

East-West Review

The Journal of the Great Britain–Russia Society

Winter 2025-26



East-West Review

The journal of the Great Britain–Russia Society

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The Society's aim is to promote a wider and deeper appreciation of the Russian Federation and its near neighbours and, in particular but not exclusively, of all aspects of their history, culture, economic, political and social conditions. This is done through the Society's Talks Programme, a periodic Newsletter, this journal, and dissemination of information on

and through the Society's website and other digital means, as well as by encouraging as wide a range of people as possible to become members.

You can join or renew membership of the Great Britain–Russia Society on www.GBRussia.org/membership. There you will find a range of options including individual membership, joint membership, institutional and corporate membership.

Or payment by cheque or other means can be arranged by contacting the Hon. Treasurer by e-mail (treasurer@GBRussia.org) or by way of the 'Contact Us' facility on the website, www.GBRussia.org/contact

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 – Journal@GBRussia.org

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Cover picture

The *EWR* Editor has found evidence that telephones such as this were in use in the Soviet Union in the 1970's. Can any reader provide more information?

The photograph was taken in Odesa's tourist zone, pre-war.

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

The Trustees of the Great Britain–Russia Society unreservedly reiterate their earlier condemnation of Russia’s unjustified and brutal invasion of Ukraine, which continues to inflict a humanitarian catastrophe of staggering proportions on Ukraine and its people. The way in which Russia conducts its campaign of death and destruction is appalling and has brought untold suffering to many millions of people in Ukraine (and many Russians are also affected). We continue to support wholeheartedly the ruling issued by the International Court of Justice on 16th March 2022, which ordered Russia to halt its invasion immediately and support the Ukrainian government’s call for all perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity to be brought to justice.

A full statement on the Great Britain–Russia Society's stance on the issue can be seen on the front page of the Society's website. Included there are some important undertakings with respect to the Society's Talks Programme, website, and publications.

To read the Society's statement in full, go to www.gbrussia.org

List of Contributors

David Brummell is the Chairman of the Great Britain-Russia Society.

Robert Chandler is the editor and main translator of Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov.

Martin Dewhirst 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.

Dmytro Drozdovskiy is the Managing Editor in Chief of the Ukrainian journal of foreign literature, *Vsesvit*.

Kim Frederichsen is an independent scholar specialising in Danish-Russian relations from the time of Peter the Great to President Putin. He has published numerous articles on various aspects of Soviet and Post-Soviet history and in May 2025 gave a Talk on his subject to our Society.

Elaine Hasty lives, with her dog, in South Gloucestershire.

Vera Liber is a freelance writer and translator.

Anthony Lipmann spent his career as a metal merchant. During the 1990s this led him frequently to Russia, the Baltic States, Armenia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan on his metal hunting trips. He recalls much kindness shown

to him by those he met on his travels. He now lives in Somerset.

Simon Pare is a British literary translator of French and German works. He lives in Switzerland.

