

## Robert Burns in soviet social commentary of 1930 – 1950s

*Robert Burns en el comentario social soviético de 1930 - 1950*

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### Abstract

The article deals for the first time with the systematization and comprehending of journalistic responses to the literary work of Robert Burns in the Soviet periodicals of the 1930s – 1950s. The article «Robert Burns» written by A.A. Anikst, published in №. 4 of the magazine «Young Guard» for 1938, raises the question of the historical role of Robert Burns in the development of English literature. The poetry of the Scottish poet is considered not from the position of her belonging to a certain literary direction, but from the point of view of her uniqueness, which expresses in the amazing closeness to ordinary people and melodiousness, similar to the folklore compositions of the Scots themselves. A.A. Anikst noted in the article the simplicity, naturalness and sincerity of the poetical works of the Scottish bard, who was «not a voluntary philanthropist who looked down on the people», but «a man from the masses», singing in his poems the everyday life of ordinary peasants, poor people, their joys and sorrows, having earned the worldwide fame of a folklore's songwriter. Burns admired the author of the article not only by his cheerfulness and optimism, but also by the depth and complexity of his emotions, expressed in a sensitive understanding of nature, its aesthetic beauty, the ability to notice the smallest details, to sympathize with an ordinary wild mouse and wildflower, sincerely, together with the people, laugh over the rich, speaking out against their stinginess and emotional poverty. In contrast to A.A. Anikst, G.I. Gerasimov, the author of the article «Scottish Bard», emphasized the international recognition of R. Burns's work, wrote about the phenomenon of finding his poems «second homeland» in the vastness of Soviet Russia, which became possible thanks to the appearance of talented translations of S. Ya. Marshak, who managed to convey not only the meaning, but also the «spirit and melody» of the works of the great Scots. The article highlights issues related to the reception of the work of a Scottish songwriter in the Soviet Union, lists the facts reflecting the extraordinary interest to his poetry by ordinary citizens, which manifested itself in a high readership demand for his books. The author of the article also wrote about the universal values sung in Burns's poems, as well as about friendship, the ability to value leisure and enjoy life despite all difficulties.

**Keywords:** Russian–English literary and historical and cultural ties, poetry, romanticism, tradition, reception, allusion, comparative science, artistic translation, intercultural communication.

### Resumen

El artículo aborda por primera vez la sistematización y la comprensión de las respuestas periodísticas a la obra literaria de Robert Burns en los periódicos soviéticos de los años treinta y cincuenta. El artículo «Robert Burns» escrito por A.A. Anikst, publicado en №. 4 de la revista «Young Guard» de 1938, plantea la cuestión del papel histórico de Robert Burns en el desarrollo de la literatura inglesa. La poesía del poeta escocés se considera no desde la posición de su pertenencia a una determinada dirección literaria, sino desde el punto de vista de su singularidad, que se expresa en la sorprendente cercanía a la gente común y la melodía, similar a las composiciones folclóricas de la Escoceses mismos. AAAnikst señaló en el artículo la simplicidad, naturalidad y sinceridad de las obras poéticas del bardo escocés, que "no era un filántropo voluntario que despreciaba a la gente", sino "un hombre de las masas", cantando en sus poemas el La vida cotidiana de los campesinos ordinarios, los pobres, sus alegrías y penas,

habiéndose ganado la fama mundial del compositor de un folklore. Burns admiraba al autor del artículo no solo por su alegría y optimismo, sino también por la profundidad y complejidad de sus emociones, expresadas en una comprensión sensible de la naturaleza, su belleza estética, la capacidad de notar los detalles más pequeños, simpatizar con un El ratón común y la flor silvestre, sinceramente, junto con la gente, se ríen de los ricos, hablando en contra de su tacañería y pobreza emocional. En contraste con A.A. Anikst, G.I. Gerasimov, autor del artículo «Scottish Bard», enfatizó el reconocimiento internacional del trabajo de R. Burns, escribió sobre el fenómeno de encontrar sus poemas «segunda patria» en la inmensidad de la Rusia soviética, que se hizo posible gracias a la aparición de talentosos traducciones de S. Ya. Marshak, que logró transmitir no solo el significado, sino también el «espíritu y la melodía» de las obras de los grandes escoceses. El artículo destaca cuestiones relacionadas con la recepción del trabajo de un compositor escocés en la Unión Soviética, enumera los hechos que reflejan el interés extraordinario a su poesía por parte de ciudadanos comunes, que se manifestó en una gran demanda de lectores por sus libros. El autor del artículo también escribió sobre los valores universales cantados en los poemas de Burns, así como sobre la amistad, la capacidad de valorar el ocio y disfrutar de la vida a pesar de todas las dificultades.

