

# *East-West Review*

*Journal of the Great Britain-Russia Society*

*New Year 2020*



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# East–West Review

The journal of the Great Britain–Russia Society, registered charity no. 1148802

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The Great Britain–Russia Society's aim is to advance the education of the public in particular but not exclusively in the following: the historical background, culture, the economic, political, social conditions and trends in the Russian Federation and its near neighbours. This is done through lectures and members' meetings and this journal, as well as by encouraging as wide a range of people as possible to become members.

Prospective member subscribers should send a cheque for £20 in favour of Great Britain–Russia Society to the Hon. Treasurer at the address above. By standing order, however, membership costs only £17; standing order forms can be provided by the Hon. Treasurer on request.

Back numbers of *East–West Review* published from Spring 2014 onwards and offprints of most articles published in Volume 7 (2008) and later can be obtained from the Editor; contact details as above.

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**Cover picture**  
*A Russian Ded Moroz (Father Frost) visits Altai, and is seen with his local counterpart and the, perhaps one and only, Snegurochka (Snow Maiden).*  
 Picture credit: 'Altaydedmoroz'  
 CC BY-SA 4.0.

*...and for those no longer in the mood for such frivolity, an illustration from a Kiev newspaper, Proletarska prava, 25th December 1928. The caption, in Ukrainian, is 'Get out of our lives!'*



## List of Contributors

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**John Crowfoot** (b. 1952) is an editor and translator from Russian. He spent the years from 1986 to 1999 working and living in Moscow and was a frequent visitor to Semyon Vilensky's 'publishing apartment' near Oktyabrskoe Pole in the Russian capital.

**John Dewey** has translated and published fiction by Irina Muravyova, Boris Yampolsky and, most recently, *The Sign and other stories by Yevgeny Zamyatin*, along with poetry by Pushkin (*The Bronze Horseman*). His biography of Tyutchev, *Mirror of the Soul* (2010), and his translations of Tyutchev's *Selected Poems* (2014) are no longer in print, but may be downloaded free of charge at [www.tyutchev.org.uk](http://www.tyutchev.org.uk).

**Martin Dewhurst** had a long and distinguished career as a lecturer in Russian in the Department of Slavonic Studies at the University of Glasgow, where he is now an Honorary Fellow. He has written and published widely on contemporary Russian literature and the arts, and especially on cinema.

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**Vera Liber** is a freelance writer and translator.

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*Semyon Vilensky (1928-2016) shortly after his 1989 anthology, 'Till my Tale is Told' was published with two of its authors, Zayara Vesnyolaya (1928-2010), and Olga Adamova-Sliozberg (1902-1991). An extract – 'The Death of Stalin: A Gulag experience' – from Vilensky's own memoir, Вопросы есть? (Any Questions?), translated and annotated by John Crowfoot, can be found on pages 20-21.*



## Kursk: The Last Mission

A film based on *A Time to Die* by Robert Moore. Directed by Thomas Vinterberg

Reviewed by Tony Cash

One of the largest submarines in the Russian Navy, the atomic-powered *Kursk*, was twice the length of a 747 jumbo jet. Unlike comparable underwater vessels in the rest of the world, it boasted two hulls; double protection for the crew. It even possessed a sauna and swimming pool. It was almost as tall as a five-storey building. Laterally, it had nine separate compartments, each capable of surviving pretty well whatever man could fling at it. Yet on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2000 the ship self-destructed, creating headlines around the world, and a major headache for the newly-elected President Putin.

Nearly 500 miles north-west of Stalingrad, Kursk is the city that gave its name to the biggest tank battle of World War II. The submarine that bore its name was conceived and designed in the old Soviet Union, understandably proud of that heroic connection. Construction of the vessel did not begin, however, until 1992, after the collapse of the Communist juggernaut. It was launched in 1994 and commissioned in 1995.

The *Kursk*'s tragic demise is the plot of a new European film co-production, featuring a range of continental stars. Two acquit themselves very proficiently – especially Belgian Matthias Schoenaerts and French actor Léa Seydoux, as the fictional second-in-command, Lt-Capt. Averin and his wife Tanya, two of the movie's principal heroes. Tanya Averina is pregnant with the couple's second child. The Swedish actor Max von Sydow plays invented Admiral Petrenko, whom she comes up against. Von Sydow was 89 when the film was shot, and looks every year of it, although his acting is up to scratch in all the scenes where he turns down offers of help from the West.