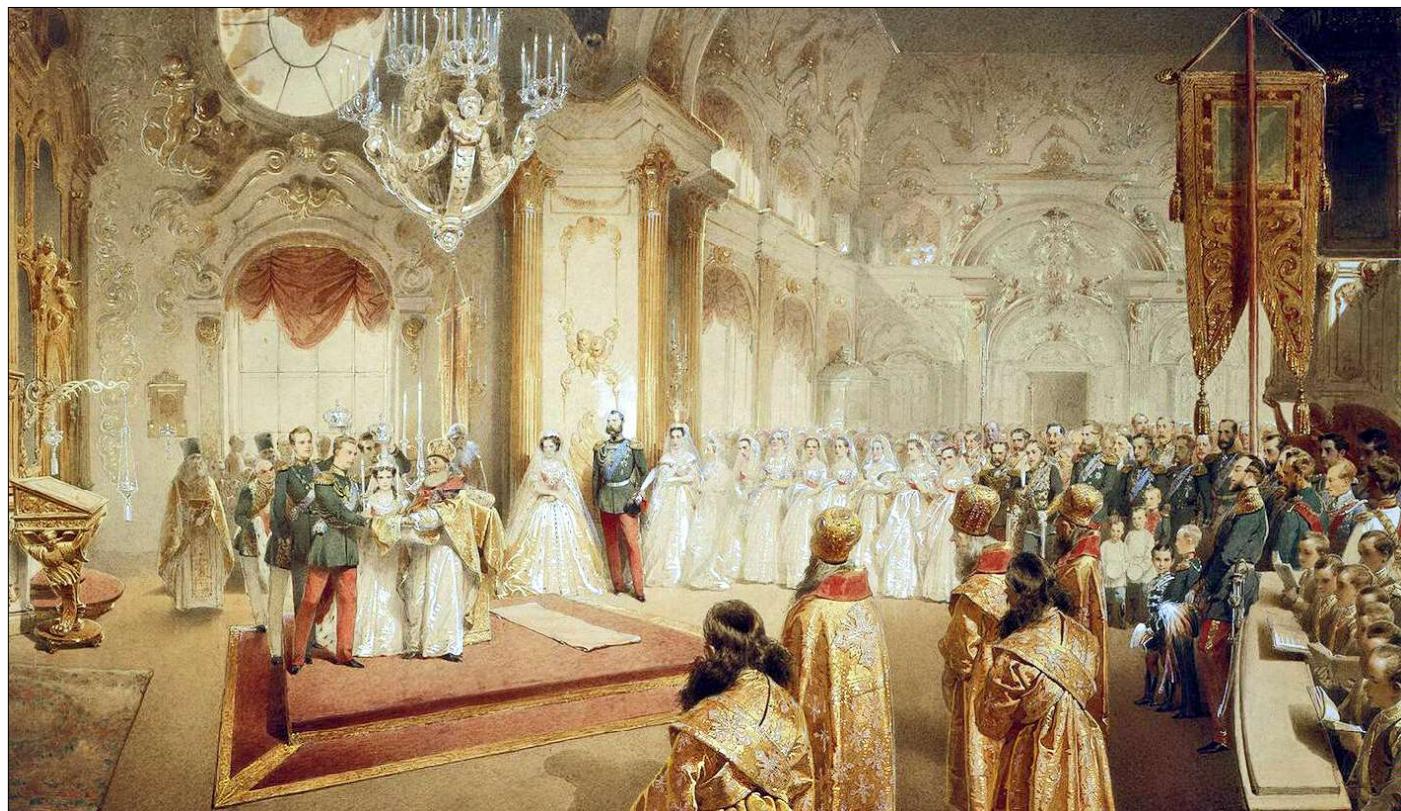
Kate Pursglove read Modern History at Oxford and has taught Russian history. She has visited the USSR and Russia with her husband, who taught and now translates Russian literature. She enjoys reading Russian novels and poetry, and writes, publishes and reviews poetry.

Michael Pursglove is a freelance translator. His latest translations from Turgenev, *Parasha and other poems* and *Memoirs of a Hunter* were published by Alma Classics in 2023 and 2024 respectively.

Lilia Shepel works as a metal trader in Molesley, Surrey. She came to the UK in March 2022, following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022.

Andrew Sheppard is the Editor of *East-West Review*.

Mikhail Shishkin is a writer of mixed Russian and Ukrainian parentage, currently living in Switzerland. He has received many awards, in particular for his best-known novel, *Венерин волос* (2005), published in English as *Maidenhair* (2012), which has been translated into many languages.



The 1866 wedding of the tsarevich Alexandre Alexandrovich and Maria Feodorovna (the Danish Princess Dagmar) in the cathedral of the Winter Palace. See Kim Frederichsen's article opposite, 'The Difficulties of Friendship: Danish-Russian relations from the mid-19th century to the Russo-Ukrainian War',

Painting by M Zichy, 1867.

The Magic Ring

Translated and adapted by Siân Valvis, illustrated by Dovile Valvis
(Fontanka, 2025) 48pp., £12.99 ISBN: 978-1906257446

Kolobok: A Russian bun on the run!

Translated and adapted by Siân Valvis, illustrated by Dovile Ciapaite
(Fontanka, 2021) 48pp., £12.99 ISBN: 978-1906257415

Reviewed by Robert Chandler

Many readers will be familiar with at least some elements of the plot of *The Magic Ring*. The charm of this version lies in the inventive energy with which the story is told.

