Since the 1700s, commercial and cultural links between Exeter and Russia (a major customer for Devon's thriving wool trade) have encouraged travellers in both directions. Sir John Bowring (1792–1872), an Exeter-born wool merchant and founding member of the Devon and Exeter Institution, extended a Continental business trip in order to visit Russia in 1819. He was received at the Imperial Court in St Petersburg, where a German acquaintance, Friedrich von Adelung, introduced him to Russian poetry. In 1821, Bowring translated and published the first English-language anthology of Russian poets, for which he was later honoured by Tsar Alexander I.

A century later, the Russian-Jewish poet and translator Samuil Marshak (1887–1964), then studying at the University of London, spent the summers of 1913 and 1914 tramping through Devon and Cornwall with his wife Sofia. His 1913 poem “20th June – 7th July” records one such walking trip between Exeter and Okehampton along the fringes of Dartmoor, sleeping in wayside inns (and sampling local cider). What he called “the wilds of Devonshire” helped inspire Marshak’s love of British literature; back in Russia, he would become that country’s greatest translator of Shakespeare, Blake and Burns, among others, and perhaps its best-loved children’s poet.

Once you were a general, And ended your days in battle… Are you contented with your pedestal And glory in your native land? I like your peaceful appearance, Though in life you were a general. How stout and pudgy you do look… I’m sure you puffed to catch your breath… Then did you learn to speak in rhyme? This poem of yours is very pretty To me it seems a delightful thing. Want me to keep and revise all my papers?

After Russia’s 1917 Revolution and Civil War (1918–1922), many Russian aristocrats, intellectuals and opponents of the new Soviet regime emigrated, some settling in Devon. One of Devon’s most exotic visitors was the brilliant actor and theatre director, Michael Chekhov (1891–1955), nephew of the playwright Anton Chekhov. Chekhov led a theatre school of about 20 students between 1936 and 1938 at Dartington Hall, near Torquay, which was then run as an experimental hub for creative artists by owners Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst.

Since 1960, the University of Exeter has offered courses in Russian language, culture, and history. Russian is now a degree option within the Department of Modern Languages. The Exeter-Yaroslavl Twinning Association maintains civic connections between the medieval Russian city of Yaroslavl, near Moscow, and Exeter, organizing annual exchange visits, talks, and Russian-themed events. Devon author Kate Furnivall has written four bestselling historical novels set around the 1917 Revolution, including The Jewel of St Petersburg (2011).
The two cannons standing guard on the Quay outside Exeter’s Custom House were originally sold to the Russian Navy for use at the Arctic port of Archangel. They were deployed at the Battle of Waterloo before being returned to England.

Military relations between Russia and Devon have not always been so friendly. The South Devonshire Regiment of Foot (“the 46th”) fought in the Crimean War (1853-1856) between the Russian Empire and the Allied Powers of Great Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire. In 1854 the South Devonshires were in the key battles of Alma, Balaklava, and Inkerman; they also took part in the year-long Siege of Sebastopol (1854-55), which ended in defeat for Russia.

After the 1917 Revolution, the Bolshevik government negotiated a peace settlement with Germany, bringing Russia out of World War I. Hawkish elements in the British Government (including Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for War from 1919 to 1921) urged the dispatch of British troops to key Russian regions, to prevent German forces from accessing Russian coastal waters. In 1918, a British Military Mission was sent to North Russia to protect the Arctic Ocean ports. A former Devonshire Regiment officer, Major-General Sir Charles Maynard, commanded the 600-strong expeditionary force in Murmansk, while the rest of the Mission, under General Ironside, occupied nearby Archangel.

A similar mission, including some Devonshires like Lieutenant William Reed, whose letters feature in this exhibition, was sent to Southern Russia to assist White Army troops on the Crimean fronts. After the Armistice, both missions intervened in the Russian Civil War against the Bolshevik Red Army – known to the troops as ‘Bolshies’ or ‘Bolos’. Despite considerable Western support, the White Army suffered increasing defeats and desertions during 1919. As continued military aid was unsustainable, a small North Russian Relief Force, including one company of volunteers from the Devonshire Regiment under Major Arthur Northcote, was sent to cover the retreat of the Northern Mission. In August and September 1919, these Devonshires fought Bolshevik soldiers in the boggy, mosquito-ridden forests on the Dvina river and its tributaries near Ust Vaga and Mala Bereznik: eight military medals were subsequently awarded to officers and men of the regiment.