



[Cimova, K.](#) and [Kranoudi, G.](#) (2018) Celebrating the centenary: the history of the founding of the Russian lectureship at the University of Glasgow. *Slavonica*, 23(1), pp. 3-6. (doi: [10.1080/13617427.2018.1471808](https://doi.org/10.1080/13617427.2018.1471808))

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Deposited on 14 June 2018

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Celebrating the Centenary: The History of Russian Lectureship at the University of Glasgow

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It is safe to say that the lectureship in Russian at the University of Glasgow could not be established without the extraordinary support given to the Faculty of Modern Languages by Principal Donald MacAlister (1854-1934). Principal MacAlister, a self-learner of Russian not only partially financed, but also actively encouraged the establishment of what is one of the oldest Russian lectureships in the UK. Though many would associate the establishment of the lectureship solely with the financial gift of William Weir to the university, the role of Principal MacAlister gained a new significance during the explorations carried out by Glasgow University's Russian students in the University Archives. While some information on the relations between the University of Glasgow and Russian institutions is available, there is yet a lot of exploration to be done into the intricacies of this relationship and the main figures who shaped the lectureship. Under the auspices of the Chancellor's Fund and the Russian language department we were able to uncover remarkable detail about how Russian at the University of Glasgow truly came about.

The primary purpose of the Russian lectureship appears to have been of a much more prosaic, commercial nature than that of a romantic endeavour to master the likes of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in the original. Not only did Principal MacAlister and Lady MacAlister tender a sum of around £14,000 to the University and by extension to the modern languages, he also singlehandedly wrote the 'Memorandum containing suggestions for the promotion in Glasgow of closer relations with Russia', dated September 1916. In the memorandum the primary goals of the lectureship were outlined and very quickly it becomes apparent that the lectureship was not only meant to provide 'instruction in the Russian language' (MacAlister, 1916) but also promote trade relations with a specific focus on training Russian-speaking commerce graduates. Within the Memorandum, good relations with the Glasgow Commercial College were emphasised as paramount. The lecturer-to-be was specifically instructed to arrange, 'with the help of a qualified colleague', evening Russian courses focused on reading, writing, speaking, commercial correspondence and economics of Russian trade' (MacAlister, 1916). These courses were specifically to be adapted to those students already in business and to those aspiring to be ultimately employed by Russian firms requiring British employees. The urgency to boost trade relations and the economy between the two countries is palpable in MacAlister's use of language. MacAlister envisioned a 'bureau or office, under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce and the Merchant's House' (MacAlister, 1916) to be established as a part of the same endeavour, to facilitate the communication with Russia in terms of trade, finance and travel, as well as translate commercial documents into or from Russian. The Principal further stipulated the need to 'ascertain and make known particular qualifications desired by British and Russian employers' and 'identify directions in which they might profitably specialise' (MacAlister, 1916). Students were clearly expected to follow a commercial route of their degree and similar to modern teaching of a foreign language, particular stress was put on the enabling of students to travel

into Russian institutions and vice versa. Officially then, the memorandum of the Russian lectureship gives a clear picture of a promising and well-equipped department within the University of Glasgow. Apart from the courses, students had the opportunity to apply for travelling scholarships of the sum of £150 to enable them to study and practice the Russian language in Russia for a year, where they could first-hand 'acquire a practical knowledge of the methods and resources of the country'(MacAlister, 1916).

With the goal of the teaching being aimed at improving relations between the two countries, it is no surprise that the visit of the Russian Duma and the Council of the Empire in May 1916 (just a few months before the penning of the Memorandum) caused much more of a 'stir than separate visits of French parliamentarians and professors in 1916' (Glasgow, 1978). The visit of the Duma was well-documented by the local and regional papers, offering such level of detail as all the lavish decorations used in City Halls, unusual for the period given wartime austerity measures. The Lord Provost and Principal MacAlister at this point actively emphasised the ties between Russia and Scotland. Lord Provost addressed the distinguished guests after a full day of showcasing Glasgow and its extraordinary shipbuilding capacity, as not only 'comrades in arms but as kinfolk bound to us by the closest ties of tradition and feeling...it is therefore no wonder that Russians and Scotsmen were fighting side by side today in the cause of civilisation, freedom and honour' (Herald, 1916). Such strong and emotional language was mirrored by MacAlister during an evening reception at Bute Hall, calling on the historical legacy of comradeship between Scotland and Russia, invoking Robert Bruce, the astronomer to Peter the Great, and also the celebration of the Scottish landscape by Mikhail Lermontov.

