as Fandorin criss-crosses Russia and Europe – as far as London – in his attempts to unravel the mystery of the "Azazel". The dénouement is as unexpected as it is shocking – and is to affect Fandorin for the rest of his life (across thirteen more novels, regrettably not all of them yet available in English – but getting there!).

Akunin writes with flair in an exemplary re-creation of the high Victorian style, which does not, however, eschew the earthy or the humorous; all of which is perfectly translated by Andrew Bromfield. The *femme fatale* is "a veritable

Cleopatra with a dense mane of hair and matt-black eyes, her long neck set in a haughty curve and a slight hint of cruelty evident in the wilful line of her mouth", whilst one of Fandorin's police colleagues is "a scrawny, lanky veteran with a crumpled face that looked as though a cow had been chewing on it". He weaves his plot lines with just the right amount of suspense to leave us wondering, yet always to surprise us: even the identity of the Winter Queen is who we would least expect. And every so often, we are jerked out of the fictional narrative by a historical reference that reminds us that nineteenth-century Russia maybe wasn't quite as backward as we might have believed. Fandorin's new boss, Brilling, tells him: "It has only just arrived from America … there is an inventor of genius there … thanks to whom it is now possible to conduct a conversation at a considerable distance … the sound is transmitted along wires like telegraph wires. In the whole of Europe there are only two lines: one has been laid from my apartment to the secretariat …" So Brilling has a telephone, but as he ruefully admits, "[I] can't quite get the hang of the samovar."



Boris Akunin, a Georgian by birth, is one of the few Russian writers of our age to have "broken through" in translation into English. *The Winter Queen* is a terrific read and a perfect example of what we are no doubt missing ten times over because so little modern Russian literature is available in our own language.

Max Easterman

Max Easterman is a journalist – he spent 25 years as a senior broadcaster with the BBC – university lecturer, translator, media trainer with Sounds Right, jazz musician and writer.

Famous as Russia's leading detective and crime writer, **Boris Akunin** (pen-name of **Grigory Chkhartishvili**) also writes "serious" literary novels as well as essays, history books and plays. His recent multi-volume, popular history project, entitled "History of The Russian State", combines both non-fiction and fiction. Akunin's books have sold over 30 million copies in Russia alone and are translated into almost 50 languages. Several of his books have been made into films and TV series in Russia.

THE BICKFORD FUSE BY ANDREY KURKOV
TRANSLATED BY BORIS DRALYUK (MACLEHOSE PRESS)
REVIEWED BY DAVID HEBBLETHWAITE

William Bickford patented the safety fuse in 1831: the gunpowder was sealed inside a length of rope, which allowed the burning time to be controlled and predicted. This improved safety for miners, and also led to the development of dynamite. In other words, the safety fuse represents a promise of delayed violence and disruption, one that could be unleashed in a moment.

It is also the central image winding its way through Andrey Kurkov's latest novel to appear in English. Kurkov, the Russophone-Ukrainian author, made his name internationally with the satirical *Death and the Penguin* in 2001. In the introduction to *The Bickford Fuse*, originally written in Russian in the late-communist 1980s, Kurkov explains that in writing this novel he was thinking about the USSR under Nikita Khrushchev. In particular, he wanted to explore why Soviet society turned away from Khrushchev's attempts at modernisation. His conclusion? It was down to "Soviet man" – or, as Kurkov puts it, "a man who is neither good nor bad, but simply Soviet".

The space that Kurkov opens up in this novel is not quite historical: his Khruschev-figure, referred to only as the "Occupant", sits alone in a black airship, spouting dialogue quoted directly from Khrushchev's speeches. Stripped from its context and spoken into thin air, this dialogue comes across as empty rhetoric that will have about as much impact as the Occupant himself can, when he's floating free of the land.

Down on Earth, events proceed with a similar deadpan absurdity, one that will be familiar to anyone who has read Kurkov before. Two characters spend most of their time in the novel rolling down a slope in a truck with no petrol. Another character, Ivan Timofeyich, sends his sons away into the world, then, having searched in vain for a sign from above, creates his own by lighting a fire – which he then feeds in order to burn down the monastery where his family has been living. He thinks: "the highest wisdom lay in destroying what you had spent your whole life building, and what your ancestors had built." Maybe so – but there's a sense that all this "wisdom" is really Timofeyich justifying his own whims to himself.

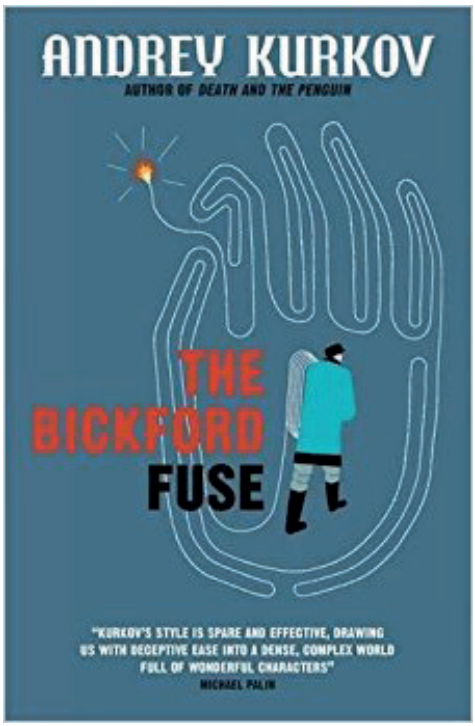
The main character we meet in *The Bickford Fuse* is Vasily Kharitonov, a ship-wrecked sailor who sets off inland to find what he may, trailing a length of safety fuse endlessly behind him. This is what allows him to be arbiter of the world.

The fuse gave meaning to his wandering – it was the gavel and weapon

Andrey Kurkov - from author's own archive

of the judge in whose power it was to decide whether to leave this world intact or, striking a match, to turn it into a memory for those who would survive the stone-melting fire. This fire would cleanse the world of unnecessary cruelty and all the incomprehensible things wrought by man's dim intellect.

We follow Kharitonov through a series of strange encounters: with, for example, an unguarded camp of musicians who sit together and play when they could just get up and leave; or an armoured train whose occupants work to keep it going, apparently *just because* ("Sure, we're fighting," says one, "what the hell else are we gonna do?"). Time elongates in this world, as Kharitonov spends years on his travels, the fuse never running out; yet there's something evanescent about it all – even when Kharitonov settles down in a relationship, it ends as abruptly as any of the other episodes on his journey. So the feeling increases of being a little to the side of reality.



The overall sense of the world that Kurkov depicts is that its inhabitants are deeply invested in their own preoccupations, even if they no longer make sense, perhaps because the alternative is too uncomfortable to contemplate. I'll leave it to you to find out whether or not Kharitonov lights the fuse in the end – but do experience the world of *The Bickford Fuse* while you can.

David Hebblethwaite

David Hebblethwaite is a book blogger and reviewer. He has written about translated fiction for Words Without Borders, Shiny New Books, Strange Horizons, *and* We Love This Book. *www.davidsbookworld.com.*

Andrey Kurkov was born in St Petersburg in 1961. Having graduated from the Kiev Foreign Languages Institute, he worked for some time as a journalist, did his military service as a prison warden in Odessa, then became a film cameraman, writer of screenplays and author of many critically acclaimed and popular novels, including the cult bestseller ***Death and the Penguin***.

RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ SHORT STORIES FROM BUNIN TO YANOVSKY

EDITED BY BRYAN KARETNYK

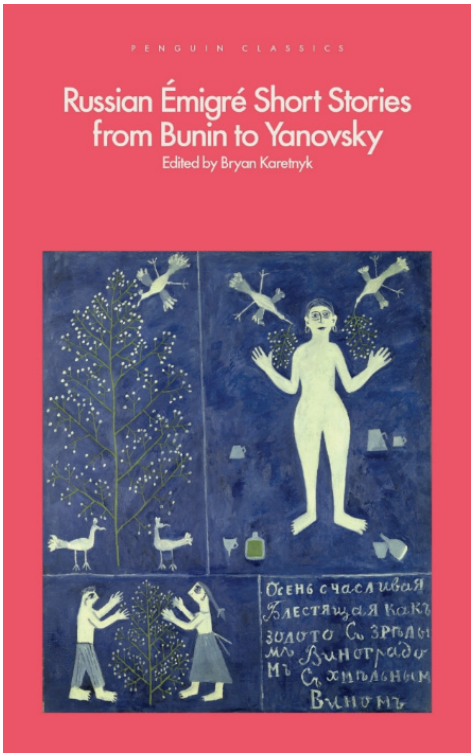
TRANSLATED BY BRYAN KARETNYK ET AL (PENGUIN CLASSICS)

REVIEWED BY ANNA GUNIN

The twentieth century spawned two Russian literatures: one living within the confines of the USSR, the other beyond the Iron Curtain. These two literatures remained divorced, with Russian émigré writers starved of a Soviet readership and only finding publication on their native soil once Communism fell. Bryan Karetnyk's new anthology *Russian Émigré Short Stories from Bunin to Yanovsky* offers a compelling glimpse into the lives and minds of the diaspora – those who fled during the 1917 Revolution or Civil War. Many renowned figures – Dovlatov, Solzhenitsyn, Brodsky, Limonov and Teffi – were fated to live as authors exiled from Soviet Russia, and the threat of exile haunted many others.

Among the most powerful in the collection are the tales dealing with love, loneliness and illicit affairs. Ivan Bunin's "In Paris" opens the anthology. It begins with a chance encounter between two émigrés in a Russian restaurant in Paris; gradually they find solace in each other's arms, before fate intervenes cruelly. The deftness of Bunin's hand ensures that the images and emotions of this story will continue to haunt you. Nina Berberova's "The Murder of Valkovsky" is starkly different in character, and yet the themes overlap: exiled Russians clinging to one another, finding companionship, succumbing to passion. Irina Guadanini's storytelling skills may not rival Bunin's or Berberova's, but "The Tunnel", believed to be a veiled account of her affair with Nabokov, captures the dark claustrophobia of a doomed love affair between émigrés.