**Palabras clave:** Lazos ruso-ingleses, históricos y culturales, poesía, romanticismo, tradición, recepción, alusión, ciencia comparada, traducción artística, comunicación intercultural.

## Introduction

Speaking about the numerous attempts of Soviet sociopolitical journalism to comprehend the significance of the works of the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns, one cannot but note a number of articles in the Soviet periodicals of the 1930s – 1950s, which became evidence of the extraordinary popularity of Robert Burns poetry in different parts of the Soviet Union. The works of Robert Burns were well-known to many poetry translators, famous writers and literary critics in pre-revolutionary Russia. The experiments of translations of his poems, written by V.S. Kurochkin and M.L. Mikhailov, were published in literary journals of the mid-19th century. Numerous positive responses to the poetry of the Scottish bard are known, in particular, from V.G. Belinsky, N.P. Ogarev, I.S. Turgenev, N.A. Nekrasov, T.G. Shevchenko.

However, a resurgence of translation interest to the literary works of Robert Burns occurred in Russia in the 1930s, which was primarily associated with a change in the social structure. Most Soviet literary scholars and writers noted in those years the closeness to common people of the poetry of the Scottish songwriter, their genre proximity to folk songs, and musicality, which explains the amazing popularity of Burns texts among different generations of Scots. Soviet critics called Burns the poet of revolutionary democracy, a fighter for the freedom of the common people, their independence from the oppressors, and a true patriot of the fatherland. One of the first persons who turned to the Burns's poems in the Soviet era was a poet, playwright, author of fairy tales and translator Tatyana Lvovna Schepkina-Kupernik. Collaborating with many periodical issues, she was involved into a process of intensive translation activity, and, after 1917, interpretations of such Western classics as Lope de Vega, William Shakespeare, John Fletcher, Jean Baptiste Moliere, Carlo Goldoni, Richard Brinsley Sheridan were written by her. She also became the author of poems from «Alice in Wonderland» by Lewis Carroll, literary works of Edmond Rostand and Victor Hugo.

However, despite Shchepkina-Kupernik's writing talent, her intensive activity as an interpreter of works written by foreign authors popular at the turn of the 19th – 20th centuries, her translations from Burns were not highly appreciated and were not as popular as the later translations of S. Ya. Marshak. According to most experts, it was thanks to the interpretations of Burns's works created by S.Ya. Marshak that the Scottish bard found his second homeland in the Soviet Union. The translations of S. Ya. Marshak, who managed to convey accurately and succinctly all the beauty

and deep meaning of the poetry of Burns, who wrote in an inaccessible Scottish dialect, even for the British themselves, were especially popular in the homeland of the «bard of Caledonia» in Scotland.

Despite the ambiguous, sometimes tense foreign policy situation that affected relations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union, the appearance of translations written by T.L. Schepkina-Kupernik and S.Ya. Marshak helped to the popularization of Robert Burns's compositions in Russia, inspired many foreign and national writers to turn to more detailed and in-depth study of the works of the Scottish bard, helped to develop and strengthen intercultural ties.

