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TRANSLATION STUDIES: THEORY AND PRACTICE

International Scientific Journal

Re-thinking Soviet Translation Studies

Guest Editor: Brian James Baer

Special Issue 3

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Department of Translation Studies

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CONTENTS

Introduction

<i>Brian James Baer</i> On Translation and Peripheries	5
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Part I: Re-thinking Translation History from the Periphery

<i>Brian James Baer</i> Translation and Soviet Nationalities Policy: The View from the Periphery	11
<i>Maria Plotnikova, Anna Sumskaia</i> Soviet Language Policy: Historical Development and Impact on Ethnic Groups and Languages	33
<i>Lada Kolomiyets</i> Soviet Language Engineering: Intra- and Inter-Republican Translation in Early Soviet Ukraine	51
<i>Taras Shmiher, Oleksandra Litvinyak</i> An Outline History of Ukrainian Interpreting and Interpreting Studies through the Prism of Pseudocoloniality	74
<i>Oleksandr Kalnychenko</i> Against Mythistory: Oleksandr Finkel's <i>Theory and Practice of Translation</i> (1929) and a Non-linear History of Translation Studies	90
<i>Monika Šavelová</i> Before Anton Popovič: Silenced Voices of Slovak Translation Studies	106

Part II: Re-thinking Soviet World Literature from the Periphery

<i>Byron Byrne-Taylor</i> Gumilev, Gilgamesh and the Translator's Studio	123
<i>Aleksei Semenenko</i> The Fate of Success: Anna Radlova's Shakespeare	133
<i>Zachary Murphy King</i> Socialist Realism Rewrites Modernism: Dos Passos' "The Body of an American" among Soviet Shock Workers	147

<i>Martina Napolitano</i> “ <i>I Struggle, Pencil in Hand</i> ”: Mariya Petrovykh’s Mastery of Translation and Poetry	166
<i>Ruzan Ghazaryan, Ishkhan Dadyan, Astghik Chubaryan</i> Ringing under Control: The Soviet Translation of Paruyr Sevak’s <i>The Unsilenceable Belfry</i>	182
<i>Kristine Dadyan, Anush Sedrakyan</i> More than Words: Robert Burns in Armenian Translation through Russian	199

INTRODUCTION

ON TRANSLATION AND PERIPHERIES

BRIAN JAMES BAER

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.

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PART I

RE-THINKING TRANSLATION HISTORY FROM THE PERIPHERY

TRANSLATION AND SOVIET NATIONALITIES POLICY: THE VIEW FROM THE PERIPHERY

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Abstract: The literature on translation in the Soviet Union has largely focused on the “center” — i.e., on state-sponsored policies and translation into Russian. This article seeks to address that imbalance by turning scholarly attention to how Soviet translation policy was experienced in the periphery, that is, in the various Soviet republics, a complex story long suppressed beneath the propagandistic veneer of *druzhba narodov*, or “friendship of Soviet peoples.” At the same time, this article aims to address the rather desultory treatment of translation in the now vast literature on Soviet nationalities policy and, more broadly, on Soviet coloniality, by examining the role of translation in both a practical sense, as a techne of communist internationalism, and in a metaphorical sense as symbolizing the Soviet state’s commitment to fostering greater mutual understanding and respect among its constituent peoples. These dual aims are then explored through the life of Armenian writer, editor, and translator Karen Mikaelian.

Keywords: adequacy; anthologies; Armenian literature; *druzhba narodov* / friendship of Soviet peoples; interlinear translations

1. Introduction

The anglophone literature on translation in the Soviet Union, inaugurated in the 1990s with Lauren G. Leighton’s *Two Worlds, One Art: Literary Translation in Russia and America* (1991) and Maurice Freidberg’s *Literary Translation in Russia: A Cultural History* (1997), greatly expanded in the first and second decades of the twenty first century when the opening of archives following the fall of the Soviet Union began to bear fruit — especially in relation to the censorship of translations.¹ The vast majority

