



*Training Russian Military Interpreters
during the Cold War (1951-58):*

A Neglected Page in the History of SSEES

Faith Wigzell



From 1951-58 probably around five hundred young men studied Russian intensively for a year at SSEES as part of their National Service. They were part of a much larger programme to train Russian translators and interpreters known as the Joint Services School for Linguists (JSSL). While the JSSL experience has been well-documented [Elliott and Shukman; Cash and Gerrard], the history of the SSEES wing of JSSL is inevitably restricted to at best a chapter. In this centenary year it is time to rescue for SSEES history what is known about these courses – not before time, as the participants are at least in their mid-seventies. Even if their recollections are inevitably fragmented, they make splendid informants; they were after all the most talented linguists of the huge number of young men who did National Service in the 1950s, and they went on to excel in many walks of life.ⁱ

Services Language Courses at SSEES

This was not the first time that SSEES found itself teaching Russian to members of the armed forces (as well as to external, evening and diploma students). It had a long tradition of teaching the languages that are part of its remit to those not registered for a degree; even before SSEES became independent from King's College in 1932, classes were being offered *inter alia* to regular Army officers, who completed their studies abroad living with émigré families and then taking the Civil Service Interpreters' exam [Roberts and Bartlett:32]. In the early 1930s the courses attracted the attention of the NKVD, which was informed that SSEES was where SIS officers learnt their Russian. At the time it was Elizabeth Hill, later Professor at Cambridge, who taught them. Indeed, the spy Guy Burgess attempted to sign on with her, evidently because he hoped to gain some intelligence from the SIS men with whom he imagined he would be studying. Nothing seems to have come of it [Elliott and Shukman:18-20]. During the War courses were offered in a range of languages including Russian, but after the War it was decided that Russian teaching to servicemen could be left to Cambridge [Roberts and Bartlett:40]. In 1949 a delegation from the University Grants Committee expressed concern about the amount of time spent by staff on elementary language teaching. 'It recommended that more time should be devoted to research and the needs of the School's full-time honours-degree students and intercollegiate students. Only by doing this could the School increase its numbers of recognised teachers (that is, full-time academic staff) and thus improve its standing within the University' [Roberts and Bartlett:45]. However, with the international situation deteriorating, SSEES Director George Bolsover, a man with a strong sense of duty, felt that the School must continue to offer Russian courses to servicemen.

Post-War Courses at SSEES for Regular Officers

Peter Norman, a full-time member of SSEES staff from 1955, taught groups of regular officers throughout the 1950s - there were around 30 in 1952. Ronald Hingley who was in charge of the JSSL course, as well as having responsibility for the officers' courses regarded the latter as operating on a lesser level of intellectual ferocity. He may have been right despite the contrary view of one participant; Peter Norman's manner was much gentler, while the officers were older and may not have had the same linguistic background. The last such officers' course was held in 1959-60, when about seven officers were joined by some eight undergraduates enrolled to study *ab initio* Russian as a preliminary to a degree in Russian Language and Literature. Among those eight were future SSEES professors Arnold McMillin and Faith Wigzell.

Dr George Bolsover and his role in JSSL



Dr G. H. Bolsover CBE (1901-90)

Shortly after Dr Bolsover became Director of SSEES in 1947, he, like Elizabeth Hill, was asked to join a Committee on Russian Studies set up by the Foreign Office to consider the training of more Russian speakers. If she represented expertise on course structuring and pedagogical method (she had been advising on this since the War), he represented academia more generally. Subsequently, when JSSL was set up, they both became members of a 'moderating committee' which had a coordinating and supervisory role [Cash and Gerrard:13-15]. He might sit on boards selecting potential JSSL candidates [Gareth Jones], or visit other JSSL establishments. In 1952 he earned the gratitude of the first interpreters' course, now honing their technical Russian at Bodmin army camp. Those in charge had decided that these softies need a proper taste of military life. Feeling that as a consequence of all these extra duties their knowledge of Russian was

fading rather than developing, John Roberts wrote to Hingley, and when Bolsover came down with a group of military men, he not only spoke to the camp authorities, but even ate with the *kursanty* rather than the CO – a brave act given how appalling the food was [Roberts]. Food and treatment improved thereafter. However as a historian, he would not have meddled in the running of a language course.

The Royal Navy sails in

It was agreed that just one of the Armed Services should have oversight of the London and Cambridge interpreters' courses respectively. The RAF took charge at Cambridge and the Navy in London. As a result all national servicemen in the RN who were selected to train as interpreters went to SSEES. Because the Navy took a relatively small number of conscripts, courses were filled with candidates from the other services. This had the effect of subverting the military culture of each arm of the services, but then the Russianists were probably the

most detached of all National Servicemen from the class hierarchies of the armed forces [Vinen:245-6].

The Admiralty was tasked with finding premises both for living and teaching, but left the running of the courses to SSEES. Academic liaison between JSSL and the Ministry of Defence in the form of an Inspector was provided by Naky Doniach from GCHQ [Elliott and Shukman:32-33], and there were also occasional formal visits by admirals or the Director of Military Intelligence.

Living Quarters

Initially *kursanty* (as they were known after the first few courses) lived at 8 Sussex Square in Bayswater, coincidentally next door to no. 9, where the School had sheltered for a few months in mid-1945. According to Patrick Miller, 8 Sussex Square, had formerly been a brothel, bought up by the Royal Navy and painted white, something that did not deter night-time visitors from knocking at the door and asking if Big Bertha was in [Cash and Gerrard:267].

However, with Peter Sellers and Edmundo Ros, the band leader, as neighbours, the area was not without its charms [Jones].ⁱⁱ The Commanding Officer was a member of the wartime Polish Navy which had fought with the British, Lt Cdr M. Lukas, DSC, though some thought it was his 'highly personable and quite dominant wife' who was the real power [Bancroft].



