History and Politics: Contacts of Russian and British Historians in the First Half of the 20th Century

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Abstract

The problem of inference of the politics into the scholar’s communication and its influence on them examines in this article, based on a wide range of historical sources (correspondence and official documents) from the Archive of Russian Academy of Sciences (ARAN) and Russian State Archive of Postmodern History (RGANI). The main attention is paid to the contacts between Russian and British specialists in English medieval history. In the middle of the 20th century British and Soviet historians made serious attempts to overcome the ideological and state oppression and many times demonstrated mutual desire to defend the opportunity of international communication.

Keywords list (en): Vinogradoff, Savin, Kosminsky, Postan, Hill, Hilton, Maitland, soviet historians, British historians, ideology, Academy of Sciences, Historians’ group of the Communist party

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1 Scholars have repeatedly appealed to the history of their professional contacts, the study of which usually helps to understand the formation and functioning of the professional community. History of contacts is at the same time the story of the interaction of different personalities, the combination of their personal stories, views and positions. At the same time — especially in the twentieth century — scholar’s international contacts became the object and subject of public interest and government intervention. In the broadest sense politics was included not only in the realm of
science it also invaded the sphere of interpersonal communication. The scholars often became the hostages of the politics. Perhaps that’s why — the state, politics and the international community of historians of the twentieth century is of particular interest for us today.

During the XIX century the two countries had enough opportunity to establish deep and constant cultural contacts, although the states had repeatedly experienced periods of political confrontation. However, the British were coming to Russia, and were writing about it. At the turn of the century, the British tourist routes had been established in Russia, as well as close ecumenical contacts between the Anglican and Orthodox churches.

“Anglofilstvo” in its various manifestations: in the economy, the political practice of literary tastes and architecture was already well settled, and became one of the phenomena of Russian everyday life. Many people went to England to study engineering and mechanics. Many in exile from Russia lived in Britain, and Herzen’s “The Bell” was also published there.

When speaking about the contacts between British and Russian historians, I will primarily talk about those representatives of historical studies that deal with English history. After all, the interest in the history of Britain became the link that brought together scholars from Russia and the United Kingdom.

By the early twentieth century, the professional communication, publications in the British scientific journals, visits of scholars in England to work in the libraries and archives were for Russian historians, as well as the other scholars became well established and a regular practice.

As a matter of fact, one can find out that the interest to the English history (primarily to its medieval period) brought together the best representatives of the historical schools from the both countries — Great Britain and Russia. And a unique system was created for the several decades when the historians of the two countries continued to be not only colleagues, but primarily the teachers and the pupils for each other in spite of all the ideological differences.

By the beginning of the century a liberal part of Russian intellectuals saw the English history as an example for the development of Russia in the direction of the constitution and freedoms (human rights). Actually, the history of law and history of agriculture in England became those professional fields, which evolved community of historians of Russia and Britain in the twentieth century. In the middle of the XIX century W. Stubbs, professor at Oxford, advised the young Russian historian M. M. Kovalevsky to pay his attention to archival sources in England. Thus the “Russian pilgrimage” to the British archives began, primarily to the Public Record Office and British Museum. During his stay in England M. Kovalevsky also got acquainted with the historians as H. Maine, E. Freeman, W. Stubbs and their studies. In the memoirs the Russian scholar stressed, that his visit to London had become a turning point for him as a scholar and a start of his academic studies in a right direction for many years. Kovalevsky’s books about English society, economy and law were very popular and influential in Russia. The Russian scholar became well known in the European academic circles as well. In 1888 M. Kovalevsky was invited to give a lecture in Oxford and became a first Russian professor to speak about Russia in English University. Being well acquainted with the British scholars he recommended the book of P. Vinogradoff to be published in English.

As a matter of fact to that time P. Vinogradoff had his own circle of English friends he’d found during his 15th months academic stay in 1883—1884. The formation of such group of scholars in English history and law like F. Seebohm, F. Pollock, F. W. Maitland and P. Vinogradoff contributed to a better understanding of scholars of the two countries. The opportunity to discuss the different aspects of English medieval history and law, to analyze the information of the historical sources led to the formation of the leading group of academics in these fields. On the other hand
such a close academic communication made the scholars to be interested in the political and social movements in both countries, in international politics and the organization of the higher education in Britain and in Russia. In 1907 historian Alexander Savin (P. Vinogradov’s pupil) dedicated this text to the memory of the great English historian F.W. Maitland (1860—1906). “I am afraid that very few Russian educated people have heard of Maitland” — with these words the article of Russian historian begins, — “In the meantime, I sincerely think that the late historian of the medieval English law deserves attention and memory of all Russian educated people. He managed to produce such a wide and attractive creative work where the history of the English law require a keen interest not only of the specialists (scholars) but of any educated person as well. If I can’t convince the reader about these points, one may bear the guilt on me and not on Maitland or on English law”. Russian historian, recalling his meetings with Maitland in 1900 and 1902, pointed out the “encouraging participation” of the Maitre in the life of young university graduate, who decided to write a thesis on English history. A. Savin recalled their last meeting in 1905 in the archive, and despite of a strict tabu on the private conversations in a reading room, F. W. Maitland had asked Russian historian about his life and work. In the article A. Savin cited an interesting episode of encounter of F. W. Maitland and P. Vinogradoff, whose views on the Middle ages were different, but that had never prevented the colleagues sincerely respect and appreciate each other’s work. After the publication of “History of English Law” P. Vinogradoff congratulated Maitland and expressed his very high opinion about this book. Maitland replied: “If I was one of the fathers of history, you were its grandfather”.

