

Jewish Historical Studies
A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry

Review

Book review: *London through Russian Eyes 1896–1914: An Anthology of Foreign Correspondence*, trans. Anna Vaninskaya and Maria Artamonova, ed. and intro. Anna Vaninskaya

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How to cite: Glover, D. 'Book review: *London through Russian Eyes 1896–1914: An Anthology of Foreign Correspondence*, trans. Anna Vaninskaya and Maria Artamonova, ed. and intro. Anna Vaninskaya'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2024, 56(1), pp. 188–190. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2025v56.12>.

Published: 9 April 2025

Peer review:

This article has been through editorial review.

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Open access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

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London through Russian Eyes 1896–1914: An Anthology of Foreign Correspondence, trans. Anna Vaninskaya and Maria Artamonova, ed. and intro. Anna Vaninskaya (London: London Record Society and Boydell Press, 2022), ISBN 978-0-900952-02-9, xvii + 359 pp., £60.

The articles assembled in this volume were a late addition to more than fifty years of journalism devoted to laying bare the grimmer aspects of life in Britain's rapidly growing capital. Their format can largely be traced back to the publication by the *Morning Chronicle* of Henry Mayhew's letters on the London poor in October 1849; one section bears the title of Mayhew's magnum opus. Yet, in contrast to their English predecessors, the "Letters from England" commissioned by monthlies like the St. Petersburg-based *Russkoe Bogatstvo* concentrated less on pressing questions of political economy, and focused more on wider cultural issues in their attempt to identify the source of Britain's – and especially London's – modernity. An article published by the Russian writer Isaak Shklovsky on "The Working Quarter" was illustrated with statistics drawn from hard-headed social investigations by Seebohm Rowntree and Charles Booth, but the key sources for the essay were his own daily experiences as a resident of an area "with a mixed population". As an antidote to dry numbers he also drew on vivid tropes taken from fictional sources. This eclecticism reflected the sheer diversity of what Anna Vaninskaya in her introduction refers to as the "thick" journals for which Shklovsky and others wrote, miscellanies that offered "an encyclopaedic survey" of contemporary urban experience (p. 6). And more. Cheek by jowl with accounts of local schools or barrel organs and street dancing, a Russian reader might also find translations of stories by Rudyard Kipling (pp. 135–6).

Shklovsky was among the most successful of *fin-de-siècle* Russian writers, savvy enough to place his work regularly in popular British newspapers like the *Daily Mail* or the *Daily News*, and well-known among influential members of the upper echelons of English society. His pen-name "Dioneo" was taken from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, suggesting a witty, playful storyteller who frequently had the last word. But it also hid the now far more familiar surname shared with his better-known nephew, the remarkable Russian Formalist critic and novelist Viktor Shklovsky.

London through Russian Eyes explores two distinct historical moments in émigré journalism, with the year 1900 as the dividing line between them. Vaninskaya refers loosely to the first group as members of "the Shklovsky

generation". This included men like Semyon Rapoport who arrived in London in their early thirties, quickly built up a reliable network of local contacts, followed by membership of the Foreign Press Association, and permanent residence in England (p. 15). Later arrivals such as Korney Chukovsky and Samuil Marshak were typically some ten years younger than old hands like Shklovsky, felt that they lacked their predecessors' advantages, and hated having to depend on journalism for a living. Employed in Britain for a much shorter period, they returned to Russia after the outbreak of war in 1914, and soon moved into other lines of work. Indeed, by 1915 Marshak had abandoned journalism altogether, and chose instead to continue the translations of English poetry that he had begun in London, gradually establishing a reputation at home and abroad for his Russian versions of Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, and Robert Burns. He also became a well-known author and editor of children's literature and a screenwriter.

However, "generation" is among the baggiest of conceptual monsters. Did the fact that seven years elapsed between Shklovsky's entry into London and Chukovsky's own later appearance create an unbridgeable experiential divide between them? Or was it more important that Shklovsky was aged thirty-nine at the time of Chukovsky's arrival, while the latter was only twenty-one? And why did professional rivalries take the shape that they did? Since all four of these men were of Jewish descent one might have expected that their shared background would have brought them closer together, counteracting pressures from the journalistic market-place. But this seems not to have been the case.

In practice, the comparisons that can be drawn from the material presented in the volume are effectively limited to just two of these writers, Shklovsky and Chukovsky. Marshak published little and only a couple of his reports are reprinted here, while for "reasons of space" Semyon Rapoport's two pieces are reduced to brief overviews, summaries that are one or one and a half pages long at most (p. 16). Although these help to provide readers with a vivid sense of what they are missing – including some instructive parallels with Shklovsky's tendency to resort to a deliberately "half-belletristic" or novelistic approach – they also have the paradoxical effect of depriving Rapoport of a voice. This is a pity since Rapoport also published widely in British papers, went on to become both a translator of Tolstoy and Shaw, and was a sometime member of the Fabian Society (pp. 13, 16–17). For Rapoport, use of fictional devices was more a form of discretion than of embellishment, and this gave his writing

an ethical edge. When he set out to chart the decline of “Garden Terrace”, Rapoport diligently moved into one of the street’s flats, the better to capture the changing occupations, ethnicities, and mores of its struggling waves of inhabitants – and to offer a sobering final image of the life of these buildings prior to demolition. Shklovsky’s bent was very different. In a disturbing story called “Richard Kelly” (February 1905), published at the height of anti-immigrant agitation, a march of unemployed workers climaxes when demonstrators spontaneously rush into St. Paul’s Cathedral and call the clergymen “aliens” while being abused as “idlers” in their turn and seized by truncheon-wielding “bobbies”. But, as Vaninskaya observes, no evidence exists that such a ruckus ever occurred (pp. 173–5). For Shklovsky, at least, truth should never get in the way of a good story.

This is a beautifully produced volume. Immense care has been taken in the selection of nearly sixty illustrations, including several full-colour maps and posters. Anna Vaninskaya is a sensitive, informative, tough, but eminently fair-minded editor, at one point tartly explaining Shklovsky’s lapse into “cliché-ridden rhetoric” by an over-reliance on “his wide reading in the contemporary literature on . . . East End depravity” at the expense of “eye-witness testimony” (p. 120). It is a tribute to the painstaking attention she gives to the multiple historical and political contexts within which the work of these neglected writers came into being that she is able to present such a richly detailed and clear-eyed account of the complexities underpinning this fast-paced mode of reportage with all its lapses, compromises, and occasional solecisms. “I am writing in haste”, Chukovsky hurriedly tells his prospective readers in 1904 as he awaits the imminent arrival of a colleague before their visit to an evening meeting that will provide the subject of his next article (p. 109).

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