In 1954 they moved into a dingy former hotel in Queens Gate Terrace, South Kensington. Leaving the building in the morning was officially known as 'going ashore' from the 'stone frigate'.ⁱⁱⁱ *Kursanty* were not the only people 'stationed' there. On one side of the building lived the WRNS officers working at the Admiralty. Fraternisation was discouraged. Will Ryan remembers that if you attempted to step onto the wrong side of the strip of carpet in the entrance hall, large Wren NCOs would threaten you. In any case the rather prim ladies were older than the national servicemen and there are no stories of close fraternisation. Mind you, Patrick Procktor, the eminent artist, remembers going over to the WRNS on a Thursday evening for Scottish dancing – a type of dancing that precluded clasping one's partner tightly [Elliott and Shukman:157]

Teaching Accommodation

In view of the large numbers, separate premises were essential and the Admiralty leased no. 38 Russell Square from the British Museum. The building, on the corner of Russell Square and Montague Place is now the location of the Museum's registered offices. Expecting up to 150 students each year, they also leased a large house at no. 47 Russell Sq. from the Bedford Estate, and when numbers did not materialize relinquished the house at no. 38.



How many courses were there and how large were they?

Courses ran from A (1951-52) to T (1957-58). There were to be three courses a year starting in October, January and April. However, Course A began in October 1951, B in January 1952, but C which comprised Navy and Army servicemen only started in October '52. The aim was to train a maximum of 50 students on each course, of whom 25 would be coders (special) (Navy), something more than achieved in 1952-53 when the course was entirely navy. But soon the target proved ambitious. The October 1953 course had only 25 *kursanty* (20 naval midshipmen, one RAF officer cadet and four army cadets). In 1954 pressure from the Treasury to economise seems to have led to the complete abandonment of one intake. According to Dennis Mills, intake size for the whole of JSSL was reduced until the summer of 1956. Thus in Gareth Jones' intake and the one preceding his there were only 15, of whom a third were RN. In November 1956 there was an intake of the original size at Crail, which must have impacted on numbers at SSEES, but levels fell again in 1957. The last five intakes, after the Navy had stopped sending men, were down to only about 25 men, a dozen or so each of soldiers and airmen [Mills:2].

The Course

Each JSSL intake attended an intensive beginners' course held variously at military bases in Coulsdon, Bodmin or Crail. In a mere 6-8 weeks these courses took participants through all the basics of grammar, pronunciation and reading, after which approximately the top 25% were selected for the interpreters' course at either Cambridge or London.

The only exception was Course A which started in October 1951. Such was the haste to set things up that this group was told to report direct to 8 Sussex Square, and hence started at SSEES without having done the preliminary couple of months. Caught napping, the Navy, which did not take many National Servicemen anyway, was unable to fill the course with its own men. Norman Bancroft remembers only six midshipmen in that intake, the rest being RAF and a smaller number from the Army. The consequence of this haste was, firstly, that Course A was the only group which started Russian from scratch at SSEES, and secondly that, without the weeding out achieved through the preliminary intensive introduction to the language, the drop-out rate was a little higher than later on (60 down to 43) [Elliott and Shukman:269]. Inevitably not everyone completed the full course, and some courses had higher dropout rates than others. However, attrition rates appear to have improved over time; Dennis Mills estimates that overall the rate may not have exceeded 10% [Mills:5-6].

Course Management

SSEES had to act with equal speed to set up the academic management of the course. Ronald Hingley, then a lecturer in the Russian department, was asked to become Course Administrator. It was the start of a fractious relationship with the SSEES Director George Bolsover (apparently known by his staff as Sobakevich, the bear-like character from Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*).

In his private memoir Hingley complains that he only found out towards the end of the long vacation that he was to run the course.^{iv} He felt that his appointment smacked of malice, but in fact he was not only the most junior member of the Russian Department,^v but also clearly the best candidate. His appointment was intended to be part-time to allow him to fulfil his lecturing duties. George Bolsover had a general supervisory role, held the purse strings, and was the person who liaised with government and military brass. This was a major bone of contention for Hingley who felt that Bolsover simply wanted to take all the credit for himself. As Hingley wrote: 'I planned the courses, headhunted the teachers, wrote the timetables, got rid of unsatisfactory teachers and pupils, put a stringent routine of language tests in place...' Bolsover was not, however, a vainglorious man, but he did not believe that junior members of staff should be allowed a say in the running of the institution (as the present author can testify).^{vi} He remained something of a shadowy figure since he did not interfere in the daily running of the courses, appearing only occasionally at end-of-course parties where he would demonstrate his party trick of allowing *kursanty* to stand on his stomach to demonstrate the strength of his stomach muscles. He was also usefully employed by Hingley as a bogeyman figure to threaten lazy or unmotivated students.

Hingley found the first year very challenging with two courses were running more or less concurrently, Course A from October 1st 1951 and Course B from January 1952. This prompted him to appoint Heads of Courses, recent graduates in Russian (and occasionally, those who had gone through the JSSL course at SSEES themselves). They took charge of managing and coordinating a team of 3-4 émigré teachers [Elliott and Shukman: 154].^{vii} One of Hingley's beefs about Dr George Bolsover is that the latter refused to pay these Heads of Courses at a higher rate than the ordinary teachers. Consequently, the only way to raise their pay was to give them more hours, not a solution.

After Hingley gratefully escaped to a post at Oxford, Bryan Toms, who was already working as a Head of Course, was appointed in his stead. He was aggrieved not to be offered a lectureship which went instead to the much more emollient Peter Norman who had been

running the officers' courses. Word went round the *kursanty* that the reason was that Bolsover did not like Toms. Doubtless, the SSEES Director was looking forward to a quieter life after Hingley. Informants from post-Hingley courses do not mention Heads of Courses, but that may well have been because the size of each intake had shrunk by 1955, and the teachers were experienced as well as familiar with both methods and material.

The Teachers

Neither Hingley nor Toms wished to make friends of the *kursanty*. Though there was socializing on a limited scale, it is notable that in his memoir Hingley remembers much more clearly his carousing with his Heads of Courses at the end of term than social events with the young servicemen. Looking back, he has some regrets about this, as well as his at times harsh treatment of his émigré staff and of *kursanty* who stepped out of line. That said, Hingley was seen by most as an effective teacher and his émigré staff respected him even if they did not like him. Though not obliged to teach, he chose to lecture on aspects of grammar, aiming to make the lectures clear, informative but, wherever possible, entertaining.