One may say that this style of memoirs it’s just a typical style of such articles. But in all the Savin’s text lines there was not a word that would not go straight from the heart. “If these pale lines lengthen Russian memory (about Maitland) ... my duty to the teacher is fulfilled”, — concluded his memorial article A.N. Savin. As for the historians, who carefully read Savin’s books, especially the chapters on the analysis of the works of the English lawers of the Middle Ages, as well as all the legal cases, it’s easy to appreciate the literary style and manner of presentation, in skepticism, irony and skills with which he explained in detail similar subjects under the influence of the English historian. Being the first of all P. Vinogradoff’s trainee, A. Savin wrote in Maitland’s language and style. In such a way we confirmed the words of A. Savin, that the audience of Maitland’s studies would always be special one (in fact, as was the audience of Savin’s books) but — it would be a big one, as well as English law and English history would be the history, not only for Oxford and Cambridge, but for Paris, Tokyo and — certainly Moscow as well.

Many years after that a modern English historian wrote in a book about Maitland (in a chapter symbolically called “Patron Saint”): “It is really astonishing to realize in how many ways Maitland stood at the beginning of a journey down the right road: teacher, research scholar, writer of history based on sound methods of work, founder of societies, inspirer of others... The historians of England have been fortunate. When at last they turned serious and professional and committed about their enterprises they had Maitland to show them the way”. And this very way in studying English medieval history and law was shown to the Russian scholars as well.

Talking about contacts of the historians of the two countries, we must first identify such iconic figures for the community, as P. G. Vinogradoff and F. W. Maitland. Their friendship as scholars and personalities have repeatedly been noted in historiography and even inspired a legend that P. Vinogradoff was the man who had “pushed” F. Maitland to become a historian. Maitland in a letter to Vinogradoff wrote: “I often think what an extraordinary piece of luck for me it was that you and I met upon a “Sunday tramp”. That day determined the rest of my life. And now the Council of the University has offered me the doctor of “honoris causa”... But for that Sunday tramp
this would not have been”. It is important that historian’s contacts affected not only a scientific sphere, but have included assistance in the acquisition of English “home” for Vinogradoff in Oxford. English friend and colleague was aware of the problems that existed for Vinogradoff in Russia, and understood the views that Russian historian and social activist confessed of.

In a letter to Henry Jackson (December 1903) Maitland said: “I’m living in hope that Pollock’s successor at Oxford may be Vinogradoff… I wish much that we had him at Cambridge — but I felt last year that it was useless to say anything about him … as the Crown could hardly appoint a man to whom the Russian Government was in effect giving the sack. A board of electors has freer hands”.

A month later he wrote: “Vinogradoff’s appointment pleases me greatly and I think that he will make a first rate professor… He had to quit Moscow… He told me years ago, that this event must happen sooner or later. He was expected to teach an official version of history and there were always spies of the Minister of Education among his audience. When … in 1902 … he lectured to extension students in the theatre at Cambridge I knew that he was finally cutting the painter though all he said was studiously moderate…”

Maitland read Vinogradoff’s books and valued them very high. About the “Growth of the Manor” he responded as of a splendid book. Prior to that he corrected the proof sheets of Vinogradoff’s “Villainage in England”, being sure that the book was going to be “loudly praised”. He even teased Vinogradoff — “Perhaps you will become an idol like Maine … I hardly wish you this fate, though you might like it for a fortnight”. The book was dedicated to Maitland.

In April 1889 Maitland wrote Vinogradoff, that he was waiting for his arrival to England, because so many things were to be discussed. They wrote to each other regularly, at least 1—2 times a month, according to the survived letters. The ratings that Vinogradoff gave to the works of some English historians as Seebohm, Stubbs and Maine were of great importance to Maitland. It gave the opportunity to look at them “as European, not merely English phenomena” — and even to “attribute to them a widespread significance”. “You are cosmopolitan and… you are putting things in a new light — that is all. If “the darkness comprehendeth is not”, that is the darkness fault” — he wrote to Vinogradoff.

In 1907 after the Maitland’s death Vinogradoff became the head (with F. V. Pollok) of Selden Society, which published manuscripts and other historical sources of England.

We would like to add that coming to Oxford Vinogradoff strengthened the tendency to change university education that had begun by W. Stubbs. Russian historian began to conduct seminars, a technique which he had successfully used in Moscow University. He edited “The Oxford Study on the Social and Legal History”, where works of his students, many of whom became famous historians, had been published. Subsequently, the British and Russian students of Vinogradoff and of his colleagues have continued the tradition of academic communication.

In 1900, former Vinogradoff’s student, A. N. Savin visited Great Britain for the first time to work in the archives and libraries. He had recommendation letters to Maitland from Vinogradoff and established a constant academic contacts with the English scholar. In 1902 “English Historical Review” published Savin’s article about copyhold cases and Maitland wrote in a letter: “As I read Savine’s admirable article I said to myself — What splendid English these Russians write”.

In 1909 another Savin’s research was published in England with the help of P. Vinogradoff. In a preface to the edition of his pupil’s monograph, P. Vonogradoff wrote: “We ought to try to coordinate research and train researchers; thorough and systematic investigation ought not to be left to chance and to the efforts of selftaught pioneers; the scientific side of history
should be brought up to the level of its literary side… Nor can it be doubted that the normal conclusion of research teaching in the Universities should be the production of monographs, the methods and results of which could be tested by learned experts outside the narrow circle of the class-room or of a particular University town… I propose, with the powerful co-operation of the Clarendon Press to publish a series of Studies in Social and Legal History in which will be collected monographs on these subjects written by my pupils, or by researchers who have done me the honour of consulting me in the course of their investigations… The work of Professor Savin is connected with my teaching in former years in the University of Moscow, and was originally published as part of a Russian thesis. But it would have been a pity if the more important results of this work, carried out by a scholar already favourably known in the English-speaking world by his studies on the end of bondage and the origins of copyhold tenure, had remained inaccessible to English readers. Professor Savin has made a painstaking and critical investigation of the principal source of our knowledge of property held by the Church before the Dissolution—the so-called Valor Ecclesiasticus. No similar systematic treatment based on a careful comparison with the parallel sources of information extant at the Record Office has been attempted hitherto. The author has not been deterred by any dryness or complexity of detail, and his work will surely not be disregarded by students of the social history of England in the sixteenth century”.

