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East-West Review

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East–West Review

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Editor: Andrew Sheppard **Sub-Editor:** Martin Dewhirst

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The views expressed by contributors should not be taken as representing those of the Great–Britain Russia Society itself.

Great Britain–Russia Society

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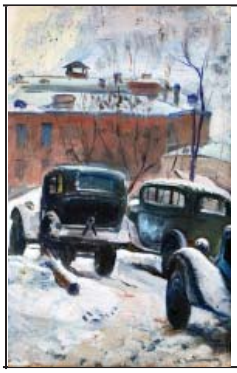

Cover illustration: *Black Ravens*, by Boris Vladimirski 1878-1950.
These cars were used by the NKVD during the 1930s and 1940s to transport newly-arrested prisoners.
See the review of *The House of Government: A saga of the Russian Revolution* on pages 43-45 and the screenshot from Nikita Mikhalkov's 1994 film *Утомлённые солнцем* (*Burnt by the Sun*) on page 4.

List of Contributors

Tony Cash spent 40 years in radio and TV production, including a spell broadcasting Russian language musical and cultural programmes to the Soviet Union. He was a founder Producer/Director of the South Bank Show and is, with Mike Gerrard, the author of *The Coder Special Archive: The untold story of naval national service men learning and using Russian during the Cold War*. He is currently pursuing a number of further media projects.

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.

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, and especially on cinema.

Thom Dinsdale has a background in freelance journalism and other non-fiction writing.

Philip Hanson is Emeritus Professor of the Political Economy of Russia and Eastern Europe at the University of Birmingham and an Associate Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. He acts as an analyst or consultant for Oxford Analytica and several banks and companies. His books include *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy, 1945-1992*.

David M Holohan was head of the Russian Section at the University of Surrey. He has written on and translated contemporary Russian literature, particularly that by Boris Mozhaev. He has also translated works by the French philosopher d'Holbach.

Vera Liber is a freelance writer and translator.

Diran Meghreblian is an ethnic Armenian born in the United States and brought up in Soviet Armenia. Having eventually left the Soviet Union, he became a Russian broadcaster at the BBC World Service in London, where he worked for almost 30 years.

John C Q Roberts was Director of the Great Britain-USSR Association, later the Great Britain-Russia Centre, from 1974 to 1993. His memoir, *Speak Clearly into the Chandelier: Cultural politics between Britain and Russia 1973-2000*, was re-published as a Routledge paperback in 2015.

Frank O'Reilly is a geographer with a special interest in development studies, agricultural geography and energy matters and a regional interest in the Baltic area. He has served as a visiting lecturer in the Forestry and Social Policy Departments of the University of Joensuu, Finland.

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 former Senior Lecturer in Russian Language and Literature and is now a freelance translator and researcher. His published translations include poetry by Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev, Yazykov, A K Tolstoi, Apukhtin, Larissa Miller and others. He has translated five novels by Turgenev, most recently *A Nest of the Gentry* and *On the Eve* (Alma Classics). Also recently, he has posted online an annotated translation of V A Giliarovskii's *Moskva i Moskvichi* and *Druz'ia i vstrechi* (www.Gilyarovsky.com).

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

Antony Wood is an independent literary publisher (Angel Classics) and translator of Pushkin. A Penguin Pushkin selection is scheduled for late 2019 publication.

In this screenshot from Nikita Mikhalkov's 1994 film 'Утомлённые солнцем' ('Burnt by the Sun'), a 'Black Raven' arrives at one of the entrances to Moscow's House of Government. The film begins and ends with scenes set in the House. 'The House of Government: A saga of the Russian Revolution' by Yuri Slezkine is reviewed on pages 43-45.

Emigrating to Soviet Armenia and Back, 1949-1965: The story of an American-Armenian family

By Diran Meghreblian

Almost 70 years ago, a series of little known and unusual population migrations took place. Unlike the present day escapes to the wealthy West from war-torn or poverty-stricken countries, those post-Second World War migrations were in the opposite direction. Thousands of Armenians from the diaspora voluntarily left their comfortable lives in the United States, France, Egypt and a number of other countries to settle in Soviet Armenia; a country just recovering from war and with a totalitarian regime.