Many of the stories offer a more lighthearted picture of life in exile. The corruption of Russian and its cross-pollination with foreign languages feature in Nadezhda Teffi's "A Conversation". Pre-revolutionary Russian literary works were, of course, dotted with dialogue in French, the



language of the Russian aristocracy, but in this story we watch helplessly as Russian morphs into a mongrel idiom. Teffi's mordant wit is also at work in "Hedda Gabler", describing a hilariously infuriating meeting with a seamstress who styles herself "Madame Elise d'Ivanoff" and is "hounded by forms". "Spindleshanks", by Sasha Chorny, involves a lengthy, humorous rant against the fashionable yearning for skinniness, as resonant today as when first written in 1931.

In Nabokov's story "The Museum", the narrative slips into a disorienting confusion of realities, as the protagonist faces the terrifying ordeal of a return to Russia. "They Called Her Russia", by Vasily Yanovsky, the final story in the anthology, is similarly dreamlike: visions and memories come tumbling out, punctuated by the question: "Dream or real?" It offers a hallucinatory train ride through Russia at war.

Karetnyk's anthology transports the reader into the motley lives and imaginations of Russian émigrés in Paris, Berlin and beyond. It is a welcome addition to our bookshelves. Highly recommended reading for anyone fascinated by pre-revolutionary Russian culture as preserved among the ranks of the two million-odd Whites that formed the first wave of emigration from Bolshevik Russia.

Anna Gunin

Anna Gunin is the co-translator of Chernobyl Prayer *by Svetlana Alexievich. Among her translations are Oleg Pavlov's award-winning* Requiem for a Soldier *and Mikail Eldin's war memoirs* The Sky Wept Fire. *She has also translated films and fairy tales, plays and poetry. She leads our Riveting Russian Translation Workshop.*

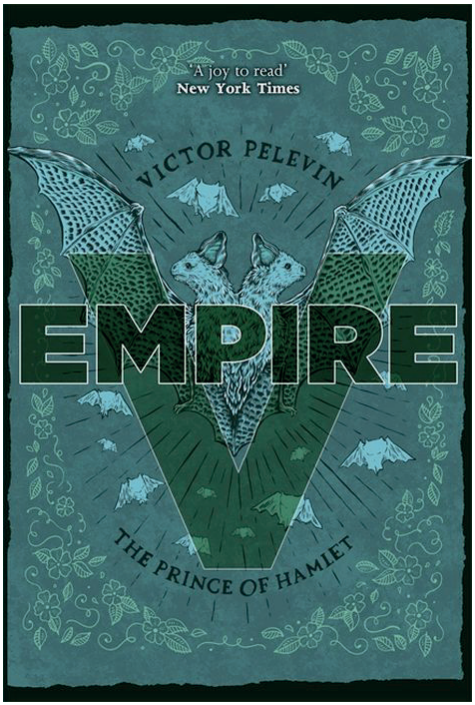
EMPIRE V BY VICTOR PELEVIN
TRANSLATED BY ANTHONY PHILLIPS (GOLLANCZ)
REVIEWED BY JONATHAN LEVI

"The glum, commonplace act of love … always brought to my mind our electoral system. After enduring interminable torrents of lies, the voter is finally allowed to insert the only real – and pathetic – candidate into an indifferent niche, which has already seen so much tampering, doctoring and rigging it no longer cares two hoots about the outcome. The voter is then supposed to persuade himself that this boring performance has been precisely the event that turns the whole world delirious with ecstasy."

Victor Pelevin - from the author's own archive

Yes, Russia has invaded our beds as well as our ballot boxes and the old in-and-out will never be the same. At least that's one philosophical observation in *Empire V*, the remarkable Victor Pelevin's latest novel to be translated into English. Many years ago I reviewed Pelevin's *Buddha's Little Finger*, *Homo Zapiens*, and *The Sacred*

Life of the Werewolf for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. I concluded that he was one of the most creative writers in any language. The ink-smudged fingerprints of Gogol, Dostoyevsky, and Bulgakov were all over his pages. And yet he had a *sui generis* talent to pulp story, history, politics, and trash into the kind of clockwork milkshake that would keep



any of my droogs – low or highbrow – entertained and stimulated for weeks.

It may be a sign of the times that Pelevin, once published in English by literary giants such as Viking and Penguin, has found his recent novels in the catalogue of Gollancz, itself the once-proud publisher of Orwell and Amis, but now wholly dedicated to sci-fi and fantasy. We are living in an overstimulated age, and publishers recognise our need for niches – doctored and rigged as they may be.

To be fair, the V in *Empire V* is for vampire. A disaffected young Muscovite named Roman, born in the waning years of the Soviet Union, follows a random invitation chalked onto the pavement to enter a nearby darkened building. Inevitably taking this bait our hero is led into twilight longings for another young initiate (and sure, why not cast Kristen Stewart in the role?).

But the curiosity that leads Roman down the rabbit hole into the vampire Wonderland is fueled by more than hormones. He has philosophy in his blood (or "red liquid" as Pelevin's vampires call it) and wants to know about the meaning of life in its full existential-religio-Monty Pythonesque glory. This gives Pelevin a chance to create a "Vampire's Guide to the Galaxy" as rich as any Terry Gilliam animation. Humans, in this philosophy, are to vampires as cows are to humans – docile ruminants created to be milked, although in the human case, not of a white but of a red liquid.

As with much literature from foreign countries, Pelevin's novel/treatise/satire is full of many social and political references that will fly over the English reader's head. Thankfully, Anthony Phillips does an excellent job of translating the essence of Pelevin's puns and wordplays in a way I can only imagine captures the original spirit of a work by a writer who is still, for me, wildly original in any language.

Jonathan Levi

US-born Jonathan Levi is the author of the novels Septimania *and* A Guide for the Perplexed. *A founding editor of* Granta, *he currently lives and teaches in Rome.*

Victor Pelevin, born in 1962, is the author of fourteen novels and eight books of essays and short stories. His first collection of stories won the Russian Little Booker Prize and his first novel, ***Omon Ra***, was shortlisted for the same prize. In 2011 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize. ***Empire V*** first appeared on the internet before it was published in Russian in 2006.

THE SUMMER GUEST BY ALISON ANDERSON
(HARPER COLLINS)
REVIEWED BY ANEESA ABBAS HIGGINS

A diarist in late nineteenth-century Russia, a translator in modern-day France and a London publisher: three women connected across time and space, united by a shared love of words. Three deftly interwoven narrative strands bring these women together in Alison Anderson's haunting, elegiac novel, a beguiling tale of loss and longing that transports us to an instantly recognisable Russian country-house setting with a full cast of Chekhovian characters.

The diarist of *The Summer Guest* is Zina, a young doctor, recently blinded as a result of a fatal illness, a character inspired by a little-known acquaintance of Chekhov. In this well-researched piece of fiction, Alison Anderson has created an imagined record of Zina's latter years, a diary in which she confides her thoughts and emotions over two summers at her family's country home. Her diary has fallen into the hands of Katya, a Russian publisher in modern-day London. Eager to publish the diary in English, Katya has engaged Ana Harding, a translator living in a village in France.

It is Ana's translation of Zina's diary that forms the bulk of *The Summer Guest*. Zina writes poignantly of her desire to resist her cruel fate, reflecting that her words on the page are no more than "sightless scratchings against mortality". Anderson approaches the subject of Zina's experience of blindness with great sensitivity, skilfully avoiding cliché and focusing on the blind woman's sensory experience of an unfamiliar world, in which friends and family have become disembodied voices. The voice that stands out is that of the eponymous summer guest, the young doctor and writer Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, who delights in engaging Zina in long discussions. In true Chekhovian fashion, they talk of love and literature, of destiny and free will, of the pressures of their shared medical calling and of the beauties of the countryside Zina can no longer see. Anton Pavlovich illuminates the world for Zina, creating pictures in her mind with his descriptions of the scenes unfolding before his eyes. Echoing many a reader's thoughts as we sink into a Chekhov short story, Zina writes: "He restores a fractured loveliness to my blind world, recalling remembered scenes and suggesting others blurred by time and loss."

Alison Anderson © Christine Kring

Interwoven with the diary are passages giving voice to Ana's musings as she works on the translation. Alone in her remote French village, she reflects

on her own life and loves while devoting herself to the task of re-creating the diary in English, always searching for that elusive touchstone of translation, "the prism where sunlight reflects language". Such insights into the process of translation are a delight for me as both reader and translator, all the more so since Anderson is herself a distinguished translator.

The diary makes repeated allusions to a manuscript of a novel that Chekhov was working on, a tantalising possibility that Ana hopes may have some substance. But even the provenance of the diary itself is shrouded in mystery. In the novel's third strand, we hear about Katya, the London publisher, struggling to keep her benighted small press afloat. How did she come across this astonishing document? Does she really have access to a long-lost Chekhov manuscript? These and other questions keep us guessing to the end of this engrossing read.

The Summer Guest is a well-crafted and subtly nuanced tale with deftly drawn, multi-faceted characters. As befits a work that owes so much to Chekhov, the language is lyrical and restrained. This is a novel to savour, a worthy homage to the master of the short story and a rare delight for anyone who is curious about the art of translation.

Aneesa Abbas Higgins

A version of this review can be read on Aneesa Abbas Higgins's website: free99656.wordpress.com.

Aneesa Abbas Higgins is a literary translator and former teacher. Born in London, she has lived in Britain, France and the USA. She translates from French and has studied several other languages, including Russian.

Alison Anderson's literary translations include ***The Elegance of the Hedgehog*** by Muriel Barbery, and works by Nobel laureate J. M. G. Le Clézio. She has also written several novels and is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literary Translation Fellowship. She has lived in Greece and Croatia, and speaks several European languages, including Russian.

