

Great Britain-Russia Society: Chairman's Report 2018-2019

March/April 2019

The last Chairman's Report covered the period from January 2018 to February 2109. I was delighted and deeply honoured to take over as Chairman at our last Annual Members' Meeting on **5 March 2019**.

We have had another excellent series of talks over the past year, hosted by Pushkin House, *Open Russia* and (in one case) King's College, London University, and we are most grateful to these three institutions for their hospitality.

The Annual Members' Meeting on 5 March was followed by a first-class illustrated lecture on **Espionage and the Telegraph** by **Barbara Emerson**, our Vice-Chairman. Barbara explained how successful Russia was in the second half of the 19th century in deciphering encrypted diplomatic communications, including the British government's. This secret intelligence to some extent made up for the diplomatic isolation that Russia experienced after 1856 and was of immense value to the Russian government in pursuing its foreign policy objectives in Europe and Central Asia.

Later on the same month (March 2019) we were privileged to have as our guest speaker **Caroline de Guitaut**, an art historian and the Senior Curator of Decorative Arts at the Royal Collection Trust. She was also at this time the Joint Curator of the *Russia, Royalty and the Romanovs* exhibition which was then running in The Queen's Gallery and the exhibits in which illustrated 300 years of history. In her illustrated talk - **From Fashion to Fabergé** – Caroline gave us a fascinating insight into the importance of the strong dynastic links between the British Royal family and the Imperial Russian family, and also described the close and mutually enriching collaboration between British and Russian craftsmen during this period.

Several members of the Society took part in a group visit to the Queen's Gallery in early April to see the *Russia, Royalty and the Romanovs* exhibition, which was stunning. As well as the fabulous *objets d'art*, sculpture and paintings on display – including paintings of Tsar Nicholas I and of Queen Victoria and her family – there was an impressive collection of photographs from the Crimean War.

Also in April **Mark Brayne** gave us the benefit of his personal take on Russia in an illustrated talk entitled **Russia on the Couch**. Mark gave an original and thought-provoking talk, which was informed by his experiences both as a former journalist and as a psychotherapist, and it stimulated a lively discussion.

May-August 2019 - Spring/Summer session

In May **John Lough**, an Associate Fellow at Chatham House, in his talk about **Germany's Russia Challenge**, first of all reminded us of the close inter-relationship historically between Russia and Germany and how, traditionally, Russians have always greatly admired the Germans and German culture. He mentioned that as many as 4.5 million *Russland-Deutsche* (ethnic Germans from Russia) are currently estimated to be living in Germany. In his clear and comprehensive overview of this complex and important relationship, both past and present, John Lough expertly covered the political, economic and cultural aspects.

At the end of May 2019, **Dr Elisabeth Robson** – a former head of the BBC’s Russian Service and a former Vice-Chairman of the Society – gave an illustrated talk titled **Student in Leningrad, the Prague Spring and the BBC**. Elisabeth gave us a fascinating account of her experiences as a post-graduate student in Leningrad from 1967-1969, which period coincided with the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact’s invasion of Czechoslovakia. Elisabeth also told us how in 2015 she was part of a team looking at archive holdings of BBC Monitoring, to assess their value for future historians. This archive material included the first rough translations of broadcasts from Czechoslovakia during the 1968 invasion, these translations being the basis of the reports published at the time by BBC Monitoring.

The highlight of our Summer session was undoubtedly the evening conversation (followed by Q & A) that we hosted in June between **Dr Henry Hardy** and **Dr Peter Oppenheimer** on the subject of **Sir Isaiah Berlin**. Henry Hardy has been Isaiah Berlin’s editor for the last 45 years, and this event marked the publication of Henry’s memoir, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*. Both speakers knew Isaiah Berlin personally – as well as having a deep and extensive knowledge of his work - and were able to regale us with several colourful anecdotes. This fact – coupled with both speakers’ fluency and enthusiasm – enabled us to appreciate Isaiah Berlin’s brilliance as one of the greatest thinkers and philosophers of the 20th century and as an eloquent exponent of the values of liberty and pluralism: a Latvian Jew who was the epitome of civilised values and of the English gentleman.

We are grateful to our long-standing member, Elizabeth Teague, for having produced a transcription of the discussion at this wonderful event, which has been published in the current (New Year 2020) edition of *East-West Review*.