A tight-lipped Colin Firth, best known for his BAFTA and Academy awards as the future King George VI in *The King's Speech*, plays British Commodore David Russell, who

offers the Russians assistance. He also acted as adviser to the Danish director, Thomas Vinterberg, whose recent credit was for the well-reviewed 2015 *Far from the Madding Crowd*, based on the Thomas Hardy novel.



The first scene of *Kursk* has Misha, prepubescent son of Averin and Tanya, in the bath holding his breath under water for approximately a minute, as he later shows off to his mum. Given the plot that is about to unfold, it is hard to imagine a more apposite image. Another particularly well-judged moment sees Averin and colleagues buying champagne and vodka for the up-coming wedding of a crew member. Because their pay has not been forthcoming, they don't have enough cash for the purchase, so they pawn their naval wrist-watches. The religious ceremony and reception that follow introduce the audience to the naval cast and their families. All this was filmed in Vidyaevo, a desolate Arctic



garrison town on an inlet of the Barents Sea, one hour's drive from Murmansk.

For the benefit of those who don't recall the events of 12<sup>th</sup> August 2000, it is worth recapping. The Russian anti-submarine exercise of the Northern Fleet involved 30 warships and accessories, plus three submarines, shadowed, in all likelihood, by one or two Western surface spies. Two huge explosions were heard as far away as Alaska: one registered 1.5 on the Richter scale; the second, two-and-a-quarter minutes later, greatly exceeded it at 3.5 on the scale.

Only a year or so after these events, BBC 2's *Horizon Special* was on the case. Unlike most other navies of the world, the Russians had continued to use high-test peroxide (HTP) as a torpedo propellant, even after the loss of HMS *Sidon* at Portland on Britain's south coast 45 years earlier. What *Horizon* revealed was the significance of HTP. The programme-makers carried out an experiment which revealed how it happened. If HTP comes into contact

with copper, or its alloys bronze and brass, used in missile tubes, it undergoes an extraordinary metamorphosis. It expands an astonishing 5,000 times, blasting apart anything in its way and raising the ambient temperature beyond a critical level.

The *Kursk* submariners were not aware that the torpedo that proved defective had not been tested for several years. Corrosion could easily have resulted in an explosion, the consequently augmented temperature engendering a 250-times more powerful detonation in the torpedo bays. In the words of *A Time to Die* by Robert Moore, on which the film is roughly based: ‘She had taken a decade to design, three years to build, and just 135 seconds to destroy.’

It is believed that the ship’s crew was immediately reduced from 118 to 23 living men, but how long the 23 remained alive is simply not known. It may have been anything between a couple of hours and, improbably in the frigid Arctic water, a few days.

This uncertainty allows Vinterberg and his scenarist an opportunity to play it by ear, bearing in mind what’s intrinsically plausible. Certainly, it sanctions the retelling of a shaggy-dog story embroiling a family of three bears: the youngest one caps it by wanting to know why ‘he’s always so f\*\*\*ing cold’. To stiffen morale, Averin reminds his subordinates that everything rescuers ‘would do for us, we would do for them’. To stretch the tension further, a couple of the survivors go down into the ever-advancing water to see if they can find gadgets to give them more oxygen. When a salvage attempt is made, the doomed men respond enthusiastically, hammering on the hull in bursts of four.

*East-West Review* readers may or may not recollect what they expected of President Putin 19 years ago. A Naval man myself, I knew this was a major examination for him. I was astonished that it took him so long to react. However, a besetting sin of the Russian military is an abiding failure to report up. Bad news, and it doesn’t come worse than the loss of your most critical attack weapon, simply has to be conveyed to the guy in charge.



Top: Colin Firth as Commodore David Russell.

Centre: Léa Seydoux as Tanya Averina

Bottom: Léa Seydoux with her ‘son’, played by Artemiy Spiridonov.

Credit: These scenes and the panoramic images opposite are screenshots from the film.

