

ANGUS AND THE STALINGRAD HOSPITAL FUND

Empathy and Aid in Wartime

Submitted by:
Dundee Russian School

To:
The Stalingrad Foundation.

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Foreword

Who we are

This submission to the contest “We Helped Stalingrad” is made by Dundee Russian School.

Dundee Russian School is a charitable organisation, which provides education in Russian to children of the local Russian-speaking community in the Scottish city of Dundee and the surrounding areas of Angus and Fife. The school also provides language classes for English speakers learning the Russian language, and other adult education classes for all and serves as a focal point for the local Russian-speaking community

The School also aims to raise awareness of, and respect for, the culture of the Russian-speaking world among our pupils and among the local communities in Dundee and the surrounding areas.

The Contest

The Stalingrad Foundation have invited us to take part in their online competition “We Helped Stalingrad” – the purpose of which is to investigate local links to the reconstruction of Stalingrad in the later years of, and immediately following, the Second World War.

The Battle of Stalingrad, the greatest battle in history and the turning of the tide of fascism, should need no introduction. But the story of the UK-wide ‘Stalingrad Hospital Fund’ perhaps does need an introduction. It is now, sadly, almost forgotten that the outpouring of sympathy for Stalingrad as the war ebbed away westwards from her ruins, took a practical form as people across the UK contributed, in ways large and small, to the reconstruction of a hospital in that devastated city. The ‘Stalingrad Hospital Fund’ was neither the first nor the only effort that the citizens of the UK made to reach out to the Soviet people in their hour of need, but it was perhaps the most emblematic.

This submission seeks to tell just one small part of the story of that fund. But we hope that in telling this small part of that story we can illustrate and sustain the spirit of friendship and mutual support between the peoples of different nations in times of need.

We would like to thank the Stalingrad Foundation for inviting us to take part in this competition.

Andriy Sukhodub

Saydulla Persheyev

Before Stalingrad. “Aid to Russia” in the County of Angus

When, on 22nd June 1941, Hitler’s armies invaded the Soviet Union a lonely and beleaguered Britain suddenly found that she was not alone in the struggle against fascism. After almost twenty-four years of mutual suspicion and distrust following the November revolution of 1917 the UK and the USSR found themselves facing the same enemy, and fighting for the same cause.

But, then again, that ‘mutual suspicion’ had always been far stronger in the corridors of power than it had ever been in the streets, factories and fields of Britain; and when the Soviet Union was suddenly faced with the genocidal hell of invasion, the people of Britain, spared this fate by the barrier of the sea, understood immediately that the existential struggle taking place in Eastern Europe was their struggle too.

The aid which came to be raised by the people of Britain would not have been possible without this strong sense of empathy at street level.

And the people of the rural county of Angus in the north-east of Scotland were moved no less by this cause than their fellow countrymen. The spirit that touched the people of Angus in those early months was eloquently captured in an editorial in “The Brechin Advertiser” of 4th November 1941:

“Aid for Russia will not all come out of the munitions factories. Up and down the country people are bestirring themselves to help our sore pressed ally.... When we consider not only the dour gallantry of the struggle which the Russians have put up against the savage invader but the unflinching way they have carried out their leaders’ scorched earth policy; their unshrinking sacrifice.... Surely the most thoughtless must feel that all WE can give will not be too much.”¹

Whilst the small towns of Angus could not muster large crowds, such as were seen in nearby Dundee, to demonstrate that empathy and solidarity, the sudden surge of feeling for Britain’s new ally was in evidence in this rural county just as it was in the urban areas of Scotland. In November 1941 a meeting of the Co-operative Society in Brechin was addressed by Evgeny Chossudovsky - a Russian Jewish émigré who went on to an illustrious career in the United Nations after the war where he was a strong advocate of East West co-operation and peaceful co-existence. But before his career in the UN had begun he was advocating this very message at the Brechin Co-operative Society. The Brechin Advertiser characterised his speech to the Co-operative Society thus:-

“Strongly convinced that the most solid foundation of future peace lies in the strengthening of friendship between the Soviet and British peoples, Dr Chossudovsky is now working with every means at his disposal towards that end”²

¹ The Brechin Advertiser 4th November 1941 – www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

² The Brechin Advertiser 25th November 1941 - www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

(It is the memory of, and desire to maintain, this same sentiment that has given rise to this project almost eighty years later.)

