

Ukrainians Wha Hae

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In the 1950s, the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan visited Kyiv and went on to translate Ukrainian poets. His encounter was full of misunderstandings but held the promise of a cosmopolitan solidarity.

In the year since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the discussions of what this violence might mean for the future of Russian culture have generated more heat than light. Ukrainian interventions in the debate, however, equipped as they are with an intimate knowledge of both Russian civilisation and Russian barbarism, have tended to be more incisive. First, instead of squabbling about famous composers, we should be promoting overlooked and imperilled Ukrainian creativity; second, with Russian bombs still falling, the most pressing question about Russian culture is not 'What is to be done with it?', but 'Is it to blame—and if so, how?'

Answering that requires, above all, a confrontation with unexamined colonial mindsets within Russia (a process necessary in many European countries), but potential culpability extends beyond Russia's borders. When it comes to the marginalisation and murder inflicted on non-Russian cultures in Moscow's orbit, western enthusiasts for Russian art, literature and music have generally been insufficiently curious or courageous. What is more, far from challenging the myth of Russian exceptionalism promoted by the Kremlin, many in Britain and elsewhere have long indulged their own fantasy that Russia, unlike its neighbours, is a land with a unique history and a special destiny. In part, this is a product of a habitual indifference towards small, stateless or newly minted nations, but it also stems from the mystique that grew up around Russia in the twentieth century. In Britain, this sense of Russia as a place apart has rested on three pillars: geopolitical—its special status as the chief antagonist of the British Empire in the nineteenth century and the American in the twentieth; political—the clear and credible alternative to capitalism offered by the revolutions of 1917; and, finally, cultural—Russia's reputation for extraordinary suffering and soulfulness that emerged in the 1910s among bohemian circles giddy on freshly translated Dostoevsky.

The appeal of this marriage of Communism and Karamazovism was particularly strong amongst those already disenchanted with the British status quo. In Scotland in the 1920s, for instance, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid envisaged a mystical 'Russo-Scottish parallelism' countering English domination. Not all twentieth-century Russophiles were as keen on Lenin as MacDiarmid was, but, as a fundamental point of distinction, the revolution underwrote the attraction of Russian culture for everyone: it was not only good and different, but it was good because it was different. The perception of essential otherness also gave a certain flexibility to the idea of Russian exception: those opposed to or disillusioned with the Soviet Union as a political project (a group whose number increased sharply in the wake of other invasions in 1956 and in 1968) could instead appreciate the cultural icons of anti-Soviet dissent—casualties of state oppression like Alexander Solzhenitsyn or more ambiguous figures, who nevertheless maintained an anti-establishment aura, such as Andrei Tarkovsky.

So have evangelists for the special appeal of 'Russian' culture (a label which normally obscures the diversity of the populations ruled from Moscow) been party to the crimes carried out in its name? It

is an idea that should be taken seriously—and can be, if we don't confuse creators with their creations and don't overstate the importance of art and of individuals when compared to laws, states and institutions—but it is a question too intricate to be answered in any one article. My contribution, instead, is a vignette from the annals of British Russophilia—one that shows that, although it has had its fair share of manipulation and myopia, the cultural relationship between Britain, Russia and Ukraine is just as much a story of misguided enthusiasms, ironic coincidences and unexplored opportunities, a tale of complexity, not complicity.

Edwin Morgan

In 1955, Edwin Morgan was part of a group from the Scotland-USSR Friendship Society that conducted a six-week tour of the Soviet Union. Morgan would go on to be one of Scotland's most prominent poets, but he was then a modest lecturer in English with a sideline in verse. The delegates found the Soviet Union in the strange interregnum of zombie Stalinism between the leader's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's denunciation of the cult of personality in 1956, but, characteristically, Morgan's report in *The Glasgow Herald* eschewed politics, preferring a more human account of Soviet life. 'Enigma and Paradox: Face of Russia'—a classic formulation of the era—ends with a lyrical description of locals 'leaning lazily over the river from a white-columned belvedere, as if Communism could safely be left, that spring day, to take care of itself'.