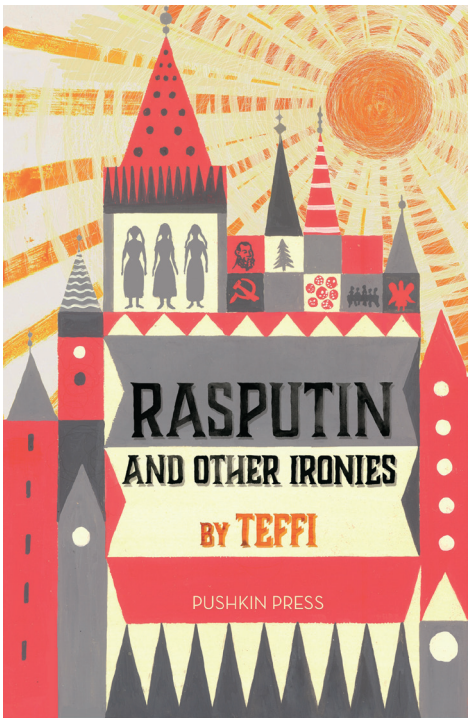
RASPUTIN AND OTHER IRONIES BY TEFFI

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT CHANDLER ET AL (PUSHKIN PRESS)

REVIEWED BY JOHN MUNCH

Teffi. It could be a child's beloved rubbery chewing gum. Or maybe a name given to some floppy-haired pet. It could never be taken seriously as the pseudonym for a writer who came to prominence in the decades before tsarist Russia descended into cataclysmic revolution, could it? Far too whimsical and tongue in cheek, right?

Wrong. It was in fact a calculated piece of personal cryptography designed to mask the authorial identity and intent of Nadezhda Alexandrovna Lokhvitskaya, which she adopted from 1907, when she was in her thirties. As Robert Chandler, one of the four translators of Teffi's wide-ranging pot pourri of recollections and reportage, makes clear in his elegant introduction, it was a defensive ploy. It was akin to that of Shakespeare's Fool – a way of cloaking a penetrating intelligence behind a mask of silliness, the more easily to accumulate and dispense sharp insights about the human condition.



Teffi's canvas, as demonstrated by this collection, is dizzily far-reaching, ranging from memories of childhood friendships, faltering sorties by the author in search of a publisher for a poem, to gatherings of the bizarre and baroque literary types she met at a radical magazine. But there is one overarching unifier: the focus on individual, small-scale interactions that take place at times when external events can only be measured on a tectonic scale. One critic summed up Teffi's oeuvre with the verdict that she had "an anarchic irreverence for power, imperial or ecclesiastical".

Teffi was a poet, journalist, satirist and humorist. Indeed, humour is a frequent visitor to these pages. In "My First Visit to an Editorial Office", Teffi describes the editor to whom she is offering a poem as a "crook-shouldered, apparently cross-eyed man with a black beard. He seemed very gloomy". After receiving Teffi's offering he gave his verdict on the poem in the magazine's published "post bag", saying that it had "nothing to recommend it".

In an office of the Stock Exchange Gazette, an oddly named liberal St Petersburg paper, Teffi describes one woman "who carried grenades around

in her muff". The staff were "captivated by her. She dresses elegantly, she goes to the hairdresser, and all the time she's carrying bombs".

There are a number of such laugh-out-loud moments in the collection. What makes Teffi's achievement so great is that, as a woman humorist, she was the only example in what was otherwise then a male-only comedy enclave. Add to that an economy of expression and clarity to rival that of a fine pen-and-ink artist, it becomes clear why there is, after a long hiatus, an upsurge of interest in her work. She died in 1952 and is buried near Paris where she lived for the last thirty years of her life.

Nadezhda Teffi

In part her reputational revival can be attributed to Pushkin Press – great enablers when it comes to panning for underappreciated literary gold. The explanatory notes are a model of helpful guidance, and apart from one typographical glitch (referring to the "first word [sic] war") the production values are spot on.

John Munch

John Munch started his career as a reporter and editor on the Cambridge News. *He then worked for the* Sheffield Morning Telegraph, The Guardian *and the* London Evening Standard. *In the 1970s, he reported for the* Toronto Star, *before spending 25 years on the* Financial Times.

Teffi (1872–1952) is the pseudonym of the Russian humorist writer Nadezhda Alexandrovna Lokhvitskaya. Together with Arkady Averchenko she was one of the most prominent authors featured in the magazine *Satiricon*. She was sister to the Russian poet Mirra Lokhvitskaya.

CATLANTIS BY ANNA STAROBINETS
TRANSLATED BY JANE BUGAEVA
ILLUSTRATED BY ANDRZEJ KLIMOWSKI (PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S BOOKS)
REVIEWED BY DANIEL HAHN

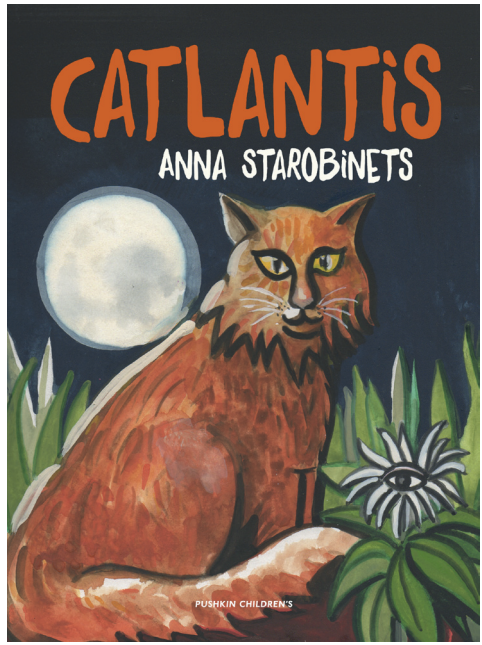
This is the story of Baguette, a domestic ginger cat living in a twelfth-floor apartment, and of his efforts to win the hand (paw?) of his beloved fiancée, Purriana.

After a courtship conducted mostly by letter (friendly dogs pass the notes on their behalf), Purriana welcomes Baguette's advances, finally turning down another suitor – the sinister Noir – to accept his proposal of matrimony. But tradition dictates that, for a cat to marry, he must first perform a heroic feat, which is why the distinctly unheroic Baguette finds himself travelling back through the perilous Ocean of Time to the lost city of Catlantis, in order to bring back a strange,

magical flower and help an old, dying oracle fulfil a prophecy. The oracle happens to be Purriana's great-great-grandmother, so Baguette is keen to impress her.

But when the island of Catlantis is swallowed up by a cat-astrophic, cat-aclysmic flood (which of course explains all subsequent cats' hatred of water), will the intrepid Baguette make it back to present-day Moscow alive? And even if he can survive the flood (and a somewhat strange interlude in fourteenth-century Paris involving a besotted cat princess called Panna Catta and a trial for witchcraft…) things still won't be easy for Baguette, as he will have to contend with some competition. For the white Catlantic flower – though largely forgotten over the centuries – has a powerful magic that gives cats their nine lives, which means that, inevitably, Baguette isn't the only one after it.

Starobinets has woven some lovely cat mythology into Catlantis, which she uses to explain the origins of our contemporary cat society, such as the different talents bestowed upon, respectively, cats who are "white like mountain snow", those who are "grey like the sky before a thunderstorm", those "black like the deepest ocean", and the cats who are ginger "just like a carrot" (not to forget, of course, the spotty and stripy ones); and there's some catty wordplay, too, with nice equivalents supplied here by translator Jane Bugaeva. But it's the spritely, pleasingly odd and quite original story that makes the book feel so fresh and fun – there's a lot for child readers and/or listeners to like here. And there's even a nice joke about French semiotics thrown in for the grown-ups. What more could you want?



Anna Starobinets © Dmitri Rozhkov

Daniel Hahn

Daniel Hahn is a writer, editor and translator, with some 50 books to his name. Recent books include the new Oxford Companion to Children's Literature.

Anna Starobinets is a journalist, novelist, and screenwriter and has published seven books, including two novels for children. ***The Awkward Age***, her collection of short stories, has been translated into seven languages including English, Spanish, Italian, and Bulgarian. Her novel ***The Living*** is an anti-utopian tale likened to the works of George Orwell, Yevgeny Zamyatin, and H.G. Wells.

WAR AND PEACE BY LEO TOLSTOY
TRANSLATED BY RICHARD PEVEAR AND LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY (VINTAGE BOOKS)
REVIEWED BY ANEESA ABBAS HIGGINS

It was a recent television adaptation of *War and Peace* that spurred me on to my second reading of the great novel, some forty years after I last read my way through its 1,200-plus pages. On that first reading I revelled in the love stories and vivid portraits of its infuriating protagonists, skipped and skimmed through the battle sections, and earnestly pondered Tolstoy's philosophical musings. I paid very little attention to which translation of the book I was reading, probably the Constance Garnett version since it was she who opened the door to the Russian classics for most of us back then.

We are spoiled for choice these days. Our editor Rosie Goldsmith wrote about the great Anthony Briggs translation in Riveting Reviews last year (www.eurolitnetwork.com/rivetingreviews-rosie-goldsmith-reviews-war-and-peace-by-leo-tolstoy-and-anthony-briggs/); I opted this time for Pevear and Volokhonsky's translation, because it fulfils my three requirements for *War and Peace*: the long French passages must be intact; the Russian names, with all their variations, must be unadulterated; and the voice, with all its irony, delicacy of touch and occasional bombast, must ring true. Garnett was reputedly cavalier with the text, paraphrasing freely and skipping over passages she didn't understand. By contrast, Pevear and Volokhonsky are meticulous in their respect for the language of the original and have created a richly nuanced English-language version that beautifully reflects Pevear's understanding of translation as "a dialogue between two languages".

Manipulating this handsome but weighty volume of 1,273 pages is no simple matter. My solution was to cut it into four sections, which I then bound with the help of some sellotape and last year's wall calendar. Book fetishists may be horrified at such violence, but the result was four slim, portable volumes that allowed me to immerse myself night and day in the work. And I was every bit as absorbed this time as I had been in my youthful reading. Those who are daunted by this massive work should take heart: *War and Peace* reads smoothly and easily, the characters' lives are irresistibly flawed, and the long descriptive passages lead the twenty-first century reader effortlessly into the world of the Napoleonic wars and Russian high society. People fall in and

Leo Tolstoy

out of love, quarrel with their parents, are prey to their desires and foolish instincts, and generally display all the human frailties we look for in fictional worlds.

