

OBITUARY

Irina Alekseyevna Levinskaya (1952–2025)

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Irina Levinskaya was born in Leningrad on 24 June 1952, the daughter of an engineer and a medical doctor. Though she was not Jewish, her name was interpreted as such and she suffered from the antisemitism that was latent in the Soviet Union. As a result, despite her outstanding educational achievement in a purely secular environment, she could not enter university, and instead worked from 1969 to 1975 at the Central Research Institute of Hydrolocation and Hydroacoustics, mainly as a librarian and office worker. Her father died when she was twenty, and it was around the same time that she was baptised into the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1976 she at last entered the classical department of Leningrad State University, from which she graduated *summa cum laude* in 1981. Among her teachers were two distinguished classicists who had both been educated in pre-revolutionary Russia and had spent time in Soviet concentration camps. Aristid Ivanovich Dovatur (1897–1982) tutored her in Greek, and Yakov Markovich Borovsky (1896–1994) taught her Latin. Irina regarded the latter as ‘one of the purest and most noble people’ she had ever met.

Unfortunately she once again suffered from antisemitism, and her entry into postgraduate study was delayed for two years, during which time she earned her living by teaching Latin. Finally, in 1983 she was admitted to the Leningrad Institute of History and could pursue higher research. In 1986 she was appointed a junior research fellow in the history department of the Leningrad Institute of Historical and Cultural Studies, where she eventually came to be the assistant to the head of the department.

In the early 1980s she came into contact with Valeri Barinov, a Russian dissident and active Christian whom she and her mother sheltered from the authorities. Barinov eventually escaped to the West, where he got in touch with Keston College, an institute for the study of religion in communist lands, and gave them Irina's name as a contact inside the Soviet Union. This led to occasional visits from Keston representatives, who learned that Irina very much wanted to obtain the *Patristic Greek Lexicon* published by Oxford University Press. Keston found the book and entrusted it to Gerald Bray, then a lecturer at Oak Hill College in London, who delivered it to her in July 1986. Soon after that the Soviet Union started to open up, thanks to the reform programme of Mikhail Gorbachev, and in May 1989 Irina and her archaeologist husband, Yuri Lesman, who worked at the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, were able to visit the United Kingdom for the first time.

During their stay in London, Irina visited Cambridge, where she quickly discovered that her interests in the Acts of the Apostles dovetailed with a multi-volume project on that book overseen by Bruce Winter, then Warden of Tyndale House. That was the beginning of an academic association that lasted for the next thirty years and led to her first book in English, *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting*, which was published in 1996 as the fifth volume in a series of six.¹ A slightly modified version appeared in Russian in 2000. It was also in 1989 that Irina met Joyce Reynolds (1918–2022), a distinguished epigraphist in Cambridge, who became a firm friend and hosted many of her subsequent visits to the university. Both Bruce and Joyce were able to obtain funding for Irina's stays in Cambridge, often for weeks and even months at a time, and she became a well-known figure both at Tyndale House and in the Classics Faculty.

Meanwhile, in 1988 Irina became a candidate for membership of the Institute of Historical Sciences in Leningrad, defending a dissertation on the subject of the 'Epigraphical Monuments of the Cult of Theos Hypsistos as a Source for the Ethnocultural History of the Bosporan Kingdom in the First Four Centuries AD'. Her main argument was that the devotees of the Supreme God were in fact non-Jewish adherents to synagogues in the Crimea. Such people appear in the Acts of the Apostles as 'God-fearers' and were of great importance in the growth of the early Christian Church.

In December 1992 Irina was appointed a research fellow of what had just been renamed the Saint Petersburg Institute of History (Russian Academy of Sciences) and on 1 December 1995 she became a senior research fellow of the same institution. At the same time she was able to reintroduce the teaching of

1. Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, BAFCS 5 (Eerdmans; Paternoster, 1996).

the New Testament in the State University, which had been suspended after the 1917 revolution. Over the following years she made a number of contacts in the UK. In 1997 she became a member of the George Bell Institute in Birmingham, and through the good offices of Professor Myles Burnyeat (1939–2019), she was elected as a bye-fellow of Robinson College in Cambridge. She also visited Germany, France, the United States, Australia and Israel, where she lectured and made contacts with prominent international specialists in ancient archaeology and in Jewish–Christian relations.

Irina had a deep Christian faith, fortified by her contacts with persecuted Jews in Russia, and this led her to develop both her academic and her non-academic interests in that direction. In 1998 she defended a doctoral dissertation based on the book she had written at Tyndale House and a year later she published the first part of a two-volume commentary (in Russian) on the Acts of the Apostles. The second part appeared in 2008.

On 1 March 1999 Irina was appointed a leading research fellow in general history in her Institute, and on 1 January 2010 she moved over to its archives department. She continued to edit and publish inscriptions relating to the Bosporan Kingdom in the Crimea and was able to clarify a number of questions about the nature of religious life there. The last major work to appear in her lifetime (2018) was a biography of the Russian classicist Elias (Ilya) Bickerman, who was forced to leave the Soviet Union in 1922.

Meanwhile, Irina had become increasingly involved in movements opposed to the rule of Vladimir Putin. She testified on behalf of dissidents in numerous court cases and became editor-in-chief of the anti-fascist magazine *Barrier*. On 18 March 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Irina resigned from the Institute of History in protest at her government's foreign policy and went into semi-retirement. Her husband Yuri passed away in 2013, but she continued her political work as long as she could. In 2023 she made a final visit to Cambridge, where she was able to retrieve some papers she had left with Joyce Reynolds in 2020, fully expecting to be able to return but prevented from doing so by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In her last years she had to battle an incurable illness, which eventually claimed her life on 5 February 2025. She leaves an impressive legacy in the fields of classical epigraphy, biblical studies, Jewish studies and the history of the Bosporan Kingdom in the Crimea, the importance of which in the later Roman world has been much illuminated by her pioneering research.