

# Scotland-Russia Institute. Tsvetelina Haralampieva

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## SCOTLAND-RUSSIA INSTITUTE

What is the connection between Scotland and Russia? When did relations between these two countries begin? And with regard to my personal interests - what were Scottish missionaries doing in the Caucasus at the beginning of the nineteenth century? All these questions and some more brought me to Edinburgh - the capital of Scotland and definitely one of the most interesting historical cities in Europe. My exploration of Scottish-Russian relations started from a very interesting place which I was pleasantly surprised to find by chance on the internet before my arrival. This is the Scotland-Russia Institute situated on South College Street in the Old Town of Edinburgh. Really a very cosy place with very charming people working there promoting how useful and necessary it is to maintain the relations between the two countries. My meeting with the founder and chairperson of the Institute - Jenny Carr was inspiring and showed me again that when "there is a will, there is a way" in achieving one's goals.

Jenny Carr used to be a Russian language teacher. In 2003 she was asked to help organise an association for Russian-Scottish relations by former members of the GB-USSR Association which was established in 1960s in London with the aim of encouraging British-Russian cultural links. The main office was in London and there was a branch in Edinburgh. Due to decreasing funds it was closed in 2001. So Ms. Carr and other volunteers established the Scotland-Russia Forum in Edinburgh in 2003. Its general aim is to promote understanding of Russia and its neighbours, to raise interest to Russia in Scotland and to show people that it is good to know more about Russian culture, history and society. The first activities of the Forum were connected with organizing meetings, talks, lectures etc. in a different places, including church halls, once per month. Interest in the Forum's events grew and the SRF realised there was a need for a permanent meeting place with scope for development of new new ideas. That's why with a donation in 2008, from a Scottish company with business in Russia, premises were rented for 3 years and a cultural centre, the Scotland-Russia Institute, was opened. Nowadays there is a great number of activities promoted by the Institute: exhibitions, talks, business meetings and conferences, promotion of Russian in schools, language classes for adults, a lending library, weekly e-bulletins, a biannual journal "The SRF Review", receptions for visiting delegations, social events, a shop, theatre productions etc.

On account of the SRF's contribution to "friendship and cooperation" Jenny Carr was awarded the medal of the Russian Federal Agency "Rossotrudnichestvo" by the Russian Embassy on 16th January this year. Another contribution of Ms. Carr is her support for the foundation of the Russian Edinburgh Education and Support Centre - a Saturday Russian school for bilingual children, which now has more than 100 pupils. There are also Russian language courses in the Scotland-Russia Institute for adults with native-speaker teachers. The Institute is also offering on demand classes such as Russian for public examinations for example TRKI, Business Russian, individual tuition, and Russian weekends.

While speaking about Russian language courses it is important to mention that at present one of the most important campaigns of the SRF is to support the keeping of school exams in Scotland, in response to the announcement by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

that they intend to abandon National Courses in Russian in 2015. Nowadays there are no Scottish schools offering Russian, with the exception of some extracurricular classes, and if there aren't national exams in the future this will be a permanent situation. As it is written in the official site of SRF "Scottish pupils are missing out - there are at least some schools which offer Russian in all other European countries." And more "Scotland is missing out - on opportunities for business and cultural interchange with one of the world's most fast growing, influential and culturally rich countries."

As was mentioned above there is a library in the Scotland-Russia Institute. It has over 2000 books mostly provided by members, former Russian language teachers, local Russians and others. There are also DVDs, language learning materials and reference books. The biggest section is devoted to Russian literature, and includes poetry, short stories, novels and plays, mainly in the original Russian although there are some English translations too. There are also a small number of works of literary criticism and a few English and Scots authors (including Robert Burns, Walter Scott and Ian Banks) translated into Russian. Other sections cover history and politics, biography, travel and geography (including guide books), art and architecture. There is also a collection of Russian children's books, which is especially useful for the children of Russians

being brought up in Scotland whose parents want them to retain their cultural links. A small number of newspapers and journals are received regularly: "Русская Мысль", "Russian Life", "East-West Review", "Англия", "Rusistika" and "Русский Язык за Рубежом". The library is public and everybody can read books there free. There is a small fee for non-members of the SRF who wish to borrow books.

Mrs. Carr is keen to offer more modern Russian literature and fiction which mostly attract the attention of the members and curious newcomers. But as I experienced by myself there is also possibility for people making a research about Russia to find books of academic value and also historical ones concerning not only the modern but also mediaeval Russian history. I was very happy to find titles like "Scotland and the Slavs. Cultures in Contact: 1500-2000", "Scots in Russia 1661-1934", "The Caledonian Phalanx. Scots in Russia" and many more which gave answers to some of my questions and made clear that there were Scotsmen who worked in the Russian Empire making their own contribution to its society and leaving a deep trace in its history. As far as the books are in English and in Russian one can practice a language while learning new things.

The SRF also houses a small shop offering products like: Russian gifts (matryoshkas to paint or tiny ones to hang from your mobile phone, painted trays, wooden toys, Khokhloma bits and pieces (eg pickle spoons), juniperwood teapot mats, photographical and greeting cards sold in aid of charities; Borjomi Women's Cooperative gifts from Georgia (hand-made jewelry, toys and others), Russian learning materials, music; books etc.

The SRF has over 300 full members and some 800 people receive regular e-bulletins with information on events all over Scotland. Everyone can learn more about the SRF and the Institute from its official website <http://www.scotlandrussiaforum.org> and from the newsletter the "SRF Review" - a twice yearly publication with an editorial content and news about the activities of the Forum.

The exploring continues. Next station: The National Library and National Archive of Scotland and their opportunities of leading a research in Russian Studies.