On this reading, I persevered with the battle scenes, admiring Tolstoy's ability to conjure up the blood and gore of the battlefield while laying bare the hubris of soldierly heroism. Aging, one-eyed Kutuzov, the world-weary general of the Russian forces, has seen it all before. Prince Andrei contemplates the beauty of the sky as he lies injured on the battlefield, and the two Rostov brothers fling themselves naively into the fray with all the wrong-headed ardour of the young.

But, once again, it was the soap opera of the various love stories that really gripped me. Knowing that Pierre, Andrei or Nikolai would slip almost unnoticed into one of the battle scenes and remind us of one of their romances kept me going through those long passages. What would happen to these men? Would their various amorous longings bring them happiness? Who would be left undamaged by the unrelenting turmoil, and who would be crushed beneath its weight? The interweaving of these personal tales with the larger canvas of historical momentum is what drives the novel forward and makes it so appealing. And just as they did before, the main characters sprang off the pages, making me feel that they were as alive as my own friends and family.

Of course, *War and Peace* is not without its weaknesses. Tolstoy's heroes ponder big questions, musing on freedom and necessity, life and death, good and evil. But Tolstoy himself seems unable to resist the urge to hold forth too. His long digressions on freemasonry, the causes of historical events, and much else, left me wishing that the great man had been subjected to some clear-eyed editing.

Editors' note: It could be serendipity, or simply that Pevear and Volokhonsky are so revered, any mention of Russian literature in English translation means their names are on many readers' lips. Whatever the reason, by chance we found two of our contributors had compared the couple's versions of Tolstoy's novels to other translations. It therefore seemed right that Gurmeet Singh's "Love Letter to Volokhonsky and Pevear" should be read alongside Aneesa Abbas Higgins's review of their translation of War and Peace.

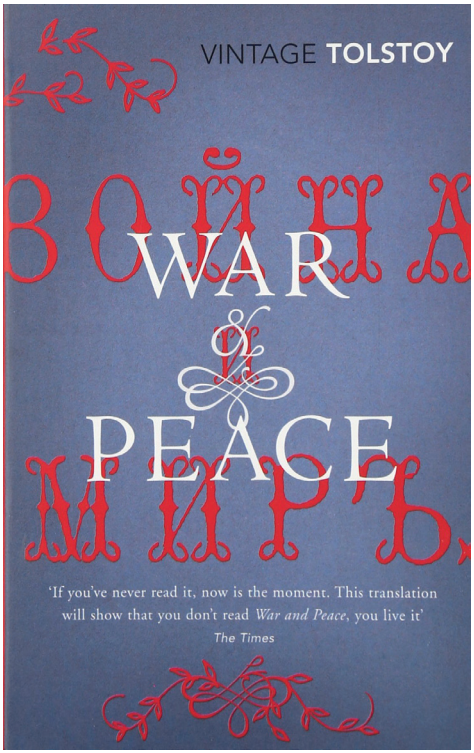
A LOVE LETTER TO VOLOKHONSKY AND PEVEAR

By Gurmeet Singh

I'm in love with Larissa Volkhonsky. That means I also love her husband, Richard Pevear. Call it a not-so-classic Russian love triangle.

As a young lad, love of Russian novels was unimaginable to me. Old Russian novels were all extreme opinions! Shouting! But what do you mean you cannot love me, Ludmila?! I had to put them down, believing even the "peace" bit was mainly composed of "war": loud Russians unable to contain their lofty Romantic spirits. Dostoevsky was the worst. Requisite reading for any broody teenager, most of Dostoevsky's writing was unintelligibly portentous, illogical and, worst of all, dense – every other sentence seemed to add layer upon layer of explication and digression. So much so I couldn't tell exactly how Aloysha and Mitya and Ivan were the "famed" brothers Karamazov. Famed for what, exactly? Yelling? Glowing with rage? No, no, Russian novels were a no-go zone. That was until I came across Volokhonsky and Pevear.

It just so happened a friend gave me a copy of Anna Karenina *for a recent birthday. Fantastic, I thought, and recalled that old, terrible joke about paperbacks as bad doorstops. But a few days later, I read the first few pages; and this time, it made sense. No – it didn't just make sense, it was enjoyable. I was amazed at how modern Tolstoy sounded - not simply describing the tired, hungover mental state of Oblonsky, but*



While I was engrossed by the lengthy passages given over to the exodus from Moscow, to a wolf-hunting party, and even to the goriest battle scenes, I was utterly defeated by Part II of the Epilogue with its forty pages of portentous pronouncements.

Then there is the thorny problem of Tolstoy's women characters. Modern feminists, steeped in the notion that literature must provide fully rounded, strong female protagonists, can only blanch in horror upon reading that a "real woman" does not listen "intelligently" to her man's pronouncements. No, she listens with rapt attention in order to reflect his wisdom back at him. She is a slave to his every need, anticipating his desires and ensuring they are fulfilled in order to leave him free to think and work. Nikolai and Pierre, quite credibly, find fulfilment in their family lives and their occupations. But the female characters, *replicating it. After a week or so, I was sad that I had finished the book, in the way that only finishing great books can make you sad.*

I texted my friend: "Thanks for the present – amazing book! I get Tolstoy now!" She replied, "Thank Larissa". It took me a while to understand she meant the translator, and not some unknown third party.

Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear are a married couple and have collaborated on dozens of English translations of classic Russian novels since the early 1990s. Volokhonsky (Russian), and Pevear (American) have diverse backgrounds, between them training in linguistics, mathematics and literature. They have taught in universities, followed numerous religious and political causes, and have created original work in various literary forms, including poetry. They are, in short, cosmopolitan, in the best sense of that word.

What's more incredible is that these exceptional talents and this encompassing cosmopolitanism are put to high service in the most humble and meticulous of tasks: translation. They stand at the threshold of languages, ushering some of the most interesting and challenging characters into entirely new settings, their auras intact. Thus Levin (from Anna Karenina*) and Pierre Bolkhonsky (from* War and Peace*) can live out their spiritual struggles in English, with all the emotion, power and force of the original. Thus Behemoth (from* The Master and Margarita*) isn't simply a big, weird, funny cat, but an amusing, subtle trickster who makes you feel close to Satan.*

I can only thank both Volokhonsky and Pevear for making the many Russian classics enjoyable in English. Without them – and this is perhaps the biggest compliment one can pay to a translator – I would have remained a victim of my prejudices, believing Russian novels (and by extension, Russian history, Russian thought, etc) were just noise. Now, I can hear their solemn, gorgeous, playful music.

Gurmeet Singh

Gurmeet Singh is a writer and editor living and working in Berlin. He writes mostly on culture, technology and politics, and is also currently writing his first novel. He tweets at @therealgurmeet.

colourful as they are – and especially reading about them with forty more years' life experience under my belt – are much less convincing. The beautiful and manipulative Hélène – a cardboard cut-out *femme fatale* – devotes her life to ensnaring innocent men in her web of deception and cruelty. Natasha, the naive beauty courted by an unending stream of captivated males, irritated me on both readings. By the end of the tale, (spoiler alert here!) she has become a voluptuous earth mother, content to suckle her babes and minister to her man. And then there are the doormats: poor Sonya, pushed aside and condemned to be a drudge in the family of the man she loved so devotedly in her youth; Lise, the "little princess", ill treated by her husband and conveniently despatched in childbirth; and pious Princess Marya, who manages quite miraculously to find love while simultaneously bailing out the impoverished Rostov family.

But we can surely forgive Tolstoy his paternalistic attitudes. For all his visionary strivings, he was, after all, a man of his times. He devoted five years of "ceaseless and exclusive labour" to writing *War and Peace*; and his translators too have laboured long and hard. And my two weeks of immersion in the great work have left me in no doubt about its undimmed rhetorical power and of its capacity to move, enrage and enlighten.

Aneesa Abbas Higgins

A version of this review can be read on Aneesa Abbas Higgins's website: free99656.wordpress.com.

Count **Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy** (1828–1910), usually referred to in English as **Leo Tolstoy**, is regarded as one of the greatest authors of all time. Born to an aristocratic Russian family, he is best known for the realist novels ***War and Peace*** and ***Anna Karenina*** . His non-fiction work ***A Confession*** sees the literal interpretation of the ethical teachings of Jesus that led him to become a fervent anarchist and pacifist. Tolstoy was also an advocate of the economic philosophy of Henry George, which he incorporated into his writing.

THE UNDERGROUND BY HAMID ISMAILOV
TRANSLATED BY CAROL ERMAKOVA (RESTLESS BOOKS)
REVIEWED BY ROSIE GOLDSMITH

Every so often a book falls through my letterbox which makes me glad to be alive. Hamid Ismailov's novel is one of them. *The Underground* is about decay, death and the end of empire but the writing is so powerful and poetic that it fills me with joy. And even though it is a short Russian novel of only 250 pages, it has all the lyricism, layers and depth of a doorstop Dostoevsky.

The young male narrator Mbobo/Kirill is nicknamed "Pushkin" for his love of story-telling and reciting poetry and because he is, like Pushkin himself, "non-Russian". Mbobo/Kirill is "an exotic blend" of African and Siberian blood; the result of a one-night stand during the Moscow Olympics in 1980 between his mother and a black African Olympian. This wise, precocious, well-read, troubled child lives only twelve years, brought up by his beautiful mother and two "uncles". Everyone is half-drunk as vodka is the only cheaply available sustenance. This is an anaesthetised, down-trodden nation where no one is sober. We witness the decline and fall of the Soviet Union through his child's eyes and his obsession with the Moscow Underground. He was born near Oktyabrskaya Station and his mother's waters broke in Paveletskaya Station and he dies underground, "being eaten or entered, bored into by maggots into his decaying body".