Vanya, the kind but seemingly naïve young hero, spends his widowed mother's last kopeks to rescue a cat, a dog and a snake from a man who is viciously maltreating them. In time, Vanya's kindness is rewarded. Skarapeya the Snake tells him how to acquire a ring through which he can summon magic helpers. Vanya is thrown into prison after a tsar's daughter tricks him into giving her this ring, but the cat and dog recover the ring and rescue Vanya. All ends well.

Siân Valvis has followed a version by Boris Shergin (1893-1973), an oral story-teller and folklorist from Arkhangelsk, on Russia's White Sea coast. The son of a shipwright and of a mother who was herself a gifted teller of tales, Shergin had a deep understanding of all aspects of Arkhangelsk folk culture and he wrote in rich, vivid dialect.

Translating dialect is difficult. Using the dialect of a specific region can seem incongruous; using standard English can drain the life of a story. Valvis has responded to this challenge by creating a language of her own. She draws on many sources – Yorkshire dialect, cockney slang, Dylan Thomas, Lewis Carroll – but she fuses these elements into a perfect unity. She introduces even the strangest phrases with such tact as to make them crystal clear. 'Not for all the bees and honey in the world!' spoken indignantly by the tsaritsa, works well whether taken literally or as rhyming slang. 'Mind your own beeswax!' is equally understandable, and it chimes with 'Not for all the bees and honey'. I had imagined the phrase was Valvis's invention, though it is, in fact, a standard, if old-fashioned, idiom.

Some passages are strikingly simple: 'Vanya got home in mid-night. He swapped his ring fing-to-finger.' Others, like

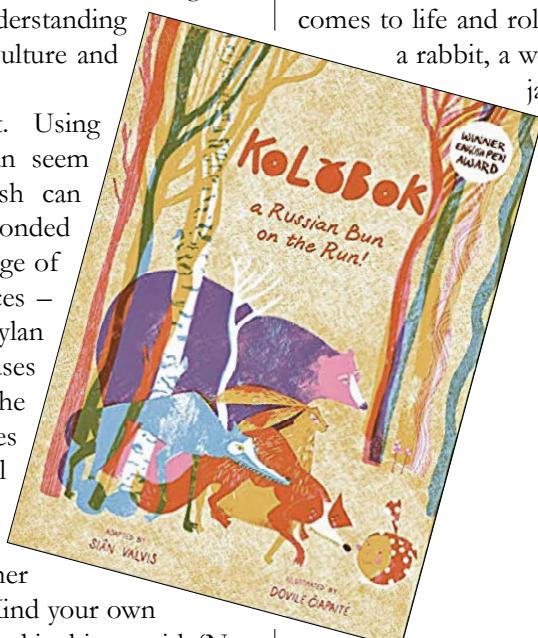
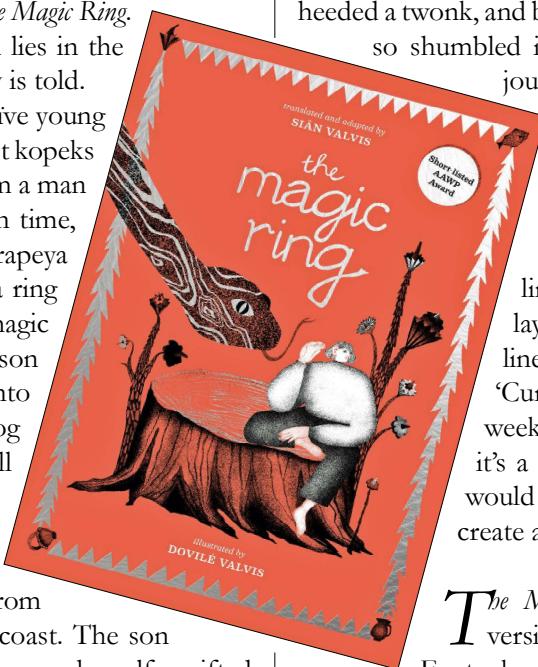
this complaint by Vanya's mother, are delightfully funny, 'I heeded a twonk, and became a twonk myself. I've never been so shumbled in my life!' Throughout all the many journeys – *wanderrambling* through forests, gliding along *glystal* bridges, *slinking* through prison bars, the story never loses its impetus, the language never ceases to dance.

