

SOCIALIST REALISM REWRITES MODERNISM: DOS PASSOS' "THE BODY OF AN AMERICAN" AMONG SOVIET SHOCK WORKERS

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Abstract: This article examines a radically rewritten Russian translation of a section of John Dos Passos's novel *1919*, published anonymously in the mass-circulation magazine *Prozhektor* in 1932, as a case study in the Soviet rewriting of literary modernism. The translation suppresses many of Dos Passos' characteristic features while preserving and sharpening his critique of American capitalism. Reading the translation alongside Dos Passos' original and the issue's surrounding articles, I argue that the text was extensively rewritten to conform to the new ideological and stylistic priorities in Soviet literature. The article situates this episode within the broader Soviet reception of Dos Passos, a writer who drew inspiration from Soviet artistic and political developments, and whose work enjoyed a sudden popularity in the early 1930s. Drawing on André Lefevere's concept of rewriting and an unpublished critique by the translator Igor Romanovich, I show how translation, editorial framing, and periodical context together reshaped a controversial modernist text for Soviet mass readership during the formation of socialist realism as a literary method.

Keywords: Soviet translation; socialist realism; literary modernism; world literature; John Dos Passos

1. Introduction

"Joyce, Dos Passos, and Marcel Proust," noted *Znamia* editor Anatolii Tarasenkov during a public debate on Dos Passos in 1933, "such is the chain of names that has become obligatory, just like the combination of the names Minin and Pozharsky" (RGALI, f. 618, op. 4, ed. khr. 1, l. 92). In his presentation, Tarasenkov may have simply meant that the sequence of names had been linked by repetition, and indeed, in his opinion, incorrectly linked. But the invocation of Minin and Pozharsky, figures famous and almost mythical for helping to free Moscow in the Time of Troubles, also indicates the extent to which the three foreign authors were being treated as foundational figures. But for what?

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The following examines an episode in the unlikely period in the early Soviet Union when the translation and reading of these three writers was not only a question of entertainment and aesthetics but of political import as well in defining the canon of Soviet literature. Recent scholarship has investigated how “international literature” and “world literature” functioned in the Soviet Union, ways in which it anticipated or fundamentally differed from the liberal model of world literature that came to prominence under globalization following the USSR’s collapse (Clark 2011, Clark 2018, Tihanov et al. 2023). The focus on the work of Proust, Dos Passos and Joyce by Soviet critics during the imposition of socialist realism has not received close attention.¹ Several moments in this history illustrate this strange elevation of these specific modernist writers in the Soviet state: the former Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky writing the preface to Proust’s collected works in Russian; Dos Passos, a Soviet best-seller, becoming the subject of public debates and open letters from Soviet writers to change his literary method; Sergei Eisenstein proposing a cinematic adaptation of Marx’s *Capital*, using Joycean techniques, to Stalin; Karl Radek declaring that all three writers were incompatible with the official Soviet literary method of socialist realism.

This article investigates a moment in the Soviet reception of the American writer John Dos Passos. What happens when a foreign author — whose writing bears the trace of Soviet modernist practices increasingly sidelined in Soviet arts and culture — is translated for Soviet readers? Fredric Jameson forcefully decried the “sterility” of “isolating ‘modernism’ as a standard by which to compare a whole series of historically and artistically incomparable writers” (Jameson 2002: 28). For the purposes of this article, the “modernism” of Dos Passos is not only a general constellation of formal practices associated with estrangement, stylistic heterogeneity, fragmentation, and challenges to realist representation — or other such hallmarks under T.J. Clark’s definition of modernism as “a loose and capacious notion” that emerges as a “distinctive patterning of mental and technical possibilities” (Clark 1999: 7). Here it is a question of a lineage partially claimed by Dos Passos and recognized by his Russian translator Valentin Stenich (Stenich 1933; King 2023). John Dos Passos’s montage techniques, shifts in register, typographic experimentation and juxtaposition of competing discourses exemplify not only a broader modernist impulse toward defamiliarizing conventional narrative forms, but also the some of specific formal qualities of Soviet art of the 1920s that official Soviet culture no longer wanted to claim as Soviet. These techniques were frequently understood by Soviet critics like Lunacharsky and Radek, or Marxists exiled in Soviet Russia like Gyorgy Lukács, as a withdrawal from social totality into subjectivity (Lunacharskii 1934: V-XII; Radek 1934; Lukach 1936). Dos Passos’ public support of the Soviet Union and popularity made his translation a fraught question, and one which one state media magazine resolved through an extreme form of rewriting and paratextual recontextualization.

