

## Julian Cooper



I joined CREES in the autumn of 1968 as a Masters student. This was a turbulent time, with a student occupation of the Great Hall for over a week in my first term, an action in which several students of the Centre were actively involved, in particular the late Pete Gowan, who went on to become a nationally known political activist of the International Marxist Group.

I was fortunate in being taught Russian by Jim Riordan, who sadly died last year. It was Jim who led a CREES student group to the USSR in August 1969, my memorable first visit to Moscow, at the time a more relaxed and welcoming place than it became during the 1970s as the Brezhnev 'stagnation' took hold. Back in Birmingham I embarked on a PhD, the choice of topic being influenced by the Centre's resident mechanical engineer, John Grayson, who with characteristic enthusiasm convinced me that it was worth exploring the pre-1941 development of the Soviet machine tool industry, a decision I never regretted, as it illuminated the process of industrialisation under Stalin and introduced me to the mysteries of the Soviet/Russian defence industry, which has remained a central research interest ever since. John's premature death in December 1981 was a black day in the life of the Centre. While remembering CREES/Russian Department colleagues sadly no longer with us, I recall with affection Geoffrey Barker, Bob Smith, Moshe Lewin, Michael Glenny, Bohumila Richter, Derek Watson and the indefatigable Elisabeth Koutaissoff, who I vividly recall nimbly climbing the Athabasca glacier in the Rocky Mountains in 1974 at over 70 years of age. (Banff in the Rockies was the venue that year of the very first conference of what later became ICCEES).

It was my excellent good fortune to have as my PhD supervisor, Bob Davies. Today's doctoral students have formal research methods training, regular supervisory meetings, many forms to complete, and numerous hoops to jump through, but in those far off days thesis supervision was agreeably informal. Indeed, I had hardly any formal meetings at all but frequent informal contact, plus Bob's meticulous correction of draft chapters. In so far as I have acquired any academic skills, it is to Bob that I am deeply indebted. He taught me the importance of scholarly rigour, accurate use of sources, balanced weighing of evidence, historical awareness and avoidance of political posturing and speculation. In one respect today's students have an easier life: I wrote my 575 page thesis - no word limit in those days - on a small portable typewriter, getting through a vast quantity of Tipp-Ex.

In my view central to the success of CREES has been its commitment to a version of area studies that has stood the test of time. It was Bob Davies who from the outset established that the staff of the Centre should be strong specialists in an academic discipline, whether social science, humanities, engineering or other, knowledgeable in Russian or another language of our region, and conversant with the relevant history and culture. This approach was embodied in the ESRC's postgraduate training guidelines for area studies and was also followed in the national language-based area studies initiative, 2006-11, in particular the Centre for East European Language based Area Studies (CEELBAS), of which CREES was a founding and active member. An evaluation of the first, ESRC-funded, phase of the LBAS scheme is now underway with a report expected later this year. It is unfortunate that the transfer out of CREES of staff concerned with languages and history makes it more difficult for the Centre to participate as fully in the second round, 2012-15, funded by the AHRC.

CREES has much to be proud of during its 50 years, not least the fact that its graduates have achieved such distinction, not only in many universities in the UK and abroad, but also in business, diplomacy, the military, NGOs and the media. Being Director over many years was often challenging, at times severely so, but also a privilege. There have been setbacks as well as successes. I suspect all Directors have at one time or another thought that CREES is better appreciated externally than nearer home; *nemo propheta in patria sua*. When I joined the Centre it had 10 members of staff. Over the years numbers fluctuated, with a variable number of research fellows, peaking at 16 in c.2008. Now, regrettably, CREES has only 7.2 members of staff. But the 0.2, who will finally retire in November this year, is confident that CREES will rebuild, grow and maintain its reputation as one of the leading centres for area studies. The proposal to rename CREES, the Centre for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies, has my full support. It reflects the massive changes in the world, not least the rising power of Asia and the emergence of new Eurasian powers likely to become increasingly significant actors in the years ahead. The research agenda is rich and challenging, a veritable ocean of issue for the next 50 years: *bol'shomu korablyu – bol'shoe plavanie*.