Of course, few of the migrants could have imagined such a ruthless system as the Soviet Union under Stalin, and in many cases idealism clouded the judgement of the heads of families who took the decision to emigrate.

Something similar happened in 1946 with several thousand White Russians. The big difference was that the Russians were indeed returning to their homeland (mostly from France), having fled the Bolshevik revolution, whereas the Armenians going to the USSR were originally from Turkey.[1]

My family lived in France prior to 1939. That is when my father, mother and ten-year-old sister Sonia visited the United States to see my father's family. The Second World War broke out soon after their arrival; passenger sailings across the Atlantic stopped and my folks were stranded in New York State for the duration of the war and beyond.

Diran with his parents and sister Sonia, New Jersey 1948.

The story I wish to tell is one of idealism and hope turned into bitter disappointment. Nevertheless, the story had a happy ending for most of the Armenians involved. The happy ending was that, after enduring years of Soviet totalitarianism, they were finally able to return to America.

My part of the story began in the winter of 1949, when a group of 162 American-Armenians emigrated to Soviet Armenia. This so called 'repatriation' was in fact a misnomer. For these Armenians it was meant to be a return to their 'ancestral homeland', rather like the Jews of the diaspora going to settle in Israel. Having been dispersed throughout the world as a result of a campaign of mass murder committed by the Young Turk government in the Ottoman Empire,[2] the survivors of those terrible events were longing for a homeland and safety for themselves and their children. Soviet Armenia, the only Armenia in existence, seemed to be offering both. It appeared to be a unique opportunity to preserve their language, culture and traditions; and to contribute towards the development of the country of their forefathers. Soviet propaganda skilfully played on the patriotism of the Armenian diaspora, encouraging them to make the move to Armenia.

During 1947 and 1948, 7500 French Armenians yielded to Stalin's siren songs and left for Soviet Armenia. In the same period a far greater number of Armenians said goodbye to Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria. Approximately 150 people also left the United States in 1947 in what was called 'the first caravan'. It was a major coup for Moscow to persuade all those people to leave the capitalist West to start a new life in the so-called workers' paradise.

There was to be a 'second caravan' from the United States in July 1948, but its departure was delayed by seven months, and the departure that very nearly didn't happen became a saga in itself. My parents, my sister Sonia and I were four of the 162 persons who made up this group. Born in the United States, I was three years old at the time; Sonia was 19.

Several of the families bound for Armenia were quite well-off. One family had owned a farm and brought pieces of agricultural machinery with them, 'to help develop the mother country'. At least four families took their cars; American automobiles that became a rarity on the streets of Yerevan and a wonder to behold.

In Armenia, these families were only too glad to sell the cars and live for months on the money earned. All families, including my own, sold whatever they could on the black market to make ends meet. But we kept a fridge, a washing machine and an electric stove; they served us faithfully for 17 years and were finally sold when we left for France.

As a party, we were all set to go, having left our homes in New York City and State, the Boston area, Rhode Island, California, Detroit and Richmond, Virginia. A specially chartered ship, the *Pobeda* (*Победа*/Victory), arrived to take us to the USSR. However, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey refused permission to board because of insufficient life-boat provision. The ship left without us, but was expected back, properly equipped, six weeks later.

1 The plight of the returning Russians is faithfully depicted in the 1999 film *East-West* (*Est-Ouest*) by the French director Régis Wargnier.

2 Starting in 1915, the campaign is now recognised by most historians as the first genocide of the 20th century.

Meanwhile, through the efforts of American-Armenian organisations, we would-be emigrants were housed at the Morningside hotel in Lakewood, a winter resort in New Jersey. The hotel was closed for the summer and due to re-open in early September. We paid for our stay and self-catered; cooking, cleaning, and shopping for food. Through a tragicomic mistake, most of the group had inadvertently acquired Soviet citizenship, thus effectively burning their bridges with America.