The *Kursk* was effectively untrackable; could travel anywhere; and it had a payload capable of wiping out the whole US federal government, and any battleship besides. This was true even from the Barents Sea, where it languished for a year before being laboriously hauled out of the water by a Dutch recovery crew.

Former Coder Special Anthony Hippisley’s account of interpreting for that operation is recorded on pages 289-290 of *The Coder Special Archive* (Mike Gerrard and Tony Cash, *Hodgson Press*, 2012). Like me, Hippisley learnt Russian as a national serviceman in the 1950s Royal Navy. He went on to become a lecturer in Russian language and literature at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. His account of the 2001 salvage operation described a Russian officer he got to know, the Northern Fleet’s Chief of Staff, who flew in to the Barents Sea from time to time to check on progress. They discussed the parallels between what they were engaged in and the World War II Arctic convoys. At their last meeting he gave Hippisley a book about the disastrous convoy PQ17.<sup>1</sup> On the flyleaf he had

written in Russian:

*We have been brought to this place by the universal human duty to honour and remember the sailors who have perished.*

*These same values united our two peoples in the years of the Second World War.*

*May God help us!*

*Chief of Staff of the SF [Northern Fleet]*

*Hero of Russia*

*Vice Admiral M Motsak*

*September 2001*

*The Barents Sea*

*Site of the loss of the atomic-powered submarine Kursk.*

Much of Vinterberg’s movie pertains to the anxieties of the submariner families back home in shabby Vidyaevo.

<sup>1</sup> Codenamed PQ17, this 1942 convoy of 35 British merchant ships would be described by Churchill as one of the most melancholy naval episodes of the war – BBC publicity.

There's an eloquent generational difference when an older couple call on a young mother to wait patiently, as they had to do in their day. A telling conversation has the former saying: 'They want you to trust them.' The latter retorts with the blunt: 'What if I don't?'

The same trio are later seen at a naval briefing where, alarmed by what they are hearing from the admirals, they line up with the junior mum and express their dismay.

In a *Times* interview, Commodore David Russell explained that pride was a governing factor in the Russian refusal to contemplate a Western attempt at rescue. Putin had been in power for only a short interval. He knew that his fleet had lost submarines before, but without foreign media fanfare. Complicating the issue was the fact that the *Kursk* was jammed with state secrets. Our Russian adversaries attach more weight to stealth than humanism.

While the whole world waited, it was finally agreed that the Brits could bring in what was, 20 years ago, probably the best deep-water rescue device, the Royal Navy LR5 submersible. It was capable of rescuing 16 sailors in one go. But then, to Russell's chagrin, the Russians announced that everything was under control, and no help was required.

Simultaneously, however, a Russian press conference stated that it was already late, and the submarine itself needed saving.

Distress and consternation.

Russell's team decided to go on offering help until they were told there was no hope left for the men. The LR5 never got closer than five miles from the wreck. Eventually, with the Russians themselves opening the hatch over the last compartment where the survivors had huddled, it was realised that the Arctic's icy waters had filled the boat. All hope of anyone pulling through was thoroughly dashed.

Vice-Admiral Valery Ryazantsev, author of *In the Wake of Death: Why the Kursk Perished*,<sup>2</sup> is the only high-ranking Russian naval officer to have written a detailed account of what must have occurred. 'Deception and embellishment of the actual situation in the fleet is incompatible with high military readiness and the professional training of sailors,'



Above 1: The British LR5 deep submersible rescue vehicle.  
Above 2: The partly-dismantled *Kursk* in a floating dock in Roslyakovo.

Below: Memorial to the submariners who died, seen at the Church of the Saviour of the Waters, Murmansk.

Picture credit: Christopher Michel CC BY 2,0PS



he declares. He claims the whole fleet was unready for war, but that not a single naval commander at any naval gathering in the presence of the President and members of the Government of the Russian Federation was able to say anything about its deplorable state. All reports echoed the notion that, although it may be hard, 'we are ready to fulfil any task ordered by the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the country'. In other words, Putin himself.

Films need linking material: without it there is no synergy. Vinterberg employs Misha productively. Through his eyes, we see the tranquilising of the woman at the Naval briefing who asked too many questions. Similarly, he it is who refuses to shake Admiral Petrenko's hand. Then, at the end, he is offered and accepts the watch his father had earlier pawned.

