



Sovremennik Magazine about the Railways (socio-economic analysis)



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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the analysis of the poetic works of the Russian authors of the middle 19th century, who published in Sovremennik [The Contemporary; the literary and socio-political magazine founded in 1836] and extensively reviewed the topic of construction of railways in the Russian Empire. Citing selected fragments of works of A. S. Pushkin, N. A. Nekrasov, N. A. Dobrolyubov, A. A. Fet, Ya. P. Polonsky, helps to present the socio-economic analysis of the problems associated with construction of first railways in Russia, as they were seen by Sovremennik authors. The conclusion is made that

Sovremennik authors regarded the topic of construction and operation of railways as one of the most socially significant and promising.

Editorial note. *Instead of a review of a scientific or educational edition traditionally suggested under that heading we publish the original analysis of the works of Russian writers and poets of 19th century made from the point of view of the history of transport and particularly of socio-economic aspects of its development. The publication might confirm the importance of transport industry, that enjoyed widespread attention two centuries ago, as it does it nowadays.*

Keywords: *transport, railway transport, railway construction, social and economic analysis, Sovremennik, literature, poetry.*

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In the middle 19th century, the existing literary trends in description and analysis of social changes in society were affected by a new phenomenon, the emergence of the very first railways in Russia. It is worth particularly highlighting poetic works on the topic of cast-iron (at that time) main lines, and the personalities of their authors, who were ambivalent about the very fact of emergence and growing interest (enthusiasm) of the state in construction of railways, but at the same time they were sensitive to the potential of railways. Analyzing poetry associated with the attitude of the society to emergence of railways in Russia in 19th century, it is remarkably interesting not to consider and analyze the works of individual authors separately, but to analyze their concentrated manifestation in the print edition, which in the first half and in the middle of 19th century influenced literary, political and the social views of most representatives of Russian intelligentsia. This is a literary and socio-political magazine called *Sovremennik* [The Contemporary].

This vector of research could have already been of interest thanks to two facts only. The founder of the magazine, Alexander S. Pushkin actively participated in the discussion of the need for railways in Russia. Nikolay A. Nekrasov who was one of the main publishers of the magazine (he together with I. I. Panaev were its publishers from 1847 to 1866) is the author of the most famous Russian poem on the considered topic which is called «Railway» (Pic. 1).

First, it should be clarified that the socio-economic emphasis of this article, aimed at analyzing poetic works and the points of view of their authors, is due to the fact that we are used to notice in the poetry the accuracy of the words used, poetic meter,

allegoricality and other artistic techniques. But in the considered case according to the authors' idea (of course, this could not be an idea, but a pure combination of circumstances, but what an economically significant one!), poems and opinions dedicated to such a resonant event as construction of railways, contained, as a rule, an assessment of socio-economic efficiency of creating new transportation routes. At that time, both for a man in the street and for a journalist it was clear that construction of railways entails significant financial investments. In many ways, therefore the society was divided into two camps consisting of those who were for construction and against it. Moreover, the opponents often argued that significant financial investments, especially those taken from the state treasury, might not be worth it.

Even though the «main» railway poem by N. A. Nekrasov has already been mentioned, it is perhaps worth starting with the founder of the journal, Alexander S. Pushkin, whose attitude to railways was far from unambiguous. The interest of the poet in the topic of construction of railways in Russia is evidenced by the fact that he was one of the participants in a lively discussion along with scientists and engineers [2]. The documented opinion of A. S. Pushkin about railways is given in [3, pp. 78–83; 4], where he became at first an indirect and then an involved participant in the controversy.

The story began in 1830 with the publication by N. P. Shcheglov entitled «On railways and their advantages over ordinary roads and canals» and continued in 1835 with an article by N. I. Tarasenko-Otreshkov, who spoke out unequivocally against construction of railways. Involvement of Pushkin begins with an article written by M. S. Volkov, professor at the Institute of the Corps of Railway Engineers, in which he constructively criticizes N. I. Tarasenko-Otreshkov and sends the article to *Sovremennik* for publication. But A. S. Pushkin did not publish the article, explaining the reasons in a letter to V. F. Odoevsky: «*Mr. Volkov's article is indeed very remarkable, efficiently and cleverly written and entertaining for everyone. However, I will not post it, because, in my opinion, the government does not need to interfere with this Gerstner's project at all. Russia cannot throw 3000000 to try. The case of the new road concerns private people: let them bother. All one can promise them is a privilege for 12 or 15 years. The road (railway) from Moscow to Nizhny Novgorod would still be more necessary than the road from Moscow to St. Petersburg — and my opinion would be: start with it ... I am, of course, not against railways; but I am opposed to the idea that government engages. Some of the objections to the project are undeniable, for example,*

