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Translations of Robert Burns in the Russian Book Market: the Old and the New

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This essay describes the history of translations of Robert Burns in the Soviet Union, at the “break of the dawn” in the 1990s and in the early 2000s. The main aim is to seek out patterns that can shed light on the curious fact that Samuil Marshak’s ideologically-adapted Soviet translations are still the ones most frequently republished, despite his being a part of the repressive, centralized state machinery of Soviet publishing and distribution that allowed manipulation of all areas of public discourse. More than twenty-five years after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Marshak’s translations of Burns continue to dominate the literary market, almost completely overshadowing contemporary translations. As a result, millions of Russian readers are still only familiar with a “polished” and ideologically-adapted Burns—that is, with a Burns whose poetry underwent serious deformations in Marshak’s translations.

I. Robert Burns in the Soviet Union

The prevalence of Marshak’s translations in the Soviet Union is not surprising, considering the fact that the whole translation and publication process was strictly controlled, and only officially distilled translations could find their way into print. The number of printings and reprintings of Marshak’s translations of Burns from the 1940s until the 1980s is astonishing, and it illustrates the importance of Burns as one of the few entirely canonized foreign poets in official Soviet discourse. The first anthology, Роберт Бернс в переводах С. Маршака. Избранное (Robert

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Burns in S. Marshak’s Translations. Selections), was published in 1947 with reprints in 1950 (twenty thousand copies), two in 1952 (twenty-five thousand copies and one hundred and twenty thousand copies), 1954 (twenty-five thousand copies), probably in 1957, and then in 1959 (fifty thousand copies).\(^2\) In 1963, a new edition was published in twenty-five thousand copies.

The first posthumous Marshak edition, the two-volume В горах мое сердце. Песни, баллады, эпиграммы в переводах С. Маришака (My Heart’s in the Highlands. Songs. Ballads, Epigrams in S. Marshak’s Translations), followed in 1971, with seventy-five thousand copies, and, in the same year, the pocket-edition Лирика (Lyrics) appeared. In 1976, the most extensive posthumous edition, Стихотворения. Поэмы. Шотландские баллады (Poems. Long Poems. Scottish Ballads), which contained two hundred and fifteen poems, was published, and three years later, in 1979, Роберт Бернс в переводах С. Маришака (Robert Burns in S. Marshak’s Translations) was offered to Soviet readers in an edition of four hundred and thirty-five thousand copies.

A number of publications also appeared in the 1980s. Among them are Роберт Бёрнс. Стихотворения (Robert Burns. Poems) published in 1982, which contained both the originals and translations, and Избранное (Selections), which included both Marshak’s and V. Fedotov’s translations. Finally, in 1984, another edition, Избранное (Selections), was published in Kemerovo in one hundred thousand copies.

II. Breaking Away from Marshak’s Tradition

The anthology Роберт Бернс. Стихотворения (Robert Burns. Poems), published in 1982, should be considered revolutionary in the Soviet reception history of Burns, as it acknowledged that Marshak was not the only Russian-speaking translator to have engaged with the famous Scottish poet. Breaking the Marshak monopoly, the editor Yuri Levin included translations of Burns done by other poets in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though Marshak’s translations triumphed, for the first time since the publication of T. Shchepkina-Kupernik’s (1936) and V. Fedotov’s (1963) translations, Soviet readers were also offered non-Marshak versions of Burns.

There are several reasons why this book should be considered seminal in establishing a new tradition of translating Burns in the Russian-speaking milieu. First, readers were offered the more scholarly publication format of

