

Vasily Aksyonov

Russian doctor who became a pro-Western writer, dissident, and playboy

Vasily Aksyonov was a symbol and leader of a generation of liberal and Westward looking writers who dominated Soviet literature in the 1960s as a result of the softening of the political regime after Stalin's death in 1953. In his writing and lifestyle he embodied the hopes of personal and political freedom in Russia after the second world war. According to his fellow writer Evgeny Popov, "Just like from Gogol's overcoat, all modern Russian literature emerged from Aksyonov's denim jacket."

He worked as a doctor but then pursued a literary career, which lasted almost half a century. He wrote 23 books, including novels, many short stories, and plays. He was a member of the Union of Soviet Writers, and honorariums from his books allowed him to lead a bohemian lifestyle in the 1960s. But in the 1970s the situation changed. Two novels, *Ozhog (The Burn)* and *Ostrov Krym (The Island of Crimea)*, were banned in the former Soviet Union. The latter, a vivid example of a genre of alternative history, is considered one of his masterpieces.

In 1979 Aksyonov and 22 other writers participated in an almanac, *Metropol*, which was censored by the Soviets but published abroad. Aksyonov decided to leave his writers' union and call himself a Russian anti-Soviet writer. The next year Aksyonov and his wife were invited to visit the United States. He was stripped of his Soviet citizenship during his tour, and his books were removed from Soviet libraries. In the US he had a weekly radio programme on Voice of America and taught Russian literature at George Mason University in Washington, DC. His new publications were unsuccessful, including *Yolk of an Egg*, the only novel he wrote in English. A pro-Westerner, he was disappointed by his US audience, which had "the amazing lack of interest in anything outside the US." A great fan of jazz since his youth, he discovered that it was long out of fashion in this country.

Enemies of the people

Aksyonov was born into a family of "nomenklatura," the powerful elite, in Kazan, Russia. His father was city mayor and a Communist Party official. His mother taught at



DENIS SINYAKOV/STRINGER

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Kazan Teachers' Institute and was then an editor at a local newspaper. In 1937 during Stalinist purges his parents were arrested as "enemies of the people" and sent to the gulag. A 4 year old Aksyonov was taken to an orphanage in the north of Russia. Aksyonov was allowed to join his mother in Magadan in 1949. He aspired to studying humanities, but his mother and stepfather, who was a prison doctor, insisted that he study medicine because doctors survive better in labour camps.

After secondary school Aksyonov started at Kazan Medical Institute. He graduated from First Leningrad Medical Institute (now the I P Pavlov Saint Petersburg State Medical University) in 1956 and wanted to become a ship's doctor, with dreams of seeing the world. Aksyonov was denied a visa and in 1957 started to work as a rural doctor in a remote hospital on Onezhskoe Lake in north Russia. There he wrote his first short novel, *Kollegi (Colleagues)*, about three romantic medical graduates. Published in 1960 in the literary journal *Yunost (Youth)*, with a circulation of about 3.5 million, it immediately made him famous. In 1958 Aksyonov moved to Moscow and worked at a tuberculosis dispensary, and he decided to give up medicine and become a professional writer.

Return to Russia

In 1989 Aksyonov returned from the United States to Moscow as a guest of a US ambassador, and in 1990 he regained his Soviet citizenship. In 1991 a mayor of Moscow presented him a luxurious apartment in a skyscraper that had been built under Stalin. He visited Russia again, especially when he retired from teaching in 2004. "I forgot [in the US] that I am a pop star," he said. His *Moskovskaya saga* (published in English as *Generations of Winter*) is

a three volume novel about a life of a family of Russian intelligentsia from 1925 to 1953. The head of the family is a professor of surgery who Aksyonov modelled on the surgeon Alexander Vishnevsky, who

advocated surgery under local anaesthesia. "When this book was promoted in America as a book on Russia, most people were uninterested. But when I started to advertise it as a novel about medical doctors, it was immediately sold out," Aksyonov recalled. The book was later adapted into a 24 part Russian television series, with Aksyonov's son Alexei as art director.

Aksyonov divided his time between Biarritz, France, where he bought a small house on the shore of the Atlantic ocean, and Moscow. One of his last novels, *Volteryantsy i Volteryanki (Voltairiens and Voltairiennes)* was awarded the Russian Booker prize.

Slang and obscenities

When asked about his ideal man, Aksyonov named Ernest Hemingway, "who, like me, was an abiding follower of Byron." According to his French interpreter, "Aksyonov took from life everything he could." Chain smoking and always dressed in style, he liked luxurious cars, good restaurants, and beautiful women. Aksyonov knew his designer clothing labels and whiskies. Sex scenes are common in his novels, full of slang, invented words, and obscenities. One of his Russian obituaries is titled "The herald of sax and sex."

In January 2008 Aksyonov had a severe ischaemic stroke while driving in Moscow and was unconscious until he died. He leaves his wife Maya Afanas'evna Karmen (born Zmeul) and his son from his first marriage, Alexei.

Boleslav Lichterman

Vasily Pavlovich Aksyonov, doctor and writer (b Kazan, 1932; q Leningrad, 1956) died Moscow 6 July 2009 from severe ischaemic stroke.