On the 14th of September in 1916, a heartening letter reached the City Council of Glasgow. Sir William Weir, a well-known businessman who was described as 'a man with a small stature but worth his weight in gold' (Lorgnette, 1917) by the local newspapers, expressed his interest in initiating a plan of financial support towards the creation of a Russian Lectureship in the University of Glasgow. The recipient of the letter, Thomas Dunlop, the then Lord Provost, elated with the news, contacted on the next day the Principal of the university, Donald MacAlister about the offer. According to the letter, Weir covenanted the generous sum of £2,500 to be paid at once, which could support the Russian Lectureship for approximately six years. Weir's action was aiming at the establishment of an eminent academic connection that could uplift and benefit both the political and business relations between Scotland and Russia. In this regard, Weir set a condition following the offer, according to which the lecturer had to devote some of his time teaching Russian to the students of the Commercial College, a condition for the lectureship establishment we also observe in Principal MacAlister's Memorandum.

Notwithstanding Weir's undoubtedly generous economic support, it was only reasonable that the lectureship could not survive just on that offer in the long run. It is clear from the University Senate minutes of an *in camera* session of 9th November 1916 that £2,000 of this endowment was designated for investment in Exchequer Bonds (Clerk, 1916). It is interesting to note that this sum therefore did not constitute the entirety needed for the lectureship and as we learned later, was supplemented by funds collected by Sir Thomas Dunlop. In fact, it was estimated that the fund had to reach £50,000 in order to be efficiently carried into effect.

Therefore, Thomas Dunlop addressed a call to the People of the City of Glasgow on the 12th of January in an effort to promote closer relationships with Russia. By stressing the fact that “this is not a philanthropic appeal but is more of the nature of a business proposition designed for the ultimate advantage of this country” (Dunlop, 1917), Dunlop managed to attract the interest of more businessmen consequently collecting more funds for the Lectureship.

It comes as a logical development for the University leadership to note in the Court minutes on 26th April 1917 that Mr Hugh George Brennan, M.A., L.es L. Chevalier of the Orders of St. Ann and St. Stanislas had been appointed to the Lectureship in Russian in the University for a period of five years. The position was to start from 1st October, 1917, or’ –adding rather humorously from a modern perspective of travel- ‘if he is able to reach Glasgow during the summer, from 1st July, 1917, at an annual salary of £400 (Clerk, 1917). It was not until 10th May 1917 that a telegram reached the Principal outlining the acceptance of his appointment. Brennan’s arrival, after an arduous overland journey through Finland, Sweden and Norway was indeed postponed well into September and was seen as a ‘shaft of light illuminating a landscape darkened by the privations of war’ (Clerk, 1917). From the research’s point of view it is vital to note the contextualisation of the creating of this lectureship as a reinvigorating act within the wartime austerity and also as a sign of hope for prosperity and economic uptake with regards to trade with Russia.

Additionally, it was decided that the Russian language should be added to the modern languages enumerated in the Regulations VIII, IX, for the Ordinary Degree of M.A. Calendar, and later on it was included under the Honours Group (G) ‘to provide fully qualified teachers of the language for the British Colleges and Schools and of English subjects for Russian educational institutions’ (MacAlister, 1916). Whilst the need for a course on Russian economy was essential at that time, the political history along with the literature was not neglected, since the students had to become acquainted with the overall cultural background of the country. Within this context, well-known Russian authors were studied such as Tolstoy and Gogol, while the Russian literature was taught through the lenses of Kropotkin and Waliszewski. In the same year, an elementary class was held under Brennan’s leadership and in March five students successfully passed the Preliminary Examination in Russian language, paving the way to constructing a deeply-rooted department within the University of Glasgow.

In 1922 the department firmly established itself within the Faculty as an Honours subject and a recommendation was made by the Lecturer in Russian that the £10 from the Russian Commercial and Education Fund be divided into two prizes of £5 each, to be awarded at the end of the current session as follows:

- (1) To the best student attending the Honours Class of Russian and
To the best student attending the Ordinary Class of Russian.

These were happily acquired by the first graduates of the Honours Class in 1922, Ephraim Harris and Margaret Carse. Two male and nine female students constituted the first Honours class in total. While the curriculum has developed profoundly over the years and books such as Forbes’s *Russian Grammar* (2nd ed.) or *Russian Reader* by Boyer and Speransky (Cambridge

University Press) are no longer used, the origins of the Russian lectureship clearly reached further than a simple academic exercise. Instead, they grew to symbolize the university's legacy for innovation, courage in the face of austerity and also ingrained the tradition of a fruitful academic collaboration between the two countries for years to come.

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