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¹ Some examples include isolated chapters in the collected volumes *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Baer 2011), *The Art of Accommodation: Literary Translation in Russia* (Burnett & Lygo 2013), *Going East: Discovering New and Alternative Traditions in Translation Studies* (Schippel & Zwischenberger 2016), *Translation in Russian Contexts: Culture, Politics, Identity* (Baer & Witt 2018), *Translation under Communism* (Rundle et al. 2022), *World Literature in the Soviet Union* (Tihanov et al. 2023), and Muireann Maguire and Cathy McAteer’s *Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context* (2024), as well as

of that research, however, has focused on the Soviet (Russophone) center and translations *into* Russian, albeit with some very notable exceptions, such as individual articles and book chapters in English and more substantial works published in the languages of the post-Soviet republics (e.g., Strikha 2006; Chernovatyi & Karaban 2007; Kalnychenko & Poliakova 2011, 2015; Kolomiyets 2015; Maskaliūnienė & Tatolytė 2024). This article seeks to address that imbalance by turning scholarly attention to how Soviet translation policy was experienced in the periphery, that is, in the various Soviet republics, a complex story long suppressed beneath the propagandistic veneer of *druzhba narodov*, or “friendship of Soviet peoples,” which involved “the most extravagant celebration of ethnic diversity that any state had ever witnessed” (Slezkine 2000: 1).

At the same time, this article aims to address the rather desultory treatment of translation in the now vast literature on Soviet nationalities policy and, more broadly, on Soviet coloniality. As Ivars Šteinbergs (2022: 141) notes: “[R]arely does research on Soviet coloniality encompass an inspection of the processes of translation” — although translation played a central role, both practically and symbolically, in forging and maintaining the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic Soviet state. As Dmitrii Usov noted in the introduction to his 1934 monograph *Basic Principles of Translational Work* (*Osnovnye printsipy perevodcheskoi raboty*): “Translation is a powerful instrument for the brotherhood of the peoples of the USSR. Translational activity, its organization and the oversight of its implementation should attract society’s attention” (Usov 1934b: 3). In fact, Soviet nationalities policy is a major reason that “translation became one of the major Soviet industries as well as the main source of sustenance for hundreds of professional writers” (Slezkine 2000: 336).

To carry out these two aims, this article pays particular attention to how translators in the various non-Russian republics negotiated the state’s shifting nationalities policy, motivated not simply by a desire to survive but also by a desire to project a worthy image of their native literature while staying true to their ethical understanding of the translator’s task. This investigation is informed by Hermine Ohanyan and Artur Ishkhanyan’s (2026) reinterpretation of Soviet internationalism “not as a historical ideal or failed project, but as a *game state* — a dynamic, tension-ridden configuration in which solidarity and coercion, cultural autonomy and ideological control, coexisted without resolution.” In relation to Soviet nationalities policy, the rules of the game were set by the center, creating the conditions in the republics for both compliance and resistance and, in some cases, producing complex entanglements of the two. The nature of the game from the perspective of the republics — and the very high stakes involved — will be illustrated through the life and work of the Armenian writer, editor and translator Karen Mikaelian (1883-1941).

monographs, such as Samantha Sherry’s *Discourses of Regulation and Resistance: Censoring Translation in the Stalin and Khrushchev Era Soviet Union* (2015), Natalia Kamovnikova’s *Made under Pressure: Literary Translation in the Soviet Union, 1960-1991* (2019), Elizaveta Vasserman’s *Andrei Fedorov in the History of Translation Studies* (2026), and Kamovnikova’s *The Fearful Steepen: Russian Translations of “Ulysses,” 1920–1930s* (2026).