\(^2\) This listing does not include editions of Marshak’s translations that also incorporated translations of other Scottish and English poets.
facing translations and originals, which allowed those who understood English and Scots well to make a comparative analysis and thus notice the drastic changes made by Marshak. Second, apart from Marshak’s translations, the book also included those by V. Rogov, M. Mihailov, V. Fedotov, N. Novich, T. Shchepkina-Kupernik, I. Kozlov (the first translator of Burns into Russian), O. Chimina-Mihailova, D. Minaev, D. Bayanov, T. Sokorskaya, I. Ivanovsky, V. Kostomarov, and P. Veinberg. Several poems, including “John Barleycorn,” “I hae a wife o’ my ain,” “The Twa Dogs” and “My Heart’s in the Highlands,” were published in different translations. Third, the anthology came equipped with extensive comments by L. Arinshtain, a professional philologist, which contained historical and biographical facts as well as numerous allusions that allowed the reader to place Burns’ poetry in the context of European literature. Contrary to Soviet critics, Arinshtain emphasized Burns’ education and mental outlook and presented him from a completely different point of view: as a broad-minded, intellectual and educated person with a substantial knowledge of history, geography and philosophy. Finally, the Afterword about the history of Burns translations in Russia was written by Yuri Levin, a famous specialist in English literature who broke with the well-established interpretation that portrayed Burns as a revolutionist and a democrat. This reputation was fostered in Soviet discourse by A. Anikst, M. Gutner, M. Morozov and other critics who discovered revolutionary sub-tones in Burns poems that were innocent of any such subtext, and who added fabricated claims to Burns’ biography. Apart from offering a brief, but historically correct, biographical note free of standard Soviet ideologemes, Levin criticized Marshak’s translations, saying that they “were far from being adequate to the originals” and that Marshak never considered a faithful or a mechanical translation a true work of art. Though Levin’s criticism was carefully framed in language acceptable to Soviet critics, it was an unprecedented case, as Marshak’s translation methods had always been highly praised.

It remains unclear why Levin also briefly referred to other translators of Burns in the Soviet Union, since he did not mention names, simply stating that alternative translations existed. In fact, V. Fedotov was the only Soviet translator who risked competing with Marshak, translating over two hundred of Burns’ poems, mostly songs, and collecting them in two books. The first book of his translations was published in 1959 in three thousand copies, followed by a single reprint in 1963 in one hundred copies, a mere drop in the ocean compared to the millions of copies of Marshak’s

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translations. Others, such as S. Petrov, whose translation of *The Jolly Beggars* was close to the original and expressed the sharpness and vulgarity of the beggars’ speech, had to wait until 1999 to reach readers.

In 1987, another edition of Marshak’s and Fedotov’s translations, *Стихотворения и песни* (*Poems and Songs*), was published. Together with the 1982 edition, this represented a crucial step in re-directing the tradition of Burns reception in the Soviet Union, which had remained unchanged from 1947, when the first book of Marshak’s translations was published. Even though Marshak’s translations still dominated in libraries, bookstores and private collections, new editions signified a change from a single acceptable interpretation to a more varied approach to translating Burns.

## III. At the Dawn of a New Era

Although the process of re-evaluating the old system’s values, including cultural and literary values, began after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Burns’s position did not change much. In Soviet times, a clear conception of his poetic heritage was formed and remained static for many years. The fact that editors continued to trust in Marshak’s name as a magnet for readers is confirmed by two publications of Marshak’s translations in the 1990s: *Стихи* (*Poems*) (ten thousand copies) in 1995, and *Джон Ячменное Зерно* (*John Barleycorn*) in 1998.

It was not until the turn of the millennium that the process of liberating Burns from Marshak’s seminal translations began. In 1999, three hundred and ninety-two translations were published in the anthology *Robert Burns. The Collection of Poetic Works*, edited by Evgeniy Vitkovsky. Along with Marshak’s, the anthology included pre-revolutionary translations by N. Novich, V. Rogov, and M. Mihailov, the first Soviet translations by T. Shchepkina-Kupernik, the “alternative” translator of Soviet times V. Fedotov, S. Petrov’s translation of *The Jolly Beggars*, and, for the first time, contemporary Russian translations done exclusively for Vitkovsky’s edition by E. Feldman, S. Aleksandrovsky, G. Zeldovich, I. Bolychev, V. Shirokov, A. Petrov, and M. Freidkin. The anthology also included several translations of Robert Fergusson by O. Koltsova and G. Zeldovich.