Also in June **Dr Olga Voronina** gave us an excellent talk on **Mikhail Bulgakov** and his great novel, *The Master and Margarita*. Olga Voronina gave us a compelling and moving account of Bulgakov’s life and work as a writer of novels, plays and short stories. Olga described how Bulgakov, who was a brilliant writer of great imaginative power, lived through the appalling time of the Stalinist purges in the 1930s, and she pointed to the strong autobiographical element in *The Master and Margarita*. Clearly, in those difficult times Bulgakov had to walk a careful tight-rope, but he was not afraid to speak truth to power. He was a writer of outstanding courage and integrity. And the survival of his own work demonstrates the abiding truth of his famous observation that “*Manuscripts don’t burn*” («Рукописи не горят»).

In early July Professor Mark Galeotti gave a talk with the title **Getting Putin (and Russia) Wrong**, which focused on the West’s imperfect understanding of Russia and President Putin. Mark Galeotti is a well-known commentator on Russia and the author of **The Vory** (2018), a book about organised crime in Russia, and **We Need to Talk About Putin** (2019). This talk, which attracted a large audience at *Open Russia*, was attended by our Patron, His Royal Highness, Prince Michael of Kent GCVO. Mark Galeotti suggested that President Putin was in the mould of a 19th century geo-politician and ‘*a judo-ist rather than a chess-player*’ and that Russia’s current foreign policy was ‘*essentially opportunist rather than involving any grand strategy*’. Mark Galeotti is highly articulate and well-informed and responded very fully to the many questions that followed from the audience.

As our guest speaker for the scheduled event in late July had to cancel at short notice, I gave an illustrated talk instead on the life and work of the great 20th century writer, **Yuri Dombrovsky**, who is surprisingly unknown in this country. I explained the background to his two major novels, *The Keeper of Antiquities* and *The Faculty of Useless Knowledge*, and **Alla**

Gelich, a long-standing member of the Society, read three of Dombrovsky's poems in the original Russian.

Thanks to the good offices of Mrs Lilian Hochauer CBE (whose husband, Victor, sadly died in March 2019), we were able to have our traditional visit to the **ballet in August**, this time to see the Bolshoi Ballet Company perform a dress rehearsal of **Don Quixote**.

The programme for last year's Spring/Summer session was the last one organised by Daniel Salbstein, who has retired as the Society's Talks Organiser. This role - which is critical to the continuing success of the Society - is now shared by Lincoln Pigman and Daragh McDowell.

September-November 2019 - Autumn session

In September **Dr Ben Noble**, a lecturer in Russian politics at UCL SEES, spoke to us about **The State Duma's Role in Russian Politics**. Ben Noble's talk was well-researched and he delivered it lucidly and in an engaging manner. As a result, we have a much better understanding of the important role played by the Duma (albeit that it is dominated by the pro-Government *United Russia* party) in Russian politics and policy-making. (The Duma is to be contrasted with the Upper Chamber of the legislature - the Federation Council - which is a pure rubber-stamp.)

In October we were treated to a roundtable discussion on **Ukrainian Politics after the 2019 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections** by **Professor Andrew Wilson** (Professor of Ukrainian Studies, UCL SEES), **Sarah Whitmore** (Senior Lecturer in Politics, Oxford Brookes University) and **Orysia Lutsevych** (Research Fellow at Chatham House and manager of the *Ukraine Forum*). The three speakers covered the 2019 Elections themselves, Ukraine's Parliament (the '*Verkhovna Rada*'), and the challenges and opportunities of Volodymyr Zelenskiy's Presidency. This was a very enlightening evening. The speakers provided a rich and informative insight into the present political situation in Ukraine. All three speakers were extremely well-informed, complemented each other well and interacted to good effect with each other and the audience, responding to the many questions posed in a balanced and measured way. Although a *rapprochement* with Russia was not yet in sight, the speakers were in varying degrees cautiously optimistic about the future of Ukraine. But all three speakers were in agreement that a stable Ukraine is vital to stability in Europe.

