President's Report

I am writing my first editorial as BASEES President on the day of the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

The pictures of the violent suppression of the demonstrators, in particular the iconic image of a brave protester blocking the way of the tanks, have special significance to my own biography and coming of age. They are my first memory of the revolutions of 1989.

I was born in East Germany in 1977 in the city of Cottbus, about 100km south of Berlin and close to the Polish border. I became a child of the 1989 revolution. I still vividly remember watching the news showing the violent suppression on Tiananmen Square. Like most East Germans, our family regularly consumed the news broadcasts of the main West German news channel. I was shocked by what I saw, and my parents’ reaction to these events fundamentally challenged my youthful belief in the legitimacy and righteousness of the state I inhabited. At school I made the mistake of openly defending the Chinese students, whose actions had been denounced by the East German government. I expressed my disagreement (and by extension, my parents’ also) with the Chinese state’s brutal response in one of our regular classroom discussions of current political events. The teacher in charge of the lesson, being responsible for maintaining and reasserting the official party line (which supported the military intervention and use of force), vocally reprimanded me so strongly that I ended up spending the rest of the lesson crying behind a curtain by the classroom window.

A few weeks later, in summer 1989, our family went on holiday to Hungary. Each morning I saw a few more empty tents at the campsite, belonging to people who had decided to flee the Eastern bloc via the Austrian-Hungarian border. This was never an option for my family. But in the autumn and winter of 1989-1990, I participated in the Monday demonstrations with my parents in my hometown, witnessing how the demands for radical reform of the system, i.e. ‘We are the people!’ rapidly changed to demands for revolution, i.e. ‘We are one people!’. Looking back at this time, I can see myself going through this process: in spring 1989, I was still a fairly stalwart and happy Thälmann Pioneer; by the autumn, I was on the streets with my parents shouting ‘We are the people!'; by spring 1990, I was handing out leaflets and putting up posters for the Allianz für Deutschland, a centre-right alliance of parties which won the first free elections to the Volkskammer; in October 1990, I celebrated the unification of Germany.

1989, the reunification of Germany, the European integration process that followed it and the cherished Freedom of Movement that came with it, opened up opportunities to people of my generation that we never dared to dream about. It is no overstatement to say that without the events of 1989, I would not be writing these lines as BASEES President today. Thus it was a real honour for me to chair, as my first presidential duty, the 2019 BASEES Conference keynote on ‘Witnessing the Collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union’ to mark the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The discussion of the events of 1989 and their legacy with Timothy Garton Ash (Professor of European Studies at the University of Oxford), Bridget Kendall (Master of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, and former BBC Diplomatic Correspondent in Moscow and Washington) and Jens Reich (scientist and former Civil Rights Campaigner in the GDR) was illuminating, but also poignant, given the recent rather regressive developments in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, just weeks into my term, I find myself writing yet another BASEES letter (something that my predecessor Judith Pallot warned me would quickly become a far too regular duty), protesting the illegitimate and regressive measures taken by Hungary’s Orbán government to impose state control over scholarly intuitions and...
reduce freedom for scholarly inquiry and teaching. After the outrageous attacks against the Central European University and against gender studies as a discipline, we were particularly shocked to learn about the forced closure of the 1956 Institute, a historical research institute on the 1956 Hungarian revolution headed by Dr János Rainer.

The 1956 Institute will now be incorporated into the Veritas Historical Research Institute, a very recent establishment which is closely aligned with the historical views of the Orbán government. On behalf of BASEES members, I would like to express our firm solidarity with Dr János Rainer and all members of his Institute. Dr Rainer bravely took part in the BASEES regional conference in Budapest in December 2016 in a climate of increasing government interference into academia. Two years later, he took part in an inspiring keynote panel on ‘Remembering and Forgetting the post-war revolutions in Eastern Europe’ at the BASEES 2018 Annual Conference. Our message to our colleagues at the 1956 Institute is that BASEES will continue to welcome them warmly at its conferences, where they will have unconstrained opportunities to engage in critical discourse on all aspects of the historical study of the 1956 Hungarian revolution and its legacy.