Savin’s first trip to England allowed him to fulfill his master's thesis on the “English Village in Tudor England” (1903) and brought him a different experience — direct acquaintance with the country and the people, with British political and social life. The Russian scholar portrayed this image of England in an article, mostly devoted to the Fabians and the ideas of this society. He saw the Fabian Society as the “club of people enlightened, progressive and balanced”. It was interesting for Savin to observe the possibility of open public debates on the issues of politics, economics and culture in England. He read with deep interest the works of Sidney Webb and listened to Beatrice Webb’s speeches, he liked the sarcastic topics of B. Shaw, and he was impressed by the participation of representatives of the working class in discussions. After the first visit to Britain, A. N. Savin never gave up his interest in its current policy. Increasingly, during the period of 1909—1917, he published a lot of articles in Russian newspapers about British affairs: parliamentary elections, the policy of the H. Asquith government, the visit of Anglican bishops to Russia, problems of international relations, and the Russian-English alliance.

In the years of World War I Russian historians — M. Kovalevsky, P. Vinogradoff and A. Savin were active members of the so-called “Society rapprochement with Britain” (Obschestvo sbliženiya s Angliej) established in 1915. The historians thought, to strengthen the contacts between two countries and to preserve the Anglo-Russian alliance after World War I.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to recover the English circle of Savin’s acquaintances as well as other Russian medievalists (for example, Dmitry Petrushevsky). In Russian archives there are no preserved letters from foreign scholars to these Russian historians. It could happen because of the fact that documents were deposited in the archives in the mid-1940s. Probably many historians had destroyed those letters by themselves during the previous years. Contacts with British, with any person from abroad, became too dangerous for the soviet citizens at the end of the 30th from a certain point of view.

At the same time it is absolutely clear, why those of the young Russian scholars (specialists in English medieval and early modern history) who had the luck to escape to England in the mid-1920s (for example E. Kosminsky and V. Lavrovsky) and worked in the archives could find the necessary professional circles so easily. They obviously had not only good letters of recommendation, but also knew who to go, who to communicate with and what to expect from English counterparts. That time Russian scholars were involved in a new circle of contacts with their British colleagues: new generation of scholars met to continue the traditions of their teachers. In this
Looking at the editions of the Russian specialists of the English medieval history one can find out, that they continue to publish their works in Britain till the middle 1930th. Famous Britain medievalist M. Postan played a prominent role in these activities, because he translated and edited the texts of his Russian colleagues. M. Postan was born in Russian Empire and studied in russian universities, he came to England in 1920 and in 1926 received masters degree in London School of Economics. By the mid-30th he became a professor in Cambridge and an editor of the “Economic History Review”.

With the appearance of the Bolshevik Russia on the political map, Russian and foreign contacts, including British scientists, have got new dimensions. Gradually, the contacts moved to the state level. If in a previous years the state didn’t interfere in the private scientific contacts and relations, publications abroad from the middle of the 20th all of these aspects of communication inside the scientific community were taken under state control, limited and strictly regulated. The authorities demanded that scholars must be the agents of the Marxist ideology abroad, as well as of the Soviet way of life and Soviet policy. It happened gradually and was realized by the intellectuals gradually.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t in the interests of the soviet government to ban the contacts between the foreign and Russian intellectuals. This was facilitated by many things: first of all — it was the need of the specialists, which the new Russia lacked. On the other hand - it was required, because it was necessary to teach young soviet scientists and engineers. Mostly they were study at the universities of the USA and Germany, and also at German factories. Relations with the United Kingdom were not conducive to such an exchange.

There was another circumstance which subsequently greatly affected the nature and organization of contacts between Russian and British historians. The new government was very interested in contacts of scientists of the USSR and other countries. Soviet leaders wanted to prove that the Bolshevik regime was not at all the monster that can’t be deal with. After all, the Soviet Union demanded trading partners, and economic ties and political allies.

One had to take into account the fact, that the Russian emigration has powerful levers for shaping public opinion and influence mood establishment of the Western countries. An example of the Russian revolution, the growing communist and trade union movement on the one hand made the Soviet Union a serious and terrible enemy, and on the other — forced to reckon with the new political reality. Diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union by the countries of the Western world after 1922 took place quite rapidly.

In the autumn of 1925 in the USSR the 200th anniversary of the Academy of Sciences was widely celebrated. For the organization of the anniversary, a special government commission chaired by A. I. Rykov was held. At a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee it was decided, that the arrival of scientists from abroad was very desirable. The authorities came to that decision after A. Rykov had received a letter from academics Oldenburg and Steklov, where they explained the need for such celebrations, the invitation of the foreign scholars and the state support in all those activities: “Foreign scientists coming here will clearly see that all the stories about the death of cultural values, the placement of barbarism in the USSR are fabrications. The authors of the letter referred to an example of a visit to Russia by Martin Conway, a member of the British Parliament. He visited the Hermitage Museum and the museums of Moscow and admired their wealth. Martin Conway gave many interviews in English newspapers on his visit to the USSR, improving the image of Soviet rulers. The authors of the letter especially stressed, that the international contacts of scientists contribute to the fact that foreign scientists had an impact on the
authorities of their countries by those changed opinion about the Soviets. To change that view and to improve it, the scientist should meet with colleagues from Russia at conferences and congresses, foreign business trips, using all types of contacts. Academics also reminded the Soviet authorities that European governments were actively involved in organization of various scientific congresses and celebrations. Authors of the letter referred to the example of England and its government which “officially stood aside for the long time, considering the scientific associations as a private enterprise”. However, already in 1923 on the 100th anniversary of the Royal Asian Society became a notable part of the state participation — solemn meeting was opened by the Prince of Wales and attended by the Prime Minister.