## Literature Review

The most significant Russian studies of R. Burns's works are connected with the names of R. Ya. Rait-Kovaleva, A. A. Elistratova, B. I. Kolesnikov, who devoted monographic works to the Scottish poet. The problems of perception of Burns's works in Russia were studied by S.A. Orlov, E.S. Belashova, Yu.D. Levin, D.N. Zhatkin. The revival of the translation reception of Burns's compositions in Russia, observed since the 1990s, did not help to draw the attention of literary scholars to the Russian reception of Robert Burns. Until now, only the history of Robert Burns's reception has been relatively fully comprehended, which, however, also has significant gaps (archival translations have not been put into scientific circulation, and the identification of forgotten translations in little-known editions of the late XIX – early XX centuries has not been done, the biography and activities of V.M. Fedotov, who challenged S.Ya. Marshak at the turn of the 1950s – 1960s and was defeated by K.I. Chukovsky, are not studied; modern (from the 1990s) translations of Burns' works have not been studied). If we talk about the history of the literary critical reception of Robert Burns, about the reminiscences and traditions of Burns in Russian literature, then they did not become the subject of study at all. This article is the first to consider publications on the life and work of Burns in the Russian periodicals of the 1930s – 1950s belonging to A.A. Anikst and G.I. Gerasimov. Additionally, published material is involved, which represents the emotional response of a Scotland citizen to the journalistic essay about Robert Burns written by G.I. Gerasimov.

## Materials and Methods

The material for the study was the journalistic essays about Robert Burns, published by A.A. Anikst and G.I. Gerasimov in the 1930–1950s. In the process of working on the article, the response

of a Scotland resident to the previously published article written by G. I. Gerasimov, published in the journal «New Times», was also analyzed. In the process of studying a scientific problem, comparative-historical, comparative, cultural-historical and historical-typological approaches were used, as well as methods of complex analysis. In methodological terms, the study relies on fundamental works in the field of historical poetics, comparative studies, the history of Russian translated literature, theory and history of poetic translation (Alexander N. Veselovsky, Alexey N. Veselovsky, V.M. Zhirmunsky, M.P. Alekseev, Yu .D. Levin, A.V. Fedorov, etc.).

### Results and Discussion

The article written by Alexander Abramovich Anikst, a Soviet literary critic and teacher, published under the title «Robert Burns» in №4 of the magazine «Young Guard» for 1939, fully reflects the life and work of the Scottish poet, who, according to the author, was «a brilliant nugget, originated from the very middle of the nation» (Anikst, 1939). Listing a number of aspects significant for the Soviet era, in particular, speaking about the poet's peasant origin, his difficult life as a poor man, the need to deal with hard work, A.A. Anikst admired the desire of Robert Burns to pay much attention to poetic creativity, despite the difficulties of everyday life, to work on himself in order to obtain new knowledge, eagerly explore «English poets and the poets of his native Scotland» (Anikst, 1939). Mentioning the poet's first literary collection entitled «Poems written mainly in the Scottish dialect» (1786), A.A. Anikst noted that this collection instantly made Burns popular among his compatriots, among whom were not only educated people, but also ordinary peasants, maids. «Listing the professions that the poet had to deal with, A.A. Anikst came to the conclusion that it was «the difficult living conditions that gave rise to a sense of hopeless despair in the poet's soul», made him «seek solace in wine», and «the ugly reality of bourgeois society distorted the life of this ingenious man, broke his health and prematurely brought to the grave (Anikst, 1939). as if justifying his perverse addictions.

On the other hand, Burns appears as the «great singer of the Scottish people», whose poetry played a «historical role in the development of English literature» and whose «healthy simplicity and naturalness» is opposed to the «prim and prissy poetry of classicism» (Anikst, 1939). Naming the Scottish songwriter «one of the pioneers of a new romantic trend in literature», A.A. Anikst, like many other admirers of his work, notes the amazing folklore peculiarities of Robert Burns's works, «going far beyond the

struggle of purely literary trends and tendencies» (Anikst, 1939). The author, singing the simple realities of peasant life, looks at them not as a «compassionate philanthropist», but as a «person from the masses» (Anikst, 1939). To prove the sincerity and artlessness of Burns' lyric poems, the author of the article supplements it with the well-known translations of S. Ya. Marshak. Rereading lines from the interpretation of «Robin», A.A. Anikst again drew attention to the fate of a simple frisky guy, drew parallels with the biography of Robert Burns himself. To learn about the customs and moreals of ordinary workers A.A. Anikst was helped by the translation «The Best Guy» made by S.Ya. Marshak and according to an interpretation entitled «What Should a Young Girl Do», A.A. Anikst suggested to get acquainted with the peculiarities of peasant life, with the cruel fate of a girl from a poor family, being condemned to live with an old man.