Following André Lefevere, translation can be understood as a form of “rewriting,” a process through which literary works are adapted to the ideological, aesthetic, and institutional requirements of a receiving culture (Lefevere 1992: 1-8). Rather than

¹ Though the general trajectory is described in Safiullina 2012.

treating translation as the transmission of a stable original, Lefevere uses “rewriting” to emphasize its role in the construction of literary systems. A translation of Dos Passos in the magazine *Prozhektor* from 1932 is a particularly striking case because translation, editorial framing and overall context within the periodical together reorient a modernist text influenced by the Soviet avant-garde toward the ideological priorities of early socialist realism — the reintegration of Dos Passos’ modernist fragmentation into the shared horizon of socialist construction.

Radical rewriting was common in Soviet poetic translation via the *podstrochnik* practice, and this tendency has been considered from a few perspectives in translation studies, including through Gideon Toury’s notion of culture planning (Witt 2011). Prose translation has been less explored in this respect, though rewriting has been fruitfully used to examine other moments in which translation and censorship cannot be neatly separated (Kuznetsova 2018). Recently, Brian James Baer has noted the tendency within early Soviet translation to present translations from the “West” as culturally transparent, not requiring paratextual intervention and explanation, while translations of “Eastern” texts were often given lengthy exegesis of their foreign context (Baer 2025). Amid the controversies in developing Marxist and Soviet aesthetics in the early 1930s, the project of translating western modernists such as Marcel Proust, John Dos Passos and James Joyce, among others, often involved considerable intervention in text and paratext, resulting in exceptional rewriting and extensive paratextual intervention in these prose translations, in notable contrast to the general norms of Soviet translation.²

This article examines an especially extreme approach to translation applied to an excerpt from John Dos Passos’s novel *1919*. The modernist forms of Dos Passos’ *U.S.A. Trilogy* were strongly influenced by his experience of Soviet theater and film of the 1920s — first as a distant reader and viewer, but later through an extended stay in the USSR in 1928 and his own attempts to reinvent American theater along the lines of Soviet drama. Dos Passos’ use of montage and newspaper excerpts in the trilogy was likely inspired by his experience of Soviet theater and film, especially after his 1928 visit to the USSR (Ludington 1980: 269-270; Shloss 1987: 143-79; Nanney 2019: 63-74.) The formal innovations of the first two novels of this trilogy became controversial in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, even as they were Soviet best-sellers, published nearly simultaneously with the originals, and interest in him from Soviet writers sparked a significant debate about literary method crucial to the official vision of socialist realism. Traces of the debate can be found across Soviet literary publications of the early 1930s, but feature most prominently in the talks organized by the journal *Znamia* in March and April of 1933. Parts of the proceedings were published in *Znamia* in May and June of the same year, nos. 5 and 6. May (RGALI f. 618 op. 4 ed. khr. 1; King 2023: 98-144). This translation appeared in the popular magazine *Prozhektor* in 1932, written by an anonymous translator. Judging from an unpublished

² These interventions are analysed in detail in the author’s doctoral dissertation. Here I mainly consider the rewriting of a modernist text and not the detailed and erudite paratextual interventions by anonymous translators in the translations of western modernists published by Vremia, Goslitizdat, *Internatsional’naia literatura* and other literary publishers and publications, interventions of a very different order in terms of audience, purpose and the norms implicit in the translators’ performances.

comparative study of Dos Passos and his Russian translations, the name of the translator was unknown even to contemporary colleagues (RGALI f. 2854 op. 1 ed. khr. 327)

2. Dos Passos' "Body" and Adornments

"The Body of an American" is the concluding section of novel *1919*, first published in English in 1932, the second book in what would become Dos Passos's *U.S.A. Trilogy*. It summarizes the book's attitude toward the US government's mythologizing of WWI with a caustic mockery of the 1921 ceremonial burial for the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery. Quotes from the official U.S. congressional declaration, President Harding's speech at the burial and newspaper coverage of the event are set in montage against the many possible hard paths of John Doe's life, considering the likely state of his corpse, the racial criteria potentially used in selecting the unidentifiable remains, and the varieties of tribulations an American of his time might experience before a pointless death in the war. Crucially, Dos Passos employed various stylistic and typographic devices to distinguish different registers in his text and to emphasize his critical attitude towards official narratives of the war and capitalist alienation.