The establishment of the Red Cross's 'Aid-to-Russia' fund to raise medical supplies for the Soviet Union was the first organised opportunity that the population of Angus had to give physical form to their moral support for the people of the Soviet Union. Established as a national fund, the Aid-to-Russia fund was met with great enthusiasm throughout Angus, as it was across the whole of the UK.

A letter to *The Courier* on the 11th of October 1941 from the president of the Angus branch of the Red Cross is the first mention of this fund in the local press and well illustrates the strength, speed and universality of the county's reaction to the establishment of the Red Cross's fund. The letter, from Lady Airlie, of one of the county's foremost noble houses, called for further contributions to the Aid-to-Russia fund for which the Angus branch of the Red Cross had already, and with impressive speed, raised a healthy sum¹. (*It might be of passing interest to the reader to note that the writer of that letter, Lady Mabell Airlie, soon had a family tie to the Aid-to-Russia fund when her niece, a certain Mrs Clementine Churchill, was appointed as the fund's chairperson*).

In every town and village of Angus press reports show an enthusiastic response to the Red Cross Aid-to-Russia fund. The initial show of empathy for Britain's new ally had found a way to turn itself into something real and tangible.

This was clear among the working men and women of the towns of Brechin, Forfar, Montrose and the villages and hamlets scattered in between. It was clear among the county's civic leaders, with the heads of Councils throwing their weight behind the fundraising efforts, and it was clear among the local nobility such as Lady Airlie.

The Aid-to-Russia fund continued to operate with great success for the duration of the war, but it was the destruction of Stalingrad through the autumn and winter of 1942 that began to focus attention on that city in particular as a recipient of aid. This was primarily done through the Stalingrad Hospital Fund. It was not only the destruction of that city which brought forth the hand of friendship (*how many cities had been destroyed in those years*) but rather the manner in which that destruction had come about. It was quickly clear that Stalingrad's sacrifice had been the turning point of the war, and, more than any other, the ruins of that city represented everything that had been lost, and more importantly, everything that was to be won.

But the study of help for Stalingrad in Angus brings us to a narrower focus - to that part of Angus where the Stalingrad Hospital Fund was taken up with greatest enthusiasm. It brings us back to the town of Brechin.

¹ The Dundee Courier – 11th October 1941 - www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.

Help for Stalingrad. - Brechin

The towns and villages of rural Angus, scattered to the north of Dundee, matched that city in the speed of their reaction to the launch of the Red Cross's 'Aid-to-Russia' fund. And this fund seems to have remained the primary focus of the efforts of these towns to provide medical aid to the USSR. Although the Stalingrad Hospital Fund is mentioned in press reports across Angus it did not seem to take the same prominence in the rural hinterland as it did in Dundee.

With one notable exception. The small town of Brechin.

This little town, with a population, then and now, of only around seven thousand, received recognition from the Soviet Union for its contribution to the Stalingrad Hospital Fund and two separate acknowledgements are recorded on the memorial book in the British Museum - one gives thanks to the "Engineers of Brechin", with the other certificate thanking, more generally, the "Citizens of Brechin¹". So why did Brechin respond to the Stalingrad Hospital Fund in a way that her neighbouring towns did not? What was it that connected Brechin to Stalingrad?

The answer to that question is simple. Coventry.