Towards the end of August, word came from Moscow that 'repatriation had come to an end'. But the Armenians' enthusiasm was not dampened. Numerous appeals to permit entry of the 'second caravan' were made to the Soviet government by the group's leaders and by Armenian Communist sympathisers. While this was going on, my family and the other prospective emigrants were obliged to move to another hotel, the Vendome Plaza at Longbranch, also in New Jersey. The Vendome Plaza was a summer resort hotel on the Atlantic coast that had just closed for the winter. We remained there for another five months, again on self-catering terms. Around Christmas 1948, permission to travel to the USSR was finally granted and a January sailing date was set.

Diran and his father en route to Armenia, 1949.

The seven-month wait played an important and beneficial role in the group's future lives. It gave the families, and especially the young, a chance to get to know each other and build friendships which were to stand them in good stead in a new, strange land.

On 21st January 1949, we all finally left New York aboard a passenger ship bound for Naples. There a Romanian cargo ship was to pick us up. It failed to materialize. After a week spent at a Naples hotel, to which the group was taken under police guard because none of us had Italian visas, we embarked for the final leg of our journey on a cargo ship carrying cork. The few cabins were allocated to women and children; the men slept in the ship's dining-room on camp beds bought in Naples. The journey to the Black Sea port of Batumi took ten days. After three nights spent there in a barracks-like warehouse barely fit for human habitation, we completed our journey to Yerevan by train, arriving on 25th February 1949.

Sadly, the predominant feeling among the newly-arrived American-Armenians very soon became not elation or happiness, but disillusionment and despair. Between 1947 and 1949, an estimated 150,000 'returnees' had arrived in Armenia from all over the world. This small country could barely cope with feeding and housing its existing population, let alone the newcomers. Armenia was a relatively primitive country with a cruel totalitarian system; an atmosphere of fear and suspicion; informers among neighbours, colleagues and even friends; shortages of everything; and an established population envious of the 'rich' newcomers. To cap it all, the sincere, patriotic – if naïve – 'repatriates' were treated by the authorities as ideologically suspect simply by virtue of having come from the West. Within weeks of arrival three heads of family were arrested during night raids by the Soviet secret police. All three were exiled to Siberia for various terms; one spent a year and a half in prison.

Most families escaped that particular fate, but there were plenty of other hardships to endure. My own family was duped into thinking we were going to be allocated a small two-room apartment. An *Izvestia* newspaper correspondent in Yerevan even wrote a story about the warm welcome the

Below: The Central Square, Yerevan, in post-war Soviet times.

American-Armenians supposedly received upon arrival. For this article he took my parents to a show-case apartment in the centre of town. In reality, the four of us were housed in a single large room forming part of a three-room apartment with a family of four in each room – a communal apartment (*коммуналка*). The 12 people in the apartment shared one kitchen and one toilet. There was no question of a bathroom; we had to go to a public bathhouse for that. We lived like that for the first ten years, and that was by no means atypical.

Diran, residential block and provision store, 1950.

This kind of uprooting was a traumatic experience for newcomers, especially for the young people born and brought up in the United States. There were around 25 of them, some fresh out of high-school, a few just starting college studies. The culture shock was enormous for them. It was easier for children of my age, of whom there were a few. We didn't have anything else to compare our lives with, other than what our parents told us about America. We were treated by the local children and adults alike as being 'different' and often made fun of. One abiding memory from when I was ten or 12 years old is of having my American baseball cap taken off my head and torn into shreds by my school principal. 'How dare you come to school in that?' My father's subsequent protestations were in vain. On the contrary, he was reprimanded for bringing me up badly.

My father had glaucoma. He had been gradually losing his sight for many years and by this stage was virtually blind. Because of his disability, he couldn't work but received a state pension, a fairly decent one relative to wages, and was thus able to make a big contribution to our family's well-being by devoting his time to queueing for food. My becoming aware from an early age that Soviet Armenia was a country of hardships and shortages was in no small measure because I sometimes accompanied him in Yerevan on his daily food shopping rounds. This entailed much queueing but meant that with luck (if this or that state-owned shop didn't run out of a particular item before our turn came), we wouldn't return home empty-handed. A small triumph!