2. The Shifting Rules of the Game

Initially, the nationalities policy promoted by Lenin and Stalin was meant to distinguish the new Soviet state from the tsarist empire, famously described by Lenin as a “prisonhouse of nations,” in which non-Russians were labeled as *inorodtsy* (or aliens).² In general, Soviet nationalities policy walked a rather fine line between recognizing the distinct value of the languages and cultures of the various non-Russian peoples of the USSR, while insisting on a common Soviet culture, as captured in the formula “nationalist in form, socialist in content.” As Gorkii put it in his essay “On Language”: “We must not forget that our nation is multilingual to an immeasurably greater extent than any of the countries of Europe, and that, while multilingual, our nation must be ideologically one” (qtd. in Usov 1934b: 3).

The Soviet policy of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*), formally introduced in 1923, initially under the term nationalization (*natsionalizatsiia*) (Martin 2001: 74), celebrated and bolstered the languages and cultures of the various non-Russian peoples of the USSR. The policy aimed to create cadres of local administrators, thus “mak[ing] Soviet power seem indigenous” (ibid.). The policy was institutionalized through the creation of autonomous and constituent republics and administrative regions based on ethnicity as well as through “dual control,” which meant that non-Russian leaders in prominent local roles were typically monitored or paired with Slavic or Russian officials to ensure loyalty to Moscow’s central directives. In the late 1920s, during the first Five-year Plan (1928-1932), a period described by Sheila Fitzpatrick as the Soviet Union’s “cultural revolution,” which coincided with Stalin’s consolidation of power, there were increasing calls to pay less attention to the literatures and cultures of the bourgeois capitalist West and to pay greater attention to the literatures and cultures of the Soviet peoples, both large and small. This focus on intranational, or intraunion literature was heralded by Maksim Gorkii in an article published in *Pravda* on September 19, 1928, titled “The Literary Creation of the Peoples of the USSR.” There, he asserted, “workers and peasants of the Union of Socialist Soviets must know their neighbors of different languages well, as their mutual goal of creating new forms of state life calls for that” (qtd. in Khotimsky 2011: 75).

In some republics, notably Ukraine, the policy of indigenization spurred a broad cultural renaissance. Fearing this would lead to calls for greater autonomy, however, Stalin made it clear in a 1929 speech to Ukrainian writers that the ultimate aim of the indigenization policy was not in fact to consolidate national cultures but rather to hasten their eventual disappearance: “[W]e are conducting a policy of maximum development of national culture so that it can exhaust itself completely and then a base can be created for organizing an international socialist culture not only in content but also in form” (Clark & Dobrenko 2007: 62). The speech foreshadows the “Great

² As Slezkine (2000: 219) notes in regard to the use of *inorodtsy* in tsarist Russia, “Some non-Orthodox were legally designated as ‘aliens’ (*inorodtsy*), a term whose etymology (‘non-kin,’ ‘non-native’) suggested genetic difference but which was usually interpreted to mean ‘non-Christian’ or ‘backward.’”

Retreat” (Timasheff 1948) from indigenization that began in the early 1930s,³ culminating in the Great Purge of the second half of that decade, “which targeted the national elites of the national republics in particular” (Kaplan 2020: 83). The end of indigenization was marked not only by the arrest and/or execution of intellectuals and other cultural figures in the republics charged as “Trotskyite nationalists” or with committing “nationalist aberrations,” but also by mass deportations — between 1935 and 1938 at least ten different nationalities (Poles, Germans, Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Koreans, Italians, Chinese, Kurds, and Iranians) experienced some degree of mass resettlement (Martin 1998: 815).

3. Translation and/in Soviet Nationalities Policy

To understand fully the role of translation in relation to Soviet nationalities policy, one must recognize that it had both a practical and a symbolic dimension. It was not only the means by which internationalism was forged, but it also served as a symbol, a demonstration of the state’s rhetorical and material commitment to internationalism both globally and within the Soviet Union. In its practical role, translation was often covert, a necessary though unremarked *techne* of Soviet internationalism, as, for example, in the series of ten-day celebrations in Moscow, known as *dekady*, dedicated to the cultures of the various republics and meant “to demonstrate the success of Soviet nationalities policy, specifically, the nation-building activities fostered by this policy in the area of culture” (Kaplan 2020: 81).⁴ The first was dedicated to the Ukrainian SSR