Stalingrad and Coventry famously became the first 'twin towns' in 1944 setting the benchmark for what has now become a network of international and cultural ties between twinned cities and towns across the world. But five years before the shared experience of war forged the link between Coventry and Stalingrad the impending threat of war had created another link - between Coventry and Brechin. This bond was created when, in the summer of 1939, the Coventry Gauge and Tool Company, a vital part of Britain's armaments industry, took the decision to move a large part of their production to the town of Brechin.

It was clear to the Company that war was looming and the threat of air attack on industrial centres such as Coventry, within the range of German bombers, was well understood from the brutal examples provided by the Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War. And so, in order to reduce the threat to their strategically vital production, a site was acquired in Brechin, hundreds of miles to the north of Coventry and beyond the effective range of German bombers.² The Company immediately became a huge part of the town's economy, and of its working culture and identity, and still operates as 'Matrix International' from the same site today.

There can be little doubt that it was this link to Coventry, with its close connection to Stalingrad, which drove the town of Brechin to greater efforts than her neighbouring towns for the Hospital Fund. Indeed, this link inspired Brechin to greater efforts than many far larger towns across the UK. The driving force for these efforts were twofold – firstly the Amalgamated Engineering Union and its branch Secretary at the time, George

¹ <https://stalingrad-uk.com/database/>

² <https://www.matrix-international.com/company/history>

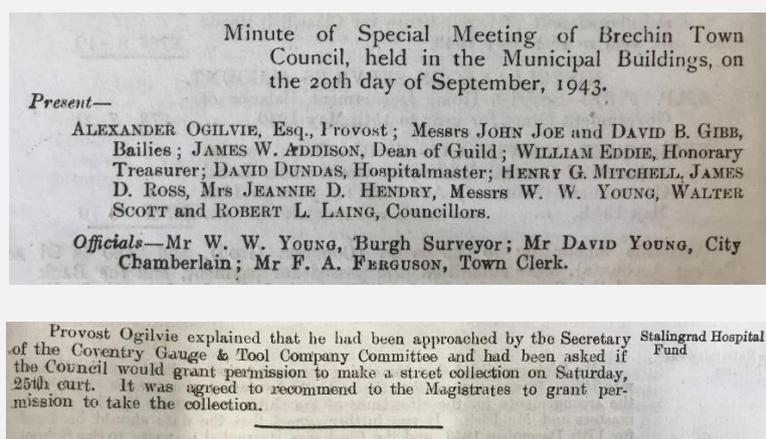
Jack; and the town's Russia Today Society. Respectively the "Engineers" and the "Citizens" who separately received the thanks of Stalingrad and the USSR.

Activity in Brechin in aid of the Stalingrad Hospital Fund seems to have begun in earnest in September of 1943. The local 'Brechin Advertiser' carried an article outlining events planned for that month which would allow Brechin "to share in this fine enterprise, a symbol of the resolve 'to go forward together'"¹ and these events were to be for the purpose of providing children's cots for the Stalingrad hospital.

The same newspaper that day carried public announcements for some of those events, including a football match to be played the following Saturday – the first sporting use of the town's stadium since the beginning of the war.

The events planned were all typical of the day-to-day life of a small town, even in wartime. But with the focus on fundraising they took on an altogether more serious meaning.

From the Minutes of Brechin Town Council



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The largest of these events was the football match organised by the workers of the Coventry Gauge and Tool factory through their union. The match was preceded by a military parade through the town, with the local army cadets and the pipe band of the Scottish Horse Regiment leading the way.

The minutes of the Town Council from the 20th

September dryly record the grant of permission to make the collection that Saturday as the parade proceeded through the town – but the pages of the local press, however, present us with a far more colourful picture of the day:-

"From St Ninian's Square the young lads...set off to the music of the pipes and flourishing of huge banners. It being Russia's day the Sickle and the Hammer of the Red Flag followed after the Union Jack, then the Stars and Stripes..."

Once the parade had circuited the town, with the less musically gifted boys running through the crowds with their collection tins, the parade reached Glebe Park where:

"The bands played the National Anthems of the various Allies (all except the Chinese which they could not manage)".