The Moscow Underground is, at first, his consolation, a regal palace "with massive temple doors", a magnificent "kingdom of marble and white stone", compared with the chaos and filth of Moscow Aboveground. It feeds his young brain which teems with vivid impressions, "like blood from the throat of a slaughtered rooster, people spurted out". A rich portrait of 1980s Moscow, above and below, builds up slowly in the details of the architecture and inhabitants of the individually distinctive stations, of the Lenin Libraries he visits, of the filthy streets and their dark homes, of outcasts and cruel relatives, of the blood-curdling racism directed at the lonely black boy.

Each chapter is named after a metro station on the famous Moscow Circle Line. Mbobo/Kirill's favourite is Sokol Station, for its "mathematical beauty". Sokol Station is, "the subconscious of Soviet

Hamid Ismailov © Rosie Goldsmith

building; its collective unconscious, its archetype. What was left unrealised – or never fully realised – on the surface was achieved underground … order, regimentation, a fixed entrance and exit."

What a metaphor for the Soviet Union! In spite of some heavy referencing, including to Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, this is not a heavy-handed novel at all. It is a moving account of betrayal and deception and of the ability to find comfort and joy in poetry and stories and of the necessity of beauty.

Mbobo passes through the twelve stations of his life and in 1992 his life turned "topsy turvy" (aged twelve) – as did the Soviet Union, as Yeltsin and Gorbachev battled it out. Mbobo describes the "cruel betrayal" of the Underground during the 1991 coup, when its stations closed and it became "the very biggest prison" and "Hades' underground realm".

He feels deceived as the new bosses then begin to rename the stations. As the old nation dies so does "Moscow's underground son". The underground is a grave, a tomb, a mausoleum for the blighted Soviet Union.

1992 is also the year that Hamid Ismailov fled the Soviet Union. Born in Kyrgystan, growing up in Uzbekistan and writing in Uzbekh and Russian, this prolific poet and novelist was forced to flee after being accused of "over-democratic tendencies". He arrived in London as a refugee, joined the BBC and rapidly rose in its ranks. He writes in his "free time" and has produced four volumes of poetry and nine novels. Our gain and their loss – thanks also to his wonderful translator.

Rosie Goldsmith

Hamid Ismailov was born in 1954 into an Uzbek family in Kyrgyzstan. He moved to Moscow, excelled in the Soviet education system and might well have become a high-flying Soviet apparatchik, but fate led him to become a dissident writer and took him to the UK. He joined the BBC World Service as a journalist, became its first Writer in Residence, then Editor of the Central Asia Service and is today BBC WS Executive Editor, Europe Region. Hamid writes his acclaimed poetry and novels in Russian and is widely translated.

Riveting Reviews

BURNING LIGHTS AND *FIRST ENCOUNTER* BY BELLA CHAGALL

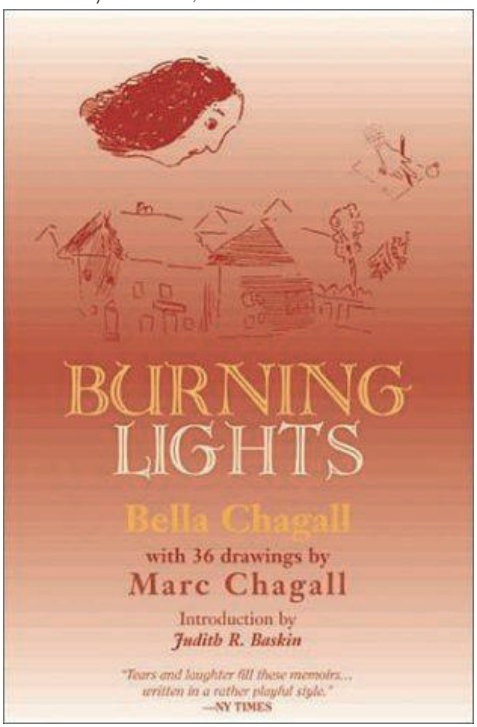
TRANSLATED BY BARBARA BRAY (SCHOCKEN)

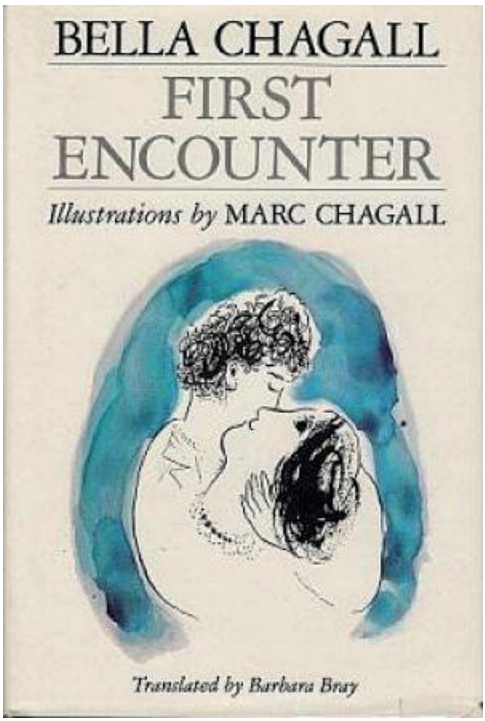
REVIEWED BY MIKA PROVATA-CARLONE

"These pages have the same meaning as a painted surface. If there were a hiding place in my pictures, I would slip them into it", wrote the artist Marc Chagall in *My Life*.

His pages are full of lead-heavy gloom, pain and despair, and with guilt, shock and horror at the fast-unravelling fabric of Russian history and society. *My Life* describes the predicament of being a Jew, an artist and a man of solitude in a world of racial conflicts, propaganda and turbulent masses. Yet "in the dark of the night, it seemed to me that there were not only smells, but a whole flock of blessings breaking through the boards, flying into space" – Chagall's autobiography is also an enchanted, riveting journey from shtetl existence to artistic vision; to the Paris of Nijinsky, Bonnard, Matisse and Apollinaire; to Vitebsk and Moscow; and to life with Bella.

My Life is a harrowing chronicle of the dolor of being Jewish in tsarist Russia, during the pogroms as the





Bella Rosenfeld Chagall © Shalom Books

Germans advance, and at the time of the dubious, disturbingly precarious concessions to tolerance made by the emerging Bolsheviks. And yet, "I only had to open my window and blue air, love, and flowers entered with her. Dressed all in white or all in black, she has long been flying over my canvasses, guiding my art".

Bella Chagall, who was Basha, Bashenka or Berta Rosenfeld, was not simply Marc's muse and companion. She was a writer, the Jewish-Russian soul Chagall would make his own, and paint with intoxicating poetry and piercing undertones of darkness. *Burning Lights* and *First Encounter* were written in the Yiddish of her childhood between 1939 and her early death in 1944 – the echo of her remembered language an act of resistance to Nazism. The books were edited and published by their daughter Ida and Marc Chagall as a gesture of long farewell, with Marc himself providing illustrations for Bella's stories, making these two slim novels into unique statements of beauty, love and immortality.

These memoirs offer an organic commentary on each of Chagall's paintings, revealing an extraordinary union of minds, souls and sensitivities. Bella's stories are the voices, colours, echoes, forgotten gestures, forbidden thoughts, yearned for dreams and the algos of a race, a family and an age that suffuse Chagall's work. She effected a momentous transformation in him: from the "still-born" man he describes, he will emerge as the painter-poet who will capture inimitably the spirit of a people. The brutalist, ironic gaze of the paintings *My Father* (1914) or *The Butcher* (1910) will acquire weight and poise, gait and lilt, a narrative, a world of past and future. She will infuse his life and work with oneiric power, depth, tantalising mischief and humour, with passionate humanity and with dazzling, life-giving colour. Every cultural hint and symbolic shade in Chagall's paintings are reflected in Bella's words, stories, images and metaphors; from the floatiness of existence to the pageant of Jewish life, to animals, intimate interiors, urban spaces and starry skies.

Burning Lights and *First Encounter* offer delicious, irresistible story-telling and mesmerising insights into the flawless osmosis between two exceptional lives. A new translation, or even a re-edition of Barbara Bray's 1983 version, is long – too long – overdue.

Mika Provata-Carlone

Mika Provata-Carlone is an independent scholar, translator, editor and illustrator, and a contributing editor to Bookanista. She has a doctorate from Princeton University and lives and works in London.

Bella Rosenfeld Chagall (1895–1944) was a Jewish Belarusian writer and the first wife of painter Marc Chagall. She was the subject of many of Chagall's paintings, including *Bella with White Collar*.

CHERNOBYL PRAYER BY SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH
TRANSLATED BY ANNA GUNIN AND ARCH TAIT (PENGUIN BOOKS)
REVIEWED BY EKATERINA ROGATCHEVSKAYA

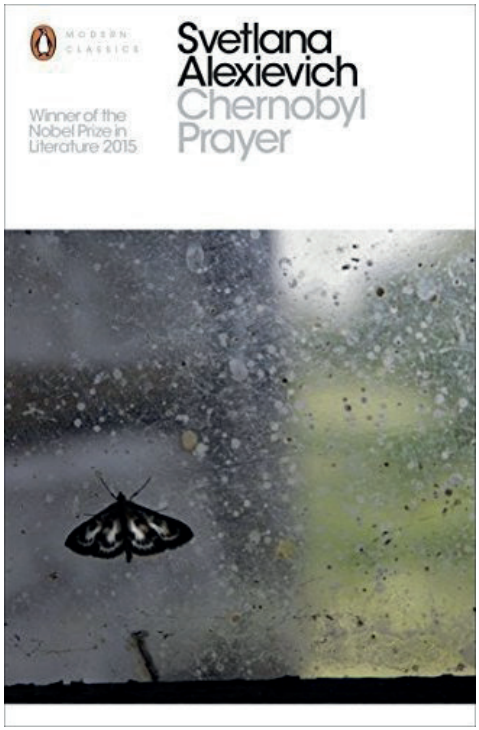
On 29 April 1986, the British public learned that a disaster had occurred three days before at a nuclear plant in the Soviet Union. Since that day the once-obscure place name "Chernobyl" – a town in Ukraine on the border with Belarus – has become synonymous with an unknown, apocalyptic future moulded by the atom.