It was during a shopping trip with my father, on Wednesday 4th March 1953, that we heard Stalin was gravely ill. I was seven at the time but recall vividly the eerie atmosphere on the streets. Loudspeakers installed in several places in Yerevan broadcast Radio Moscow's bulletins, interspersed with solemn music. The following day, news of Stalin's death came, and was greeted with most people crying openly. For a boy of seven, it was bewildering to see adults crying in that way.

Something I learnt early on was not to repeat outside what I heard said at home. This puzzles me to this day, as I don't recall my parents or my sister telling me not to. I suppose I learnt this Orwellian double-speak, or double-think, by osmosis; by observing how careful they were when talking to anyone beyond the immediate family and close relatives. With time, this mind-set became second nature; outside the family circle one either kept one's mouth shut or said nothing remotely critical of the regime.

Only since becoming an adult have I realized what a rock my parents and sister were for me in my childhood and teens. My mother worked full-time in a quality control role at a nearby sewing factory. So I rarely saw her during the day; only in the evening and at weekends. My father acted as house-husband. He did most of the shopping and cooked some meals too.

I found out much later that from time to time my mother would complain bitterly to my father about going to Soviet Armenia saying: 'You didn't appreciate America enough!' That sort of thing was never said in my presence, although I do remember occasional nostalgic remarks from my parents about their earlier life in France and the USA.

Above all, I owe my parents and my sister an enormous debt of gratitude for quietly ensuring my day-to-day wellbeing and giving me an upbringing and values different from those that prevailed outside the home.

One area neither of my parents had any involvement with was my schooling. How could they? Neither spoke any Russian! My sister Sonia's involvement was minimal. If she was around (soon after graduating from University, she began teaching French and then English), she would check that I had done my homework. And it was mostly she who attended parents' evenings. These were often uncomfortable experiences for her as I was prone to naughtiness and getting into trouble at school.

Having arrived in Armenia at the age of three, I had far fewer problems fitting-in than the adults. I attended a local kindergarten, first – briefly – an Armenian language one and later, for more than two years, a Russian one. My parents understood that I would learn Armenian anyway, but that Russian was the *lingua franca* for the whole Soviet Union and would be advantageous for me for a future career. My spoken Russian also improved greatly thanks to a girl of my own age, Tanya, the daughter of a Russian family, one of those with whom we shared our communal apartment.

I started school, a Russian one, at the age of seven. A particular advantage of the Russian schools, of which there were few, was that they were preferred by the Armenian elite. Consequently, I had contact with what one might call a better class of children. More than that, in the two schools I attended over 11 years I was fortunate to have several ethnic Russian classmates, and some Armenians who spoke Russian at home. Some of them became my close friends; that too benefited my Russian considerably.

All subjects were taught in Russian, and Russian language and literature classes were of a good standard. I excelled at twice weekly dictations that tested spelling and the notoriously challenging Russian punctuation. I was less good when it came to essay writing: I found it boring because it largely involved looking up and copying officially approved literary criticism. I'm sure my accurate spelling was due to voracious reading from the age of 12 of Russian books, adventure stories and West European novels in translation. How much I understood of what Balzac, Zola, Dickens, Thomas Mann and other writers had to say is another matter!

Sonia and Diran, 1952.

I was good at all the non-science subjects; Russian, History, Geography, German and, later, English: not so good at Maths, Geometry, Chemistry and Physics.

I took up swimming, fencing and basketball. For four years from the age of 14, I became a member of the Armenian junior national basketball team. Sport was taken seriously in the USSR even at that level. We had practice sessions three times a week and took part in competitions. The best thing about basketball was that it gave me a chance to travel outside Armenia for various tournaments (but all within the Soviet Union). It also conferred unheard of privileges on me and my team-mates. For example, if a particular competition took place during the school term we were allowed to skip classes.