These works are an example of a «folk song», since they were originally «written in the size of popular folk songs»; they immediately began to be sung among the people, not even knowing that «they were the creation of a brilliant poet» (Anikst, 1939). According to A.Anikst, «The Drinking song», which has become a kind of hymn to friendship, performed during traditional Scottish feasts, can serve as an excellent example of a lyric composition's going viral.

Calling Robert Burns «a wonderful lyrical poet», the Soviet critic speaks of the Scottish author's amazing ability to convey deep and complex emotions unusually clearly and precisely, to reflect a deep understanding of nature, where «aesthetic love of her beauties» is replaced by a «healthy feeling of a man of labor, who knows and understand nature through everyday routine work» (Anikst, 1939). The author of the article quotes lines from the interpretation of S. Ya. Marshak «My heart is in the mountains», drawing readers' attention to one of the most striking and at the same time unusually easy to understand poems that reflects Burns's love for the vast plains of his native Scotland, where everything is from «the roof of the snow» to the «slopes of the meadows» and the «abyss of the forest» dear to his heart. A.A. Anikst notes all the power of unity of the soul of a lyrical hero with mountain nature as a source of inspiration. Being the true son of his Fatherland and his people, Burns was a holder of «inimitable humor» and cheerfulness, which allowed him, according to A.Anikst, «to notice perfectly different details, to laugh with a cheerful, infectious laugh» (Anikst, 1939). For example, in an interpretation of R. Burns's poem «What Should a Young Girl Do», S. Ya. Marshak, in a humorous manner borrowed from a Scottish poet, expressed the advice of the wise aunt Kitty to young Jenny, so that she would not give up and

bring her old husband with the help of relentless nature to the death: «Thanks God, there's Aunt Ketty in the world, – / She gave me precious advice. / I'll argue over the old man, / Until he bursts in his old age!» (Marshak, 1969)

Being, in the opinion of the author of the article, «a poet of revolutionary democracy», Burns advocated not only for his compatriots – he «repeatedly expressed his dissatisfaction with the policies of the ruling classes of England and demanded an improvement in the living conditions of the working people», «he greeted the French revolution of 1789 with great enthusiasm», spoke on the side of ordinary citizens of France, who fought with injustice and oppression, for freedom and equality of all people before the law, which caused a deluge of criticism from the «reactionary elite of England», who organized «intervention against revolutionary France» (Anikst, 1939). In his works, such as «M'pherson's Farewell» and «Highland Laddie», Burns, according to the observation of A.A. Anikst, openly spoke about the formidable resolve and desire of a simple person to be free from the shackles of powerful people, about the impossibility of breaking the spirit of the people, whose strength can not be suppressed by hard work, whose will in the struggle for justice cannot be defeated even by death, since dying on the gallows or during the battle for freedom is only a matter of honor for heroes who glorify their homeland and show by their own example the real price of their lives in the struggle for the prosperity of their country.

Speaking of Burns as a poet of world significance, whose work is still relevant for the peoples of different countries who want to unite their efforts in the struggle for equality and fraternity around the world, A.A. Anikst gave an example of the noble act of the Scottish poet who sacrificed all his money received after the confiscation of a contraband vessel, after which he pointed out that Burns' poetry and his life values are a role model. And, finally, in continuation of the topic «on the world fame of the poet», A.A. Anikst quite in detail lists the facts and circumstances that contributed to the reception of Burns's work in Russia, notes that he, as «one of the favorite poets of revolutionary democracy» began to be interpreted in Russia «from the middle of the last century», and it was precisely the «democrat poets» M.L. Mikhailov and V. S. Kurochkin who became propagandists of his literary works (Anikst, 1939). Among other poets who translated Burns, the author of the article listed the names of P. Weinberg, V. Kostomarov, K. Balmont. Among other things, the collection of «Selected Lyrics» is mentioned in translations of T. L. Schepkina-Kupernik, published in the publishing house «Literature» in 1936, and in separate