This book, written by the Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich ten years after the disaster, published in Russian in 1997 and presented to the English-language world by Penguin Books in a striking new translation last year, when we marked Chernobyl's sad thirtieth anniversary, tells quite a different story from the official account. By way of a telling introduction, the author provides some shocking statistics: "The Soviet Union sent 800,000 regular conscripts and reservist clean-up workers to the disaster area. The average age of the drafted workers was thirty-three, while the conscripts were fresh from school. In Belarus alone, 115,493 people are recorded as clean-up workers. According to figures from the Belarusian Ministry of Health, between 1990 and 2003, 8,553 clean-up workers died. Two people per day."

As it was thirty years ago, it is still the case that most of the statistical data relating to the Chernobyl disaster either do not exist or are hugely obscured, classified and mythologised. The power of the explosion was three hundred times that of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. The official casualties, however, totalled only 165: 31 people killed in the blast, and 134 dying from the radiation. At the same time, an area two hundred kilometres square – home to five million people – was affected. It is the voices of these people that Svetlana Alexievich intends to make heard. As the writer formulates it, she "paints and collects mundane feelings, thoughts and words" and tries "to capture the life of the soul". She "met and talked with former workers at the power plant, with scientists, doctors, soldiers, displaced people and people who returned to their homes in the Zone".

In all her books Alexievich focuses on ordinary people caught up in tragic and catastrophic historical events, narrating their experiences using a montage technique. As if in a film documentary, she presents extracts from her interviews with real people who have taken part or were affected by a major catastrophe, be it the Second World War, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Chernobyl disaster or the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result, the tone of her books provides

Svetlana Alexievich © Elke Wetzig



a sharp contrast with the official line on these events, which portrayed them as, for example, an heroic sacrifice for the Soviet Motherland or a shameful episode that should never be spoken about. In 2015 Svetlana Alexievich became a Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time".

It could be said that Alexievich follows in the footsteps of Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin's *A Book of the Blockade*, or Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Some critics even trace her style back to Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion. In my view, though, Alexievich has turned documentary-based prose into a unique tool; she has created a genre that I would describe metaphorically as "written oral history", in which she imitates in writing the effect of an oral monologue. Significantly, she does this while making a special effort to remove the figure of the author from the fabric of the text, therefore dramatically shortening the distance between her speakers and the reader, creating a narrative in which the reader feels completely unprotected by any intermediary. The reader is therefore "naked" in front of the text, wounded by the simple words in which the stories are expressed:

> "There's one conversation I remember. Someone was pressuring me: 'You mustn't forget this isn't your husband, it isn't the man you love, it's a highly contaminated radioactive object. You're not a suicide case. Pull yourself together.' But I was like a crazy woman: 'I love him! I love him! While he was asleep, I whispered, 'I love you!' Walking about the hospital courtyard, 'I love you!' Carrying the bedpan, 'I love you!'"

In *Chernobyl Prayer* Alexievich accentuates this technique by giving her chapters titles such as "From conversations" and "From the grapevine", as if she has simply overheard people's voices, rather than recording them:

> "We are fatalists. We don't embark on action, because we believe whatever will be, will be. We believe in destiny; that is our history. Every generation's been plagued with war and bloodshed. How could we be any different? Fatalists."

> "They are building camps outside Chernobyl to hold all the people who were exposed to radiation. They'll hold them there, watch them and bury them."

Although the reader hears multiple voices, this polyphony deceives. Alexievich's narratives are well-orchestrated symphonies with just a few major tunes: the Soviet experience, the phenomenon of the so called "homo sovieticus" or "Red Man", and the relations between the state and its citizens.

By taking her discussion of these

themes to a human level, however, Alexievich makes her stories universal, beyond the former Soviet Union. And it is perhaps in this spirit that the translators chose the title *Chernobyl Prayer* rather than the *Voices from Chernobyl* that was used for the 2005 American edition (both titles were used by the author). The former title, combined with references to prayer and God at the end of the book, shifts the emphasis from collective experience to the individual perception of the catastrophe, in a way that, to my mind, strengthens the emotional impact of the story.

Ekaterina Rogatchevskaya

Ekaterina Rogatchevskaia is the Lead Curator East European Collections at the British Library. She also curates the "Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths" (www.bl.uk/events/russian-revolution-hope-tragedy-myths) of which our events on 3 August are a part.

Svetlana Alexandrovna Alexievich (1948–) is a Belarusian investigative journalist and non-fiction prose writer who writes in Russian. She was awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first writer from Belarus to receive the award.

OCTOBER: THE STORY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

BY CHINA MIÉVILLE (VERSO)

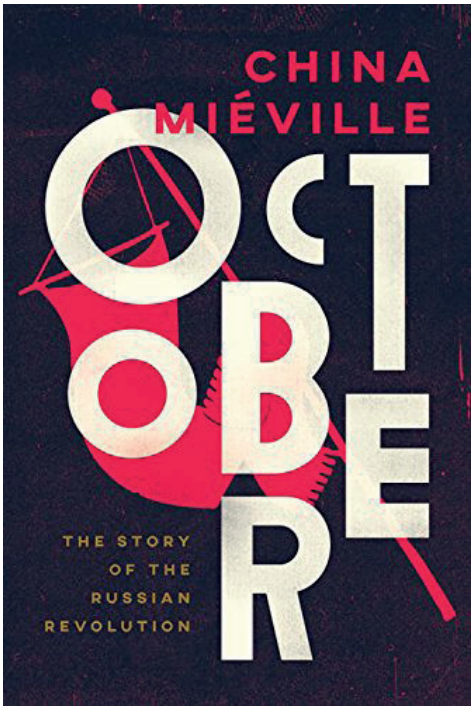
REVIEWED BY WEST CAMEL

China Miéville's fiction output outnumbers his nonfiction by about three to one. So, while his political and academic credentials suggest that writing a history of the Russian Revolution would be no kind of stretch, readers could be forgiven for thinking he might bring a fiction writer's sensibility to this nonfiction story.

On my reading, he does. The scholarship Miéville employs is of a high standard – where possible, incidents are described using first-hand accounts; in his acknowledgements, the author pays tribute to the "leading researchers" who have read and responded to the manuscript; and his "Further Reading" is a comprehensive list of scholarly works, histories and memoirs he "found particularly helpful and/or interesting in the long research for this book".

However, this is not an academic work. The "Further Reading" is not a bibliography; and there are no references or declared sources in the text. What's more, Miéville makes great use of the novelist's tools. *October* is elegantly structured. We start with a "Prehistory of 1917". This is followed by a sequence of nine chapters, each dealing with one of the nine months leading from the

China Miéville © Cordtown



February Revolution – which saw the fall of Tsar Nicholas II and the establishment of the shaky "dual power" of the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet – and building steadily, day by sluggish day, to the October Revolution later that year, when the Bolsheviks "seized" power (parentheses intended).

The story is told in a series of tight, digestible sections. Neat explications of the confusion of switching loyalties and changeable exigencies are interspersed with impressionistic descriptions of, for example, a fleeing Lenin stoking the fire of a steam engine. Miéville even makes an interesting choice of tenses – using the present for his framing chapters, but the past for those key moments between February and October. Thus he intimates that he is describing the prevailing situations in the pre- and post-revolutionary eras, but specific incidents in what I'm sure he'd smile at me calling the "interregnum".

With all these fictive elements at play, and with his avowed political stance as a modern-day Marxist, one could be forgiven for assuming that Miéville's account of the Revolution is a romantic one: brave leftists sweeping away the terrible Imperial regime, utopia shining in their eyes. Yet *October* paints exactly the opposite picture. What we see is a bitterly divided left, unable to agree on a route to power – or, more importantly, if they even want power it. We see fickle, unreliable leaders, whose failure to grasp the reality of the volatile situation leads to decisions that still have repercussions today. Even Lenin is a mercurial, divisive character, out of touch with his party and the people it claims to represent.

Above all, we see those people acting not like a mob, but like ordinary individuals, attempting to engage with what is happening around them while trying to live their everyday lives – taking trams on the day the Winter Palace fell, or bringing wood into Petrograd on barges, while the February Revolution rages on the bridges above them. And it is in these human stories that Miéville, the novelist and historian, is most effective and effecting.

Reviewed by West Camel

China Miéville (1972–) is an English fantasy fiction author, comic writer, political activist and academic. He often describes his work as "weird fiction" and is allied to the loosely associated movement of writers sometimes called New Weird. He has won numerous awards and is active in left-wing politics. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2015.

FIVE POEMS BY MARINA TSVETAEVA
TRANSLATED BY MONIZA ALVI AND VERONIKA KRASNOVA

Some of these poems were previously published in Modern Poetry in Translation. *Thanks to Veronika Bowker for making this special selection for* The Russian Riveter.

The Stream

I glimpse my heart reflected in the water.

Am I following the stream, or is it following me?
We must both make our own way
rippling over the unfeeling stones, singing their praises.
We have no power on earth to shift them.

I flow with the current –
or is the stream hurrying to keep up with me,
its wave curving like a swimmer's shoulder?

Wherever we find a stream
a poet is nearby!

Lucky people shedding tears
pouring them into us both
so they can feel better.
Then rinsing their tear-stained faces.

All the smeary water
from their past sorrows!
We carry them forever
so they are able to forget.

A Poet's Fate

How blessed they are,
those who are unable to sing!
Their tears flow – what a relief it must be
for grief to pour down like rain.

There's a shuddering
under the heart's stone.
Commanded to sing among the graves,
to be born a poet is my cruel fate.

David sang a lament for Jonathan
even though he was broken in two.
If Orpheus hadn't descended into hell
he could have sent his voice,

his voice alone gone down into the dark
while he stood at the threshold
allowing Eurydice to walk right out
on the tightrope of his song.