It was the most-translated individual section from any of Dos Passos' novels into Russian, and at least four Russian versions were published in the early 1930s, one of them in Valentin Stenich's complete translation of the novel which first appeared in 1933. *Prozhektor*, the popular magazine which published this anonymous translation, came out in large runs of 60,000, thereby making this single page of Dos Passos his largest Soviet publication.

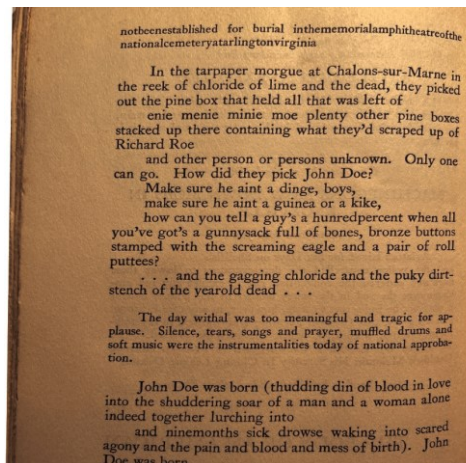


Fig. 1: Typographic experimentation in Dos Passos' "Body of an American" from *1919* (1932)

Prozhektor was published as a supplement to *Pravda* between 1923 and 1935. Rather than merely consider the isolated original and translation from Dos Passos, it is

necessary to consider the dead American soldier's cohabitants in the other articles in this issue, which act as a macro-paratext for Dos Passos, as, simultaneously, "Body of an Unknown American" (as the title was translated) is turned into a foil to highlight the successes of Soviet industry and social planning. This tightly-curated presentation constrains how the translated text can be read and presents an implicit justification for rewriting.

I briefly present below the titles, photo descriptions and some translated excerpts from the articles which precede Dzhon Dos Passos' "TELO NEIZVESTNOGO AMERIKANTSA" in the second February issue of *Prozhektor*, with its cover featuring a portrait of the People's Commissar for Military and Navy Affairs, Kliment Voroshilov. The issue is filled with positive images and representations of Soviet military and civilian labor, its benefits, its community and comradery, and, especially, a broad spectrum of the "shock" workers fulfilling the five-year plan. In contrast to Dos Passos' treatment of the soldier in *1919*, the soldiers in *Prozhektor* are individuated, given a meaningful place in history as builders of socialism and defenders of their country. They are also depicted as comrades, working in collectives, acquiring and being taught new skills, not merely cannon fodder in the trenches of imperialist wars. In contrast to the list of cliches in Dos Passos' "Body of an American" that summarizes and satirizes the entirety of the education available to a young man in pre-WWI America, the Soviet experience is presented here as one in which even a boy from a village can find a path to a modern, prosperous, educated life.



Fig. 2: Red Army “shock soldiers” (with the repeated use of the word *udarnik*) learning to use new military technology in *Prozhektor* (1932)

A series of articles about socialist construction describe the achievements in building massive blast furnaces for metal production. Statistics impress the reader regarding the magnitude and scope of the project and its productive capacities. An array of leisure, cultural and ideological institutions promise to provide new shock workers with a life not only productive, but also comfortable and stimulating.



Fig. 3: On the Soviet Cruiser ‘Aurora.’ Clockwise from top left: in the cruiser’s Lenin corner; work in gas masks for a chemical alarm [*khimtrevoga*]; delicious naval borscht for lunch; music-making during a “merry moment”; young pioneers on the cruiser.

The articles show Soviet construction not only learning from American ingenuity, but, at times, surpassing it in speed and bravery. In an article on the building of the Kuznetskstroy aluminum plant, workers outcompete the Americans, overfulfilling construction (*udarno okonchivshaia*) by completing the plan in 40 days rather than the 70 days “suggested by the Americans.” In an article on the construction of a blast furnace, men are mechanized and machines anthropomorphized as in Andrei Platonov’s fiction. And despite the heavy toil celebrated in the article, it also notes the human needs that will be met at the end of this shock labor, when the foreman thinks,

“Tonight I can sleep at home.” An American engineer advising the project insists on proceeding cautiously and slowly in raising a bridge, and is contradicted by the Soviet foreman, whose calculations prove correct.