But synergy may not be enough to save a film from stricture. When bad pronunciation of the English-language dialogue by some members of the multi-national cast results in words and whole phrases being lost; when the composer sticks in a version of *The Red Flag* (*Tannenbaum*) which I can't find on *YouTube*; when the wedding ceremony sounds anything but Russian; when native speakers complain of lack of detail in the observance of insignia and rank; and above all when it feels as though we have no special reason to be involved – that's when it is necessary to complain.

In view of one surprising aspect of the film's story-line (and Putin's belated grasp of it), we might have expected to see him at least three or four times. Yet there's nary a sign of him. One can speculate on the reasons. We know that he appeared in several scenes in the original script, at least until casting took place. Is it conceivable that Sony's experience with a 2014 film, *The Interview*, depicting North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, caused the production team to abort?<sup>3</sup> □

<sup>3</sup> 'The North Korean government threatened action against the United States if Sony released [*The Interview*]. As a result, Sony delayed the release from October to December and reportedly re-edited the film ... to make it more acceptable to North Korea. In November, the computer systems of Sony were hacked by the "Guardians of Peace", a group the FBI claims has ties to North Korea. The group also threatened terrorist attacks against theaters showing the film.' Source: Wikipedia.

<sup>2</sup> В Кильватерном Строю за Смертью: Почему Погиб "Курск" (Яуза, 2017), Валерий Рязанцев.



# Great Britain–Russia Society Summary of Guest Speakers: New Year 2020

## *The Future of Protest in Russia*

Yekaterina Schulmann

Thursday 30th January 2020 - for the start time and venue see updates on [www.gbrussia.org](http://www.gbrussia.org)

## *We Are Building Capitalism! Moscow in Transition 1992–1997*

Robert Stephenson

Wednesday 26th February 2020 at the Open Russia Club, 67 Wimpole Street, W1G 8AP

## *'Traditional Values' and the Law in Putin's Russia*

Jane Henderson

Wednesday 11th March 2020 at the Open Russia Club, 67 Wimpole Street, W1G 8AP

## *Vera and vlast': Religion's role in Russian politics*

Marat Shterin

Thursday 26th March 2020 at Pushkin House, 5a Bloomsbury Square, WC1A 2TA

N.B. This talk will be preceded by the Great-Britain Russia Society's Annual Members' Meeting, 5.45pm for 6.00pm

## *War with Moscow? The risk of an unintended conflict, 1983 and 2020*

Taylor Downing & Sebastian Brixey-Williams

Monday 6th April 2020 at the Open Russia Club, 67 Wimpole Street, W1G 8AP

## *Memory after Maidan: The politics of memory in post-revolutionary Ukraine*

Uilleam Blacker

Thursday 23rd April 2020 at Pushkin House, 5a Bloomsbury Square, WC1A 2TA

With the possible exception of the first, all the above talks are at 6.30pm for 7.00pm.

All details are subject to change: please check [www.gbrussia.org](http://www.gbrussia.org) for the latest information

## Great Britain-Russia Society Traditional Russian Old New Year Party

at the *Lowiczanka* Restaurant, the Polish Social and Cultural Centre (POSK),

238-246 King Street, London W6 0RF

Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2020 at 6:30pm for 7.00pm

There will be a three-course *table d'hôte* dinner and

from 8.00pm a two-piece band will play East European, Russian and Gypsy Music

£33 per person inclusive of a half bottle of house wine, or £27 without wine

There will be water on the tables, a cash bar for pre-dinner drinks and the waiters will take orders (and payment) for soft drinks

Book for this event on [www.gbrussia.org](http://www.gbrussia.org) or by sending a cheque

(payable to the Great Britain-Russia Society) to the Hon. Membership Secretary,

Mrs Ute Lynch, 43 Kenilworth Court, Lower Richmond Road, London SW15 1EN

The menu, with alternates, can be seen on [www.gbrussia.org](http://www.gbrussia.org) and on page 39 of this issue of *East-West Review*. The fish and vegetarian options must be ordered

when booking: they cannot be ordered on the night.