A rope-walk into the day.
Blinded by light – she couldn't look back.
I know if you're given a poet's voice
all the rest will be taken from you.

Exile

["the churn of stale words in the heart
again"]
from 'Cascando' – Samuel Beckett

Nostalgia. That cliché!
It doesn't matter to me where I am,
where I'm solitary, on what pavement

I heave my shopping back
to a home that doesn't know it's mine,
no more than a hospital, or barracks.

No difference to me, captive lion,
whose faces stare at my tormented self,
what crowd hurls me back, predictably

to the loneliness of my heart – I'm
like a polar bear without an ice-floe.
Precisely where I don't fit in (don't try to)

or where I'm humiliated,
it's all the same – I won't be seduced
by my mother-tongue, it's milky lure.

It doesn't matter in what language
I'm misunderstood by everyone,
(those readers gorging on newsprint,

hungry for a scandal). They all
belong to the twentieth century.
Born before time, I'm stunned

like the last remaining log when
the whole avenue's been felled.
People are undistinguishable.

Nothing alters – and what's most stale
are those reminders of my past,
of what was once so dear to me.

My dates have been erased –
I'm just someone born somewhere.
My country has such scant regard for me

that even the sharpest detective
could search my entire soul
and find no clue to where I'm from.

Everywhere is alien, every church is empty.
All is stagnant. But if I should glimpse

a rowan tree by the roadside...

Marina Tsvetaeva

Solitude

Aloneness: retreat
into yourself, as our ancestors
fell into their feuds.
You will seek out freedom
and discover it – in solitude.
Not a soul in sight.
There is no such peaceful garden –
so search for it inside yourself,
find coolness, shade.

Don't think of those
who win over the populace
in the town squares.
Celebrate victory and mourn it –
in the loneliness of your heart.

Loneliness: leave me,

Life!

I Refuse!

My eyes flooded with tears!
I cry out of anger and love!
Oh, weeping Czechoslovakia!
Oh, Spanish bloodshed!

A black mountain –
overshadows the world!
It's time – time – time
to return this journey's ticket
to our Creator!

I refuse to exist!
I refuse to live
in this Bedlam of nonhumans.
With the wolves of the city squares

I refuse to bay.
I refuse to swim
over all the human bodies
with the sharks of dry valleys.

I don't need sharp
ears or a poet's prophetic eyes.
I have only one response
to your mad world – reject it.

The poetry of **Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva** (1892–1941) is considered among some of the greatest in twentieth-century Russian literature. She lived through, and wrote of, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Moscow famine that followed it. Tsvetaeva left Russia in 1922 returning to Moscow in 1939. She committed suicide in 1941. As a lyrical poet, her passion and daring linguistic experimentation mark her as a striking chronicler of her times and the depths of the human condition.

Translator **Moniza Alvi** is a poet, author of nine poetry collections, and a tutor for the Poetry School. In 2002 she received a Cholmondeley Award for her poetry.

Translator **Veronika Krasnova** lectures at the University of East Anglia in Norwich.

Riveting Reads

Always keen to champion the best of European literature in English translation, and spread the word about excellent writing, when putting together our Russian *Riveter* magazine, we asked the four guest authors gracing the stage at our 3 August British Library event what books they would recommend to our Riveting Readers. So here we present the favourite and most formative Russian novels chosen by four prominent, contemporary Russian-language writers.

RIVETING READS BY ALISA GANIEVA

***Hadji Murat* by Leo Tolstoy:**

Tolstoy's final work wasn't published in his lifetime. It is dedicated to the tempestuous nineteenth-century Avar rebellion leader and a hero of the so-called Caucasian War, who was forced by circumstances to make an alliance with the Russians he had been fighting. It's a book highly relevant to recent events in post-Soviet Russia.

***The House on the Embankment* by Yury Trifonov:**

This novel about childhood in Josef Stalin's era of ubiquitous suspicion and informers makes any reader think deeply about how likely they would be to betray others just so they could enjoy the benefits of conformity.

***Moscow-Petushki* by Venedikt Erofeev**
(also published in English as "Moscow to the End of the Line", "Moscow Stations", and "Moscow Circles"):

A pseudo-autobiographical postmodernist poem in prose, this describes the entire drama of being a Soviet intellectual – in drunken conversations and reflections on board a suburban Moscow train.

RIVETING READS BY BORIS AKUNIN

(Editors' Note: Interestingly, without consultation, both Alisa Ganieva and Boris Akunin separately chose the same work as their favourite piece of Russian literature.)

***Hadji Murat* by Leo Tolstoy:**

In my personal list of the best of the best literary texts – written not only in Russian, but in any language – this relatively short novella would definitely be number one. It was written by one of the world's greatest storytellers late in his life, when he was already fed up with writing fiction and disillusioned by literature. It is minimalistic and devoid of any embellishment or ambition, but for me it reads like a manual of the writer's craft. It combines an almost hidden yugen-like* beauty of style with breathtaking plot-building and amazingly multi-layered meanings, so that you discover new ones at every re-reading.
The author here is god-like, effortlessly sliding from one character's inner world to another, understanding everybody and anybody – being everybody and anybody. This is what literary fiction is about, after all: temporarily becoming somebody else.
The story is based on an episode from a long-forgotten nineteenth-century war, describing the last days of a long-gone Dagestan warlord, but like every great text it is eternally modern and timeless. Think *War and Peace* in forty pages instead of four volumes.

*Japanese word meaning "deep awareness of existence".

RIVETING READS BY ANDREY KURKOV

***Foundation Pit* by Andrei Platonov,** translated by Robert Chandler:

If a day spent reading a book you love can be compared to a great festival, a joyous holiday, that holiday for me was the days and nights I spent reading Andrei Plantonov's *Foundation Pit* ("Kotlovan" in Russian). You have to listen with your internal ears to every word of Platonov's prose – in the same way you might savour a good Cognac. English-speaking readers are fortunate because this novel has been translated by a wonderful devotee of Platonov, Robert Chandler. In fact he has twice translated the novel. But that is another story.

In his unique fairy-tale style, at once beautiful and brutal, Platonov, with intense love and fear describes the birth of Soviet society. This is one of those books that, once read, lives with the reader forever. It has lived with me for more than forty years. I would very much like the number of fans of this novel to increase.

After the Ball by Leo Tolstoy:

After the Ball is a novella written by Tolstoy in one day in 1903, and turned out to be a prophetic insight into the horrors of the twentieth century.

The story's plotline is centred on the narrator's two encounters with the father of the girl with whom he is passionately in love. He recounts the night of the ball at her house and his tender feelings when he, intoxicated with adoration, watches how his beloved dances the mazurka with her father, a well-groomed and debonair old colonel. The morning after the ball, unable to sleep, the narrator accidentally witnesses a horrifying scene: the running of the gauntlet by a Tartar who has deserted the army. This procedure of incredible brutality is conducted by the same charming colonel, the father of the narrator's fiancé. Unable to reconcile two contradictory images of the same man, the narrator loses his faith in love as well as in life – in mankind as a whole.

As A.N. Wilson remarks in his biography of Leo Tolstoy, this story reveals "the singular truth about the country which it embodies ... the secret of how one nation could produce in the same generation Nijinsky, Shostakovich, Akhmatova ... and the Stalinist purges". I would add that Tolstoy's story informs our understanding not only of the emergence of Russia's Gulag, but Nazi Germany's "banality of evil", Maoism and even the Khmer Rouge.

Riveting Reads

THE STORY OF GLAS: PUBLISHING NEW RUSSIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY NATASHA PEROVA

In the 1990s post-Soviet Russia was in the political limelight, but its literature was practically unknown. Formerly banned books were just starting to return, overlooked classics were emerging from oblivion, while new authors were beginning to write. Foreign publishers were mildly interested, but disoriented. There was the need to create a new literary guide to Russian literature in a language everybody could understand and read. It was then that I launched Glas. Based in Moscow, the Glas series of Russian literature in English translation existed for twenty-five years, a small independent publisher amassing an impressive body of contemporary literary fiction covering the two post-perestroika decades plus some overlooked twentieth-century classics.

We produced anthologies at first, to introduce more names, and then moved on to single-author books. In all, Glas has showcased more than 150 authors; and for more than a decade Glas was the only source of new Russian writing in translation.

My first co-editor was Andrew Bromfield, but he was soon succeeded by Arch Tait, then Joanne Turnbull joined the team and stayed with Glas longest – to the bitter end! We never received any outside financial assistance, but did get lots of moral support from translators, many of whom later received commissions to translate whole books by authors they first worked on for Glas. Andrew Bromfield translated Victor Pelevin for us and was soon commissioned by bigger publishers to translate Pelevin's novels. Arch Tait translated Ludmila Ulitskaya for Glas long before she became an international celebrity. Joanne Turnbull did quite a few translations for Glas before finding "her own writer", Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, a forgotten genius from the early twentieth century. (Since then she has translated several books by him for NYRB Classics.) Robert Chandler translated a collection of Platonov's work for the centenary of that great writer, which helped promote him abroad. We also helped many aspiring translators by publishing their first efforts in Glas anthologies, through which their work was noticed.

A good example of a literary gem Glas resurrected is Anatoly Mariengof's *Cynics*, published in Glas #1 in 1991. *Cynics* was then "discovered" twenty years later by American critic Michael Stein, who wrote a rapturous review. When Svetlana Alexievich won the Nobel Prize, the only English translation of her work then available was her "Landscape of Loneliness" published ten years earlier in Glas. The remainder of that Glas collection, as well as a reprint, sold out in a matter of days.

In spite of these successes, certain deplorable changes in world publishing eventually meant it was becoming increasingly difficult to produce translated fiction without subsidies. The Russian organisations that could have helped us chose not to. Finally, sadly, I had to put Glas on hold –not closing it completely but curtailing operations. Our books are still available in POD and e-book form – and every single book is still in demand.

Interested readers can look up our list here: www.glas.msk.su or here: inpressbooks.co.uk/collections/glas-new-russian-writing-1.