Toms was a thin, nervous and intense character, termed the workaholic's workaholic by Hingley. He had little sense of humour and may have been even tougher than Hingley. However, he excelled at explaining grammar and devising grammatical exercises. It was rumoured that he had learnt the little red Russian-English dictionary by heart, while another rumour, more obviously false, held that he had written a complete Russian grammar, in which 250 pages related to numerals [Elliott and Shukman:155]. The rumour reflects the obsessive insistence on getting *kursanty* to put complex numerals into oblique cases: now translate into Russian, 'he was communicating with 127,349 soldiers...!

Apart from Hingley, Toms and the heads of courses, all the other teachers were émigrés from different backgrounds and by no means all Russian native speakers. It was obvious to *kursanty* that their teachers did not necessarily get on with each other, as Robin Hope explains: 'the motley collection of refugee and other teachers did not all speak Russian as their first language. Teasing, we asked Teacher A why he said the correct phrase was X, while Teacher B said it was Y. I treasure A's reply, "What do you expect from a Bulgarian peasant?"'[Cash and Gerrard:100]. Hingley and Toms had to draw their teaching staff from a limited supply of possible candidates, and it is hardly surprising that they ended up with a motley crew.

Over the decade teachers left and others arrived, but since some are remembered by *kursanty* from different years, the teaching personnel achieved some degree of stability. But Hingley from the word go was opposed to Professor Elizabeth Hill's approach at Cambridge which was to employ teachers, recruited through her personal contacts, who could imbue the students with a knowledge and love of Russian culture, whether through their background or personality. For Hingley this was an exercise in producing military interpreters in the event of national need. Hence he came down hard on teachers who in his view did not perform adequately, or liked to tell anecdotes about their past. The charming Count Alexis Bobrinskoi, son of a well-known archaeologist, who told wonderful stories about bear-hunting on the family estate at Bobriki and more generally of life in the Tsarist era did not last long as a teacher on the SSEES course. He found a more appreciative audience when he recorded his childhood memories for a BBC radio series while maintaining a small role in the Cambridge JSSL [Elliott and Shukman:142-3]. It may be Bobrinskoi who was castigated by

Hingley for his inability to keep his lectures to the prescribed length – Hingley avoids giving his name.

Since teachers were not expected to fraternise with the students, sometimes little more than their names remain.^{viii} There was a degree of amusement to be had in names of some. Mr Khrushchev, a rather frail, ‘courtly’ Tsarist gentleman given to staring vaguely out of the window, could not have been more different from his shoe-banging namesake, while Lazar Kaganovich was not on leave from the Politburo [Elliott and Shukman:158]. Amusement had to be gleaned where possible, so the relatively easy-going Mrs Cholerton, a Russian married to a distinguished Moscow correspondent of the *Telegraph*, is remembered by Will Ryan for her garbled versions of English idioms. The formidable Russian lady Mrs Harley rounded on Michael Waller as they went through the long list of words to learn: ‘Meester Waller, I geeve you dat bedbug’.

The teachers who stuck in the memory tended to be physically distinctive. One such was Madame Alkhazova, a lady of Wagnerian proportions, remembered by John Roberts as a lady from Moldova with elaborate gypsy-style earrings and lots of chins, and by Norman Bancroft for her booming voice, theatrical manner and almost apologetic manner. Another was Mieczysław (Mietek) Gigieł-Melechowicz (1922-91), a Pole with one eye, no hands and a missing forearm, lost either in a grenade accident or in an air crash. He had different hooks for different activities and so would deftly screw in a special one for holding chalk and writing on the board. Nicknamed Hooks by Will Ryan’s intake, he was according to Clifford German ‘a brave and courteous man, who could unerringly drink vodka from a small glass balanced on his wooden elbow, and another and another’ [Cash and Gerrard:94].



There is one female instructor who is vividly remembered by the young men. This was the glamorous divorcée Kosara Gavrilović (b. 1924), the daughter of the President of the Agrarian Party in pre-War Serbia. Described by one *kursant* as ‘Gavrilović of the divine body and gorgeous legs’, she was a lady of strong opinions and a Cambridge degree in French and Russian.

Rumoured to have boyfriends with sports cars, Will Ryan remembers that she once demonstrated ski turns standing on a desk. After a few years she moved to the US to take up a post at George Washington University, subsequently involving herself in Serb politics and literary translation [Cash and Gerrard:98]. Hingley describes her as a ‘notable life-enhancer’ and indeed she was the only one of the émigré teachers with whom Hingley socialized.

Other instructors turned up later at SSEES. Natasha Scorer, an excellent teacher who later married Peter Norman, taught on the *ab initio* Russian course 1958-59; Helen Rapp was as much praised by her *kursant* pupils as by SSEES undergraduates who lamented her departure in 1959 or 1960; Lyuba Volossevich, known as ‘Flossie’, was young, blonde and pretty, as well as prone to blush [Elliott and Shukman:158]. Well over a decade later she was teaching conversational Russian at SSEES.

The JSSL team at no. 47 was completed by a caretaker, ‘Old Ivory’, and secretarial and administrative support, the latter including the brilliant Jeremy Wolfenden, depicted by

Sebastian Faulks in his *Three Fatal Englishmen*, who had been unable to take the Civil Service exam and returned to JSSL London [Hingley]. At one point (1953) a Mrs Southwood ran a small canteen in the basement of 47 Russell Square. The programme for the pantomime performed in November of that year advertises 'The Sailor's Rest' with Mrs S's smiling service, a genuine night-club atmosphere and finest Bloomsbury cuisine, all doubtless written with heavy irony.

Cambridge v London

The rivalry between Hingley and Liza (as she was known, though not to her face) has been well documented by Elliott and Shukman. Liza Hill had been involved in an advisory capacity on the setting-up of JSSL and had been teaching Russian courses to regular servicemen since the end of the War. Without her it seems doubtful that the JSSL project would have been so effective. It was she who saw clearly that about 50% of the trainee interpreters' work should be oral rather than written, given the aims of the JSSL programme. An ebullient and colourful character, she was convinced that Hingley was incapable of teaching an intensive course that rivalled hers. She ignored SSEES' considerable experience of teaching servicemen, proclaiming that the methods and exercises had been devised by her at Cambridge. Indeed some exercises relating to interpretership had been, and Hingley wisely adopted them after visiting Cambridge. Hingley, himself highly competitive, rose to the challenge, insisting that the respective courses be measured by performance in the demanding Civil Service Interpreters' exam, taken at the end of their training.