According to these, A. I. Rykov wrote a note to the Politburo, stressing that the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Academy of Sciences should be given not just a “state”, but even an “impressive” character. This meant not only to invite foreign scholars, but arrange for them special travelling “on our established routes”; meetings and communication with those of Russian academics, who supported the communist regime. The whole planning of the anniversary celebration would be agreed and proved by the Central Committee of the Bolshevic party. As a result of all the activities the Soviet government received positive reviews in the foreign press, which printed detailed reports on those celebrations. The anniversary of the Academy of Sciences should be used to symbolize the great advantage of the Soviet government and the foreign guests help to prove it.

The resolution of SNK (The Council of people's Commissars) about the organization of the celebration of the Academy’s anniversary included among all the measures such as: free visas to foreign visitors, the release of all invitees from customs and other inspections as well as travel in first class sleepers free of charge. At the end of the anniversary the Central Committee was presented a secret report about the present foreign scientists and their reviews of the event.

The Communist party and Soviet authorities paid even more attention to the organization of the next anniversary of the Academy of Sciences in 1945. It was decided to celebrate its 220th anniversary. The Council of people's Commissars (SNK) made such a decision in January 1945. Originally it was planned that the celebration would be held from 25th of May to the 7th of June. However, on 5th of May the President of the Academy of Sciences V. L. Komarov wrote to Stalin, that the scientists from the USA, Canada, France, England, Australia wouldn’t not be able to attend the session, as they hadn’t have enough time for paperwork, ticketing, etc. Academy requested to postpone the celebration, because “the presence of the foreign scholars is highly desirable”. The time of the jubilee celebrations were moved to June 15—28.

The Academy gave the Central Committee of the Communist party the list of 198 names of the visitors from abroad (except Germany) to be invited to this celebrations. The largest delegation should be from Great Britain: 61 scholars. Then the number of invitees declined to 45. It was clear, that the majority of the invited scientists were physicists, mathematicians, chemists and biologists. Some of them (8 persons from British delegation) were not permitted to come to Moscow by the British security services. “Pravda” quoted the words of W. Churchill that “it is impossible to prevent the departure from England at this stage of the war against Japan, so many scientists whose services the government may wish to use for special work to defense the country... I am sure, that the Soviet Union would understand the concern of the British government in this issue, taking into consideration the fact, that the British government still employs a deadly war against a formidable enemy”. 21 scholars from England eventually attended the celebrations, according to the special registration cards, which they filled in Moscow. The list of invited foreign guests, reviewed and approved by the Politburo, often had special remarks regarding their attitude to the Soviet Union in addition to specialty and place of work.
There were only 4 historians in the delegation of British scientists. Professor of Trinity College (Cambridge) George Macaulay Trevelyan was among them. By his name a special characteristics has been added: “Trevelyan sent greetings to Soviet scientists and performed with anti-fascist slogans”. In this list one can see also George Gooch, Gordon Childe (Professor of Archaeology at Edinberge) and Richard Tawney (Professor of Economic History, University of London). By the name of the latter a special mark was written — a member of the Labour Party.

Eventually, only two English historians — G. Childe and R. Tawney came to Moscow. Toney was among those scientists who did not represent any organization, but received a personal invitation from the USSR. It was Richard Tawney, who visited meeting of the so called “English history group” in the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences and discussed with its members the possibilities of the further contacts between the Soviet and British historians. His visit made the soviet medievalists and other specialists in English history to feel the reality of the collaboration between the scholars of the two countries. In 1945 Soviet historians forgot about the ideological differences and class struggle — and it was dangerous for them. As for Tawney, he met colleagues whom he’d got acquainted with in the mid-20s in England (E. Kosminsky and V. Lavrovsky).

The military alliance of the USSR and Great Britain in World War II needed and ideological support from the both sides and historians played their role to make it work. In 1943—1945 in the USSR as a part of the program devoted to military allies of the Soviet Union, historians wrote articles about the history of England and the United States, biographies of Oliver Cromwell and George Washington. In 1944 E. Kosminsky prepared an article on cultural relations between Russia and England. He stressed, that culture should serve as the cement that securely fasten the nations which had been united by brotherhood-in-arms, and a military alliance should become the long peaceful cooperation for the benefit of all mankind.

In Great Britain in 1944, John Trevelyan (the head of Trinity College, Cambridge), being ready to print his work “English social history: a review of six centuries, from Chaucer to Queen Victoria” (published in Russian in 1959), made a report about the works of Russian historians on English medieval history, in particular he analyzed Kosminsky’s ideas.

At that time soviet historians planned a grandiose work on the agrarian history of England from the earliest times to the early 20th century. Among all participants one could see E. Kosminsky (pupil of D. Petrushovsky and Savin) and V. Lavrovsky (Savin’s pupil). It was assumed that such book could finish the series of monographic works of Russian historians on the agrarian history of England, and at the same time “a step forward in understanding the general problems of agricultural development in both the West and other countries, including the USSR”. Those book on agrarian history to some extent planned to become a Marxist response to “Cambridge Economic History” published in England by M. Postan.

But those ambitious plans of the soviet historians could be fulfilled only if they would have an opportunity to work in the British archives and libraries, and to receive books and articles from England. Tawney’s visit gave hope for the restoration of the international contacts: the opportunity to travel to England to communicate with British counterparts, to organize the English translation of the works of Soviet specialists in English medieval history.

Apparently, with the assistance of Tawney, in 1945, E. Kosminsky began to plan a trip to Britain with a course of lectures on Russian history. He prepared four notebooks of lectures in English. He saw himself primarily as a mediator between the Russian and English audiences. However, the situation in the world had changed and the Kosminsky’s visit didn’t take place. The Cold War rapidly changed the priorities of the state authorities. It became much more complicated.
to continue the contacts between the scholars, the correspondence between historians, well-reestablished in 1945, was limited. Those Soviet historians who dreamed of cooperation with the western colleagues, who wanted to discuss the problems of English history, were severely criticized by the Communist party organizations. Their attempts not no expose as “the enemies” all so called “bourgeois” English historians, became a serious point for the accusation those soviet historians to be aware of the political vigilance.

