Friends House Moscow

Supporting work for peace and justice
in eastern Europe and former-Soviet regions

Newsletter
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We stand on the shoulders of giants

Nothing about the work of FHM can be taken for granted in today's world. In discerning the future strategy of Friends House Moscow this October, the FHM board needed to answer some very tough questions about the future of its work, given the challenges it faces. Not the least of these result from its work being conducted in the context of the war in Ukraine, a war which shows little or no sign of ending any day soon. Astonishingly, there has already been nearly four years of fighting – a length that is quickly closing on that of the First World War –rather than lasting the three or four days many had predicted.

The present circumstances, tight finances and other practical constraints mean that FHM cannot meet the needs of all those approaching it for help. The three days of discernment in October at Maison Quaker Congénies have led the FHM board to conclude that it should continue its work in Russia, within the limitations of what is possible. FHM has committed itself to work that plants seeds that it hopes will germinate once days are brighter.

In committing to continue its work, FHM is aware that it has gone out on something of a limb, trusting Friends to continue to give financially to work that not all Quakers will agree with. Russia is an aggressor state. For some, this makes working for peace in the country when it is at war morally ambiguous. For its part, FHM discerns this work to be in keeping with Quaker testimonies.

Maison Quaker Congénies

A brief history of Quaker dialogue

Friends House Moscow stands in the long line of Quaker involvement with Russia that reaches back over several centuries. From the very start, Friends' engagement has been focused on humanitarian engagement and extending dialogue – what is called "person-to-person diplomacy".

From its beginning, the nature of such work in Russia has brought controversy. In 1853, just prior to the Crimean war, a Quaker delegation visited Tsar Nicholas I, seeking to prevent the outbreak of the war. Sadly, their efforts proved futile. On their return, the Friends were criticised severely in the British press. This did not prevent their continued involvement, however. Immediately after the end of the war, on hearing of the famine conditions among the Finns (Finland then being part of Russia), which had been brought about by the combination of the severe winter of 1856-7, crop failure, and the early closure of the Baltic shipping lanes, Friends organised what is the very first example of wartime humanitarian relief to "enemy civilians". The Society of Friends administered the funds raised, purchasing and distributing "necessities of all kinds, corn, meal, potatoes, 'clothing for naked children,' seed-corn for future harvests, fishing nets to those affected by the famine. This became the template for all such future wartime relief efforts.

Young Russian Boy in Ragged Clothing 1919 Lantern slide Swarthmore College Friends Historical Library (Gift, AFSC)

During the First World War Quakers also courted disapproval when they dispensed food and medical supplies in the famine regions of Russia and Ukraine during and after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

During and after the Second World War, Quakers worked with refugees across Europe, providing relief to hundreds of thousands of people whichever side they had been on during the war. While this work was controversial during the war, afterwards it was recognised in Quakers receiving the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1947.

Throughout the Cold War, a number of Quakers continued to pursue East–West dialogue, often in very difficult circumstances. They did do so conscious of the limitations and contradictions of such work, while attempting to bridge the divide.

International Voluntary Service for Peace Volunteers cutting wood for elderly, poor, Duisburg, Germany, 1947 Photographic postcard Swarthmore College Peace Collection

Next year marks its thirtieth anniversary of Friends House Moscow. Its opening marked a period of optimism that followed the thawing of East–West relations, circumstances very different to those today. Those who conduct the work in Russia do so under circumstances that are not only difficult but dangerous.

FHM's continuing work

What is it that FHM can do in 2026? It has decided that it will continue to support a refugee centre, bolster its Russian language publishing work, maintain its support for a language club, and fund art projects for youth.

The refugee centre continues to help children whose families have come to Russia in search of a better life and greater security. FHM has been supporting the centre since the mid-1990s. Refugees and other migrants come to the city from a wide variety of countries. Once in Russia, they face many challenges and often need to keep a very low profile, which makes the centre so critical for them in learning and support.

Richard Kilbey, Children Sledding, Buzuluk, Russia, 1922 Pen and ink Collection: Wells-Next-the-Sea Meeting

FHM will continue to help support the young people living in two large mental institutions. FHM has been working with neuro-divergent young people over the past twenty-two years. Since the work is conducted within state institutions, it requires great discretion as well as sensitivity.

FHM's publishing efforts remain central to its work. FHM has published 22 titles in Moscow following their translation into Russian. Its "best sellers" include *Plague, Pestilence and Famine* by Muriel Payne and *The Fruits of Solitude* by William Penn.

Russian speakers everywhere are invited to look at our quakers.ru website. We also maintain an online presence in Russian on Facebook and vKonkakte, although these sites are less visited than previously. Facebook has been banned in Russia and many Russians prefer to avoid online activity because they do not feel such exposure is safe.

Child at refugee centre in Moscow, 2025 Photo: Friends House Moscow

Over the past year FHM has funded language lessons for students who wish to develop confidence is speaking in public in the politically "incorrect" language of English. It is a sign of hope that students wish to continue learning a foreign language. FHM will also fund art projects for alienated youth living in a southern province far from Moscow.

A nod to our Mennonite brothers and sisters

Like Quakers, Mennonites continue to build peace and transform conflict when others have turned to war, even when they facing pressures to turn away from this commitment. Like Quakers, the Mennonites were active in Russia and Ukraine prior to the war. We hope that connections between FHM and Mennonites in Ukraine, established briefly prior to the 2022 invasion, may see new growth once the war ends.

The branches of peace spread yet wider. Although not widely known, in Russia other churches, including Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses, are also pacifists. Their young men have benefited from Friends House Moscow's counselling for those wishing to register as COs and claim alternative civilian service. With the advent of each six-month draft, around two thousand more young men do so.

We know that Quaker peace work is not ever likely to receive the level of funding given to the arms manufacturers, but every penny counts in person-to-person diplomacy. FHM continues to plant seeds of peace, from which we hope mighty oaks can grow.

Button from Swarthmore University Peace Collection

If you or your Meeting would like a presentation about Friends House Moscow, please contact Julie Harlow at harlow4julie@gmail.com
She often can travel or arrange a zoom presentation.

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Ivan Hutnik is the author of this report from the International Board of Friends House Moscow. Ivan is a member of Surrey & Hampshire Border Area Meeting and a member of the Quaker Peace and Social Witness International Conciliation Group. He serves on the boards of the Peace Museum and Friends House Moscow.