¹ 'The Brechin Advertiser' 14th September 1943

It is entirely probable that this is the only occasion on which the National Anthem of the Soviet Union was ever played at the town's modest, but famous, stadium.¹ After the ceremony and the honours the town's Lord Provost got the match underway and the *ad-hoc* teams, pulled together from various professionals displaced by war, fought out a 1-1 draw in front of a respectable crowd of over four hundred.

Through the remainder of the Autumn, there were further events – a film show showcasing Soviet cinema; dances and drama performances were all undertaken in aid of the Stalingrad Hospital Fund under the auspices of the Russia Today Society. Aid for the reconstruction of Stalingrad was the thread which tied together the various different parts of the cultural life of Brechin during that autumn and winter of 1943 into 1944.

Whilst a town the size of Brechin could never lay claim to have hosted the *largest* fundraising event of the nationwide campaign for the Stalingrad Hospital Fund there is a case to be made for the claim that Brechin laid on the *strangest* fundraising event of the campaign.

The Brechin Advertiser of 30th November 1943 tells the wonderful story of 'Punch' the performing dog and his curious contribution to the Stalingrad Hospital Fund. It seems that Punch was a Labrador who had come all the way to Brechin from Lancashire with his owner, a Mr Gummerson, whose sister was working in the canteen of the Coventry Gauge factory. This performing dog was already something of a hit in the youth hostel which his owner managed², and it seems that Mr Gummerson had taught the dog to 'talk'; to tell its age; use simple arithmetic and to perform a variety of tricks.

Their visit to Brechin, is recounted in some detail in the "Brechin Advertiser" of that week:

"..as both were rather hungry a breakfast had been prepared....Punch was asked 'are you hungry, Punch?' 'I am' was the reply, or did I just imagine it?....Again Mr Gummerson put the question...Again came the answer, this time a little louder, 'I am'..."

The report goes on to describe how Punch would launch coins into the air from a small see-saw and catch them in his mouth, and with every coin he caught he promptly jumped onto a chair and deposited it into the collection box for the Hospital Fund.

"As there seemed to be quite a number of folk desirous of seeing this performance, Punch collected in this manner no mean sum for the Stalingrad Cot Fund"

After his long and arduous journey and the morning's exertions a few hours of well-earned rest awaited Punch as his audience began their day's work. But when the time came for the workers to rest, Punch got back to work:

¹ Brechin Advertiser 28th September 1943 www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

² A Lancashire Past: A Family Love Story. JW Foulds AuthorHouseUK 2013

“At lunchtime he ran around with a cap collecting money from the workers at the dining tables and thus added a few more shillings to the fund. His great achievement though was a game of dominoes with one of the employees...”

This strange tale seems so engaging, not only because of the unusual, almost archaic style, in which it is written, but also because it presents us with a mix of so much that is good in life – work, laughter, friendship and loyalty, and the desire to extend that friendship and loyalty to places far beyond that raucous canteen.

Punch raised £30 among the factory workers that day and the author would not have been wrong in stating that:-

“His visit to Brechin will remain a memorable one to those who witnessed his performance and antics...”¹

But the willingness of Brechin to hold out a helping and grateful hand to Stalingrad extended beyond the factory floor and canteen of the Coventry Gauge and Tool Company. And it extended beyond the cultural cosmopolitanism of the members of the Russia Today Society. In February of 1944 the Brechin Advertiser carried a short report on the distribution of money raised by the pupils of Brechin High School². The money was distributed to various war relief causes (*how many causes there were in those dark times*). The sums distributed by the school children were small, but what is notable is that no cause received a greater contribution than the Stalingrad Hospital Fund. The importance and significance of Stalingrad in the consciousness of the youth of Brechin at that time can be measured by this - no local or national cause was considered more worthy than the reconstruction of that distant city where the momentum of the war had been so decisively turned.

By the later months of 1944 the focus of fundraising in Brechin seems to have shifted from the Hospital Fund to the reconstruction of the Stalingrad Telephone Exchange.

