

Pushkin House Celebrates Russia on the Page

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Courtesy of Pushkin House

On June 7 the sixth annual Pushkin House Book Prize was announced at a standing-room-only awards ceremony in London.

The £5,000 prize for the best English-language non-fiction book published in 2017 about Russia was given to “The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad” (Harvard University Press) by Alexis Peri, assistant professor of history at Boston University.

A second book, “Other Russias,” (Penguin) written and illustrated by Victoria Lomasko and translated by Thomas Campbell, was given a special commendation and an award of £2,000.

The prizes were awarded by a jury of five distinguished readers and writers — by tradition four native English speakers and one English-speaking Russian citizen. This year the panel of judges was chaired by The Rt. Hon. Sir Nick Clegg (chair), former deputy prime minister, and

included Rosalind Blakesley, head of the Department of the History of Art at Cambridge University, and winner of last year's prize; Oleg Budnitsky, professor at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow; Dervla Murphy, celebrated author of travel books; and John Thornhill, innovation editor of the Financial Times.

In the spring the jury narrowed down the first list of more than 70 books to six volumes. That was a diverse set of books varying in length from under 200 pages to more than 1,100, and in genre from a classic biography to a collection of letters and drawings sent from the Gulag.

On behalf of the jury and Pushkin House, The Rt. Hon. Sir Nick Clegg, chair of the jury, called "The War Within" a "remarkable book. To have unearthed such searing, and hitherto unpublished, testimonies of the agony of the Leningrad siege is achievement enough...The book offers a genuinely new way of looking at, and understanding, a pivotal moment of Russian modern history."

Witnesses to History

"The War Within" began as a different book altogether. Alexis Peri told The Moscow Times that she had been doing research in St. Petersburg on the Siege of Leningrad, the 900-day Nazi blockade of the city that had resulted in the deaths of 1.5 million people and devastated the city.

Peri had begun recording oral histories of survivors and their children, but soon learned from librarians, archivists, scholars and families about unpublished diaries. They were held in public libraries, small archives, and, in some cases, in descendants' homes. "The biggest tip I got was to look in the former party archive, now the Central State Archive of Historical-Political Documents in St. Petersburg," Peri said. "I learned that there had been a campaign coming from the local Leningrad party organization to encourage Leningraders to keep diaries during the siege."

In the end, she found 125 diaries written by a diverse group of chroniclers. Although they varied tremendously in age, education and profession, they were united, Peri found, in their attempts to come to "intellectual grips with the siege and in where they looked for touchstones to make sense of their circumstances."

"The War Within" brings new dimensions to what seemed to be a thoroughly studied history. Peri said, "What is well known about the siege is all of the hardships, the extreme hunger, the starvation, the cold, the bombardment. I wanted to add to that a discussion of how these devastating circumstances became a font of creativity and discovery, and sparked extraordinary insights not just about being a Soviet citizen or a Leningrader, but about being a human being and the human condition more generally."

Peri finished the book with a sense of "awe, tremendous respect for the dignity, humanity, and insight of these diarists...staggered by their heroic resilience, their humanity, and their courage to record such personal and difficult experiences."

A Witness With a Paintbrush

The second book honored this year is also about the human condition — but in contemporary

Russia. “Other Russias” was given a special commendation by the judges, who cited not only its innovative form, but its accessibility to the general reader. “Lomasko's powerful use of words and sketches provides an unvarnished insight into the life of ordinary Russians living in such an extraordinary country,” Sir Nick said.

“Other Russias” is a new genre. Author and artist Viktoria Lomasko told The Moscow Times that she doesn’t work in the genre of “documentary comics or graphic novellas, but in the genre of graphic reporting. It is a matter of principle for me not to draw at home from a photo or sketch, but to immediately make a finished drawing on site.”

Her reports have the good fortune of being translated by Thomas Campbell, who knows both Lomasko and the varied “Russias” she draws and writes about. These reports show the lives of hipsters and religious zealots, skinheads and intellectuals, resigned middle-aged women and priests, and dozens of other citizens of urban and rural Russia.

For Lomasko, the award for her writing and not her art was particularly gratifying. “It felt right when I began to include texts in my work in 2008,” she said. “At the beginning of the book ‘Other Russias’ there are short commentaries to drawings, but at the end, it is full-fledged reporting.”

Summer Reading List

The annual Book Prize is just one event in the Pushkin House’s schedule of events. The organization was founded in 1954 as a meeting ground for various generations of Russian emigres. Over the decades it has developed into an independent venue to share and promote Russian culture through art exhibitions, concerts, classes, lectures, round-tables, and other cultural events with guests from Russia and other countries around the world.

The Book Prize was made possible by contributions by Douglas Smith, Stephanie Ellis-Smith, and The Polonsky Foundation.

While only in its sixth year, the prize is becoming one of the organization’s most popular and important events. Clementine Cecil, the executive director of Pushkin House told The Moscow Times that the competition “demonstrates to both Russia and the West the sheer extent of English-language scholarship on Russia, and the extent of serious, intelligent and balanced discussion of Russia in the English-speaking world.” In addition to supporting scholars, it “aims to bring about increased exchange in writing about Russia, more mutual recognition and interaction, including translations into both Russian and English,” Cecil said.

Translators and readers will be busy. In addition to the winning books, there are four other worthy contenders: “Armageddon and Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation” by Rodric Braithwaite (Profile Books); “Stalin’s Meteorologist: One Man’s Untold Story of Love, Life, and Death” by Olivier Rolin (Penguin) translated from the French by Ros Schwartz; “The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution” by Yuri Slezkine (Princeton University Press); and “Gorbachev: His Life and Times” by William Taubman. (Simon & Schuster).

For more information about these books and authors as well as other Pushkin House activities, see their [site](#).

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