translations of E. Bagritsky. Complaining about the lack of a complete collection of Burns poems in Russian, A.A. Anikst informed the reader about S. Ya. Marshak's work with Burns's texts, characterizing the last as «one of the outstanding masters of our literature» (Anikst, 1939). Giving a high assessment of the translation activity of S. Ya. Marshak, A.A. Anikst writes of him as a poet whose work «is distinguished by a deep penetration into the very spirit of Burns's folk poetry», thanks to his ability «to master the melodious character of Burns's poems, their peculiar rhythm, simplicity and spontaneity of style» (Anikst, 1939).

Talking about the «happy fate of poems» created by Robert Burns, who crossed national boundaries and gained fame thanks to «deep folk roots» Gerasimov G. (1959). the international journalist G.I. Gerasimov in the article «The Scottish Bard», published in № 8 of the magazine «New Times» for 1959, gives programmatic, at that time, judgments on popular recognition and «universal significance» (Gerasimov, 1959). of the poetry of R. Burns, in the translational process of which is important to convey not only the meaning and the national spirit, but also the melody of the poems. Saying that «Robert Burns's talent tree has taken root and flourished in other lands» (Gerasimov, 1959)., G.I. Gerasimov, of course, has in mind the accurate and concise translations of S.Ya. Marshak, thanks to which the Scottish author is «read and loved in the Soviet Union», where his work «found a second homeland», as well as interpretations in Ukrainian, Belarusian, Georgian languages (Gerasimov, 1959).

Referring to the appeal of the World Peace Council to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns, the author of the article reported a significant and long-awaited event for Soviet literary circles, namely, the publication of 75,000 copies of the book entitled «Robert Burns in translations of S.Y. Marshak», instantly disappeared from the book shelves. Despite the fact that Robert Burns belongs to Scotland, freedom loving motives of his works, their melody, lyricism, close to folk song, are appreciated throughout the world. Pointing to the role of the October Revolution in the mass education and attachment of «illiterate workers and peasants» (Gerasimov, 1959). to world culture, G.I. Gerasimov noted that it was what made Burns's literary works familiar and accessible for mass reading in the Soviet Union. Listing pre-revolutionary popularizers of Burns in Russia, G.I. Gerasimov primarily mentioned such translators as V.S. Kurochkin and M.L. Mikhailov, then referred to the positive estimates of V.G. Belinsky, N.P. Ogarev, I.S. Turgenev, and finally, N.A. Nekrasov, who published Burns's works in his «Sovremennik». Citing the words of



T.G.Shevchenko about the greatness and national peculiarity of Burns poetry, the author of the article once again emphasized the closeness of the work of the Scottish poet to Soviet people who appreciate him «for the love of freedom and hatred to the oppressors», and noted that, on the one hand, «popularity is impossible without good translations», and on the other, «even good translations will not provide fame for verses unless they find a response in the heart of a person» (Gerasimov, 1959).

The activities of S. Ya. Marshak «helped to a wider acquaintance of the Soviet reader with the Scottish poet», especially since it was Soviet Russia, in the opinion of the critic, that became «fertile ground for Burns poetry» (Gerasimov, 1959). Bringing ordinary Soviet people together with Robert Burns, who not only «came out of the people», but «lived all his life among the people and plowed the land himself», and considered the main goal of his life to be liked by «the ordinary people, inhabitants of village huts» (Gerasimov, 1959). The author of the article writes about the equal attitude among different peoples towards life values, such as leisure, friendship, and finally, a folk song transmitted from generation to generation and forming the basis for understanding the national identity of people (Gerasimov, 1959). Continuing topic of nationality, the originality of Burns's lyrics, the critic, relying on the statement of the Scottish poet that there is a small number of writers in the world who were so ignoble by their origin that they were able to communicate with people from the lower classes, gives as an example the statement of the Ukrainian poet Mikola Bazhan that the words of the works of Robert Burns continue to live among the people up to nowadays, largely due to their truthfulness and accessibility for understanding of the honest soul of a simple person. In addition to the folklore peculiarity of the Scottish poet's works of, G.I. Gerasimov also notes the melody of his works, due to the fact that «the poet first looked for or composed the melody and only then wrote the text» (Gerasimov, 1959). This melodiousness inspired D. Shestakovich, D. Kabalevsky, T. Khrennikov, G. Sviridov to create songs and romances. Such popularity of the literary works of the great Scottish poet, according to the Soviet critic, resulted from his contemptuous attitude to the upper class, who made his fortune through the labor of the oppressed, ordinary workers and peasants, due to which Burns's political views, despite the recognition of his poetic talent, were criticized more than once from the side of bourgeoisie's representatives. So, for example, G.I. Gerasimov quotes Dr. Blair's statement about the «smell of the forge» from the political views of Robert Burns, while the Scottish poet himself was never