No. B/1/601

JOINT SERVICES SCHOOLS FOR LINGUISTS
CERTIFICATE FOR RUSSIAN

This is to certify that

MIDSHIPMAN A.B. McNAB

has attended a one-year course in Russian at the University of LONDON and a 6 months continuation and orientation course at the Joint Services School for Linguists, BOWEN, and has qualified as a SERVICE INTERPRETER.

In the Interpretership Examination conducted by the Civil Service Commission in JUNE, 1955, he obtained 63% per cent. of the possible marks.

Date: AUGUST, 1955. *Richard* Principal *Indlow* Commandant

Joint Services School for Linguists, BOWEN.

(Details of the examination are given overleaf)

Andrew McNab RN passes The Civil Service Interpreters' Examination

THE INTERPRETERSHIP EXAMINATION OF THE CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION

The Interpretership examination consists of the following tests:—

Conversation
Translation from Service Manuals
Messages and Service Terms
Service Paper (Translation from and into Russian)
Essay
Extempore Translation
Extempore Composition

Classification

The system of classification used in the Interpretership Examination is as follows:—

80 per cent. or over.....Interpreter, First-class
60 per cent. or over.....Interpreter, Second-class

To qualify, candidates must obtain at least 40 per cent. both in the oral and in the written tests considered independently.

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Andrew McNab RN passes The Civil Service Interpreters' Examination

The two were chalk and cheese; Liza Hill was demanding, but loved by her students, while the atmosphere on the SSEES course was termed 'Stakhanovite' [Elliott and Shukman:148]. Hingley was not an empathetic person, but he was more aware of the purpose of the JSSL programme, and he achieved results. Fred Wright who was on the course beginning October 1953 reports that the army cadets who joined the course at SSEES were sent there because it 'was known to be of a better standard than the Cambridge course'. In fact the jury is out on this; it may be that the sterner approach and greater attention to relevant vocabulary on the SSEES course gave it a slight edge, but equally it may be the Army believed that the firm discipline and high demands of the SSEES course were bound to give better results.

The teaching and the syllabus

Malcolm Brown, a graduate, was told on his first day that 'they were not "bloody students" but Servicemen, and that every lesson was a parade' [Elliott, Shukman:152]. The pace was tremendous, with five or six hours of classes each day followed by two to three of homework. Whereas the translators' courses at Bodmin and Crail specialized in developing listening skills, the interpreters were expected not just to interpret but also, with their excellent knowledge of the language, fulfil other roles in the event of a military emergency.

Grammar was taught by British instructors, Hingley, Toms or Heads of Course to large groups. Similarly, pronunciation was taught via an excellent course in practical phonetics, in the early years by John Nicholson. Teachers had their own teaching materials, which James Muckle says went beyond anything available at the time [Muckle:130]. Then *kursanty* divided into small groups of between 4 and 9 depending on the numbers on the course. Here heavy emphasis was placed on oral work, including 15-minute prepared lecturettes in Russian, interpreting exercises involving role play, as well as extempore translations from Russian. Other skills were developed through lectures in Russian, essay writing and translation of English passages, which might be about current affairs [Muckle:130]. After the first course during which they went to the old cinema at the Regent Street Poly to watch *The Fall of Berlin*, films did not feature at SSEES which had no facilities for showing them.

Ten-week university terms were not observed; classes went on continuously with breaks for public holidays. Fred Wright remembers just a fortnight's leave during his course.^{ix} Perhaps the most tedious activity involved vocabulary via word lists of 20-30 words to learn each night, the Basic Verb List, the Basic Noun List as well as lists containing words classified in various ways such as their irregular stress patterns [Muckle:130]. Within a short space of time *kursanty* were reading *Crime and Punishment* (in a stressed edition). And of course no translations were allowed. Then, instead of reading the great classics of Russian literature like their Cambridge counterparts, they were plunged into Soviet novels with more contemporary vocabulary like Kataev's *A White Sail Gleams*, Simonov's *Days and Nights* or Kaverin's *Two Captains* (1944) about a boy who becomes an Arctic pilot and finds out what happened to an Arctic expedition. Amidst the Soviet science fiction and novels about the war, the appearance of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* seemed to one *kursant* an 'administrative oversight' [Elliott and Shukman:59]. So turgid were some of these works that students formed syndicates, one of whom would read the allotted chunk and compile a vocabulary list which the others would learn [Elliott and Shukman:159].

About two hours a week were given over to learning military vocabulary, which had to be adapted according to the branch of the military. It might be Russian naval word lists ranging from Dutch terms imported by Peter the Great to those relating to nuclear submarines, or air force and army vocabulary when required [Cousins, Doughty]. The inadequacy of this aspect of the teaching was revealed when regular servicemen including Jack Doughty were allowed to join the JSSL London course from August 1955. The teacher, who had been a Tsarist officer, was challenged about the phrases he was teaching by those with real experience and knowledge of military communication monitoring. 'But he always insisted he was right. I remember one example: the phrase "Undercarriage down and locked". There are two standard ways of saying this in Russian and we knew both of them very well... The only way to satisfy him was to use his wrong version.' After finishing at SSEES, interpreters went on to study military terminology elsewhere with better qualified instructors.

Kursanty could not weaken since important tests were held every couple of weeks on a Friday and a major one at the end of each term. If you failed to reach the pass mark of 60% on two consecutive tests (marks were made public), you would be RTU'd (returned to unit).^x Inevitably, some did not enjoy the experience, and all courses suffered some degree of attrition.



If some felt that there seemed no point to what they were doing, the courses themselves had inherent difficulties stemming from both syllabus and teaching staff. Some of the teachers spoke a type of Russian current before 1914, while the British teachers had had no opportunity to visit the Soviet Union to learn up-to-date Russian. Others, however fluent, were not native speakers. The Russian language had changed and it is always the spoken language that changes most. Despite making *kursanty* read Soviet novels, the prudishness of Soviet censorship meant they did not encounter the liveliest colloquial language and they were not taught it. This was a 'Russia of the past'... a long way away from the contemporary political and social realities of the USSR in the 1950s' as Hilary Footitt puts it.^{xi}

How much anti-Soviet propaganda was there?

