

Blitz spirit

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE

The irony wasn't lost on any of the 12 high-powered women who had gathered in the House of Lords at 2.30 pm on March 22. The Afghan Women's Support Forum was holding one of its quarterly meetings to discuss keeping the issue of Afghan women's rights on the political agenda. All of us had a strong connection to the country.

Not long after we started came a sound like a herd of elephants stomping down the corridor. The meeting continued as normal until the news broke by text: there had been an incident at the palace. "The Arg in Kabul?" we assumed.

Cloistered as we were inside one of the womb-like committee rooms, the drama unfolding outside seemed surreal. A female staff member arrived and asked us to stay in the room as we were now locked down. She told us she would escort us out of the building when we needed to go. As the following meeting couldn't take place she brought in the chopped egg and cress finger sandwiches that the next group had ordered, saying they shouldn't go to waste. After a few more minutes, Baroness Hodgson, organiser of our group, proposed that we break, have the sandwiches and watch the news.

The police responded quickly, coming in periodically to give us updates about staying put. Four officers guarded the door, including a heavily-armed member of the Swat team. A couple of hours passed, with no panic, no drama. The meeting continued on and off until the guards collected us and corralled us into the Central Hall, where we remained for a few more hours.

Two things struck me: the spirit of the Blitz and the diversity of the people. I went looking for water: a young woman stopped me to say she had two bottles and insisted I take one, which I first declined, then gratefully accepted.

Later, the staff distributed water and biscuits to the hundreds of people in the hall. Everyone shared. It felt as I imagine in a bomb shelter during the Blitz must have been, despite the horrific events outside. One of our group, an Afghan surgeon who works at University College Hospital, texted her husband to say she was safe. She accidentally texted the governor of Nangarhar, an eastern province in Afghanistan and centre of Taliban activity, who replied to say he hoped we were all OK.

After the five-hour ordeal, we left in an orderly fashion through the historic passages, past the flag flying at half-mast, onto the deserted streets, where the tragic events of the afternoon began to feel real.

Ironies of ideology

BY MARINA GERNER

On a recent visit to the Royal Academy, I noticed a tall, elegantly dressed man who spent quite some time admiring a square object attached to the wall. I wondered whether to tell him that far from being Russian avant-garde art, which was the theme of the exhibition, it was in fact the temperature and humidity control box.

Many visitors to *Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932* (until April 17) will recognise world-famous works of art by Soviet artists such as the archetypal red horse in Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's *Fantasy* and Marc Chagall's ro-

matic couple in *Promenade*. A hundred years after the Russian Revolution, the exhibition explores the many strands of art that followed in its aftermath.

Avant-garde artists initially embraced the revolution and its creative and experimental potential. Orchestras were led without conductors, clothes were unisex, poems were composed in group settings, line by line. Sergei Eisenstein's films are on display as well as photographs of Anna Akhmatova and Alexander Blok. In paintings, symbols of old Russia can still be found in Soviet art in the shape of melancholic onion church domes, while icons of Lenin replaced those of Christ.

By the late 1920s, as the Soviet Union became increasingly oppressive, Socialist Realism was promoted to make art easily digestible to the masses and an extension of the regime's ideology. Groundbreaking artists like Kazimir Malevich, whose *Black Square* revolutionised the art world, had to paint more figuratively. Malevich did so but with an ironic touch: the people in his paintings don't have faces.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, you can find Trotsky's mug and a handkerchief with Lenin's face on it. A series of propaganda paintings shows English capitalism represented by a man in a top hat standing in front of a factory. Such paintings probably seemed satirical to the Soviet intelligentsia, who would have to wait until the 1980s to be able to read fictional accounts of their lived realities in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and the book it heavily influenced, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Visitors to the RA will find another show dealing with the same era: *America after the Fall* (the fall being the Depression), including works by Jackson Pollock, Georgia O'Keeffe and Edward Hopper. Communist Party members and fellow-travellers are well represented: *Phoenix* by O. Louis Guglielmi (1935) depicts a wasteland of factories and industrial pollution: a picture of Lenin propped up against a pylon in the foreground seems to advocate him as the saviour who will bring about a Communist solution.

The Russian show on the floor below provides a sobering counterpoint to such naivety or ignorance. A black room shows a series of photographs of artists, intellectuals, peasants and people from all walks of life ▶

"Phoenix" (1935) by O. Louis Guglielmi



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