ashamed of his origin and called himself a man «grown up and educated in the principles of revolution – the principles of reason and common sense» (Gerasimov, 1959).

Continuing the theme of the relevance of the literary works of Robert Burns, G.I. Gerasimov announced the release in 1944 in London of a collection of poems by the famous and beloved poet in his homeland, whose works during the Second World War helped peoples from different countries to unite their efforts in the struggle against fascism. The author of the article, quoting the preface to the collection, which focuses on the value orientations of Burns, who bravely opposed «tyranny, despotism and dictatorship», who rejoiced for universal brotherhood and international security without encroachment on personal freedom and national independence, writes about the condemnation of «war of conquest» on the part of the Scottish poet and cites as an example his thoughts about the negative impact of military battles, leading to widespread of destruction and the painful death of many people (Gerasimov, 1959). Robert Burns, in the understanding of G.I. Gerasimov, is a brave fighter for the freedom of his fatherland, an honest worker who has not lost his dignity under the pressure of church and upper class persecution. Using the lines from S. Ya. Marshak's translation as an example, in which the lyric hero of Burns is optimistic about the bright future, the critic admires the poet's «bright and noble aspirations», his «progressive direction in creativity», bringing people together and helping in «their struggle for peace and a better future» (Gerasimov, 1959).

Of great interest is the emotional response to the article «Scottish Bard» written by G.I. Gerasimov, which appeared in № 11 of the magazine «New Times» for 1959. The author of the published open letter is R. Celkerk, a simple resident of the Scottish city of Cowdenbeath, who took the initiative to express gratitude to the magazine's editorial board for an article about a Scottish poet, which, in his opinion, is a proof of love and respect for his work. Complaining about the statements of some powerful people about strict censorship in Soviet journalism, the author of the letter reports that excerpts from the article written by G.I. Gerasimov helped him to prove the opposite. The only reason for such pressure and prejudice from the British government, R. Selkirk sees in the interest to the Cold War, which «perverts everything in the relations between people» (Selkirk, 1959). It is noteworthy that ordinary citizens of European countries, connoisseurs of the traditions of Burns, were not the first to send their materials to the editors of Soviet magazines, sharing their impressions about the material they had read and expressing hope for full-fledged intercultural cooperation with

Soviet Russia, despite political and ideological disagreements in the world.

### Conclusions

As you can see, in Soviet journalism of the 1930–1950s. Robert Burns's work was publicized from the perspective of the closeness of his life principles to the ideals of Soviet society (Zhatkin & Yashina 2019; Zhatkin & Futljaev 2019; Zhatkin Futljaev 2019). Critics and publicists noted the patriotism and citizenship of the poetry of the Scottish author, who praised the beauty of nature of his homeland in poetry, always speaking on the side of ordinary peasants, poor farmers and workers. Noting the popularity of Burns's works in their homeland, in Scotland, due to their melodiousness, closeness to a folk song, as well as amazing simplicity and conciseness, understandable to ordinary people, the authors of

the articles argued that the works of the Scottish bard went far beyond the «foggy Albion» and became a symbol of the struggle for freedom and independence, uniting the peoples of different countries and continents. Discussing the relevance of Burns's poems, the authors of the articles cited some examples of the reception of his literary works in Russia, wrote about the enormous contribution of S. Ya. Marshak to the development of Burns poetry in the Soviet Union.

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