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4 This was the first time S. Petrov’s translation of *The Jolly Beggars* (*Голь Гулящая*), in which the translator used numerous vulgarisms, was published. Though a comparative analysis is not the subject of this essay, it should be mentioned that contemporary translations of Burns differ from Marshak’s above all in the use of dialect, vulgarisms and slang in their attempts to create a spontaneous, neo-literal, “unpolished” style.
Clearly it was Vitkovsky’s intention to offer an alternative to the canonical Soviet translations done by Marshak. An important role in the new interpretation of Burns’ poetry was assigned to commentaries, and these contained the sources of Burns’ quotations, epigrams and some historical facts compiled by Vitkovsky. He also wrote a prologue to the anthology, which revealed the ideologically influenced adaptations in Marshak’s translations. The anthology included a short bibliographical note in which Vitkovsky strongly criticized previous Soviet biographers of Burns who worked according to “social command” and whose main task was to introduce Burns as a hard-working peasant and a victim of the upper classes. Though Vitkovsky sincerely acknowledged the poetic value of Marshak’s translations, he made it clear that Marshak “politicized Burns” by aligning his poetry with prevailing ideological values (7). Despite his sharp criticism of Marshak’s translations, however, Vitkovsky decided to include those that were “not changed to the extent that the original completely vanished behind the translation” (20). As Marshak was still the only well-known translator of Burns by the time the volume was published, Vitkovsky’s decision seemed logical.

Vitkovsky’s anthology was a daring yet important step in creating a new tradition of Burns’ poetry for the turbulent post-Soviet era, where the old system of canonical values had been destroyed, while a new one had yet to be worked out. In the face of the sharp and often chaotic criticism of everything “Soviet,” including translations, that became a common practice after 1991, Vitkovsky established a bridge between the old and the new by including Marshak’s translations. He made it clear that, regardless of their being pure ideological formations, translations done in the Soviet Union were of high literary value and still deserved readers’ and critics’ attention; nor did he underestimate Marshak’s success as a translator and the enormous popularity of his translations among Soviet readers. But the absolute monopoly of Marshak over Burns’ poetry was finally dissolved.

In the same year, 1999, Robert Burns. Стихи (Robert Burns. Poems), translated by Evgeniy Feldman, went to press, unfortunately, in only five hundred copies. This was the first anthology of translations of Burns done by one translator since 1963. In 2000, Vitkovsky edited another volume of translations, Видение (Vision), published in five thousand copies. This time, Vitkovsky excluded Marshak’s translations: the striking difference is apparent in the very first selection in the volume, namely, Feldman’s new translation of “Tam O’ Shanter” (the previous publication had used

IV. Norms and Translations: The Contemporary Russian Literary Market

In the 1990s, both Chesterman and Hermans argued that translation norms are not a matter of right or wrong but of collective community approval, of who does the translation and for whom. Both questions were easy to answer in the time of the Soviet regime, when the general choice of books and particularly of translations was systematic, programmatic and based on objectives that were primarily non-literary. Normally, two main factors directed the selection of works for translation: the author’s background and his/her personal attitude towards ideological constraints on, for instance, democracy and freedom, which could be intensified in the translations. In addition to these limitations, a careful choice of official translators, none of whom were independent, also took place. The overall size of the Soviet literary market and strictly centralized publication machinery meant that paths for understanding foreign literature were open to Soviet readers only to the extent defined by the authorities. This is in stark contrast to the sporadic individual choices that seem to define the contemporary Russian literary market after the sudden change from state-owned publishing houses and distribution networks to (for the most part) private presses that are increasingly client-driven. Deliberate institutional decisions no longer guide the choice of literary works. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the infrastructure supporting distribution and retailing collapsed and the literary market became a free arena.