Actually, looking through the archival materials it is possible to see how difficult it was for the soviet historians to continue the contacts with the foreign colleagues. All the letters to the soviet historians should be addressed only through the Institutions, where historians worked. Then, after a letter had been got, it was obligatory translated into Russian for the appropriate inspection. The collection of documents of V. M. Lavrovsy (in the Archive of the Russian Academy of Science) where the completely organized correspondence remained, demonstrates that on each letter from an English historian, translated by Lavrovsy, there were put a special mark — “to print 3 copies” or “in 2 copies,” etc. Giving response to the letter any Soviet historian had to give the Russian text also submit for verification. It’s hard to say how texts were verified, whether all the content of letters and their translations or not, but the control of correspondence implemented full.

All the visits of the foreigners to the soviet Institutions, all the meetings among the soviet and foreign colleagues had to be fixed in a special form for the authorities with the detailed information about the discussions and conversations. Most often, those reports were formal, especially since the mid 1950s when intensity of cooperation with foreign colleagues became one of the indicators of quality of work of academic institutions.

But if the academic contacts between the historians of the USSR and Britain were severely restricted and monitored, who could play the role of conductor between the two communities? It should be recognized that in the case of the relationship of British and Soviet historiography an important role should be assigned to a group of historians of the Communist Party of Britain (Historians’ Group of the Communist Party, abbr. HGCP). Its members, primarily R. Hilton, C. Hill, E. Hobsbawm became that inspiring force that literally forced the Soviet historians, especially specialists in the history of England and in economic history, to break through the iron curtain. Their talent and sincere desire to learn and understand the specific features of the Marxist approach to history were common to all members of the HGCP.

In this academic milieu “some of the distinctive theories of British Marxist theory were first formulated: about the nature of feudalism and absolutism, the development of capitalism, the character of the English Civil war, the relation of science and Puritanism to capitalism… The Group also contributed to the new social history — history from below, the history of the common people — which became, as it were, a fellow traveler of Marxist history”.

The first contacts with the Soviet historians were established by Christopher Hill, who visited Moscow in 1935 as a student, and then again in 1952. His colleagues from the Historians’ Group saw him as “a link with Soviet economic historians.” In the early 1950s R. Hilton came to Moscow. The soviet colleagues were impressed by his sincerity, openness and charm. The “high years” of the group of Marxist historians in Britain (1946—1956) were characterized among all by the active communications with Soviet historians, including Kosminsky. E. Hobsbaum specially mentioned E. Kosminsky, talking about the history of the group and the influence of Kosminsky’s works of feudal England (“respected and influential”).

The correspondence between E. Kosminsky and R. Hilton lasted from 1950 to 1958. One can see, that very soon the formal address “dear academician Kosminsky” changed to “dear comrade.” It was R. Hilton who actively worked to prepare for publication Kosminsky’s book
“Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century” (Oxford, 1956). E. Kosminsky, in turn, did his best to publish the works of the English historians in “Srednie Veka” (“The Middle Ages”) magazine. E. Kosminsky thought that such publications would be extremely useful for the fastening of closer relations between the English and the Russian historians-marxists. At the same time M. Postan continued to help his Russian colleagues (E. Kosminsky and V. Lavrosky) to publish their articles in “Economic History Review”.

According to their correspondence an intriguing story how the book of the Soviet medievalist (E. Kosminsky) was published in Great Britain can be found out. By the way, the Russian edition of the “Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the XIIIth Century” by E. Kosminsky was nominated for the Stalin Prize in 1949, but after severe critics of the scholar for “academicism and bourgeois objectivism”, the nomination was cancelled. However, while in the USSR in 1950 that party criticism of historians has continued, the preparation for the translation into English and publication of the book continued in England. Many times during the period of 1950—1951 E. Kosminsky in his letters wrote to Hilton: “I'm not sure where it would not be safer to postpone the publication of my book in English till the better times”. In his replies R. Hilton every time explained to his soviet friend and colleague what else he had done for its publication. This friendly support at such a difficult time for the Soviet historian was very important. The process of publication was actively supported by M. Postan, with whom Kosminsky discussed over different problems, such as the crisis of feudalism and the essence of feudalism itself. When R. Hilton informed M. Postan about the problems with the publication of the book (publishers in 1950 in England massively rejected to deal with the publication of a Soviet author, whose special book initially couldn’t bring any profit for them), M. Postan immediately “went so far as to announce this fact to a meeting of the “Economic History Review”. Despite the different interpretations of the dynamics of feudal rent in medieval England, attitude to Marxism etc. E. Kosminsky and M. Postan had a continuous respect to each other’s works as well as personal friendship. M. Postan published in “Economic History Review” many articles of Russian specialists in English economic history (E. Kosminsky, V. Lavrovsky, M. Barg), correcting their translations and respecting their opinions.

There were more problems with the translation of E. Kosminsky’s book — soviet historian wrote it during the World War II, with lacking access to special literature. And that’s why many concepts, for example, Postan’s, with whom he argued, had been changed during the decade. A sizable part of the book had to be rewritten for the English edition, while it was difficult to receive books and articles Soviet historian needed. R. Hilton made a lot of work to find all the literature for the new version of Kosminsky’s book to be written. As a matter of fact, many terminological problems were found out during the work of translation into English. For example, the editor didn’t understand and approve Marxist terminology in the text. R. Hilton explained it to the soviet colleague: “When you use the words ‘bourgeois historian’ he thinks that this will not convey what you mean to the Englishman who is unacquainted with Marxist terminology”. After all, when the book had been completely redesigned and upgraded The Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences withdraw the permission for its publication abroad as “wrong and un-Marxist” (1952). The book “Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the XIIIth Century” by E. Kosminsky was published in Great Britain only in 1956.