Just as Valvis fuses different linguistic registers, so she mixes different layers of time. Now and again, there are lines you would never find in a folktale: 'Curse them workers and their seven-day weeks! If it's not a Saturday they wake us, it's a Sunday! And now even at night-time, would you adam-and-eve it?' Such moments create an effect of timelessness.

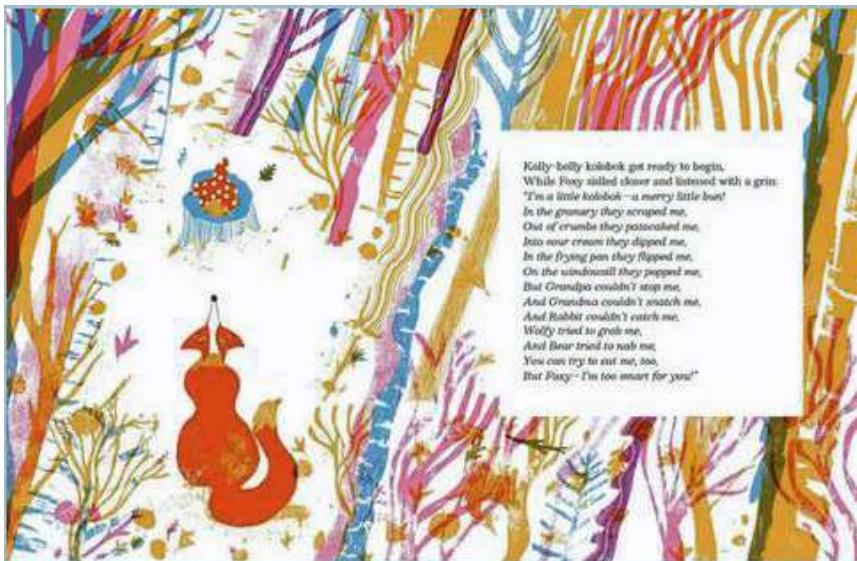
The Magic Ring is the second of Valvis's versions of folk tales to be published by Fontanka. The first, *Kolobok*, is about a bun that comes to life and rolls into the forest. There it encounters a rabbit, a wolf and a bear – escaping the animals' jaws by singing a jaunty song that grows longer with each encounter. Here is the song, in one of its shorter versions.

I'm a little kolobok – a roly, poly bun!

In the granary they scraped me,
Out of crumbs they patacaked me,
Into sour cream they dipped me,
In the frying pan they flipped me,
On the windowsill they popped me,
But Grandpa couldn't stop me,
And Grandma couldn't snatch me,
And Rabbit couldn't catch me,
You can try to eat me, too,
But Wolfy – I'm too smart for you!



The Russian original is nearly all in prose, with a very few rhymes, whereas Valvis's version is entirely rhymed. It appears that for Valvis, some technical challenge – whether a complex rhyme scheme or the difficulty of finding an equivalent for dialect – serves as a magic ring, a way of



calling up inspiration. Valvis seems well aware of this. In a brief afterword, she writes:

And finally, a salute to Skarapeya, the sorcerous snake: I struggled at first to wrestle this story into English, to shape its surreal and sticky sentences. But when I came to Skarapeya's lines, something strange happened: her

short, secretive Russian whispers slithered out silkily in English – and shimmered into SONG. After that, the rest of the story sprang forth. And so I am grateful to Skarapeya, the silvery snake, who saved my story.

The passage Valvis refers to is Skarapeya's only extended speech:

Then the snake proclaimed in a voice most humanish:

Vanya, pet, don't you fret
that you bet your money on me.
I'm Skarapeya, a long-tall swayer,
I'm magical, you see.
Silky mover, slick manoeuvre,
a slitherer extraordinary.

So Vanya, pet, have no regret,
you're all set with a friend like me!

These are two of the liveliest versions of any folktales I know. The illustrations, especially for *The Magic Ring*, are equally unusual. Both books deserve to reach a wide audience. □

Aleksandr Tvardovskii: Memory and truth in the Soviet Union

by Geoffrey Hosking

(Central European University Press, 2025) 494 pp., £156 ISBN: 978-9633867471

Reviewed by Andrew Sheppard

Aleksandr Tvardovskii (1910-71) is most widely known as the author of *Vasili Tyorkin: A Book about a Soldier* (Василий Тёркин. Книга про бойца), an epic poem describing the life of a soldier serving in the Red Army during the 1941-45 Great Fatherland War (the Soviet part of WW2). The poem was a huge popular success and established him as a foremost Russian poet.

