

BOOK REVIEW for publication by MRC

"Speak Clearly into the Chandelier: Cultural Politics between Britain and Russia 1973-2000"

by JCQ Roberts

Curzon

Available on www.amazon.co.uk

John Roberts has compiled a personal scrapbook of his twenty years as Director of what used to be called the Great Britain-USSR Association and is now known as the Britain-Russia Centre. This was a small, eccentrically British organisation which was set up by Harold Macmillan in 1959 in order to promote individual contact between influential cultural figures in the two countries. Macmillan apparently believed this might help to lessen political tensions. In fact all it did was introduce politics into cultural life.

There are two main themes to this book. The first is relations between Britain and the USSR/Russia; the second between the Association Roberts directed and the British Foreign Office, which financed it. The unpalatable fact is that by the end of the book Roberts appears to have come to the conclusion that dealing with the Soviet bureaucracy was only marginally more difficult than dealing with its British counterpart. Unfortunately, due to the unchronological, scrap-book technique Roberts has adopted, it is hard for the reader to follow the story of an honest man's disillusionment with his own ideal: the mythically smooth competence of traditional British diplomacy.

Roberts came to the world of Russian culture through a National Service Russian language course. Subsequently, he taught Russian at Marlborough, the prestigious public school in Wiltshire, from where, in 1973, he was headhunted for the job of Director of the Great Britain-USSR Association. Astonishingly, he was the first Russian speaker to hold the job. For the next twenty years he guided the Association with a rare combination (for a bureaucrat) of energy and wisdom. He developed his mandarin camouflage without entirely concealing an elegantly bohemian sense of mischief.

I vividly remember the day, in 1978, when he

invented me to lunch with him in a Belgravia pub after I had applied to join the Association. He came as Strelnikov, complete with leather jacket and cap. I half expected to see the bulge of a huge Mauser strapped to his belt. We ordered pints of beer--how very "seventies" of us!--at which point my host switched to M, and proceeded to administer a skillfully Whitehallesque vetting of his potential recruit. Was I in fact a fellow traveler who would have been more at home in the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR? That supposedly Kremlinophile organization operated out of dingy offices in Brixton, whereas the GB-USSR Association occupied handsome first floor premises in Grosvenor Place, SW1. From his spacious office Roberts could watch the Duke of Edinburgh playing tennis in the gardens of Buckingham Palace. He would cheekily point this out to his Soviet guests, the more Soviet the more cheekily.

A minor theme of this book is the clash of personalities within the Association between its Director and the person who was successively first executive officer, President and Past President: Sir Fitzroy Maclean of Duncanmec, Bt. Maclean was an old-fashioned Highland brigand who used positions like that on the GB-USSR Association to further his own personal agenda. That is the free market way. But Roberts disliked his approach and tried to insist on professional bureaucratic standards in order to match those on the Soviet side. To my mind, Roberts was fighting paper with paper, when it was matches that were needed. Ironically, Roberts saw himself as working for the free market, and Maclean as too pro-Soviet.

Bureaucracy is a cross-border cancer. There are only two ways of administering organizations and states, the competitive way, with all its ugliness, brutality, injustice and corruption, and the bureaucratic way, with its own forms of ugliness, brutality, injustice and corruption. Personally, I see the uncorrupted *ideal* of communism as being closer to the teachings of Christ than the uncorrupted ideal of a nation of shopkeepers or a global market in retailing

stocks. But the work-a-day realities are far less clear-cut.

All ideals end, as it were, on Calvary, and Roberts was eventually crucified--almost literally: the strains of the job nearly killed him in 1990--for his uncompliant approach to Foreign Office *diktats*. Since all bureaucracy is ultimately totalitarian--universal standards demand universal homogeneity--Roberts was a victim of his own colorful, humane and generous individualism. Within the grey, impersonal and mean-spirited worlds of Whitehall and the Kremlin he was looked upon as something of a loose cannon. For this reason he was never honoured in Britain with any official recognition for his work, though grateful colleagues in post-Soviet Moscow have appointed him Chairman of the International Board of the prestigious State Library for Foreign Literature. Today he lives in retirement in the hills of southern Lanarkshire, his anti-Soviet achievements redundant.

I draw two lessons from Roberts's book. The first is that bureaucracy is *per se* horrible. In my own field, the politics of nature conservation in Scotland today, you only have to think of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to see just how cynical and manipulative an apparently benevolent organisation can actually be. The similarities between its *modus operandi* and that of the faceless bureaucrats in the House of Friendship (*sic*) in Moscow are striking: the pomposity, the self-referential vanity, the clyping, the contempt for "outsiders", the conspiratorial approach to human relations, and the belief that ends can justify means.

The second lesson from this entertaining, if maddeningly unchronological tale, is that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive. Roberts had a fascinating job and met many fascinating people. Readers interested in the cultural politics of the Cold War will find much to enjoy, from John Le Carré's Introduction to gossip about Melvyn Bragg, Penelope Lively, Beryl Bainbridge, Alan Bennett, Elaine Feinstein, Michael Frayn, Seamus Heaney and Harold Wilson. From the other side, Roberts gives us personal

reminiscences of Okudzhava, Vosnesensky, Rozhdestvensky, Rostropovich, Soloukhin, Yevtushenko, the tragic Galina Starovoitova, masses of Soviet cultural kommissars and more Pasternaks than you could shake a stick at.

But the demise of the USSR shattered the anti-Soviet community. Something small but beautiful has been lost. Roberts quotes Vosnesensky's complaint about the West: "We send them our best ballerinas and get Pepsi-Cola in return." Today Russian writers have less time for endless discussions in Moscow kitchens on the grand themes of love and war, philosophy and *perestroika*. They have to think about miserable royalties, dishonest agents and the best way to butter up potential reviewers.

Ian Mitchell is journalist and the author of four books, including *Isles of the West: a Hebridean Voyage* (1999) and *The Justice Factory: Show me the Judge and I'll tell you the Law* (2011). He lives in Moscow where he is writing a book about the political history of law in Russia, to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*.

ENDS -- 1050 words