As many of the values we have taken for granted are being questioned again on these shores, in Europe and beyond, BASEES as a scholarly community organisation will stand firm to defend academic freedom and provide an inclusive environment for scholarly endeavours. Even so, as a community of scholars we are not yet quite where we aspire to be in terms of diversity and inclusivity. It is rather shocking that only our recent move to Robinson College has enabled us to accommodate delegates with children at our annual conference (Fitzwilliam College did not allow children to stay in college accommodation). Next year we will also provide small bursaries for delegates with children to help them arrange private childcare during parts of the conference. Progress has clearly been made, but as the session by the BASEES Women’s Forum, led by the Eurasian, East & Central European Studies Women Academics Forum (EECES WAF), vigorously highlighted, there is still plenty of work to be done to overcome deeply embedded structural imbalances and ensure fairness, openness and equality of opportunity in our field. Nor does this apply only to gender issues. Therefore we have decided to make diversity and inclusion the special focus of the BASEES 2020 conference. As usual we will welcome panel and paper proposals on all subjects also covered by the association. However, we wish to use next year’s conference to discuss and reflect critically on issues affecting ethnic and racial minorities, members of the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups in the field of Slavonic and East European Studies through a number of keynote and special events. So please get involved! Send us your ideas for special events, roundtables or workshops, and, of course, send us your paper and panel proposals. They can be submitted at www.basees2020.org.

Matthias Neumann

Academic Background:

M.A. Modern History, Social and Economic History, and Political Science; Dresden University of Technology, Germany (2004)

Ph.D. Modern History; University of East Anglia (2008)
AGM Report (2018-19)

From former President
Judith Pallot (pictured)

This is the last report I shall make to the Association as President. I have been fortunate for the whole duration of my Presidency to have been supported by a very strong committee that has shouldered an enormous amount of work while finding time to consider and launch a variety of new initiatives.

The conference remains the Association’s defining activity, and it has gone from strength to strength. Attendee numbers have risen to 500, with a corresponding increase in the number of parallel panels. This has brought greater choice, but also the frustration of clashes. There may well come a moment in the near future when the membership might want to review the maximum size of the Conference. A task I have particularly enjoyed, as President, has been suggesting participants for keynote panels and speakers. I have tended to favour ‘roundtables’ rather than the sole speaker format. This has, of course, increased the cost of keynote, and I hope that members agree that the extra expense has been worth it. We have been treated to some interesting and exhilarating roundtable sessions. The format is not fixed and I look forward to my successor’s approach.

During 2018-19, the committee has given serious attention to future-proofing and re-locating our annual conference. Planning for its temporary move to Glasgow in 2021 has begun. Matthias Neumann and I visited Glasgow for the preliminary planning meeting in March; our meeting with members of the university involved in Russian, East European and Eurasian studies dispelled any doubts we may have had about moving away from Cambridge, where we have held the annual conference for the past thirty years. There are risks associated with the change in location, but we are now confident that they are outweighed by the opportunities. We certainly are not abandoning Cambridge for good as, depending upon the outcome of 2021, the plan is for bi- or tri-annual re-location of the conference. This year, we have the novelty of holding the conference in a new Cambridge venue, Robinson College.

One of the long-standing activities of BASEES that we have continued to build upon in 2018-2019 is financial support for study groups and for postgraduates to allow them to organise workshops or undertake research trips. The support we can give is limited by our budget, but we are growing support for our Research and Development sub-committee. The R&D sub-committee is responsible for evaluating and allocating funds for these activities; its members monitor changes in the pattern of applications and make recommendations to the committee for prioritizing the grants made.

The Women’s Forum, now entering its fifth year, has also gone from strength to strength and its roundtable is now an established feature of the annual conference. Between conferences, the WF works hard to increase diversity in our subject area by providing mentoring for women early in their careers. The Forum is anxious to encourage more women members to submit their publications for the WF prizes.