Hingley and Bolsover were no Commie-lovers, but did not view indoctrination as part of the syllabus.^{xii} However, with a staff comprising Russians, Poles and émigrés from the Baltic States, including, it was rumoured in Basil Cousins' intake, some ex-members of certain Soviet establishments, it is hardly surprising that the general political outlook was anti-Soviet. With instructors strictly enjoined to keep to the job in hand, there were relatively few

lapses into political or personal anecdote. But there might be comment. Clifford German relates that Mietek Gigiel-Melechowicz entered the room in March 1953, declaring: ‘Stalin has died aged 72 years, 2 months, four days - 72 years, 4 months and 2 days too long’ [Elliott and Shukman:94]. And according to one RAF *ex-kursant* one of the teachers in his 1956 or 57 intake took a group of off-duty students to observe a meeting of the Polish government in exile in South Kensington to show them that it still existed.

By contrast, there is one report from the first course of a possibly pro-Soviet instructor. Alan Gosling’s female tutor told them to listen to Moscow radio (good aural practice), but they were startled when their names were read out on air as members of the supposedly secret course. They assumed she was a KGB plant. There is no doubt that the KGB knew about the JSSL programme as a whole. Hingley was dissatisfied with some of the teachers he started with, and this lady may have been one to whom he said goodbye.

With all that work was there any time to do anything else?

Although some *ex-kursanty* felt that it was all work and no play, most managed to have a good time, some even describing it as a great time. ‘They had looked forward somewhat miserably to a largely wasted two years but instead found themselves being taken into an almost entirely unknown, intellectual world.’ [Mills]. After a short time, those from the different Services bonded, and it is remarkable how many remain in contact with each other still, or take part in reunions (the FRINTONS for navy *kursanty* and the ENLC for all those who were at Crail). ‘We had a splendid social life’ remarks Basil Cousins (1953). But it was not just social. As Brian Jones remarks: ‘for anyone who responded positively to the experience (of language learning FW), it was an enormously enjoyable thing to be doing when stories about the service life of contemporaries elsewhere seemed unbearably grim’. The demand of classes and the pressure of homework was not so great that it did not allow for the production of plays, whether the renowned production by Course A of ‘Boris Godunov’ in Russian with the Tsar played by Peter Woodthorpe, pantomimes or burlesque performances in which, according to Hingley, the students dressed up as their teachers. One such event was the panto written by Peter Hill and Will Ryan which was put on at their quarters in Queens Gate Terrace and ran for two nights. Using well-known tunes, *inter alia* it poked fun at the lecturers. Peter Hill writes: ‘three of us dressed as Wrens and trained by Tony Hoare (now Professor of Computing), sang “We are from Queens Gate, good girls are we, we are very proud of our virginitee, we take all precautions, against all abortions, for we are the



The cast of the 1957 panto, including Peter Oppenheimer (later Oxford economics don) in RAF uniform and moustache, Rick Pollock (later Prof. of Russian) in admiral’s uniform, Peter Hill (later BBC political correspondent) at the back with a hat, blacked up, Peter Underwood, furthest right (later teacher at University College School)

Queens Gate girls!” Peter Oppenheimer (now an Oxford economics don) sang a Noel Coward song at the piano, and the whole thing was set in the jungle of a desert island... There was a plot of sorts, and the hero (Rick Pollock, later interpreter for Mrs Thatcher with Gorbachev) finished up with the girl.’ It was a rare opportunity to socialize with the Wrens who lived on the other side of the building. For details of an earlier pantomime, see Appendix I.

London beckoned to these lively and intelligent young men, who needed a release from the unrelenting pressure of the course. Norman Bancroft talks of debating current affairs, playing various sports including rowing on the Serpentine, but adds that ‘for an 18 year-old provincial lad, sampling the delights of the capital city for the first time ... was a personal Mecca’. He adds that he might have got better marks if he had ‘spent less time enjoying the attractions of London’. With some money in their pockets they were able to go to the theatre and enjoy the cultural offerings of London. Brian Jones remarks: ‘Once the season came, there were regular visits to the Albert Hall across the park for Promenade Concerts. To have such delights on our doorstep was unbelievable good fortune’. Others just enjoyed relaxing in the coffee bars and pubs of South Kensington. Certain places, like the Society for Cultural relations with the USSR were out of bounds, and one intake was instructed to avoid Collet’s Russian bookshop (in case KGB agents got hold of them). But judging by the programme for a pantomime of 1953, most were well aware of what Collet’s was like, as a tongue-in-cheek advertisement declares: Collect’s. Russian Tract Shop. Bibles. Objets de piete. Missiles. Everything for the Religiously Inclined.

All the nice girls love a sailor

Kursanty did not generally wear uniform when attending classes, but they were expected to dress respectably in a jacket, shirt and tie plus hat. John Roberts on Course A was issued with clothes including a trilby, all surplus demob clothing issue from 1945-46, but later, as Andrew McNab and Will Ryan indicate, you could wear your own clothes. There was one exception to the no-uniform policy in the last few years of the London JSSL, when *kursanty* were no longer midshipmen (officers) but upper yardmen, as Will Ryan relates: one student in the group designated as being on duty that day had to be in uniform which was the square rig, i.e. bell bottomed trousers, square collar, round sailor’s hat. Those whose turn it was were bemused to find their shoulder constantly tapped by ladies on the tube. They were not aware of the popular belief that it is lucky to touch a sailor’s collar!

Apart from this one individual, it was not possible to identify *kursanty* as servicemen when travelling to and from their classes in Russell Square. They sometimes played on this, using the Russian they spent so much of each day studying. Brian Jones recounts that ‘one evening at a fairly smart pub in Shepherd Market to the south of Hyde Park a group of us was becoming increasingly voluble in the language. When closing-time came, rigidly enforced in those days, the barman, as he firmly ushered us out of the door, was heard to mutter: “Bloody Welshmen!”.’ Patrick Miller recounts that they would occasionally get off the Tube at Marble Arch and walk to Lancaster Gate through Hyde Park. ‘The trick was to see how often we were accosted by the ladies of leisure who lurked by every tree, and to find out if it made any difference if one wore a hat (it did, invitations increased by 50%)’ [Cash and Gerrard:269]. One story, possibly an urban legend of the kind that reappears in many different contexts, went the rounds among the Cambridge group.