Although I am no longer able to publish books, I continue to seek out and promote new Russian talent in my capacity as a literary agent. If only I could publish them as well.

Natasha Perova

Natasha Perova is the founder and editor of Glas.

LIZOK'S BOOKSHELF
READING IDEAS FROM RUSSIAN CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION
BY LISA HAYDEN

This article was first published on lizoksbooks.blogspot.co.uk and last updated on Sunday, 9 July 2017. To see the regularly updated list, to find links to the books mentioned and to contact Lisa Hayden visit lizoksbooks.blogspot.co.uk

Russian-to-English Translations for 2017

I started this Russian-to-English translation list for 2017 thinking it would hit an all-time high. It turns out, however, that 2014 is larger, although a) the 2017 list may yet grow significantly; and b) there could be more 2014 listings that were postponed to 2015.

In terms of numbers there are forty-eight books of many genres. I think a few factors account for the increase. I've mentioned two of those factors in previous years – ongoing grant programmes from the Institute of Translation (institutperevoda.ru)and the Prokhorov Fund's Transcript Program (prokhorov-fund.ru) – and know that continued funding plays a big role in helping translations reach readers. A third factor – the Russian Library at Columbia University Press (cup.columbia.edu/series/russian-library/) – was new last year, with three books, but has five highly varied books scheduled for publication this year. That may only be a difference of two books this time around, but the Russian Library has an ambitious schedule for the coming years.

As always, there are caveats (but not caviar) to accompany the list. This list is just a start; I'll be adding books throughout the year and making corrections as necessary. As last year, this is a global list that includes new translations and some retranslations. I've linked titles on the list to publishers' pages wherever possible. Publication dates are notoriously subject to slippage for various and sundry reasons; I transfer books from year to year as necessary and have tried to cross out titles on previous lists if they weren't actually published in those years. I'm taking names and titles for 2018 now, so please feel free to send them in. Finally, don't forget the Self-Published Translation post (lizoksbooks.blogspot.com/2014/08/diy-self-posting-about-self-publishing.html).

Alexievich, Svetlana: *Boys in Zinc,* translated by Andrew Bromfield; Penguin Modern Classics, March 2017.

Alexievich, Svetlana: *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; Penguin Random House, July 2017.

Aristov, Vladimir: *What We Saw from This Mountain*, translated by Julia Trubikhina-Kunina, Betsy Hulick, Gerald Janecek; Ugly Duckling Presse, spring 2017.

Aygi, Gennady: *Time of Gratitude*, translated by Peter France; New Directions, December 2017.

Babel, Isaac: *The Essential Fictions*, translated by Val Vinokur and illustrated by Yefim Ladyzhensky; Northwestern University Press, November 2017.

Batyushkov, Konstantin: *Writings from the Golden Age of Russian Poetry*, presented and translated by Peter France; Russian Library/Columbia University Press, November 2017.

Bochkareva, Maria: *Maria's War: A Soldier's Autobiography*, translated by Isaac Don Levine; Russian Life, January 2017.

Buksha, Ksenia: *The Freedom Factory*, translated by Anne Fisher; Phoneme Media, 2017. This novel won the 2014 National Bestseller Award.

Chekhov, Anton: *The Plays*, translated by Hugh Aplin; Alma Classics, October 2017.

Chekhov, Anton: *The Beauties: Essential Stories*, translated by Nicolas Slater Pasternak; Pushkin Press, October 2017.

Chizhova, Elena: *Zinnober's Poppets* (I believe this is Крошки Цахес), translated by Carol Ermakova; Glagoslav, July 2017.

Chudakova, Marietta: *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Life and Times*, translated by Huw Davies; Glagoslav, July 2017.

Dashkova, Polina: *Madness Treads Lightly*, translated by Marian Schwartz; Amazon Crossing, September 2017.

Desombre, Daria: *The Sin Collector*, translated by Shelley Fairweather-Vega; Amazon Crossing, October 2017.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor: *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, translated by Kyril Zinovieff; Alma Classics, spring 2017.

Formakov, Arsenii: *Gulag Letters*, translated and introduced by Emily D. Johnson; Yale University Press, June 2017.

Ganieva, Alisa: *Bride and Groom*, translated by Carol Apollonio; Deep Vellum, September 2017.

Gelasimov, Andrei: *Into the Thickening Fog*, translated by Marian Schwartz; Amazon Crossing, January 2017.

Gogol, Nikolai: *Dead Souls*, translated by Donald Rayfield; Alma Classics, July 2017.

Goralik, Linor: *Found Life: Poems, Stories, Comics, a Play, and an Interview*, edited by Ainsley Morse, Maria Vassileva, and Maya Vinokur; Russian Library/Columbia University Press, November 2017.

Griboyedov, Alexander: *Woe from Wit/Горе от ума*, translated by Sir Bernard Pares; Russian Life, June 2017. A bilingual edition of the classic.

Iliazd: *Rapture*, translated by Thomas J. Kitson; Russian Library/Columbia University Press, May 2017.

Kapitsa, Sergei: *Paradoxes of Growth*, translated by Inna Tsys and edited by Scott D. Moss and Huw Davies; Glagoslav, March 2017.

Kharms, Daniil: *Russian Absurd: Selected Writings*, translated by Alex Cigale; Northwestern University Press, February 2017.

Kholin, Igor: *Kholin 66: Diaries and Poems*, translated by Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich, and illustrated by Ripley Whiteside; Ugly Duckling Presse, spring 2017.

Khvoshchinskaya, Sofia: *City Folk and Country Folk*, translated by Nora Seligman Favorov; Russian Library/Columbia University Press, August 2017.

Krylov, Ivan: *The Fables of Ivan Krylov*, translated by Stephen Pimenoff; Dedalus Books, February 2017.

Kucherena, Anatoly: *Time of the Octopus*, translated by John Farndon with Akbota Sultanbekova and Olga Nakston; Glagoslav, January 2017.

Kurchatkin, Anatoly: *Tsunami*, translated by Arch Tait; Glagoslav, February 2017.

Kuznetsov, Sergey: *The Round Dance of Water*, translated by Valeriya Yermishova; Dalkey Archive Press, September 2017.

Lebedev, Sergei: *The Year of the Comet*, translated by Antonina W. Bouis; New Vessel Press, February 2017.

Lomasko, Victoria: *Other Russias*, translated by Thomas Campbell; Penguin (UK) and n+1 (US), 2017.

Maisky, Ivan: *The Complete Maisky Diaries: Volumes 1-3*, edited by Gabriel Gorodetsky, translated by Tatiana Sorokina and Oliver Ready; Yale University Press, 2017.

Petrosyan, Mariam: *The Gray House* (Дом в котором in Russian), translated by Yuri Machkasov; Amazon Crossing, April 2017.

Petrushevskaya, Ludmilla: *The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing Up in Communist Russia*, translated and introduced by Anna Summers; Penguin, February 2017.

Remizov, Alexei: *Sisters of the Cross*, translated by Roger Keys and Brian Murphy; Russian Library/ Columbia University Press, December 2017.

Sharov, Vladimir: *The Rehearsals*, translated by Oliver Ready; Dedalus Ltd, apparently September 2017.

Shklovsky, Viktor: *The Hamburg Score*, translated by Shushan Avagyan; Dalkey Archive Press, February 2017.

Shklovsky, Viktor: *Life of a Bishop's Assistant*, translated by Valeriya Yermishova; Dalkey Archive Press, July 2017.

Smoliarova, Tatiana: *Three Metaphors for Life: Derzhavin's Late Poetry*, translated by Ronald Meyer and Nancy Workman; Academic Studies Press, September 2017.

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr: *March 1917: The Red Wheel: Node III, Book 1*, translated by Marian Schwartz, Notre Dame Press; autumn 2017. More of The Red Wheel will be rolling out...

Sonkin, Victor: *Here Was Rome: Modern Walks in the Ancient City*, translated by Victor Sonkin; Skyscraper Publications, August 2017.

Tsvetaeva, Marina: *Earthly Signs: Moscow Diaries 1917-1922*, edited and translated by Jamey Gambrell; New York Review Books, October 2017.

Various: *The Fire Horse: Children's Poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip Mandelstam and Daniil Kharms*, translated by Eugene Ostashevsky; New York Review Books, March 14, 2017.

Various: *Russian Émigré Short Stories from Bunin to Yanovsky*, translated, edited, introduced, and with notes by Bryan Karetnyk; Penguin Classics, July 2017.

Vinogradova, Lyuba: *Avenging Angels: Soviet Women Snipers on the Eastern Front (1941-1945)*, translated Arch Tait; MacLehose Press, April 2017.

Yarov, Sergey: *Leningrad 1941-42: Morality in a City under Siege*, translated by Arch Tait; Polity Press, 2017.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny: *We*, translated by Hugh Aplin; Alma Classics, November 2017.

Bonus Book that doesn't fit the theme exactly: **Robert Chandler**'s *A Short Life of Pushkin*, from (appropriately enough) Pushkin Press, released this summer. (Robert also loves **Edith Sollohub**'s *The Russian Countess*, for which he wrote a foreword ...)

And because I just can't help myself, here's another Bonus Book that doesn't fit the theme: *Croatian War Nocturnal* by **Spomenka Štimec** and translated from the Esperanto, yes, the Esperanto, by Sebastian Schulman; Phoneme Media, August 2017.

Disclaimers: The usual because I know so many of those involved with these books. And many of my own translations are supported by grants from the Institute of Translation and the Prokhorov Fund's Transcript Program, plus I'm working on a book for the Russian Library. I'm grateful to all those organisations for their support of authors, publishers, translators, and, of course, Russian literature itself.

Lisa Hayden

Lisa Hayden's translations from the Russian include Eugene Vodolazkin's Laurus, *Marina Stepnova's* The Women of Lazarus *and Vladislav Otroshenko's* Addendum to a Photo Album. *Her blog, Lizok's Bookshelf, focuses on contemporary Russian fiction.*

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