Women, too, are shown to be answering the call to work and finding the state-provided resources that make it possible to raise children and work for socialist construction at the same time. An apprentice switchboard operator and single mother is able to take advantage of a kindergarten in her building while receiving training. But this spotlight on “how simple everything is for us!” does not come without prompting, however, as the author admits — it comes as a “response to Berlin switchboard operators,” to refute supposed “lies in an article in the newspaper of the Social Democrats about the position of women in the USSR.”



Fig. 4: Comrade Klimova, in her kitchen and with her son at home.

The journal seems to describe the creation of a new world in which the worker is the integral element, situated happily and robustly as the primary agent of progress, able to receive according to their needs, able to give according to their abilities — all of which is missing in Dos Passos' life of the unknown soldier.

Fig. 5: "Body of an Unknown American" in *Prozhektor* or

Dzhon Dos Passos* BODY OF UNKNOWN AMERICAN

3. Altering the Telos of the Telo in *Prozhektor*

In the context of the joyous Stalinism of the February 1932 *Prozhektor*, celebrating the achievements of shock workers of all kinds, rationalization and worker benefits under the five year plan, Dos Passos' darkly pessimistic view of American military heroism and the hypocrisy of US officialdom stands out as a critique of militaristic capitalism, as a stark contrast to the bright presentation of Soviet everyday life, including the heavily emphasized communal aspects of service in the Soviet military. At the same time, the translator's methods themselves rewrite the text into something much closer to the socialist realism which would come to reflect this moment of Stalinism in literature. Within the context of the journal, it becomes a stylistically subdued "shock essay" for striking at the contradictions of the "West."

Dos Passos' "Body of an American" presents an imagined prehistory of the "unknown soldier" killed in WWI and interred at Arlington Cemetery on March 4, 1921. A more immediate inspiration for Dos Passos' section, however, was the construction and installation of a massive marble "superstructure" for the grave which took place from 1930 until the beginning of 1932. The project, which required extensive materials and labor, was covered widely in newspapers at the time, and President Harding delivered a speech at the inauguration of the embellished monument quoted by Dos Passos in his text, using Harding's words as a foil for a critical collective story of the unknown American. Turning the abstraction of the unknown soldier, so crucial to the post-war US nationalism, inside out, Dos Passos writes the passage with caustic and furious irony. This begins even in the title, in which Dos Passos shifts the identity of the man from "unknown" and "soldier," to an American body. To the empty vessel of the unknown soldier — as Benedict Anderson noted, so easily filled in with the desired attributes of many nationalist projects, the "secular transformation of fatality into continuity" — Dos Passos returns the physical body and potential biography of the American it once belonged to (Anderson 1983: 9-37). Further, by removing "unknown" from the title (an epithet returned in the *Prozhektor* translation title) Dos Passos suggests that the unknown can actually be recovered and known again through a kind of statistical storytelling: if we tell enough plausibly accurate, but also humanly real and heart-rending stories of possible American lives, we can reach the "known" that has been withheld from the "Unknown Soldier" for the sake of a poetic, patriotic gesture vague and fuzzy on the facts.

Conventionally, the problem of the unknown soldier is seen as a crisis of identification stemming from the brutality of modern warfare. Dos Passos, however, suggests that this crisis begins long before the effacing death, as the whole life of the citizen-soldier is rendered meaningless and anonymous under capitalism. The individual in Dos Passos' telling remains unknown, but where President Harding noted, in the speech which Dos Passos quotes, that "We do not know his station in life, because from every station came the patriotic response of the five millions," Dos Passos fills his descriptions of each possible station with a wealth of details that contradict any "patriotic response."

Dos Passos uses several registers in the section. First, he uses the official language of legal pronouncements, newspaper coverage and Harding's presidential speech that spoke for the Unknown Soldier, these parts of the section being printed in the original publication and most subsequent editions in a smaller font. Stylistically, placed within the context of social and physical degradation that the soldier likely experienced in life, the quotations emphasize the hypocrisy of mainstream US political discourse. In the beginning, the delivery of the speech is satirized by absurdly joining together a number of words at once: "Whereasthe Congress of the unitedstates bya concurrent resolution adopted on the 4th day of march..." These official registers, however, comprise a much smaller portion of the text. Most of the section is written in an informal register with a sing-songy, staccato intonation, with a narrator who knows, if not the actual origin and biography of the soldier, then at least the collective range possibilities which all detract from the grand framing of the Unknown Soldier. The

modernist mixture and clash of styles in the short section also allows Dos Passos to adopt a subversive position of rhetorical abjection.