Diran dancing the hopak, Volgograd, 1962.

The greatest privilege of all came at the age of 17, when the Armenian junior basketball team went to train in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, in preparation for the Spartakiad of Peoples of the USSR (*Спартакиада народов СССР*), a version of the Olympics within the Soviet Union involving young athletes from all 15 constituent republics. I received special dispensation not to have to sit school graduation exams. There would have been six or seven arduous exams and I certainly wasn't looking forward to the slog of preparing for them. How much more pleasant to spend nearly a month away from home playing basketball in a different country (that's how Lithuania seemed to us). On my return, my school graduation diploma was waiting for me; all the subjects were deemed passed, calculated on the basis of marks gained during the final year.

There was a further huge favour reserved for us 'top athletes'. All Soviet universities and colleges had entrance examinations. My choice was to major in English at the Yerevan Pedagogical Institute of Russian and Foreign Languages. To gain entrance one had to sit four exams and, because the intake was very small, competition was fierce. Normally, only those with top marks in all four exams would get in. However, that year the Institute itself had earmarked three athletes it wanted as future students: a top junior tennis player (coincidentally, also the son of American-Armenian emigrants), a young female basketball player, and me. Provided the three of us got the minimum pass marks, we'd be in. And so it proved, except that I flummoxed the head of the Institute's Komsomol organisation (the Young Communist League), who was also in charge of Physical Education, by getting a top mark in my English exam. I remember him asking me: 'Are you Diran the basketball player?' I said yes. To which his reply was: 'I didn't think athletes were smart enough to get top marks in any academic subject!'

I completed the first two years of a four-year degree course at the Institute. I remember that period with fondness. It involved hard work, but for the first time in my life I took my studies seriously and made several new good friends. We had common interests such as listening to jazz and, under Khrushchev, the relatively liberal times of the early 1960s meant one could speak one's mind more freely without fear of repercussions. Much of our 'political discussion' consisted of telling each

other jokes, most of them anti-Soviet in one way or another.

One amusing episode occurred during my second year at the Institute. I was approached by the KGB, who wanted to employ me as bait to catch *valyutchiki* (*валютчики*/ currency dealers) by posing as a foreign tourist. These *valyutchiki*, usually young men, were after foreign currency. They hung around the Intourist hotel offering visitors from abroad more favourable exchange rates than the official one. The KGB must have learnt from the Institute that I spoke good English. So the plan was to install me at the hotel, wait for me to be approached by a *valyutchik* and arrest him in flagrante. To wriggle out of it, I pointed out that, through basketball, I was far too well known in a relatively small city like Yerevan (something they evidently hadn't thought of). Also, members of my family and I had frequented the Intourist hotel on a number of occasions to meet a growing number of foreign tourists. Surely the *valyutchiki* would have seen me around already; the ploy wouldn't work. Thankfully, that was the end of it; the KGB left me alone.

Vilnius, 1963: Diran, far left, wears the number 7 shirt.

By then, my family, minus my father, who had died in 1962, was taking steps to apply for permission to leave the Soviet Union. We finally managed to emigrate in 1965, not to the USA but to France. My mother had two brothers in Paris who acted as sponsors.

What sustained the American-Armenians during those difficult years was the dream – hope would be putting it too strongly – of being able to return to the United States. Up until the end of the 1950s, one couldn't so much as mention this for fear of serious trouble. But around 1957 something happened that gave some substance to this vague hope and yearning. A family of French-Armenian repatriates was allowed to leave for France. Mysteriously, this family had been able to retain their French citizenship while living in Армения. That made them an exceptional case, but it was still a breakthrough.

School graduation, 1963; Diran bottom left, teachers top row.

However, it was only in the early 1960s that a few families dared approach the authorities to express their wish to leave. Various obstacles were put in their way, chiefly an insistence on having close relatives abroad before one could apply for an exit visa. Even then, completely arbitrary refusals were common. Nevertheless, from around 1963 and up to the late 1970s, the vast majority of American-Armenians succeeded in returning to the USA. The French Armenians were also allowed to leave; older and wiser, one is tempted to say.