The relaxed 'Russian' city Morgan describes so sympathetically here is Kyiv. He is evidently wearing the 'Russian spectacles' that critics like Oksana Zabuzhko have implicated in the Western erasure of Ukrainian culture. The conflation of 'Russian' and 'Soviet' was common in the Cold War—the famous 'Russian linesman' at the 1966 World Cup was Azerbaijani—but Morgan had just spent several happy weeks in Ukraine, which he said he preferred to Moscow and Leningrad. His carefully stage-managed itinerary featured Ukrainian-language operas, exhibitions of Ukrainian 'folk art' and meetings with Ukrainianophone poets. Despite this, in his notebook, Morgan still refers to Ukraine as 'the southern part of the USSR'.

On the one hand, this blind spot is evidence of the superficiality of those official performances of Ukrainian identity. Under Stalin, nationalism was anathema, but 'nationality' was a ubiquitous, mandatory category that was crucial both to the organisation of the state and to its master narrative, one that celebrated the USSR's diversity while constantly reinforcing the pre-eminence of the Russian people. On the other, there is still a surprising lack of empathy. Morgan would certainly never have described himself as living in 'the northern part of Britain': he wore a kilt for much of the trip and more than once broke into a Russian-language version of 'Glasgow Belongs to Me'.

Does the reason for this overlooking of Ukraine lie in Morgan's lifelong passion for Russian language and literature? Born in 1920, Morgan came too late for the first wave of Dostoevsky-fuelled Russomania. His Russia was firmly Soviet: it encompassed the nineteenth-century classics, but the dominant note was one of self-confident, experimental modernity—the very thing he wanted for Scotland. A visitor to Morgan's childhood home set the tone by leaving behind a copy of the impeccably designed journal *USSR in Construction* and the scrapbooks Morgan compiled as a young man are filled with photographs of sleek Soviet buildings. This precocious interest in Russia would eventually serve as the starting point for his late autobiographical poem 'Seventy Years': 'At ten I read Mayakovsky had died, / learned my first word of Russian, lyublyu'.

Lyublyu means 'I love', but, in retrospect at least, Morgan's schoolboy romance with Russian is not idealistic, but shadowed with death. Love twinned with loss was indeed the leitmotif of Morgan's Russia: the first Russian poem he translated was Alexander Pushkin's 'I loved you' and his motivation for studying the language came not from his vague sympathy for socialism but his unrequited affection for a more politically committed friend. Likewise, for Morgan, Russian

literature's totemic figure was not Dostoevsky or Tolstoy but the conflicted figure of Vladimir Mayakovsky—a romantic poet as well as a propagandist, a suicide who became a poster boy for Soviet optimism—not to mention a global celebrity, with a particular appeal, it seems, for young gay men like Morgan, Langston Hughes and Frank O'Hara.

By the time of Morgan's trip, the once controversial Mayakovsky had been ideologically defanged, and turned into another waxwork in the Stalin-approved line-up of Russian literary greats. His true nature was not lost on Morgan, however, who decided to rescue Mayakovsky's verbal energy and outsider appeal by translating him into Scots. This demotic, dynamic idiom was not the middle-class Morgan's native vernacular, but it was the tongue MacDiarmid had once seen as capable of embodying the rich potential of the Russo-Scottish parallelism.

Despite this supposed connection between the two languages, the profiles of regionally dominant Russian and long-suppressed Scots are hardly analogous, and Morgan and MacDiarmid could perhaps be accused of ignoring Russian's long role in imperial domination, dazzled by its brief heyday as a lingua franca of anti-colonial revolution. But Morgan, at least, for all his solecisms about 'Russian' Kyiv, was not insensitive to the interlocking of language, identity and oppression in Ukraine. On his return to Scotland, he produced translations (into English) of three Ukrainian-language poems—two by Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) and one by Lesia Ukrainka (1871-1913), figureheads of Ukraine's independent literary heritage who now adorn the 100 and 200 hryvnia notes respectively.

