

INTRODUCTION

ON TRANSLATION AND PERIPHERIES

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Guest Editor

The story of the Soviet Union is often told in terms of ever-increasing centralization, a process that accelerated with Stalin's consolidation of power in the late 1920s. That centralization was reflected initially in the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932) and then in the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, when Socialist Realism was adopted as the governing aesthetic of the Soviet Union and all writers and translators were made to work under the auspices of the Union of Soviet Writers. While aspects of this story are valid, it is no less true that the relationship between the center and the periphery of the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic Soviet state was constantly being negotiated — and renegotiated — in the face of shifts in policy, triggered by domestic as well as international affairs. This special issue approaches Soviet culture therefore not as an increasingly centralized monolithic state but as a “dynamic, tension-ridden configuration” (Ohanyan & Ishkhanyan 2026, online) in which the relationship between the center and the periphery was in constant flux.

To that end, the issue is divided into two parts. The first, *Re-thinking Translation History from the Periphery*, addresses periphery in the traditional sense as referring to the non-Russian republics, a site at which “solidarity and coercion, cultural autonomy and ideological control” (Ohanyan & Ishkhanyan 2026, online) were configured in ways that were different from at the center, producing specific forms of compliance and resistance. The first three contributions in this section take a critical look at Soviet official language and translation policy, exploring their effects on the cultures of the periphery. The section opens with Brian James Baer's study of the role of translation in forging and maintaining the “friendship of Soviet peoples” through the example of the Armenian writer and translator Karen Mikaelian, whose career was characterized by a complex and ongoing negotiation of his allegiance to Soviet internationalism, his promotion of Armenian literature, and his professional ethics as a translator. Next is Maria Plotnikova and Anna Sumskeya's general overview, “Soviet Language Policy: Historical Development and Impact on Ethnic Groups and Languages,” which is followed by a close examination of the situation in Soviet Ukraine: “Soviet Language Engineering: Intra- and Inter-Republican Translation in Early Soviet Ukraine,” by Lada Kolomiyets. The next three papers explore the deleterious effects of center-periphery relations on the historiography of translation and Translation Studies. Taking a new look at histories of translation from the periphery, these three contributions offer what could be considered restorative readings, beginning with “An Outline History of Ukrainian Interpreting and Interpreting Studies through the Prism of Pseudocoloniality,” by Taras Shmihor and Oleksandra Litvinyak, followed by “Against Mythistory: Oleksandr Finkel's *Theory and Practice of Translation* (1929) and a Non-linear History of Translation Studies,” by Oleksandr Kalnychenko, and ending outside

the Soviet Union but within the Socialist bloc with “Before Anton Popovič: Silenced Voices of Slovak Translation Studies,” by Monika Šavelová.

Part two addresses the negotiation and re-negotiation of centers and peripheries in the construction of a Soviet World Literature, one that sought to distinguish itself from the World Literature of the West by incorporating literatures from both the East and West and from cultures both large and small (e.g., *malen'kie narodnosti*, or small nations) — in other words, the project was imagined as the incorporation into a new, socialist canon literatures traditionally marginalized by the West. The concept of periphery is relevant to Soviet World Literature in another sense, namely, that the core and periphery of the Soviet canon of World Literature was not stable. For example, French writer André Gide occupied a rather central place in the early Soviet canon when he was a vocal supporter of the Soviet Union. In fact, a five-volume collected works was published by Academic publishers beginning in the late 1920s. Following his pointed critique of the Soviet Union in his 1936 *Retour de l'URSS*, however, Gide instantly became *persona non grata* and his works were no longer published. For other authors, the process of marginalization took place over the course of years, as happened with another French writer, Marcel Proust. Although Proust was increasingly criticized, alongside James Joyce, as a decadent modernist in the pre-World War II period, Russian translations of his work continued to be published until 1941, when the galley proofs of volume five of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, *La Prisonnière*, were destroyed and Proust, too, joined the ranks of the unpublishable. Finally, periphery is also relevant to the making of Soviet World Literature as it relates to the first generation of Soviet translators and theorists, many of whom were not supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution. In fact, the translators recruited to work for the World Literature Publishing House, established in 1918, were for the most part members of the former bourgeoisie or nobility — known in Soviet parlance as “former people” — who had the necessary language proficiency to translate and who needed the work. And while Soviet rhetoric stressed the historically new nature of Soviet society and an of the Soviet citizen (*homo sovieticus*), much of the early Soviet writings on the theory and practice of translation were heavily indebted to the culture of translation that had developed in the pre-revolutionary Silver Age — and to Russian Formalism, which would be increasingly marginalized, culminating in the campaign against formalism that was launched in the early 1930s. All this is to say, that the “effort of locating world literature as a construct” (Tihanov 2017: 468), in this case, Soviet World Literature, is an especially complicated task, one that must take into account the shifting and overlapping centers and peripheries involved.

This section opens with Byron Byrne-Taylor’s article on an understudied translation of the Syrian epic *Gilgamesh* by the Silver Age poet and translator Nikolai Gumilev, who would be executed in 1921 as a monarchist. Gumilev’s project stands at the intersection of a interest in the cultures of the East that emerged in the decade preceding the Revolution, that produced a number of translations, like Gumilev’s, and the new Soviet project of creating a Socialist World Literature that gave equal attention to the literatures of the East and West. The next two articles continue the investigation of the shifting status of source text authors and their Soviet translators, beginning with Aleksei Semenenko’s “The Fate of Success: Anna Radlova’s Shakespeare,” followed

by Zachary Murphy King's study of the Soviet translation of the US author John Dos Passos, "Socialist Realism Rewrites Modernism: Dos Passos' 'The Body of an American' among Soviet Shock Workers." Next, Martina Napolitano's study of the Russian translator Mariya Petrovykh (1908-1979) seeks to address the traditional marginalization of translation in the work of poet-translators, such as Petrovykh, by demonstrating the rich mutual influence of these two creative activities. This section ends with two articles dealing with the making of world literature in the context of Soviet Armenia. The first, "Ringing under Control: The Soviet Translation of Paruyr Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfrey*," by Ruzan Ghazaryan, Ishkhan Dadyan, and Astghik Chubaryan, examines the censorship works from the periphery had to undergo in order to be incorporated into Soviet World Literature, while the second, "More than Words: Robert Burns in Armenian Translation through Russian," by Kristine Dadyan and Anush Sedrakyan, examines the double mediation works of World Literature had to undergo when being translated into the languages of the non-Russian republics.

Together, these contributions to re-thinking Soviet Translation Studies underscore the dynamic nature of Soviet culture, with its shifting and overlapping centers and peripheries, which defines what can be translated, how, and by whom, while also shifting greater attention to the experience of these shifts in the periphery of the Soviet Union. It is hoped that this special issue will inspire further research of this kind as well as translations of the excellent research that has already been produced in the various languages of the region.

Works Cited

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- Tihanov, Galin. 2017. "The Location of World Literature." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*. 44(3) : 468-481.