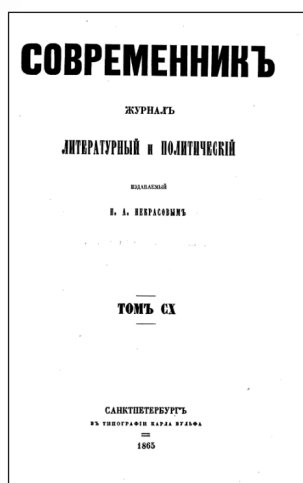


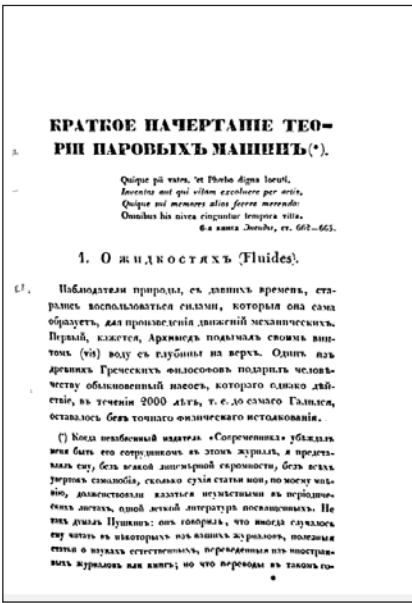
Fig. 1. Pages of *Sovremennik* with the first page of the poem «Railway» by N. A. Nekrasov who published it in Vol. 110, 1865 [1, p. 547].

about snowdrifts. For this a new machine must be invented, *sine qua non*¹. There is nothing to think about sending people or hiring workers to sweep snow: this is absurdity» [3, pp. 81–82]. At the same time, Alexander Pushkin had plans to publish material on railway topics, so he wrote on the pages of the journal: «I asked Prince Kozlovsky to give me articles on the theory of steam engines, now that Gerstner is finishing his cast-iron road between the capital and Tsarskoe Selo, we all need to understand and master the great invention to which the future belongs». The article by P. B. Kozlovsky «A Brief Outline of the Theory of Steam Engines» was published in *Sovremennik* (Pic. 2) in Volume VII [5, pp. 6–14].

From the above materials, it can be concluded that Pushkin's opinion on construction of railways was ambiguous since he was not sure of effectiveness of this project. On the one hand, he writes about railways that «we all need to understand and master the great invention, to which the future belongs», and on the other, «Russia cannot throw 3000000 to try. The case of the new road concerns private people: let them bother». By this A. Pushkin shows that he is on the side of progress, but against risk. He also notes the long-term nature of the new railway project and its long-term return on investment: «All you can promise them [private people] is a privilege for 12 or 15 years». His opinion about the private capital required for construction is also interesting. Did the poet mean that the state has enough problems even without a railway, or did he foresee the position of S. Yu. Witte, who in some of his works argued about the need to transfer railways from state to private management!? In any case, this also proves that A. S. Pushkin worried not only about technical issues (there is a historical fact that the poet became the author of the idea of a snowplow), but also about the economic component of the grandiose project, and in that case he apparently adhered emphasized liberal position [7].

Returning to Nekrasov and his great work, it should be noted that, unlike most authors whose works were devoted to the potential of railways, speed, their progressiveness and importance for Russia, the romance of travel, he, with the lyrical folk tragicalness, characteristic of his works, describes particularly the unattractive side of the socio-economic situation associated with construction: difficult working conditions, low wages, tight deadlines for commissioning facilities, etc. If we interpret the poem in a modern way, then it reflects the problems of human resource management that existed at that

¹ Necessary condition (lat.).



Pic. 2. Page of *Sovremennik* with the article by P. B. Kozlovsky «A Brief Outline of the Theory of Steam Engines», Vol. 7, 1837 [6, p. 51].

time, inefficiency of their use and the lack of means of mechanization:

*Bloodless lips, drooping eyelids,
Ulcers on skinny arms
Forever knee-deep in water
The legs are swollen; tangled hair;
I will wash my chest, which is diligently on the
spade
I spent the whole century day after day...
You take a closer look at him, Vanya, carefully:
It was difficult for a man to get his bread!
Didn't straighten his hunchbacked back
He is still: stupidly silent
And mechanically with a rusty shovel
Hollows the frozen ground! [8, p. 40]²*

Undoubtedly, the statesmen and railway developers «liked» the poem published in 1865,

² The author of translation is unknown. Another version of translation was posted at <https://matthias-gloekner.de/blog/en/nikolay-nekrasov-the-railway/>:
*His lips bloodless, eyelids sunken,
His skinny arms sore,
Always kneeling in the water,
His legs swollen; Polish plait in his hair;
A dent in his breast, because day by day
He stemmed against the spade for all of his life...
Look at him, Vanya, attentively:
This man worked hard to earn his bread!
His hunched back he straightens up
No more now: in silence
And the mechanical rusty spade
Is hitting into the frozen ground!*



and largely due to this, in 1866, after two preliminary warnings, the magazine was forced to close [9; 10, p. 392].

Nekrasov's attitude to construction of railways was as ambiguous as that of A. S. Pushkin. But, if Pushkin did not have a definite opinion about the technical and economic well-being of railways, then Nekrasov had similar worries for common people, for «muzhiks». On the one hand, he expressed sorrow due to excessive exploitation of workers, and on the other hand, he emphasized that the road had been built, justified itself and people had been able to cope [10, p. 391].