However, the problems with the publication of works of Soviet historians in British magazines continued. In 1959 M. Postan wrote V. Lavrovsky a letter full with comments and advises how to make an article of the soviet historian publication about the English peasantry in the 18th century worth to be published successfully in “Economic History Review”: “May I however, in
a purely personal capacity, as a friend rather than an editor, make a suggestion which I hope you will not consider tactless. Your paper will, in my opinion, gain greatly in its effect if the translation is not merely one of language but also one of manner, i.e. if in producing the English version you make your theoretical categories implicit. I found that the reaction of most English readers of your previous article was one of regret that your theoretical positions should be so conspicuously imposed upon your material, instead of emerging from it by implication. This is not of course a condition for publishing your article. We shall publish it in any case and in whatever form you send it in ... This is merely a piece of advice. Your work on the English 18th century is so important that your friends and well-wishers are anxious for it to have as full an impact as it deserves; and as you so well know English academic readers, whether Marxist or not, are more likely to receive sympathetically an historical study like your first book in which your point of view is implied instead of being repeated and stressed, than a paper in which the “categorier” obtrude very conspicuously.”

In 1956, Christopher Hill, after reading the soviet monograph about the English Revolution of the 17th century, which was edited by E. Kosminsky, agreed with him that for the foreign reader the chapter on historiography must be corrected and changed: “I think that a little more friendnese towards the real achievements of bourgeous academic historians might be a great help in bringing about that cooperation between historians of our two countries which I know you so much in heart.”

The constant and intensive dialogue of the Soviet and British historians (Kosminsky, R. Hilton and C. Hill) covered various fields — from discussion of D. Petrushevsky’s works about the peasant revolt in 1381 to the situation with Marxism in England. In December 1950 R. Hilton wrote: “The situation in England is such that either this Aesopian technique is used or nothing is published. Insistence on the full and proper employment of Marxist terminology might lead to an abandonment of the ideological struggle.” And in February 1951 he told Kosminsky about the idea to create a magazine in England, which will bring together Marxist and progressive non-marxist historians. E. Kosminsky was asked to be one of the “foreign advisors.” After several months R. Hilton reported that the journal “Past and Present” had been established and it minded “to provide a common platform for the marxist and non-marxist progressives.” In its editorial board were Gordon Child, Maurice Dobb, Ch. Hill, R.Hilton, J. Morris, E. Hobsbaum, G. Bara.

Since 1951 R. Hilton tried to establish and develop the cooperation with the soviet colleagues in other direction. British historian regularly sent E. Kosminsky invitations to the Annual general meetings of the Economic History Society (M. Postan was at the head of it). R. Hilton understood the symbolism of such an act, because he visited the Soviet Union several times and new quite well how difficult it was for the soviet scholars to go abroad. E. Kosminsky every time thanked his English friend and explained that he couldn’t come. But nevertheless invitations kept coming. “I hope the invitation will come to you as a sign of friendly feelings in the part of English Economic historians, as well as of natural desire to hear your views on the subject to be discussed — the history of agriculture” was written in one of the letters by R. Hilton. In turn, since 1957 M. Postan also tried to incorporate the Soviet historians (V. Lavrovsky and M. Barg) into the Economic History Association, which he’d organized together with F. Braudel and other specialists in that field. But no one of Soviet historians could participate in those organizational meetings, as they required not personal invitations from the foreign scholars, but formal invitations from the institutions, approved by the soviet authorities.

However, sometimes it was impossible not only for the soviet scholars to visit Great Britain, but an unexplained collision could happen when British historians, even with the members of the HGCP. In the summer of 1955 R. Hilton and C. Hill did not receive a Soviet visa. They wrote
to E. Kosminsky: “We have been somewhat amazed to hear that our visas are not to be granted, on the grounds that the Academy of Sciences does not wish to see us in Moscow. This information has arrived rather late, in view of our early application for the visas, and we are perplexed about the reason. It occurs to us, that it may be assumed at the Academy that we were expecting to be entertained when in Moscow. This was far from our expectations or wish. We hoped to be able to talk to such Soviet historians as would be in Moscow ... We were expecting simply to look about us, to visit places of interest and to improve our knowledge of Russian”74. Probably at the same R. Hilton wrote to his soviet colleague: “I do not know when next we shall meet. It seems ridiculous that after our considerable correspondence, we should have had so little opportunity to talk together”75.

If the contacts between the soviet and the British Marxist historians were more or less established and E. Kosminsky and R. Hilton were able to meet several times, the contacts of Vladimir Lavrovsky from the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences and an Oxford professor William Edward Tate remained only in correspondence. First letter W. Tate wrote to V. Lavrovsky in 1933, after reading his article in “Economic History Review”. Then, after many years of the ban on communication of the soviet citizens with the foreigners, their correspondence resumed. In 1968 V. Lavrovsky wrote to his counterpart in England: “I'd like to see your book (“The English village community and the enclosure movements”) translated in Russian as well as my book “The parliamentary enclosures and the growth of the capitalist estate in England in the 18-19 centuries” in English ... The scholars both in England and in Russia have done so much to throw light on English agrarian history. I suppose the mutual edition of their studies in this region assist the further growth of the scientific and cultural relations of English and Soviet historians”76.