On this, the engineers of the Coventry Gauge and Tool factory again led the effort through the local branch of their trade union – the Amalgamated Engineering Union.

Whilst the list of towns across the UK which contributed to the Stalingrad Hospital Fund is a long one the fund for the reconstruction of the telephone exchange seems to be much less prominent. A search of the British Newspaper Archive will provide many reports from those years of fundraising for the Stalingrad Hospital Fund across Britain. But reports of fundraising for the reconstruction of the telephone exchange are rarer – indeed fleetingly rare.³

In researching the links between Brechin and Stalingrad the author could find only three examples across the United Kingdom of events in the name of this cause. Two of these are referenced in Brechin and the other is referenced in Nottingham around the same

¹ The Brechin Advertiser 30th November 1943. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

² The Brechin Advertiser 8th February 1944 www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

³ The Brechin Advertiser 21st November 1944 / The Brechin Advertiser 28th November 1944 - www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

time. In this, the town of Brechin can be said to have held truer and longer to the principles of solidarity with allies than many other towns.

The contributions which were made to the Stalingrad Hospital Fund by so many towns in those later years of the war demonstrate the universality of the human urge to care for and help those who have suffered and bled, and particularly those who have suffered and bled for us. If the story of the Stalingrad Hospital Fund is one of international solidarity then the small part of that story which played out in Brechin shows that that compassion and internationalism ran into every far corner of the UK in those years.

But the story of Brechin perhaps provides us with an example of something else. Something equally important if less obvious – the contributions to the telephone exchange fund show that this town understood, better than any other, the importance of communication as a part of the process of healing and moving forward. Indeed, the movement of town twinning, which sprung from the links between Stalingrad and Coventry in those later war years, has always been about precisely this – the importance of communication.

We all need the care and comfort that hospitals and medical science can bring, but we all also need the care and comfort that comes from speaking to family and to friends; and the peace, understanding and friendship that come from speaking to strangers. And it is only through talking and communicating that the bonds of friendship can be extended.

The town of Brechin has now all but forgotten its own role in the reconstruction of war-ravaged Stalingrad, but it never has forgotten the simple instincts which inspired it – care and compassion, companionship and conversation.

Afterword – A Daughter of Angus and a Citizen of Stalingrad

No story that tells of the wartime links between Angus and the Soviet Union, and in particular the links between Angus and Stalingrad, can be allowed to pass without us acknowledging the county's, and indeed the country's, most famous proponent of aid to the Soviet Union.

This was a daughter of Angus whose efforts in the cause of fundraising and whose moral support during the war did so much to raise the profile of these causes and the links between the two nations that she was, in the year 2000, made an honorary citizen of Stalingrad. By then, of course, renamed Volgograd the hero-city¹ paid its respects to her as she approached her 100th birthday.²

This grand old lady, and daughter of the county of Angus, from the village of Glamis, was of course Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon. Better known as Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, she served as Queen Consort of the United Kingdom alongside her husband, King George VI during the war and until his death in 1952 when the throne passed to their daughter, Queen Elizabeth II.

The story of the Queen Mother and Stalingrad has been told elsewhere, and the only biography of her to be written in the Russian language is entitled "The Stalingrad Story of an English Queen"³.

But if this, our story of help for Stalingrad in Angus, cannot add anything to the story of the Queen Mother and all that she did, we hope that it can remind the people of Volgograd / Stalingrad that the hand of friendship was extended not only from palaces, but also from the village halls, factory floors and workers' canteens of Angus.

Stephen Connor

January 2020

¹ For English language readers unfamiliar with the term 'Hero-City' is an official designation given to twelve cities of the former USSR in the immediate aftermath of the war - Stalingrad was among them.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hero_City

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/710761.stm>

³ Наталья Кулишенко: Сталинградская история английской королевы. Биография Елизаветы Анжелы Маргарет Боуз-Лайон