While it is one of the more notably poetic and experimental sections in *1919*, the translation in *Prozhektor* radically rewrites it as almost typical prose. The short text is recast in simplified form, without its rhymes or rhythms, its regionalisms, colloquialisms and deliberate ambiguities. Fragmented, unclear phrases in the original are smoothed into multiple, straightforward sentences in the translation, slang is refined to standard speech, and Dos Passos' experimental formatting, reminiscent of Mayakovsky's futurist poetry, is brought into line as uniform block text. The translation narrows the message of the text by ignoring many of its stylistic particularities. Dos Passos' different fonts and the long chains of unspaced words are simply not included. However, officialese remains officialese, and sometimes the translation even "translates" the tone of the original, or unstated suggestion of the text, into a direct statement. Thus the original, for example, includes the following passage:

In the tarpaper morgue at Chalons-sur-Marne in the reek of chloride of lime and the dead,
they picked out the pine box that held all that was left of
enie menie minie moe plenty other pine boxes stacked up there containing what they'd
scraped up of Richard Roe

The translation, however, replaces the entire beginning of the third line with "a pine box was chosen at random" (*byl vziat naugad sosnovyi iashchik*), conveying the sense of the phrase while dropping its stylized delivery. Dos Passos draws attention to the unspoken but assumed racial identity of the soldier, returned to later in the list of clichés taught to John Doe ("This is a white man's country") and the underlying racism of the officialdom which would single out such a soldier. In doing this, however, Dos Passos relays this racism as free indirect speech, using racial slurs as one of the rough colloquialisms which stand out within the text as not belonging to the narrator.

Only one can go. How did they pick John Doe?
Make sure he aint a dinge, boys,
make sure he aint a guinea or a kike,
how can you tell a guy's a hundredpercent when all you've got's a gunnysack full of bones
stamped with a screaming eagle and pair of roll puttees?
...and the gagging chloride and the puky dirtstench of the yearold dead...

The translator, however, moderates the offensive language, eliminating racial slurs and replacing them with colloquialisms — familiar or condescending, depending on context, but not so clearly insulting as the terms used by Dos Passos:

How could they ascertain that he wasn't one of the dark ones [*iz chernomazykh*]?
How could they be certain that he wasn't some little Italian, a little Jew?
How could they confirm that some guy was all one hundred percent American, when all you
have in your hands is a rough bag with bones, copper buttons with the stamp of the eagle

with its gaping mouth, and a pair of rolled puttees? Along with that there's the gagging smell of chloride powder and the nausea-inducing stench of corpses lain in the earth for a year.³

The lumpen speech of so many dialects and regions which Dos Passos places throughout his novel and this section becomes, in the "homeland of the proletariat," a standardized, inoffensive language, exemplified here by the replacement of not only Dos Passos' clearly offensive slurs with less unambiguously insulting Russian synonyms but also in the replacement of Dos Passos' deliberately repetitive and slangy "make sures" with elegant "literary" variations.⁴

The Sovietization of "Telo neizvestnogo amerikantsa" makes it a text fit for (ideally chaste) Soviet ears, removing rude realities cemented in the American diction of Dos Passos. In addition to the racial vocabulary, too-frank descriptions of sexual organs are also rewritten: the indignities of John Doe's army medical exam are reduced by two — in Russian they do not "[squeeze] your penis to see if you had clap" nor do they "[look] up your anus to see if you had piles": phrases that would have been unprintable in Russian at the time, but which could also have been translated euphemistically. Meanwhile, in relating John Doe's various excuses for losing his dog tags, which include a fling with a French woman named Jeanne, the summary of *Dzhon Do's* escapade becomes noticeably more chaste, as Dos Passos' summary loses the soldier's sexual fantasy and gains a more explicit mention of the treatment for venereal disease which followed:

(Love moving picture *wet French postcard dream* began with saltpeter in the coffee and ended at the *propho station*)

(love, cinema, a *dampened post card, dreams*, began with saltpeter in the coffee, ended at the *venereological station*)⁵

Here, "wet French postcard dream," certainly suggestive of a soldier's romantic vision for a French affair, with "wet" almost certainly bound to "dream," is rendered literally and confusingly as "dampened post card" — likely a failure of fluency. The translator may have added, however, a sexual innuendo not as available in the original, as the Russian word for "ended" here (*konchil*) has a second meaning of reaching

³ For ease of reference and to avoid unnecessary redundancy, transcriptions of the Russian passages will be given in footnotes here and throughout the article:

Как могли они удостовериться в том, что это не один из черномазых?