Reading Morgan's version of Shevchenko's 'Testament' now, with its fantasy of the river Dnipro carrying 'Our enemies' blood to the sea' and its call to 'Baptize freedom with the hated / Blood from hostile veins...', it is hard not to see it as a presentiment of Ukraine's current resistance to Russian occupation. Even Ukrainka's non-specific urging for hope in 'Contra spem spero'—'Life shall be mine though the darkness is strong...'—seems to speak to Ukraine's present resilience. It is ironic, therefore, that Morgan's relationship with these avatars of Ukrainianness was shaped by the Stalinist pantomime of national specificity he had been treated to in Kyiv. It was standard policy that non-Russian literature be embodied by founding fathers like Shevchenko and lesser authorities like Ukrainka—provided these long-dead classics could be portrayed as both opponents of tsarism and disciples of more talented Russians. Of the hundreds of thousands of copies of Shevchenko's collected works published in the post-war decade, two were acquired by Morgan—one in Ukrainian, one in Russian. The latter duly hails the former serf Shevchenko as the patriarch of Ukrainian folk culture but emphasises his ties to 'progressive Russian culture' and his 'implacable struggle against Ukrainian bourgeois liberalism and nationalism'. The 'enemies' blood' of 'Testament' may now appear to be an unambiguous allusion to the Russian interloper, but in the mid-twentieth century, the authorities felt confident that readers would find only a reference to the Romanov past. The poem was widely anthologized—Morgan's Russian-language version comes with a facsimile of the original manuscript—and quoted on the monument erected at Shevchenko's gravesite in 1939.

But the party line does not tell us what Shevchenko really meant to Ukrainians—or to Morgan. For a proud Scot, the parallels with his own nation and its cultural heritage were obvious—and unflattering. A visit to Kyiv's grand State Shevchenko Museum prompted him to question the paltry official recognition of Scotland's own national poet: 'What has Scotland done for Burns that is any way comparable?' A year later, on the 160th anniversary of Robert Burns' death, he used his scrapbooks to juxtapose the stamp issued by the Soviet Union in celebration of the bard with an article explaining that no such commemoration would take place in Britain.

Burns seems to haunt Morgan's interaction with Ukrainian culture. He was quizzed about him by locals, who emphasised his kinship with fellow 'peasant poet' Shevchenko. When invited to contribute at an open-air concert in Zaporizhzhia, not far from the current front lines, it was Burns

he recited (as well as Mayakovsky). The Soviet Union had enshrined Burns, a democrat and champion of the common man, in its international literary pantheon, but he also had special significance in Ukraine where, since the nineteenth century, he had served as a model for agitators for cultural autonomy. Shevchenko, who read him in Russian, cited Burns as his inspiration for writing in his subjugated national tongue and Ukrainka borrowed from the patriotic song 'Scots Wha Hae' in her long allegorical poem about Robert the Bruce and his fight for independence.

If Morgan joined Shevchenko and Ukrainka in sensing this potential 'Ukraino-Scottish parallelism', he did not make it explicit, but his decision to translate the stirringly nationalist 'Testament' seems suggestive. Although firmly in English, we might even hear in Morgan's version echoes of Burns: 'the blue, blue sea' and the 'red, red rose' perhaps, but also the patriotic imagery of 'Scots Wha Hae'—all chains, blood and liberty.

Whatever his thoughts on Scotland and Ukraine, Morgan never translated Ukrainian poetry again. At least, not knowingly. In 1957 he submitted English versions of two Russian-language poems by Lina Kostenko, a recent graduate of Moscow's Maxim Gorky Literature Institute, to the journal *Soviet Literature*. The anthology in which Morgan found these poems makes no mention of the fact that Kostenko is Ukrainian; unlike the garlanded classics, the nationality of living poets was apt to be washed away in default Russophone Sovietness. Less than a decade later, the defiantly Ukrainophone Kostenko would be frozen out of official literature, and she is now the grande dame of patriotic Ukrainian poetry. Morgan's Scottishness did not fare much better in this exchange: he would surely have laughed at the title 'Englishman Translates Soviet Poetry'.

Much about Morgan's engagement with Ukrainian culture remains unknown. It is not clear how well the polyglot poet understood Ukrainian: his personal library included both a beginners' textbook and a Ukrainian version of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Unlike with Hungarian poetry, which he started translating in the 1970s, Morgan makes no mention of an interlingual crib. His biographer Jim McGonigal recalls that in his nursing home, Morgan would chat with a Ukrainian care worker, but that might have been in Ukrainian, Russian, or English—maybe there was the odd Scots word too. Perhaps it doesn't matter: for Morgan, language is important, but human connection even more so. *Lyublyu* is a Ukrainian word too.