Also in October **Ruth Deyermond**, Senior Lecturer in Post-Soviet Security at King's College London University, and **Professor Malcolm Chalmers**, Deputy Director-General of RUSI (the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies), gave a talk on **Russia's Relations with the West**. They both gave us a lot to think about. In considering whether "the West's" strategy for dealing with Russia was fit for purpose, Ruth Deyermond suggested that there needed first to be a clear and coherent policy objective. There was currently a 'knowledge gap' and a need for much greater expertise on Russia. The West needed to develop a more balanced (as well as more unified) way of thinking about Russia and there was a need for more **dialogue** with the Russian government, in particular on arms control.

In November **Dr. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova**, a Reader at King's College, London University, in her talk about **Politics beyond the Kremlin: Developments in Russia's Regions**, gave us a well-researched and wide-ranging overview of developments in Russia's 85 regions, the

balance between the centre and the regions and the growing importance of the regions to Russia's future development.

January 2020

Our programme for January-April 2020 opened with an outstanding talk in January by **Dr Ekaterina Schulmann** on **The Future of Protest in Russia**. Ekaterina Schulmann is by profession a political scientist, her specialism being the study of law-making. She has been described as an '*indefatigable observer of Russian politics whom every serious Russia-watcher should follow*'. She is a highly-respected and prominent columnist and commentator on current affairs in Russia, and is an Associate Professor at 'RANEPA' - the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. From December 2018 to October 2019, she served as a member of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights. Ekaterina's presentation to us in January was magisterial. She presented a wealth of information to us – as well as answering a wide variety of questions - with the utmost clarity. As a result, we have a much better understanding of where protest is right now in Russia, the reasons for it and the likely direction of future travel.

Disbursement of funds/sponsorship

In April 2019 the Committee agreed to contribute £250 to the **Resonate Orchestra** by way of support for its performance of **Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony (the Leningrad Symphony)** at St John's, Smith Square in June 2019 (2019 being the 75th Anniversary of the Siege of Leningrad). The Society was listed as one of the sponsors of the event in the programme. The concert was preceded by an eloquent and moving talk on the Siege of Leningrad by Sir Rodric Braithwaite GCMG, who was HM Ambassador in Moscow from 1988-1992. Sir Rodric is a long-standing member of the Society and has spoken on a number of occasions at Society events.

In April 2019 the Committee also agreed to contribute £250 to Shadwell Opera towards the cost of their performance on 20 October 2019 of the opera "*Where the Wild Things Are*" (its Russian premiere) by the British composer, Oliver Knussen, at the Mariinsky Concert Hall in St Petersburg, as part of the 2019 UK-Russian Year of Music. Shadwell Opera comprises a group of 50 young British instrumentalists.

Russian New Year Party – January 2020

This year we decided to hold our Russian New Year Party at a different venue, POSK (Polish Social and Cultural Centre), in King Street, Hammersmith. Our thanks are due to **Ute Chatterjee**, our Hon. Membership and Meetings Secretary, and **Jenny Alexander**, our Hon. Treasurer, for all their assistance in arranging this. It was an enjoyable party, though some of us found the music rather too loud towards the latter part of the evening.

Committee changes

I would like to record my appreciation of **Stuart Thom**'s excellent chairmanship over the last ten years and for leaving the Society in such sound shape. I am also indebted to Stuart for the wise guidance he continues to provide as a member of the Committee. I am deeply honoured to have been appointed to take over from Stuart as Chairman and I very much hope to build on his good work in taking the Society forward.

I am also immensely grateful to **Daniel Salbstein** – as I am sure we all are - for having been such a splendid Talks Organiser. His energy and enthusiasm have helped to ensure a wide range of speakers of consistently high quality, and the programme of speakers he secured for our Spring/Summer programme last year was outstanding.

However, **Lincoln Pigman** and **Daragh McDowell** are worthy successors in this role and they have got off to a promising start with high-quality programmes for both the Autumn 2019 session and the current Winter session.

I am also delighted that **Barbara Emerson** has succeeded me as Vice-Chairman and that **Henry Pares** is now Hon. Secretary.

I am very grateful to all the Committee for all their hard work and support in ensuring that the Society continues to flourish. We have a great team in place and, while there must be no let-up in our efforts on behalf of the Society, we can look forward to the future with confidence.

Given the outstanding quality of Ekaterina Schulmann's recent talk, we will be exploring ways and means of inviting more speakers in the future from Russia to address the Society.

David Brummell

22nd February 2020