Как могли они быть уверенными в том, что это не итальяшка, не еврейчик?

Как можно утверждать что такой-то парень, из все сто процентов американец, когда имеешь под руками лишь грубый мешок с костями, медные пуговицы, на которых выштампован орел с разверстой пастью, и пару свернутых обмоток? А тут еще и удушливый запах хлористой извести и тошнотворная вонища от трупов, год пролежавших в земле.

⁴ It is worth noting that "chernomazyi," (lit. "black-smears"), used today in a quite unambiguously contemptuous and pejoratively racist sense, was still defined at the time "colloquial" and "familiar" though "more often judgmental" (Ushakov 1935: 1259)

⁵ "(любовь, кино, *отсыревшая почтовая карточка, мечты*, начал с селитры в кофе, кончил *венерологическим пунктом*)"

sexual climax — a meaning easily suggested by the context. As in many cases of outwardly “sterilized” Soviet texts, suggestively tongue-in-cheek language appears.

In selecting such stylistic devices for his novel, Dos Passos was not motivated merely by shock value, but also by hopes to act upon his readers’ political and social conscience. In letters to Soviet acquaintances Dos Passos defended his method of writing from the demand that he more clearly address political questions and promote Communist political solutions in his work, saying that he felt any ready slogans would be automatically rejected by the American reader (Salmanova 1993: 251-52; Salmanova 1994). For his imagined American reader, the “shock” elements of this text were intended, alongside the effect of the bulk of the content which preceded it, to have an agitational effect, and convince (or secure) his readers in knowledge of the woefully corrupt state of American society and politics. As Dos Passos responded to Béla Illés over criticisms of insufficient positive political content in his novels:

“...the ears of Soviet newspaper readers would be effective over here, and the problem is to find a formula that will move masses of Americans. You must remember that we haven’t had our 1905 yet. After all if I believed in the effectiveness of Communist phraseology among American workers I’d be applying for membership in the party. [...] I think I can be most useful in trying to reach a formula that will appeal to the average American worker and farmer and small businessman (confused, disoriented and suffering).” (Dubovikov and Lanskii, eds. 1969: 474-75)

Dos Passos repeated this comparison of the American situation to a pre-1905 Russia in several letters to his Soviet correspondents, but his interlocutors evinced no desire to engage in the discussion on these terms. The task of “trying to reach a formula” for the “average American worker and farmer and small businessman,” of course, was superfluous for the translator and editors of *Prozhektor*, as was the reproduction of stylistic measures so far outside the bounds of the orderly, hard-working and joyful society they were engaged to represent.

4. Contrasting the Unknown American with Soviet Shock Workers

Yet the translation cannot be understood in isolation from the issue in which it appeared. If we also take into account the representation of reality printed alongside Dos Passos’ excerpt, with battleship orchestras, tasty cruiser borschts and free kindergartens for the children of switchboard operators, then the rude reality of this American soldier’s treatment in life and in death also requires a less graphic or rough linguistic portrayal. Does the satisfaction of working-class needs, or at least the represented satisfaction thereof, liberate the text from the need or allure of distinguishing between a false “official” and a “true” untutored speech? Has register been eliminated because — in politically and socially acceptable print, if not in social and political reality — class has been eliminated?

The article on comrade Klimova the telephone operator, with snapshots taken to refute “lies” about the position of women in the USSR, indicates something of how the editors and contributors wanted that article and much of the issue to be read: not only

as “truthful” stories about “real” people implicit in all journalistic reporting, but as responses to *other* perspectives on the state of life in the USSR — in the case of the article in a German SPD newspaper, quite distant and, to the vast majority of the Soviet reading public, inaccessible and illegible, but re-presented in what became a familiar Soviet (and now, unfortunately, post-Soviet) technique, the rebuttal of foreign “lies.” And through this anxiety of how a distant other sees Soviet life, the rest of the issue — indeed much of the Soviet press of the mid-30s — was similarly inflected with an anxiety of misreading by both distant and near readers. Though the excerpt from Dos Passos is noted to be from the novel *1919*, there can be little doubt about the mode in which the editors of the magazine hoped it would be read. A cartoon by Leonid Soifertis which follows soon after the excerpt shows a shivering, starving capitalist curled up in a fetal position against a wall, clutching a massive key in front of a series of crumbling, padlocked factories. The cartoon evokes the economic suffering following the Great Depression, a context crucial to Dos Passos’ novels and while contrasting it with the portrait of robust and jubilant Soviet working life that fills most of the magazine.