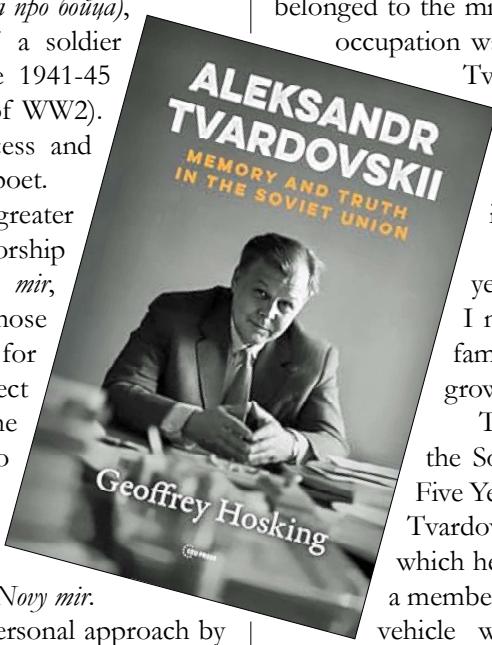
For many, however, his yet greater achievement came by way of his editorship of the leading literary journal, *Novy mir*, between 1950-54 and 1958-70. During those years, the material published was noted for its authenticity – especially with respect to life in the vast rural spaces of the Soviet Union – and its contribution to the liberalisation of Russian literature. In 1962, Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Один день Ивана Денисовича) saw its first publication in *Novy mir*. That achievement, which followed a personal approach by Tvardovskii to Khrushchev, opened the door to other works being published first in the Soviet Union, rather than after their having been smuggled out and published in the West.

Tvardovskii was born and grew up in Zagore, a hamlet to the south-east of Smolensk. His mother's family belonged to the minor Polish nobility. His father's primary occupation was as a blacksmith, but he also farmed.

Tvardovskii was obliged to assist his father, but their relationship was not good¹ and Tvardovskii dreaded the prospect of having to remain in Zagore, working in the smithy and on the family farm.

When still a few months short of 17 years old, Tvardovskii wrote: 'What would I not give just to get out of the accursed family in which nature compelled me to grow up.'

The ramping-up of collectivisation of the Soviet agricultural sector under the First Five Year Plan (from 1928) may have seemed to Tvardovskii to offer an escape from the life to which he feared he was condemned. He became a member of an agrovagon, an improvised motor vehicle whose occupants toured the villages distributing pamphlets and making speeches in



¹ For all that, it was Tvardovskii's father who introduced him to Russian literature and encouraged him to read Russian poetry out loud.



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The Great Britain–Russia Society Programme: New Year 2026

Our New Year 2026 Talks Programme will be announced shortly.

The details of each event will be posted on www.gbrussia.org/gbres-events as they are finalised and bookings will open simultaneously on that same web page. If you are a member of the Great Britain–Russia Society, in order to secure your member's discount on your tickets, remember to log-in before booking.



Annual Members' Meeting and Social Event

The Annual Members' Meeting will take place at 5.30pm on Wednesday 4th March at the Swedenborg Hall, 20-21 Bloomsbury Way, London, WC1A 2TH

Tea will be served from 5.00pm.

After the Members' Meeting, at about 7.15pm, a Social Event with food and wine will follow in the same venue.

Admission to the Members' Meeting, also for Zoom access to the meeting, is free to all members.

Non-members and members will all be welcome to the Social Event, for which there will be a charge. A similar Social Event held after the 2025 Annual Members' Meeting was much enjoyed by those who attended.

Tickets for the two events should be booked in advance on www.gbrussia.org/gbres-events.



The Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre's production of

The Witch of Konotop

(trailer: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVlbrKSjekg)

will return to London at the Hackney Empire on 28th January 2026.

See page 32 of this issue of East-West Review for Dmytro Drozdovskiy's overview of the play.

www.gbrussia.org

<https://www.instagram.com/greatbritainrussiasociety/>