The month of Anglo-Soviet Friendship Society, held in November-December 1952 in England became a major breakthrough in improving cultural relations between the two countries and restoration of the contacts between the historians. The Soviet delegation was attended by famous writers K. Fedin and K. Simonov, composer D. Kabalevsky, musician E. Gilels, historian E. Kosminsky. For the latter the visit to Great Britain and meetings with old and new friends were touching and memorable. He gave lectures, communicated with the members of the CPHG, and met with his acquaintances from 1920s77. Kosminsky’s visit to Great Britain in 1952 was intensively discussed again and again at the meetings of the group of the history of England at the Institute of History. It was very important for the Soviet historians to realize, that the doors to the country of their academic interest once may be opened for them. The majority of the soviet specialists in English history by that time had never seen the country they study. That constant interest to the visit in 1952 was also connected with the fact, that the members of the Soviet delegation were able to find a place of A. Savin’s burial (the historian died in London in 1923) at the Kensel Green cemetery. That “place of memory” was very important for the Soviet historians, because many of them were Savin’s students at Moscow university.

E. Kosminsky published his English impressions in the journal “News”, of which he’d become an editor in 1952. That journal was created especially for the Soviet propaganda in Britain. Corresponding with R. Hilton, E. Kosminsky asked his opinion about this magazine, its contents and the quality of the English language the articles were translated into78. It’s worth mentioning that none of the Marxist historians in Great Britain had ever heard about that Soviet magazine. “I shall do everything I can to promote the friendly relations between the Soviet and British historians, — wrote Kosminsky in a letter to R. Hilton. — This is a principal historical goal of the moment. This is why I have accepted the position of the editor of the ‘News’79. Unfortunately, all his attempts to make the journal help to improve the anglo-soviet relations failed very soon. “News” was under a strict control of the Central Committee of the Communist party and remained its official primarily ideological character. The chair of the editorial board brought E. Kosminsky a lot of trouble80.
At the beginning of 1950s Soviet historians, primarily E. Kosminsky, began to correspond with Robert Browning, the representative of the English History and Archeology section of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS). An attempt was made to invite to Moscow an imposing delegation of British historians and archaeologists. E. Kosminsky discussed those plans with R. Hilton and R. Browning in 1952 as well as the names of participants of such a delegation. R. Browning requested E. Kosminsky to organize an invitation for the British historians from the Academy of Sciences of the USSR without involving VOKS in those plans. Historians knew quite well, that the invitation from the Academy of Sciences would give them more freedom to choose the participants of such a delegation. Needless to say, that a visit of such delegation of British historians to the Soviet Union couldn’t take place that time, but the Soviet and British dreamers continued to have correspondence about it throughout 1954. In 1954 a visit of the Historians from the Historian’s Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain to the USSR was organized.

Another turning point in the contacts between the Soviet specialists in English medieval history and the members of the British CPHG happened after 1956. The policy of de-Stalinization (Khrushchev’s speech to the Twentieth Congress denouncing Stalin) as well as the Hungarian events of 1956 led to the fact that many members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (and among them — C. Hill and R. Hilton) came out of the Party, creating by those choice additional difficulties for establishing contacts with the Soviet scholars. Anglo-Soviet Conference in London in 1958 took place without R. Hilton and C. Hill. And though all the old friends came to meet with E. Kosminsky, he had to reckon with the fact that they stopped at some time be “close” to Soviet historians.

In 1957 another “political” accident, his British friends were involved in, happened. At that time a new wave of Communist party critics of the intelligentsia (and the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences as well) spread all over the country. The magazine “Voprosy Istorii” and its editorial board were severely criticized for the lack of “partiynost” and serious “mistakes” in characterizing some episodes of the Soviet history (the revolutions of 1905 and 1917). As a result the editorial board of “Voprosy Istorii” was changed and a special editorial article (very critique one) was published. To demonstrate to the international communist movement, that the CPSU was ready to struggle with “anti-Leninist” and “anti-Marxist” approaches on history, that editorial article was translated into many languages and published. Sincere Marxists R. Hilton and C. Hill publicly spoke out against it and moreover that new trend in the politics of the ideological struggle in the Soviet Union. British historians sent a special letter to the editor of “Voprosy Istorii” and ... to E.Kosminsky. They wrote: “We do not want to express any opinion about the validity of specific criticisms of fact or interpretation [in the published articles]. However, the [editorial] article contains some general remarks about the aims and methods of historical research, which seem to us to be contrary to the spirit of Marxism and harmful to good relations between Soviet and English historians. The attitude which seems to us to be most characteristically anti-Marxist is, that certain historical judgments, once made, are sacrosanct and can never be critically investigated again. This idea dominates the whole article. It seems to us that, at the present time especially, Soviet historians should be vigilant in guarding against this sort of idealist dogmatism. After all, it is only recently that the ‘Short course on the history of the CPSU’, once treated in the USSR and abroad as an infallible text, has been disowned in the USSR itself. It seems to us that if Soviet historians admit that they were wrong in accepting this work, they should be very careful about claiming infallibility for other historical judgments. It also seems to us that some Soviet Marxists, who for so long time accepted the profoundly anti-Marxist cult of the personality, should be wary about making accusations of revisionism against other Marxists. It is believed that the propaganda which seems to inspire the editors of “Voprosy Istorii” is already out of date. ... Editors seem to belong to that outmoded bend among soviet politicians (Molotov and Co) who seek to intensify the Cold war, who
distrust the movement towards peaceful coexistence and who deny the possibility of different roads to socialism according to the scientific historical conditions of different countries”. Referring to Kosminsky British historians wrote: “We should be very glad to know what you think of these reflections, and, if possible, we would also like to hear the views of our other friends among soviet historians”.

E. Kosminsky had to answer that letter under a strict control. Among his papers one can see the printed copy of the Russian translation of Hill and Hilton’s letter, variants of Kosminsky’s answer. Soviet historian answered his British colleagues with cautious words, trying not to disturb that understanding, which for many years he had completed with British counterparts, not to destroy the trust they’d felt to him. R. Hilton replied: “I was particularly glad to hear from you, since it is my earnest wish, that discussion — even controversy — which might arise between us, as individuals, or between Soviet and British historians, should always be within the framework of a firm friendship. Would that international relationships were also conducted in that spirit — but we must not be utopian about interstate relationships”.