How much contact was there with SSEES and the University?

Numbers in each intake dictated that SSEES' own accommodation was inadequate for three intakes annually of some fifty people, but there is little doubt that SSEES wanted to keep the JSSL separate from its own more lofty academic activities and the Admiralty for its part probably had no desire to have the motivation of its midshipmen undermined by contact with laid-back undergraduate wastrels. It is hard to tell how much contact there actually was. In the early years Professor Seton Watson gave lectures on Russian history over at SSEES; Ron Hingley says he learnt a great deal over the years from these lectures, so by implication they were repeated, probably over years rather than just one course (John Roberts who was on Course A recalls only one such lecture). Similarly in the early years *kursanty* made use of the University of London sports facilities, Norman Bancroft recollecting that in 1951-52 they played rugby and football on the University grounds at Motspur Park (now Fulham football club's training ground) and elsewhere in London. However, Course C also played in Hyde Park, though this might have been because of its proximity.

Nonetheless there existed at one point some sense of attachment to SSEES; one RAF *kursant*, who was on the course in 1956 or '57 says that they owned SSEES scarves (black, gold and pale blue). He still owns his. That cohort at least must have been sufficiently aware of the college as an undergraduate institution to make the effort to visit the official suppliers and buy a scarf. Geoffrey Elliott on the last course in 1958 who was transferred to London from Cambridge when that course closed does not remember any contact with SSEES – it was just language classes and more language classes, tests and more tests. The facilities of the university such as the Senate House refectory were never made known to them. It was a mid-morning coffee and a bun at the (then much smaller) refreshment hut in Russell Square, with lunch in the Air Ministry canteen in Kingsway, or the ABC in Southampton Row if it was raining [Elliott].



The Impact of JSSL on SSEES

With conscription about to end, the decision was taken to close down the JSSL programme, and for the War Office to set up its own Russian-language programmes.^{xiii} SSEES was 'not altogether sorry', as the official history politely puts it, since it allowed 'the School to devote more time to its normal academic work' [Roberts and Bartlett: 46].

But there certainly was a large impact. Inevitably, the teaching methods and particularly the materials from JSSL were recycled. Students in the 1960s remember a blue textbook of translation passages, the red dictionary, copies of *Two Captains* and the edition of *Crime and Punishment* with stresses, all with JSSL stamped inside the covers. Undergraduates, including a qualified teacher familiar with the latest pedagogical theories about effective learning, objected to the rote learning of lists of words with irregular stress patterns. For a few years the Russian department attempted to replicate the regime of fortnightly tests but came up against resistance, passive or even active. Students could not be easily RTU'd and SSEES did not want to lose them anyway.

The effect on the student body came less through the interpreters' course (few subsequently enrolled for a BA at SSEES) than from the ex-JSSL students at SSEES in the late 1950s

and early 1960s. These students brought with them the activities they had enjoyed at Bodmin or Crail. Many had learnt Russian songs from the *Samovar* songbook and once at SSEES happily joined the Slavonic choir, led by the jolly Dr Harry Leeming. It flourished for many years through the 1960s and 70s (and sporadically thereafter). SSEES students also followed the practice of putting on Russian plays; in 1959 and 1960 these were directed by Dmitry Makaroff who had worked at Bodmin and Crail. And in the early 1960s, revues satirising SSEES staff proved very popular at Students' Union social events.

The Junior Common Room seemed to those of us straight from school to resemble a NAAFI (as we imagined it), predominantly male with people sitting around discussing what they had got up to in Berlin or wherever. JSSL was a shared experience. Hence the editor of the undated number of the SSEES student magazine *Squeak* from 1960 or 1961 pleads the indulgence of his readers: 'it is very difficult to please such a critical public', he says, 'nurtured on such classics as *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment* or "John and Mary" (a reference to the less than exhilarating reader *Ordinary People* by Elizaveta Fen that was standard early fare at Coulsdon, Bodmin and Crail).

And the famous little red Russian-English dictionary that it was reputed Bryan Toms had learnt from cover to cover was so well known at SSEES that it furnished each day's useless word, to be passed around. What is the Russian for 'a dismounted Cossack in the Central Asian steppes' or 'a low sofa covered by a carpet'? How should you translate '*vret kak sivyi merin?*' (lit: 'he lies like a blue-gray gelding' here colourfully rendered as 'he lies like a gas meter' - SSEES students were prone to startle their friends by casually employing this strange idiom). Indeed the same edition of *Squeak* had a little quiz called 'Know your Red Dictionary':

'Give the Russian for (it instructed):

- a) To make a road of brushwood across marshy ground
- b) Vain bluster on the part of an erring communist
- c) Illegal summer outing of revolutionaries in capitalist states
- d) Rats!
- e) Over the left
- f) Don't you wish you may get it!

The compiler added: All one-word answers: d, e and f are the same word believe it or not!

Kursanty move on

By the time the servicemen had completed their JSSL Interpreter course and follow-up training in military/naval/air force technical vocabulary, little time remained of their two-year period of conscription. Some never got to use their Russian skills. A number stayed on the reserve list (RNR) for many years, undergoing training, including intelligence courses at the Admiralty. They might be summoned to interpret on specific occasions, such as visits of British warships to Soviet ports and vice versa, or fishery protection duties, or joined an interrogation unit [Peter Hill].^{xiv} But this was far from being the end of the impact of the *kursant* experience. It is a common view of the survivors that they really learnt how to work at JSSL, finding university a doddle after that. Hingley writes: 'I think we broke the pain barrier with focussed application to study, and sometimes think that ours was the mental equivalent of an SAS or Royal Marine training course'.

Some chose to study Russian; in the mid to late 50s numbers swelled dramatically in the university departments offering courses in Russian. SSEES was no exception. In the academic year 1959-60 it is likely that at least 75% of those studying Russian had learnt it in the forces, mainly as translators. You could tell who they were by the speed with which they could reel off numbers in Russian.

One took a Russian-related path with a difference: Geoffrey Prime, who lasted only three months at SSEES, but returned to Russian later in his RAF career, subsequently became a Soviet spy. Jeremy Wolfenden, by contrast, became a British spy while working in Moscow as the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent, where he was blackmailed by the KGB.