Titled “Thoughts ‘at the Entryway,’” it includes a quote “from the newspapers” which reads: “Every day new factories and plants in the West lock up their gates...” Below, the capitalist says to himself: “Even if it’s dead property, it’s still MINE.” The Sovietized “Body of an Unknown American,” proposes a similar reading, in which the body of an American, in life and in death, belongs to a number of other entities before it belongs to its occupant, and can be claimed not only by organizations — by the military, by the government — but also, regardless of his skin color and ancestry before lying in the earth for a year, by racist and nationalist categories. A series of contrasts to the epithets are constructed in the issue to “Body of an Unknown American”: Where the American’s *body* is exploited and thrown away in an imperialist war and in capitalist exploitation, subjected to humiliating racialization, denied leisure, weakened, undernourished, perverted, Soviet bodies are nourished, clothed, and engaged in rewarding communal labor, regardless of national origin. The American is *unknown*, anonymous, all his accomplishments, characteristics and suffering forgotten besides the ultimate one supposedly for the sake of the state, while the Soviet project as presented in the preceding pages glorifies workers’ achievements, individuates them within the group, promotes expanding knowledge and education, names and makes celebrities of common men and women. The American *soldier* is lost even within the war, calling out as a mantra within the section, “how do I get to my outfit?” — emphasized even more strongly in the Russian as “how do I find my own [people]?” (*kak razyskat’ tut svoikh?*), while Soviet military life overfulfills its targets with joy, solidarity, vigor.



Fig. 6: Caricature of American capitalist misery by Leonid Soifertis in *Prozhektor*

5. Conclusion

Though *Prozhektor*'s translation of Dos Passos may have successfully rewritten the controversial aspects of his writing for the lay reader to fit within a narrative of socialist construction vs. capitalist immiseration, the methods employed exceeded accepted practices professional translators. Theorists like Kornei Chukovsky and Ivan Kashkin, even while disagreeing quite often on the methods of translation, all insisted on the accuracy of translation in details or in "spirit" — a standard which many professional Soviet translators would probably have found lacking in *Prozhektor*'s translation. One testimony to such a reaction is held in Russian state archives. An unpublished study by the translator Igor Romanovich — protégé of Ivan Kashkin and translator of several episodes of *Ulysses* — shows one quite negative review of the excerpt from *Prozhektor*: "An attempt to interpret the text while totally ignoring its form" (RGALI f. 2854 op. 1 ed. khr. 327 l. 16). Romanovich, a talented translator of contemporary Anglophone prose and verse, including Dos Passos, James Joyce, W. H. Auden, and Aldous Huxley, was critical of both the translation in *Prozhektor* and the translation by Dos Passos' friend and preferred Russian translator, Valentin Stenich. In the same unpublished study of translations of this section from 1919, Romanovich accuses Stenich of "using formalist methods of translation (not reading into the text and not trying to make sense of it)" (RGALI f. 2854 op. 1 ed. khr. 327 l. 16). Notably, Romanovich concludes by focusing on how both translations create the impression of

“fragmented consciousness” (*razorvanost’ soznaniia*), a term reflecting central questions of the debate about modernism generally, Dos Passos in *Znamia* as well as Kashkin’s later critique of Hemingway (Kashkin 1934: 92-93). For Dos Passos, representing in his words the “confused, disoriented and suffering”—and hence necessarily *fragmented*—view of the average American worker and farmer was a justification of his fragmented, partly Soviet-inspired forms. Yet for Romanovich, a translation that properly made efforts to “read into” (*vychityvat’*) the original would avoid the controversial and, in his view, incorrect reading of Dos Passos’ work. Even as a professional opposed to the practices in *Prozhektor*, Romanovich remained committed to a similar project of presenting a Dos Passos *without* fragmentation, a consciousness unified in the mind of the translator for sake of a shared horizon of understanding with the reader — an indication that, however accurate Dos Passos’ diagnosis of American life, his style often required intervention for Soviet translation.