The dream of settling in what was left of the land of our forefathers had been a failure, but not unmitigatedly so. The arrival of American, French and other diaspora Armenians brought considerable long-term benefits to Soviet Armenia. They brought their skills and know-how, Western ways and ideas. A major contribution was the English language which the young generation of emigrants taught at schools and at Yerevan University. Perhaps more importantly, their arrival helped to change the outlook of the local population, so brainwashed and conditioned by years of Soviet propaganda. There were positive aspects for the repatriates too. They, their children and grandchildren maintained their knowledge of the Armenian language and got to know their roots, and the young received a university education that they might not have obtained elsewhere. Some also learned good Russian; in my case allowing me to make a living as a Russian broadcaster at the BBC World Service.

Speaking purely personally, my conclusion is that, unlike my parents and my sister, I benefited overall from my 17 years in Soviet Armenia. Even the experience of living under a totalitarian regime had its positive aspects in that I now appreciate so much more the freedoms afforded to citizens of Western countries. I have only one regret; that my father, who felt deep remorse for having taken his family to Soviet Armenia, did not live long enough to see us emerge to build new lives in the West. □

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Great Britain–Russia Society

Summary of Guest Speakers: Autumn 2018

The author speaks about his new play, 'Requiem', formed from five Chekhov short stories

Paul Caister

Thursday 6th September 2018 at Pushkin House, 5a Bloomsbury Square, WC1A 2TA

The Life of Secret Agent, Captain Leo Steveni MC OBE

Martin Vander Weyer (introduced by Major Peter Steveney)

Wednesday 26th September 2018 at the Open Russia Club, 67 Wimpole Street, W1G 8AP

The Bolsheviks and the Building of Socialism 1917-1921

Beryl Williams

Monday 8th October* 2018 at UCL SSEES, 16 Taviton Street, WC1H 0BW

Is the Norwegian Option now the UK's Best Bet?

Jeremy Warner

Tuesday 30th October 2018 at the Open Russia Club, 67 Wimpole Street, W1G 8AP

Thomas, Lucy and Alatau: The Atkinsons' adventures in Siberia and Kazakhstan

John Massey-Stewart

Wednesday 7th November 2018 at Pushkin House, 5a Bloomsbury Square, WC1A 2TA

Estonia and Russia: 100 years of poor relations

Neil Taylor

Thursday 22nd November at the Open Russia Club, 67 Wimpole Street, W1G 8AP

This Thorny Throne: Russia, royalty and the Romanovs

Stephen Patterson

Monday 10th December 2018 at the Open Russia Club, 67 Wimpole Street, W1G 8AP

Collusion: Secret meetings, dirty money & how Russia helped Donald Trump win

Luke Harding

Wednesday 19th December 2018 at Pushkin House, 5a Bloomsbury Square, WC1A 2TA

All talks this session are at 6.30pm for 7.00pm.
Please note carefully the location of each talk; they are variously at three different venues.
Please also note that the Open Russia Club has *MOVED* to 67 Wimpole Street, W1G 8AP,
the nearest tube stations are Bond Street and Oxford Circus.
*The date of the UCL SEES lecture is to be confirmed, please check the GBRS website before booking
For more information and to book places for yourself and your guests at any of these talks visit our website

www.gbrussia.org

Great Britain-Russia Society Traditional Russian Old New Year Party

at the Civil Service Club, 13-15 Great Scotland Yard, SW1A 2HJ
on Saturday 12th January 2019 at 6:30pm

There will be a three course à la carte dinner and
live Russian music from the five-strong *Russian Souvenir*
£26 per person
inclusive of welcome drink, a half bottle of house wine *or* mineral water/soft drinks

Book for this event by sending a cheque for £26 (payable to the Great Britain-Russia Society)
to the Hon Membership Secretary, Mrs Ute Lynch, 43 Kenilworth Court, Lower Richmond Road,
London SW15 1EN