Whether *kursanty* chose to pursue Russian further or went off to university to study all manner of subjects and/or enter unrelated professions, the country had fostered a body of highly intelligent people with a deep love of Russian culture and the language itself. No complete list of those who attended the course at SSEES exists. The most famous names among the 4000-4,500 JSSL participants like Sir Eddie George, Dennis Potter, Michael Frayn, Sir Peter Hall, Alan Bennett, the poet D. M. Thomas and the historian Sir Martin Gilbert were at Cambridge, but the SSEES course produced many who shone in varied walks of life. What the SSEES course, like its Cambridge counterpart, delivered in particular was a supply of future academics in the Russian field, ready for the expansion of Russian in UK universities in the second half of the 1960s: Antony Cross (Cambridge), Charles Drage (SSEES), Antony Hippisley (St Andrews), Gareth Jones (Bangor), Robin Milner-Gulland (Sussex), Will Ryan (SSEES and Warburg Institute), Mike Shotton (Oxford), Michael Waller (Manchester) and Marcus Wheeler (Belfast) are just some who did the London course. Others became school masters helping the development of Russian teaching in schools in the 1960s. Many chose a different path elsewhere in academia, or, like the actors Jeffry Wickham and Peter Woodthorpe as well as the artist Patrick Procktor RA, in the arts. Many have written books, including autobiographies, worked in television, radio, theatre and film, become ambassadors, senior civil servants, lawyers, businessmen and scientists.^{xv} Some would have followed their career path whether they had been on the interpreters' course at SSEES during National Service or not, but for others the year in London changed their lives. And all of them remember this as an extraordinary period of their lives.

APPENDIX I

Since writing this essay Peter Hill has sent me a copy of the programme for 'Sadko, or There is No Place like JSSL', performed on November 26th, 1953 in the Assembly Hall at the Institute of Education. Written by Jeremy Wolfenden and Gerald Howell, the action switches from the 14th to the 20th century as can be seen from roles such as Patriarch of the Masaryk Hall, a character called Bayswater (a reference to their accommodation in Sussex Square), 'Neobyknovennye liudi' (a reference to the infamous reader) as well as midshipmen extras. There are familiar names in the cast, like Boris Thomson, later a lecturer at SSEES, and jokes aplenty: Eunuch played by K Sozhaleniyu (Russ. =U. N. Fortunately). 'Are you feeling Tired? Depressed? Nervy? Irritable? Constipated? Is it surprising?'

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Mrs. Southwood's SAILORS' REST</p> <p>in the basement of 47, Russell Square</p> <p>Service with a smile!</p> <p>Genuine Night Club Atmosphere Finest Bloomsbury Cuisine</p> | <p>COLLECT ' S</p> <p>Russian Tract Shop</p> <p>Bibles</p> <p>Objets de piété</p> <p>Missiles</p> <p>Everything for the religiously inclined</p> |
|--|--|

Licensed by the London County Council as not
suitable for adult audiences.
In accordance with the requirements of the Lord
Chamberlain, the public may leave at the end of
the performance.

A R A N K P R O D U C T I O N

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Are you feeling -- Tired? Depressed? Nervy? Irritable? Constipated? Is it surprising?</p> | <p>Our next production:</p> <p>S A D K O</p> <p>O N I C E</p> <p>CinepanoramaScope Sovcolor! Smogcolor! Dogcolor!</p> <p>3-D Smells.</p> |
|--|--|

PROGRAMME: Price 6d.

S A D K O

or

There's No Place Like J.S.S.L.

A PANTOMIME-

Words and Lyrics by

Jeremy Wolfenden and Gerald Howell

Music by

Rimsky-Korsakoff, Verdi, Bizet, Gounod,
Khachaturian, and Stinker Murdoch.

in the Assembly Hall
Institute of Education
London University.

November 26th., 1953. 7.30 p.m.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|----------------------------|
| Cast in order of appearance:- | | Scene 1. | Novgorod |
| Announcer | John Edmunds | Scene 2. | The Bar |
| Chorus:- | | Scene 3. | The Red Sea |
| Peasants | David Bolton Paul Banks Boris Thomson | Scene 4. | Sarai: the Prince's Palace |
| Peasant Women | Colin Tilney Michael Bird Malcolm Brown | Scene 5. | Novgorod |
| Sadko | Gerald Howell | Produced by Democratic Committee Meetings, and general squabbling. | |
| Bayswater | Charlier | Stage Managed hardly at all. | |
| The Baron | John Cox | Choreography by Chance. | |
| Waiter | Bob Scott | At the Piano: Derek Hopwood. | |
| Tomski the Tumbler | Cooper Harding | Technical Manager: Mr. Jay, late of O.U.D.S. | |
| Hall Porter | Andrew Sample | Electrician and General Effects: Sean Massey. | |
| Patriarch of the Masaryk Hall | Robert Cassen | Costumes by Nathan and R.N. Slops. | |
| Monk | Martin Goldsmith | Wigs by Nathanwigs. Mr. Hope's hair is his own. | |
| Neobiknovennia Lioudi | Robin Hope Michael Connock | Properties constructed in the Theatre Workshops under the supervision of Mr. Jay. | |
| Lioubava | Richard Samuel | Scenery painted by Richard Samuel. | |
| Princess of the Sea | T.P. Devonsire Jones | Bits and pieces by Stage Properties, Ltd. | |
| An Eunuch | K. Sozhaleniyu | Umbrella by Zontik. | |
| Ooan, Prince of Sarai | Jeremy Wolfendân | Creme-de-Menthe by OLEOSMARI Hair Products, Ltd. | |
| Interpreter | Mick Duffy | In the interests of public hygiene all lavatory brushes used in the performance have been supplied by Woolworth's. | |
| Nicotine, a wizard | Martin Clay | Malcolm Brown is not a pupil of the Italia Conti Stage School. | |
| Bird of Happiness | Joe Harvey | John Edmunds appears by permission of the Muswell Hill Arts Group. | |
| Midshipmen, Soldiers, etc. | | The Interpreter appears by permission of the Director of Studies, J.S.S.L., London. | |
| Time: The 14th. and 20th. centuries. | | Prince Ooan appears by permission of the Patriarch. The Patriarch appears by Divine Permission. | |



Course C Rugby Team (courtesy of Brian Jones)

List of informants

Bancroft, Norman, RAF

Cousins, Basil, RN

Doughty, Jack, RAF regular

Gosling, Alan, RN
 Elliott, Geoffrey, Intelligence Corps
 Hill, Peter, RN
 Jones, Brian T., RN
 Jones, Gareth, RN
 McNab, Andrew, RN
 Roberts, John C. Q., RAF
 Ryan, W. R., RN, 1957
 Watson, Keith, RN
 Wright, Fred, RN
 Other *ex-kursanty* who wish to remain anonymous, as well as Malcom Brown and Clifford German whose remarks are taken from Cash and Gerrard or Elliott and Shukman.