The anonymity of *Prozhektor*’s translator suggests an implicit acknowledgement that such a translation hardly met the standards of other professional Soviet translators. *Prozhektor*’s translation does, however, illustrate how the content of Dos Passos’ writing was apparently taken by the translator and editors of state media like *Prozhektor* as broadly compatible with the magazine, while the stylistic elements of typographical experimentation, clashing registers, slang, and montage were apparently taken to be incompatible with the broad readership of *Prozhektor* and *Pravda* or ideologically incompatible with emerging standards of Soviet aesthetics, despite the fact that Dos Passos had probably been inspired to use these forms by his experience of Soviet theater and film, especially during a visit to the Soviet Union just a few years before. *Prozhektor*’s translation domesticates Dos Passos into Soviet literary norms while rewriting his modernism, stripping it of “formalist” excess while retaining its usefulness as an ideological critique of American capitalism. In this, it repeats the Soviet reevaluations of American engineering expertise presented in the same issue in the construction in Kuznetsk.

Prozhektor’s translation was an unusually extreme example of rewriting within Soviet prose translations of modernist texts, replacing a controversial style with one that fit within an emerging orthodoxy soon to be defined as socialist realism — but the contours of which had already largely been defined in the approving reappraisal of Tolstoy and the attacks on experimentalism at the end of the 1920s. Most professional translators would likely have agreed with Romanovich, and yet the anonymous translator may have seen the task differently, as a stylistic simplification that made reading Dos Passos possible in a Soviet context. The surrounding articles on life in the Red Army and in the massive construction projects of Kuznetskstroy and Magnitostroy added to this excerpt the horizon Dos Passos was seen to lack — what Karl Radek later, criticizing interest in Joyce, would describe as an attitude of “don’t come near me with your Kuznetskstroys and Magnitostroys, your Red Army men and shock brigaders. My specialty is little things, but done very subtly, originally, cleverly” (Radek 1934: 373). Dos Passos’ “The Body of an American” brilliantly mocked state hypocrisy under pre-New Deal capitalism but did not contrast it to the struggle that would lead to the positive results of “socialist construction.” The changes made in *Prozhektor* give a glimpse of the international gap in literary priorities that existed by

the 30s, separating a writer who, in Dos Passos' case, saw his goals not only as broadly consistent with those of Soviet writers, but who also hoped to recreate Soviet theatrical achievements in an American context (Dos Passos 1930).

The Soviet engagement with Dos Passos examined in this article was neither a simple rejection of modernism nor a faithful transmission of its formal innovations, but a deliberate act of rewriting that transformed modernist narrative techniques into ideologically legible prose forms compatible with emerging socialist realist norms. The *Prozhektor* translation demonstrates how translation, criticism, and periodical framing worked together to manage risk: formal estrangement was minimized, narrative content was ideologically recalibrated, and the translated text was embedded within a paratextual environment that guided interpretation and pre-empted undesirable readings. This was only an extreme version of attempts to integrate and adapt modernist texts to Soviet culture in the shifting reality of the 1930s. These attempts occurred frequently. Other practices used to clear the way for texts seeking approval in Soviet print were less dramatic interventions on the part of the translator, as in Valentin Stenich's choices for racially sensitive terms in his translations of Dos Passos, or unusually extensive introductory and other paratextual materials — notable in the unfinished 1930s project to publish Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Ivan Kashkin's 1936 translation of *The 42nd Parallel*, and the collective translation project of *Ulysses* in *Internatsional'naia literatura* under Kashkin's leadership. This case does not challenge other accounts of Soviet hostility towards modernism. What it does suggest is that the encounter between modernism and socialist realism was mediated through a range of adaptive practices depending on publication venue and readership. A periodical like *Prozhektor*, situated closely to official figures and ideology, may have permitted degrees of intervention that differed from those of more prestigious book and journal publication. Attention to these venue-specific conditions can help illuminate the diverse ways foreign literature circulated in the Soviet Union and the methods through which Soviet translators, editors and cultural figures appropriated works they could neither be fully embrace nor entirely reject. In this case, Dos Passos' adaptation of Soviet modernism is repurposed to make a collective argument about the failures of capitalism and the achievements of socialist construction, integrating his individualized and fragmented vision of American consciousness into a total artwork alongside not only supposedly effective "Communist phraseology," but the supposed effectiveness of the real work of building the Soviet economy.

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Conflict of Interests

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Ethics Statement

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.