One of the most progressive literary critics of that time, an employee of *Sovremennik* N. A. Dobrolyubov, also had a desire to speak out about accelerating development of railways on the pages of the magazine (more precisely, in *Svistok* [The Whistle], the appendix to the main magazine) [11, pp. 185–186]. As it is known, he adhered to the «left» views on the structure of society and implementation of social reforms in the fatherland (finally, his publication was published only in 1886 in *Russkaya starina* magazine), so it was through political satire that Dobrolyubov tried to convey the attachment of many public figures to the «old days» and social alienation of obvious progress. Dobrolyubov's poem is built on the foundation of «Russian swagger and non-punctuality», a keen sense of freedom, but it also touches upon socio-economic problems. At the beginning of the poem, in a satirical manner, he describes the opposition of the chaotic movement of horse-drawn vehicles to the linear movement of trains:

*Troika is quite another!
I rush where I want,
With no need, no purpose,
Indenting traces on the soil.
I do not want, straight –
Take it to the left,
Through the meadows to the right,
Backwards through the crops ...* [12, p. 513–514].

Further, he writes about foreign investments in construction of railways and purchase of foreign machines:

*The foreigners bulk
Russian millions
To put obstacles
To the Russian will.*

Then Dobrolyubov ridicules all the negative statements about the railway, listing fears and problems that may arise during operation of railways in Russia. At the same time, in the listed problems, we see obvious reference to economic costs, which was the main «visiting card» of opponents of construction of railways:

*Our train will not go
As the German one goes:
It will jump the track
With a valiant force;
Or will crumble the embankment,
Either will crush a little bridge,
Then towards the opposing train
Rakishly will drive.
It will go slower,
Will be late to its heart's content,
Because of blizzard
Will be halting for a day or three in the open country.*

Dobrolyubov ends the poem in the same satirical vein, but at the same time his personal beliefs and hopes of a positive outcome of emergence of railways in Russia are clearly traced:

*Yes, I passionately believe:
Dead car
Will not bind the arbitrariness of the
Giant Russia.
I believe: all machines
In the Russian nature
Will revive themselves
By the spirit and freedom.*

The lines «Will revive themselves/By the spirit and freedom» are of particular interest. Here, the word «revive» can be interpreted as «take root». The confidence of Dobrolyubov in wholesomeness of construction of railways corresponded also to the officially formulated state position. So, the decree of the Emperor Alexander II «On construction of the first railway network in Russia» dated January 26, 1857 read: «...Railways, in the need for which many had doubts for another ten years, are now recognized by all estates as a necessity for the Empire and have become a national need, a common, urgent desire» [13].

Let us note another interesting feature traced in the works of the authors of *Sovremennik* and of other poets of the middle 19th century written on the topic of railways. It refers to the mention of bridges, perhaps the most popular man-made structure on the railway. So, N. A. Nekrasov used descriptive

words: «Straight path is: narrow embankments, / Mileposts, rails, bridges»; N.A. Dobrolyubov worded satirically: « Or will crumble the embankment, / Either will crush a little bridge». In his sensuous poem «On the railway», published in 1860 in *Russkiy vestnik* journal, [the poet] Afanasy Fet, who was not a stranger to *Sovremennik*, wrote:

*And, doused with silver moon,
The trees are flying past us
Below us with a roar of cast iron
Instant bridges thunder* [14, pp. 282–283].

And [the poet] Ya. P. Polonsky in his poem of 1868 «On the railway» also published in *Russkiy vestnik* compared rolling stock with an «iron horse» and noted the noise from bridges:

*There is a little forest rushing towards,
Bridges rumble across the ravines,
And the steam clings to the bushes;
The iron horse is riding, riding,
And the poles are flickering, flickering ...* [15, p. 108–111].

Should we assume that Ya. P. Polonsky wrote his poem under the impression of Fet's creation? It is quite possible, since the name is exactly the same, and in both poems note the rumble of bridges, and both were published in *Russkiy vestnik*.

Besides the listed authors, many contemporaries of the magazine devoted their works to the railway theme in their poetry and prose, these are P. A. Vyazemsky, V. A. Sleptsov, N. S. Leskov, V. G. Benediktov, M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, A. N. Apukhtin and many others [16, p. 255].

The railway topic in Russian fiction of 19th–20th centuries was extremely popular [17]. Pig-iron and then steel main lines more and more occupied the minds of progressively thinking intelligentsia, a significant part of which expressed their opinions through literary works, criticism and journalism and rallied around *Sovremennik*. It is important to note that responsible publishers and employees of the magazine were mostly representatives of «new people» [3, p. 62; 11], and in their works, when describing the socio-economic problems of the Empire, they often left «artistry» in favor of «realism». The authors by their own example, their ideas and works showed that one should never artificially slow down progress, that sensible assessment of the «new» and its harmonious coexistence with the «old» will give a synergistic effect. And railways, both

in 19th century and now, play a key socio-economic role in this process.

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