Among other new initiatives the Committee has put its weight behind in the past three years have been two Europe-based regional conferences, one in 2016 in Hungary, and one in September 2018 in Uppsala, Sweden. The Association is grateful to the group of people in Uppsala, and particularly to the Director of Uppsala University’s IREES, Claes Levinsson, who helped make this conference happen. While they continue to be financially viable, the Association would like to continue with occasional regional conferences; we welcome suggestions for possible host institutions in Europe. The aim of the regional conference initiative is to extend BASEES’s reach in Europe, not least in order to counter the perceived isolationism of the UK in the aftermath of Brexit. For much the same reason, we decided to co-opt Professor Libora Oates-Indruchova (Graz) onto the Committee to represent the interests of our EU members.

During 2018-2019 we have continued to work on the development of an Institutional Membership scheme. The purpose of the scheme is to improve the lines of communication between BASEES and regional Centres, University departments, Colleges, and other institutions and organisations with an interest in the former Soviet Union and East Central Europe in the UK; also to strengthen links with our European and other overseas colleagues. Our belief is that by acting collectively with our institutional members, BASEES will be able to enhance its contribution to the entire field of Slavonic, Eurasian and East Central European Studies, to advance training and secure funding for the next generation of scholars, while playing an active role in the national debate about matters of concern to our field. We have already secured half a dozen Institutional members, who are holding their first meeting at the 2019 conference.

These new initiatives have been possible only because of the solid foundation of core support we have from our membership, our hard-working committee members and our traditional sponsors, chief among whom is Routledge Publishers. We approach the next few years of general financial uncertainty in reasonably solvent condition thanks to careful management and to an active approach to fundraising and expanding our sponsorship base. As our organisation’s activities have extended beyond the annual conference, calls upon committee members’ time have increased. Hence the time has probably come to overhaul the committee structure so that the number of officers and ordinary members and the division of labour between them reflects the new tasks of the Association. Even more important than any constitutional changes we might initiate is the ongoing renewal of the committee itself, with young academics from different parts of the UK and Europe representing the full breadth of disciplinary interests and geographical regions our association embraces.

Judith Pallot (pictured)
Tell us about yourself – what brought you to Russian Studies?

Although Russia fascinated me from an early age, I came to Russian Studies fairly late, and originally from a Victorianist perspective. As an undergraduate and during my M.Phil, I became interested in the history of Russia's image in the West, especially in Britain – how Russia has served historically as a mirror of the Western self, and how Russians themselves have interacted with and helped shape Western representations of their country. In part, this early attraction to Anglo-Russian history was a pragmatic choice, since I had only a smattering of Russian at the time, but it has remained a major focus of my research.

When writing my M.Phil dissertation on Anglo-Russian cultural relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I discovered that the late-Victorian public seemed to have had an almost inexhaustible appetite for bloodcurdling stories about the Siberian exile system, and that the literary sources for this were quite extensive. Like many people, I suspect, I had assumed that the Siberia's reputation as a foreboding place of exile was (at least in the West) an almost inexhaustible appetite for bloodcurdling stories about the Siberian exile system, and that the literary sources for this were quite extensive. Like many people, I suspect, I had assumed that the Siberia's reputation as a foreboding land of exile was (at least in the West) a product of the Cold War; I was thus surprised to find that it actually predated the twentieth century quite significantly. One thing led to another and I ended up at UCL SSEES writing an interdisciplinary thesis on the subject (and, just as crucially, learning Russian). After completing my PhD, I taught Russian and European history for a year at Queen Mary University of London before joining the Russian department at the University of Exeter in January 2019.

What are the highlights of your academic career to date?

My career is only a few years old at the time of writing, so this is a tricky question to answer! I was lucky enough to receive a visiting fellowship at the Library of Congress (via the AHRC's International Placement Scheme) in 2014-5, which enabled me to work with the personal papers of George Kennan – a pioneering American journalist who campaigned against the Tsarist exile system, and a distant relative of his more famous 20th century namesake – in the LoC's manuscripts division for several months. A year later, just before the centenary of the Russian Revolution, I was invited by Jeff Howarth – the librarian of the Trades Union Congress collections at London Metropolitan University – to collaborate on an exhibition exploring connections between British and Russian socialists and trade unionists during 1917 and the early years of Soviet rule. This was a fascinating experience which taught me much about public engagement (and indeed British labour history). The opportunity to be involved in celebrating this centenary reminded me that there is still huge public interest in Russia, its history and culture – which should give us all hope for the future of our field. Finally, I have been very fortunate to teach some truly remarkable students over the past few years at SSEES, QMUL and now at Exeter, and to have benefited from the friendship and mentorship of equally remarkable colleagues (many of them members of BASEES).