Reading list:

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Elliott, Geoffrey and Harry Shukman 2002. *Secret Classrooms: An Untold Story of the Cold War*. St Ermin's Press: London

Footitt, Hilary 2011. "Russia of the mind": Languages in the Cold War'. In: Feldner, H., Gorrara, C. and Passmore, K. (eds.), *The lost decade? The 1950s in European History, Society and Culture*. Cambridge Scholars: Newcastle upon Tyne, pp. 101-17.

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<http://www.royalnavyresearcharchive.org.uk/JSSL.htm#.VNDLOtKsVBI>. A concise account focussing on the numbers involved, dropout rates etc

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Vinen, Richard 2014. *National Service: A Generation in Uniform, 1945-63*. London: Allen Lane

ⁱ I am extremely grateful to the former JSSL students and in particular to Basil Cousins and his

comrades who made me aware of the London JSSL as well as to Dennis Mills, the compiler of an archive of all the reminiscences and material relating to JSSL and Peter Hill the archivist for the FRINTONS. I also received help from my old friend, ex-Craill Pete Seagrave.

ⁱⁱ Names are of informants, both those who I contacted personally and those from the archive maintained by Dennis Mills. They are listed at the end of this article. Other informants' testimony is taken from the books by Elliott and Shukman, and by Cash and Gerrard.

ⁱⁱⁱ In their testimony some *ex-kursanty* describe 8 Sussex Square and Queens Gate Terrace as HMS *President*. This is technically incorrect. Everyone in the Navy has to be attached to a ship (or building designated as one), and for *kursanty* it was HMS *President*, which was an accounting base in London administering their pay and service records. Nonetheless, leaving the building in the morning was described using naval terminology.

^{iv} I am grateful to Dr Jane Grayson for bringing this document to my attention and helping me track it down, and to Professor Roger Bartlett for letting me have sight of it.

^v Matthews was Head of Department, Bertha Malnick was a Reader, Grigory Nandriş and Reginald de Bray were historical linguists with little experience in teaching elementary Russian. Literature was taught by Nina Brodiansky (appointed 1942), F. F. Seeley (1943), and Richard Hare (1949). The latter was appointed after Hingley but to a full lectureship as opposed to Hingley's Assistant Lectureship. Hingley would only have become a Lecturer in 1951 - early promotion was not the order of the day in the Bolsoverian era.

^{vi} Perhaps the most extreme example of this was when the Noble Committee visited the School in 1971 and met the professors and readers who complained about the acute shortage of funds placing a serious brake on developments of any kind. They were told that SSEES regularly returned some of its grant to the UGC each year! The episode encapsulates both Dr Bolsover's famous penny-pinching where public funds were concerned, and his insistence on secrecy as well as control over decision making. Hingley fought with Bolsover over both control of the course and his own pay. Given university pay in the early fifties, Hingley was relatively well-rewarded for his role, especially after his success forced Bolsover to double the supplement to his salary from £250 to £500 pa, though he didn't think so.

^{vii} Heads of courses included Michael Futrell (future academic Russianist and SSEES alumnus), John Nicholson, John Warne, Mark Petheram, John Richardson, *ex-SSEES kursant* John Roberts, later Director of the GB-Russia Association and David Rundle (worked at GCHQ), Peter Norman (later SSEES member of staff) and Bryan Toms who took over from Hingley.

^{viii} Others included Mrs Ivanova, singled out by Hingley as the most capable and responsible of his émigré teachers and praised for her teaching by Norman Bancroft, Mrs Ivashova, Mr Kononowicz (a Polish specialist in military vocabulary), Mrs Movshovich, Miss Alexander, Irina Wolf and the relatively easy-going Tanya Knupfer, whose husband was involved in émigré politics. Mr Malhomme who taught at Craill had briefly taught at SSEES.

^{ix} Dennis Mills says that on the translators' course they got a fortnight at Easter and in August or one of those periods plus Xmas/New Year. It is likely that it was more or less the same on the SSEES course. SSEES itself would have been closed for nearly a fortnight over Christmas and New Year. That many remember the course as unrelenting toil is hardly surprising given how hard they had to work.

^x This was a special problem for the Navy as the midshipmen had been commissioned at the start of their courses. One could hardly be reduced to the lower deck (sent back to the translator course), because this kind of punishment was used for serious offences such as striking a rating or running a boat aground. So RTU did not work, and those who failed became cipher officers and were dispersed across the world, two to ships in action of Korea, one to Singapore, one to the Persian Gulf, etc. In c. 1955 the problem was resolved by giving navy interpreters the status of either acting POs or upper yardmen (i.e. fast track to a commission) and then commissioning on a successful completion of the course. My thanks to Dennis Mills for this information.

^{xi} Even in the early 1960s students at SSEES were being taught the pronunciation current in pre-Revolutionary Russia, known as the old Moscow norm. Students speculated about the appearance of this elderly Muscovite called Norm. Was he perhaps a relative of lecturer Peter Norman?

^{xii} Academic liaison via Naky Doniach and the moderating committee ensured that the same policy was in force in the other centres.

^{xiii} For many years at Beaconsfield but more recently at the DCLC at Shrivenham, where Russian teaching, threatened with cuts in 2011, is now expanding to reflect the MOD's views of perceived need in the current political climate [Avery 2016].

^{xiv} On the role played by midshipmen interpreters after their training see Cash and Gerrard:272-90.

^{xv} For an entertaining account of the ways in which various former naval coders used their Russian in later years see ch.14 of Cash and Gerrard.