Cultural Reconfiguration

The twentieth-century Russophilia of Morgan and others, which was made possible by distance and by Russia's genuine political and cultural distinction, is unthinkable now. The obvious, immediate brutality of Russia's invasion is one reason for that, but another is the vacuity of Putinism. Russia has nothing special to offer, except perhaps to those so desperate for a counterweight to American power that they misread Putin's bloody interventions as refuting Western warmongering, not reprising it. Conservatives eager for the 'traditional values' shilled by the Kremlin have already found a more congenial exporter in Orban's Hungary. Culturally, despite the many brave and talented people still in Russia, we will not soon be seeing global stars of anti-regime dissent in the style of Pussy Riot: the state is much more unforgiving and sophisticated than it was a decade ago, and, unlike its Stalin-era precursor, content to leave the borders open.

Despite its grim cause, the final extinction of Russia's romantic appeal is to be welcomed, as it allows a clear-eyed appreciation of Russian culture's many merits, as well as its flaws. It also makes space for something new.

Morgan's engagement with Ukraine's heritage was short-lived and confined to the narrow window offered by Soviet officialdom—but it points to ways in which the cultural relationship between Britain, Russia and Ukraine can be reconfigured. There are presently more than a hundred thousand

Ukrainians newly arrived in Britain, with tens of thousands of them in Scotland—some speaking Russian, some Ukrainian, many no doubt blithely referring to Glaswegians as Englishmen. This exodus, temporary and tragic as it may be, offers a chance to restart the halting conversation between Scotland and Ukraine that was begun by Burns and Shevchenko and taken up, albeit briefly, by Morgan. This cosmopolitan conversation—across English, Scots, Ukrainian, Russian, and other languages too—promises to yield not only a richer understanding of Ukraine and of Russia, but, perhaps, of Scotland and England too.

Two translations from the Ukrainian by Edwin Morgan

‘ASpringtime Remembered (from the Ukrainian of Lesya Ukrainka’), July 1955

That spring was sweet, was brilliant, was abundant,
Dancing with light it came, all light, all flowers,
Flashing, skimming it came to us on the hundred
Wings of the singing birds that praised its powers.

The world was wakening, was murmuring, was living -
The grove was rustling, and the echo rang,
The world was vibrant with its laughing, its singing -
And I lay sick: in me nothing sang.

I thought: ‘Here is the spring that comes pleasing
All in the world, some little gift I see
All in the world receive; yet I am receiving
Nothing, spring in its joy has forgotten me.’

But I was not forgotten. In at my window
Branches of apple blossom glanced and swung,
The green leaves flickered, and the day was sprinkled
With a fine snow of petals where they hung.

And the wind spoke to my cramped walls, trying
To trace in song the great free face of spring,
And tiny birds rose twittering and crying
Through the dear woods that echo all they sing.

Unforgotten! And the gift will be unforgotten
By me as long as my heart recalls that day;
Never before, and never in years that followed,
Did such a springtime flower where I lay.

‘Testament (from the Ukrainian of Taras Shevchenko, 1814-61)’

Once I’m dead, then you must lay me
In the grave, in a burial-mound
In the heart of the broad Ukrainian steppe-land
Where my heart is bound.
For there to my senses the endless meadows
Will stretch as they stretched before,

And the Dnieper's craggy banks, and the Dnieper,
The thunderer and its roar.

Once the Ukrainian river has carried
Our enemies' blood to the sea,
To the blue blue sea... ah, then only
Will these fields be left by me.
And the hills be abandoned, and in prayer
May I fly even to God...
But till that time comes, I have no prayer;
I do not know this God.

Bury me low, and then be rising,
Stand and break the chains,
Baptize freedom with the hated
Blood from hostile veins.
And then in that great company
The new brothers of the free,
Keep my memory, and put in gently
One good word for me.
(Zapovit, 1845)

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