Tell us about your current research.

Apart from the history of Anglo-Russian relations, my main interests are the Russian revolutionary movement throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Russian intellectual history. I am revising my thesis for publication as a monograph next year: it's appearing in the BASEES/Routledge series (naturally) and is provisionally titled *Inventing Revolutionary Russia: Siberian Exile and the Transnational Mythologies of Russian Radicalism*, 1825-1917. In the book, I argue that Siberia's 'carceral' mythology, once transnationally disseminated in the late nineteenth century by Polish and Russian revolutionary émigrés and through global literary networks, helped shape many Western progressives' understanding of the revolutionary struggle against Tsarism and their ideas about Russia in general. One chapter from the book appears as an article in the forthcoming *Slavonic and East European Review* (97.3).

My second project is a study of religious influences on the Russian revolutionary movement from around the time of the Great Reforms up to the collapse of Tsarism, asking why revolutionaries tended so often to frame the anti-Tsarist struggle in religious terms, how they reconciled this framing with the atheism and materialism demanded by the revolutionary programme, and how the autocratic state and Orthodox >>
Find out more here >>

in January 2020, will be hosted at
fully funded studentship, beginning
Russian-to-English literary translation
802437). This project investigates the
"RusTrans: Dark Side of Translation"
with the lead researchers on the
Department of Modern Languages
ERC-funded PhD studentship in the
Applications are invited for an
Russian Literary Translation
Fully funded PhD Studentship in

What are your plans for the
Newsletter – and your thoughts on the future of the field?

The Newsletter is clearly in good shape as things stand, so I don’t envisage deviating too much from the current format or style. As an avid Twitter user, however, I am very much looking forward to tweeting some good content from @Basees.

Book Reviews


There are no blank pages in this book. Practically every other page features a life-sized, richly coloured reproduction of a postcard from the revolutionary era of 1905, with the intervening space devoted to contextualising these images in terms of both their historical period and the intricacies of their production, distribution and use. Millions of postcards were printed during what Mathew calls the ‘bacchanalia of publishing activity’ that exploded in late 1905, lasting until 1907, when the reassertion of tight censorship and a drastic drop in demand dammed the creative tide.

In this book, Tobie Mathew, a collector himself, focuses particularly on Russian-made leftist anti-government postcards intended for Russian audiences; that is, on postcards published by the Social Democrats (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) and Socialist Revolutionaries, as well as by independent leftist printers and artists. The goal of his volume is to ‘shed new light on the dissemination of revolutionary ideas […] and the [vibrant] public sphere’ of late Imperial Russia. In doing so, Mathew reveals the manufacture, politicization and marketization of postcards to be an apt case study for Russia’s modernization. The history of the Russian postcard follows the familiar narrative of top-down state instigation in the 1860s, and subsequent privatization, which opened the door to foreign investment and left domestic enterprises at a disadvantage by the 1890s. As a sign of the growing market economy, revolutionary parties engaged in postcard production increasingly as a source of revenue rather than strictly for recruitment. The postcard also served as a social leveller as traditional class soslovie crumbled. Mass-produced at affordable prices, postcards were consumed by all social classes, from royal family members some of whom were avid collectors, to Lenin (who brought an album into Siberian exile), to peasants and workers seeking decoration, inspiration and diversion from the reproduced artworks, heroic portraits, political scenes, and satirical cartoons that appeared on the cards.

The book is divided into three parts: Part I provides an overview of the histories of postcards and revolution in Russia; Part II, a closer look at the groups and sub-genres of postcards and revolution in Russia; and Part III examines the main sub-genres of postcards and their reception. Although Mathew incorporates detailed archival work, his book is geared towards readers unfamiliar with Russia’s Revolutionary period and as such, with over 200 images, it will prove a valuable teaching resource for courses on the material and visual cultures of the late Imperial period in their political context.

Claire Knight