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Alexander Gordon Bearn

Former professor of medicine Cornell University, United States (b 1923; q Guy's Hospital, London, 1946; MD, FRCPed, FRCP), d 15 May 2009. Alexander Gordon Bearn ("Alick") was medical officer in the Royal Air Force during 1947-9. In 1951 he joined the Rockefeller University and Institute until 1966. He was then professor of medicine at Cornell University until 1979, vice president of Merck during 1979-88, and executive officer of the American Philosophical Society, 1997-2002. His distinguished lectures were legion, and his many awards and honours included freedom of the City of London in 1976. He edited numerous textbooks, was editor in chief of the *American Journal of Medicine* 1971-9, wrote three medical biographies, and published extensively. He was proud of his dual American and British citizenship. He leaves a wife, Margaret, and two children.

D Geraint James

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John Alexander Erskine Clark



Former general practitioner Portsmouth (b 1926; q Cambridge/St Thomas' Hospital, London, 1951; MRCP), died from acute renal failure on 30 March 2009.

John Alexander Erskine Clark converted to the 1st MB after gaining a classics scholarship to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. After time as a medical registrar and locum general practitioner, he became a partner in the inner city practice where he remained throughout his working life, retiring on the eve of the 1990 GP contract. He was clinical assistant in the alcohol dependency unit at St James' Hospital, and ship's doctor for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary on

sabbatical. In retirement he indulged his love of reading and travelled with his wife, Phyllida, for whom he later became carer. Predeceased by Phyllida in 2008, he leaves two children and four grandchildren.

Jane Clark

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Richard Charles Cumming Groves



General practitioner Ditton Priors, Shropshire (b 1952; q Liverpool 1975; MRCP), died from oesophageal cancer on 20 January 2009.

Born into an army family, Richard Charles Cumming Groves joined the Royal Army Medical Corps while at university and subsequently served in Germany with tours of Northern Ireland. After completing his short service commission, he served as regimental medical officer with the rank of major with Five Light Infantry (TA) in Shrewsbury. In 1981 he entered rural general practice in Ditton Priors, becoming an integral part of the local community. The shooting season was the highlight of his year. A very good shot, he taught his daughters to shoot, and last went out shooting three days before he died. He leaves a wife, Helen, and two daughters.

William Casey

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Suryamoni Mitra (née Devi)

Former director Sun Hospital and chair Sun Hospitals Ltd, Cuttack, Orissa, India (b 1924; q Patna, India, 1948; MD, FRCOG), d 7 June 2009.

After qualification and specialist training, Suryamoni Mitra (née Devi) studied for a research degree in Sheffield, returning to India with the MRCOG in 1959. From 1961 to 1978 she was professor of obstetrics and gynaecology before starting the Sun Clinic. This became the Sun Hospital,

a private institution nationally recognised for intern training in obstetrics and gynaecology. She introduced ultrasonography, radioimmunoassay, and endoscopy and endoscopic surgery ahead of the state's most senior medical college, setting a high standard of care both in her specialty and all specialties. Made blind through dry macular degeneration, she was nevertheless chair of Sun Hospital until her death. She leaves a husband, a son, and three grandchildren.

S Mitra

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Robert Pringle



Former consultant surgeon Ninewells Hospital and Medical School, Dundee (b 1927; q Glasgow 1950), died on 15 February 2009 after a stroke.

After house jobs, Robert Pringle held a four-year short service commission in the Royal Air Force, becoming squadron leader, and for many years he held a private pilot's licence. In 1964 he became senior lecturer in surgery at Dundee Royal Infirmary, moving in 1967 to the NHS consultant post he kept until retirement in 1992. A general surgeon, he operated on patients of all ages, specialised in upper gastrointestinal surgery, introduced innovations in endoscopy, laparoscopy, and laser surgery, and published widely. An inspirational teacher, he was head of clinical sciences in Kuala Lumpur after retirement. Predeceased by his wife, Margaret, in 1994, he leaves three children and 10 grandchildren.

Stuart D Pringle

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Ian Ranger

Former consultant surgeon Norfolk and Norwich Hospital (b 1924; q Middlesex Hospital, London, 1947; MS, FRCS), d 14 February 2008.

After qualification, Ian Ranger spent a year in Boston researching into oesophageal reflux and gained a Hunterian professorship. After posts at the Middlesex and Addenbrooke's Hospitals, he was consultant surgeon in Norwich from 1966 to 1988. He first helped to develop with gusto the surgical services at Cromer Hospital, which were then managed by general practitioners. Australian-born, he set up links with the surgical unit at the Prince Alfred Hospital in Melbourne, and many young Australian and New Zealand surgical trainees spent part of their training in Norwich. Predeceased by his wife, Janet in 2003, he leaves two sons.

John F Colin

Piers Ranger

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Dorothy Lindsay Smith (née Grieve)



Former associate specialist in geriatric medicine Royal Victoria Hospital, Edinburgh (b 1930; q 1954; MD, FRCPed), d 30 May 2009.

A native of Edinburgh, Dorothy Lindsay Smith (née Grieve) was a distinguished medical student, winning the Mackenzie bursary for anatomy, the Royal Victoria Trust gold medal for tuberculosis, and Dorothy Gilfillan prize for most distinguished woman graduate of the year. She also won three blues at rowing. In 1975 she was appointed clinical research fellow in the Edinburgh Stroke Rehabilitation Study, and in 1981 was associate specialist in geriatric medicine at the Royal Victoria Hospital until her retirement. Dorothy was an accomplished pianist, and enjoyed sailing, obtaining a navigational qualification. She leaves a husband, Ian, and three children.

Clifton P Lowther

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