

Eisenstein and Homintern

Anthony Lane

A recent London exhibition at the GRAD gallery highlighted the enduring appeal of a great Russian iconoclast, while a path-breaking new book situates Eisenstein's creative adventures in a broader context.

Gregory Woods has written an accessible, erudite and often amusing 'poet's book', which casts images 'on the reader's visual imagination, rather than persuade by linear argument'. Its mainspring encompasses the prejudice and suspicion inherent in homophobia, reflected in a poor if originally camp joke which spread to include some British gents who spied for the Soviet Union during the 1930s as forming a gay conspiracy or 'Homintern'. This was a double calumny on homosexuality and on international communism. The Communist International, or Comintern, dated back to 1919, and parties that wished to be admitted had to meet Lenin's 21 communist obligations.

Loyalty to the Comintern overrode all other commitments. So it was that the Cambridge communists included Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt and James Klugmann, three gay men, plus bisexual Donald Maclean and heterosexual Kim Philby. Not that the Soviet affiliations of these five and others were necessarily mutually known. After Cambridge, Klugmann had the job of recruiting John Cairncross, 23 years old, who had started work at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1937. The NKVD shrewdly chose the openly Communist Klugmann for the task, who was thought to be a more socially appealing to the modest Cairncross than Maclean, Burgess and other posh personages. Subsequently, during the Second World War, Cairncross spied at Bletchley Park, and the decoded intelligence on Nazi war plans in southern Russia that he passed to his Soviet minder probably altered the course of the fighting

there. Defeat on the Eastern Front preceded defeats of Nazi Germany elsewhere. Cairncross, the ‘fifth man’, was ‘straight’, married twice and, like Klugmann, doesn’t figure in Homintern’s extensive index.

That these young men, and some women, became communists at Cambridge reflected the circumstances of the time. In the late 1920s and ’30s, there was already a substantial anti-fascist movement in response to developments in Italy; and anti-imperialist sentiment railed against the conduct of the British and others in faraway China. The defeat of the General Strike in 1926, and the misery and desperation it engendered in mining and industrial communities across Britain, was deepened by the Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Depression. While Capitalism was collapsing, the Soviet Union was industrialising and collectivising its vast agriculture. The grass looked altogether greener, and principled young people risked all by committing themselves to spy for the Soviet Union.

The slur sometimes entailed in ‘homintern’ turns on conflating sexuality with ‘treachery’ as, for example, in Andrew Boyle’s hatchet job, *The Climate of Treason*, published in 1979. In a characteristically infomative note, Woods writes:

‘The spy books often pre-empt questions about the (un)trustworthiness of homosexual men by describing homosexuality in entirely negative terms. For instance, Andrew Boyle speaks of “the sad pleasures of sodomy” with specific reference to the exuberantly cheerful Guy Burgess; and characterises the “two most obvious weaknesses” of Donald Maclean as follows: “the first, an urge to drink himself into a stupor when depressed; the second and more repelling, a desire, in that condition, to consort with homosexuals”.’

Boyle had interviewed Klugmann shortly before his death, who told him of the thrill at being involved in left-wing politics in Cambridge and Paris in the 1920s and 30s: ‘It was a splendid time. The young can’t begin to understand our sense of exhilaration and adventurous freedom.’ Their encounter is recounted in *The Shadow Man* (p.239) by Geoff Andrews (see *Spokesman* 132).

Woods ranges across continents, hemispheres and latitudes. He visits Harlem in the 1930s (‘The New World’), where some young women found lesbian love, sometimes in exile from Europe and elsewhere, and Federica Garcia Lorca ‘witnessed the Wall Street Crash in person’. He disentangles Henry Miller’s homophobic comments on visiting Paris in the 1930s:

‘One of the most famous of these American consumers of Parisian pleasures was Henry Miller. Prolifically engaged as he was, however, in what the city had to offer by way of heterosexual delicacies, his view of homosexual life in Paris

was fragmentary and only grudgingly acknowledged. Of a dance hall he might observe: “There were three or four whores at the bar and one or two drunks, English, of course. Pansies, most likely”.’

Woods has a sharp eye for northern homosexuals accounts of southern love and vice versa. Russia receives generous and informative coverage.

Sergey Eisenstein, the pioneering and innovative Soviet film director, visited Europe in 1929-30, as recounted in the excerpt from *Homintern* reprinted in this issue of *The Spokesman*. Woods’ hunch is that, when travelling, Eisenstein had more opportunity to explore his homosexual impulses, while somehow managing to survive Stalin’s deadly purges on return to the Soviet Union. He was an astute, gifted and humorous artist, as ‘Unexpected Eisenstein’, the recent show at London’s GRAD gallery, makes abundantly clear. The director’s drawings for Rimbaud and Verlaine contort with desire, while those for ‘Sherlock Holmes and Nick Carter’ are altogether more straightlaced.

Eisenstein’s last film, *Ivan the Terrible*, was made in the Soviet Union during the Second World War. It was left incomplete. The director planned a third part which would, among other things, explore Ivan’s fantasies about Elizabeth I, the ‘Virgin Queen’ of England. They corresponded for more than two decades, as Elizabeth encouraged the development of trade



Elizabeth and the Boyar, Osip Nemeya: Eisenstein’s drawing for Ivan the Terrible, 1942

via the Muscovy Company, while Ivan sought strategic alliances against Poland, Lithuania and others. But Eisenstein imagined a more carnal Elizabeth, turning the head of young Charles Blount and others. Certainly, in his sketches he has her more revealingly attired than anything usually seen in the chilly Elizabethan court. Some of these amusing drawings were on display in London at the GRAD gallery's excellent show. However, rumours of Ivan's proposal of marriage to Elizabeth seem unfounded. How different Anglo-Russian relations might have been!

Eisenstein's drawings of Constance and Mellors, inspired by Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, are altogether more sensuous and less comedic. They bring to mind Lawrence's own fine artwork, rarely seen. Eisenstein read the novel whilst sailing across the Atlantic. God only knows what he made of Mellors' Notts dialect ('Tha'rt not one o' them button-arsed lasses as should be lads, are ter!'), but Eisenstein was much taken with the 'naked' and what this revealed of the couple's inner lives. Such exploration of desire parallels Woods' own interests. For neither gay nor any other culture has yet much liberated the modern world.

Interestingly, Eisenstein's *Lady Chatterley* drawings feature in a short film by Mark Cousins commissioned for the exhibition at the GRAD, in which Cousins imagines a conversation he has with Eisenstein about Lawrence. This appealing short, complete with Cousins' Irish lilt, is paired with Derek Jarman's *Imagining October*, partly filmed in Moscow in 1984, when Jarman visited the Eisenstein Museum with other British directors including Sally Potter, who later cast Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth I and Tilda Swinton as Orlando in the film of the same name.

Homintern is comprehensively indexed, referenced and illustrated. It is beautifully written, printed, bound and jacketed. Yale University Press are to be commended for making available this pioneering work at an affordable price. Gregory Woods' hat-trick of titles for Yale represents a substantial addition to scholarship, knowledge and understanding.

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