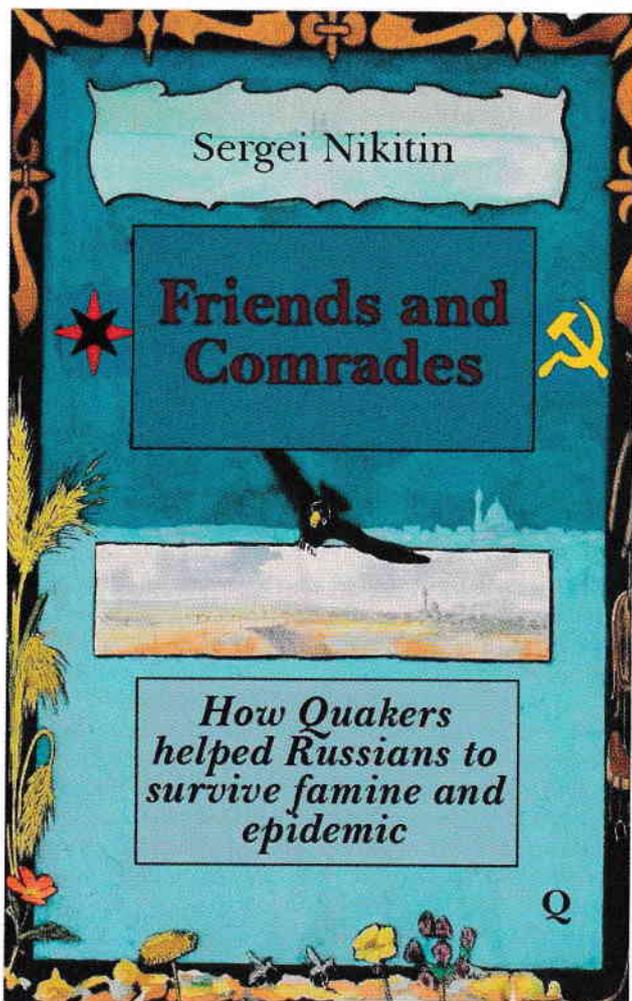

Friends and Comrades: How Quakers helped Russians survive famine and epidemic, by Sergei Nikitin

Review by Daphne Sanders



A century ago, British and US Quakers were amid the turmoil of the revolution in Russia, providing help to starving people. Today there is again strife and war in Europe. Sergei Nikitin's book, translated by Suzanne Eades-Roberts, comes at a useful time.

Sergei Nikitin grew up in the Soviet Union and became a Quaker after its fall. From 2003 he worked as the head of Amnesty International in Russia until he retired to the UK in 2017. In 1993, he heard for the first time about the Quaker famine relief in his country, and began years of enquiry through archives in Russia, the UK and USA. He was able to talk with some very elderly survivors, who had vivid memories of the Quakers who came to help them.

The outcome is a meticulously-researched account of the period from 1916, when Quakers first negotiated entry into Russia to help refugees. They built on those relationships of trust to carry out an ambitious programme of famine relief, credited with saving the lives of 400,000 people.

Providing food was not enough. The starving population was prey to disease, with scarcely any medical help. Local agriculture and the economy had to be regenerated. The locals had few means to grow their own food once the immediate threat of starvation had passed – most of the horses and seed grain had been eaten. One story that seizes my imagination is of the journey to Siberia to bring back more than 500 horses.

The final instalment tells of the gradual withdrawal of Quakers from the USSR, completed in 1931. Of continuing interest, however, is the summary of the subsequent lives of the volunteers. These are individual and varied. But there are more layers to this account than the individual figures. The origins of the planning and communications – first between British and US Friends and their governments, and then with the rapidly-changing Russian authorities and Russian relief organisations – are documented in all their demanding complexity. This was relief on a vast scale.

The book also reflects on the difficulties of working with regimes and individuals whose behaviour runs counter to the Quaker way. Russia's representative on relief organisations was a member of what was to become the KGB.

For me, however, the most valuable part of the account is from Sergei Nikitin himself. He describes his response to learning that Friends came to Russia in fearful circumstances, with no idea of personal gain, simply to relieve suffering. His sense of finding what he was seeking in Quakerism is real and grounded. Actions of compassion and love, spirit-led, and carried out with trust tempered by realism, is powerful and effective, whatever our limitations and frustrations, doubts and fears. This is an inspirational story. ●

Daphne is from Preston Meeting.