One of the most striking differences between older and more contemporary publications of Marshak’s translations is that new editions do not include forewords or comments – with the notable exception of those anthologies edited by Vitkovsky. This practice, which was so crucial in the Soviet Union, has almost completely vanished in contemporary publication generally. But Marshak’s translations of Burns still continue to dominate the market even after the start of the twenty-first century, though not as absolutely as before. Thus, in the 2000s, several collections were released by one of the major Russian publishing houses, AST, while two

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editions of Marshak’s translations were also published in 2009 by Harvest and in 2010 by Azbuka in five thousand copies.

But three new names have somehow succeeded in breaking through Marshak’s continuing dominance: S. Sapozhnikov, Jury Kniazev and Evgeniy Feldman, whose translations were published in Vitkovsky’s editions of 1999 and 2000. Soon after the publication of Видение (Vision), which included one hundred and two of Feldman’s translations, Feldman’s collection Роберт Бёрнс. Избранные стихотворения (Robert Burns. Selected Poems) was released by ARKOR in Omsk in one thousand copies. Unfortunately, because of the lower status of regional publishing houses and the limited number of copies, this publication could not reach large numbers of readers. Hence, in 2001, Feldman’s translations were included in the volume Избранное: Стихи, поэмы, эпиграммы (Selected Poems, Long Poems, Epigrams), edited by Vitkovsky and published in Moscow by one of the major publishing houses, EKSMO, in four thousand copies as part of the “Golden Age of Poetry” literary series. In 2003 Feldman’s translations were included in another of Vitkovsky’s anthologies, Роберт Бёрнс. Баллады. Поэмы. Стихотворения (Robert Burns. Ballads. Long Poems. Poems) (four thousand copies), and in 2007, Vitkovsky edited Бёрнс Р. Стихотворения. Песни. Баллады (Burns R. Poems. Songs. Ballads), which was published in nine thousand copies as part of the “Library of Poetry” series. The anthology included various translations, with almost half of them done by Feldman. In 2009, Feldman’s translations were also published by the Russian-language Ukrainian publishing house Folio in two thousand copies; and in 2012, Feldman’s and Rumyantseva’s translations, Джон Ячменное Зерно: стихотворения, поэмы, песни, баллады (John Barleycorn: Poems, Long Poems, Songs, Ballads) were published in sixty-one thousand copies as a part of the “Great Poets” series. Significantly, this was the first edition of Burns translations to explicitly indicate that the translations were done “from both Scots and English.” No previous editions made this distinction.

Jury Kniazev translated two hundred and forty-five poems, published by Profizdat in 2008 under the title Роберт Бёрнс. Стихотворения (Robert Burns. Poems) in five thousand copies; reprinted in 2013 in another five thousand copies. The following year translations by S. Sapozhnikov, Роберт Бёрнс. Собрание стихотворений (Collected Poems of Robert Burns), appeared in Saint Petersburg from the Polytechnic University Press. This 2014 collection is the most complete to date and contains 783 facing translations and originals (including many of uncertain attribution), as well as extensive paratextual material. The print run, however, was a miniscule three hundred.
V. Conclusion

The good news is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union Burns was not forgotten, though current print runs can hardly be compared to Soviet ones. Nonetheless, the question remains why Marshak’s translations, which became so popular in the Soviet Union due to its systematic and strictly organized approach to literary production and distribution, are still the most commonly reprinted. Several plausible reasons present themselves. Whatever the ideological constraints of Marshak’s practice, and his obvious preference for a free translation style that entails numerous deviations from the original, his translations are of an undoubtedly high literary quality. Furthermore, Marshak’s historical popularity, and the fact that his name has been closely associated with that of Burns for decades, presumably make it more lucrative to reprint his older translations than to invest in new ones, which would be non-viable in a market where poetry does not feature among the more economically-vibrant genres. It may seem more logical, from a marketing perspective, to offer a familiar name that would be guaranteed to attract readers’ attention and recognition. Beyond this, it is hard to trace any deliberate economic or political strategy. One may hope that the continuing popularity of Burns’ poetry among post-Soviet readers will keep inspiring interest among contemporary Russian translators.

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