Since early 1950s more and more Soviet people were sent abroad to work in various Soviet organizations. Among them were lawyers and engineers, drivers and cooks. But for the historians for a long time all the visits abroad remained not approved by the authorities. Only since 1956 the governments of the USSR and Great Britain began negotiations on the adoption of a cultural exchange program. In April 1958 a special committee of the CPSU approved such a plan, which encompassed student exchange programs, visits schoolchildren to England and the invitations of groups of artists.

But the program of cultural exchange between the USSR and Great Britain had some ideological reefs and the historians were the first to find it out. In December 1957 R. Hilton wrote to E. Kosminsky: “An English newspaper (“Daily Mail”) reported that some soviet students who had been in England had an interview with professor Postan in Cambridge. In the article in “Komsomolskaya Pravda” those students (or the editor of the newspaper) accused Postan (who they referred to as “this creature”) of being a warmonger. As a result of this publicity, Postan wrote to the “Times”, stating that during the interview, where factory technique in Birmingham was discussed, he had said that during the war a good deal of re-equipment took place. This was interpreted in “Komsomolskaya Pravda” as if Postan thought war was desirable in order to make possible equipment. I do not believe that Postan really spoke in the sense attributed to him in “Komsomolskaya Pravda”. Perhaps there was misunderstanding, which led to distortion. However there is no need to emphasize what difficulties incidents of this type course when such reactionary newspapers as the “Daily Mail” are ready to exploit them. It certainly will limit the exchange of people and points of view between our countries which we all so much desire”. At the end of the letter R. Hilton wrote: “All the better, then, that those of us who have got to know each other personally can exchange letters and so make direct contact”.

It was absolutely clear for the British and Soviet scholars that only personal contacts, active and free correspondence, participation in discussions about the different problems of historical studies can establish that system of normal academic communication which was well known for them from the previous decades and the examples of the lives and friendship of their teachers.

The contacts of British and Russian historians in the first half of the 20th century were vividly controversial: at the beginning of the century one can see free communications and friendship between the scholars of the same field, mutual respect of professionals. In the middle of the century the historians of both countries had to overcome the influence of ideological blinkers as well as the state control over the historical studies in the USSR. And sometimes it was equally
difficult both for British and Russian (Soviet) historians.

Remarks:


2. “Anglomania” in Russia also manifested in an interest to the works of Charles Dickens. Many Russians studied English to read his books.


4. Ibid. P. 164

5. In English were published: Kovalevsky M. Modern Customs and Ancient Laws of Russia: Being the Ilchester Lectures For 1889—1890. London, 1891; Ковалевский М. М. Общественный строй Англии в конце Средних веков. М., 1880.

6. Ковалевский М. М. Моя жизнь… С. 256—258.


9. In a letter to Vinogradoff F. Maitland gave an interesting characteristics to the “political types” of his colleagues: “our leading “village communists”, Stubbs and Maine, are men of the most conservative type, while Seebohm, who is to mark conservative reaction, is a thorough liberal. I am not speaking of votes at the polling booth but of radical and essential habits of mind” // The Letters of Frederic William Maitland. Cambridge, 1965. Р. 57—58.

10. Савин А. Н. Памяти Мэтланда // Русская мысль. 1907. № 10. С. 80; A. Savin wrote about works by F. Maitland also an article Савин А. Н. Английский юрист в роли историка // Журнал министерства народного просвещения. 1900. Т. 332. Ч. 1. С. 210—232; Ч. 2. С. 419—443.

11. Ibid. P. 93


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid. P. 91


19. Ibid. P. 288


22. Ibid. P. 94.

23. Ibid. P. 60; The title comes from the Latin Gospel of St. John, which refers to Christ as the light of men — “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (“The Light that shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not”) 1:5 1:5.


25. The Letters of Frederic William Maitland… P. 243
55. In 1947 the articles of the three English Marxist historians (Christopher Hill, Margaret James and Edgell Rickword) were translated into Russian and printed in Moscow in one volume. All of them were devoted to the problems of English Revolution of the 17th century. It’s interesting, that in Russian translation on the title of the book was only the name of C. Hill. See: Хилл K. Английская революция. М., 1947.


58. Hobsbawm E. The Historians’ Group... P. 31.


63. R. Hilton suggested to use the term “non-marxist” instead of “bourgeois historians”.

64. Хилтон Р., Фаган Г. Восстание английского народа в 1381 г. М., 1952.


66. Английская буржуазная революция XVII в. Т. 1—2. М., 1954.


69. Ibid. L. 11 ob.

70. Ibid. L. 15; E. Hobsbawm also wrote: “In the totally unpropitious climate of 1952 John Morris nagged and bulldozed some members of the Group to launch the review “Past and Present” as a deliberately constructed common forum for Marxists and non-Marxists, specialist and non-specialist historians” (E. Hobsbawm. The Historians' Group... P. 33).


72. Ibid. D. 96. L. 17.


75. Ibid. L. 120.


77. The details about E. Kosminsky’s visit to London see: Hobsbawm E. Interesting Times... P. 220.


79. Ibid. L. 22 ob.


История и политика: контакты российских и британских историков в первой половине ХХ в.

Шарова А. В.

Аннотация

В статье с привлечением документов из фондов Архива Российской академии наук и Российского государственного архива новейшей истории показана специфическая роль государственного вмешательства в научные контакты отечественных и британских историков. Рассматривая как личностные, так и научные аспекты коммуницирования специалистов по английской истории, автор уделяет особое внимание проблеме преодоления идеологического давления на советских историков, а также вопросу о значении научного общения с советскими коллегами для английских ученых, входивших в группу историков Коммунистической партии Великобритании.

Ключевые слова: Виноградов, Савин, Косминский, Постан, Хилл, Хилтон, Мэйтланд, советские историки, британские историки, идеология, Академия наук

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