³ While the “Great Retreat” usefully describes the overall trajectory, it obscures regional variation, in particular, the fact that the attack on national intelligentsias did not begin simultaneously everywhere. The conventional dating of the “Great Retreat” from *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) to the early 1930s — popularized especially by Terry Martin’s *The Affirmative Action Empire* — needs qualification, particularly in the Ukrainian case. The show trial of the fabricated Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (*Spilka vyzvolennia Ukrainy*, SVU) took place in Kharkiv (then the capital of the Ukrainian SSR) from 9 March to 19 April 1930. Arrests connected with the case began in 1929. Forty-five Ukrainian intellectuals, scholars, writers, and church figures (many linked to the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church) were publicly tried; hundreds more were arrested in connection with it. The charges were entirely invented by the GPU. Historians of Ukraine consistently treat the SVU affair as a deliberate political signal that the case (arrests from early 1930, sentences 1931) were near-simultaneous operations. Both targeted the non-Bolshevik and national-communist intelligentsia that had driven the cultural and linguistic revival of the 1920s. In both republics (and the closely related Ukrainian-speaking areas of the North Caucasus), the 1929–1931 wave marked the practical end of the liberal phase of *korenizatsiia*, even though the full all-Union “Great Retreat” (formal elevation of Russian, further purges, etc.) continued into the mid- and late 1930s (see Mace 1983; Kostyuk 1960; on Belarus, see Plokhyy 2006). All this is to say that, while the various non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union had to navigate the shifting nationalities policy of the state, those shifts were experienced somewhat differently, requiring that any history of translation done from the periphery of the Soviet empire must take into consideration the individual experiences of those peoples.

⁴ As Kaplan (2010: 84) comments, “Each *dekada* was conceived as a showcase for evidence of mature nationhood and cultural progress,” and, as such, the *dekada* was meant to be “a ritual of integration” (86) into Soviet culture. As Isabelle Kaplan notes (2020: 83), “The Great Terror, which targeted the national elites of the national republics in particular, did not leave *dekada* planning

(March 1936), followed by Kazakh SSR (May 1936), Georgian SSR (January 1937), Uzbek SSR (May 1937), Azerbaidzhan SSR (April 1938), Kyrgyz SSR (May-June 1939), Armenian SSR (October 1939), Belorussian SSR (June 1940), Buryat-Montol ASSR (October 1940), and Tajik SSR (April 1941) (Kaplan 2020: 81).⁵ While “the dekady before World War II emphasized music and dance” (Ibid., 89) over the written word — the culminating event of the dekada celebrations was typically “an original Western-style grand opera in the republican language” (ibid., 84) — translation was nevertheless an essential feature of the those celebrations, although mostly as a practical affordance. At the first dekada celebration in 1936, for example, the Kyiv State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater performed two operas at the Bolshoi Theater; one was by Ukrainian composers while the other was a Russian classic, sung in Ukrainian. Furthermore, as Isabelle Kaplan (2010: 82) notes, “The groups would bring all scenery and costumes from Kiev, as well as a staff of stagehands, along with Ukrainian and Russian booklets with summaries and other information about each opera.” At the same time, there were the obligatory panegyrics to Stalin and the Soviet state that had to be rendered, often very quickly and using interlinear trots, into Russian.

Translation played a more overt role in carrying out the friendship of peoples initiative in the realm of literature. As Natalia Kamovnikova (2019: 151) notes, “The widely propagated friendship of nations [...] was expected to manifest itself in different spheres of social life, including publishing.” One of the most visible manifestations was the publication of translations into Russian in the form of anthologies, beginning in 1924 with the *Anthology of Ukrainian Poetry in Russian Translations* [*Antologiiia ukrainskoi poezii v russkikh perevodakh*] edited by Aleksandr Gatov and Serhiy Pylypenko, with an introduction by Aleksandr Biletskii [Oleksander Biletskyi]. Another highly visible manifestation was the journal *Druzhba Narodov*, founded in 1939, which published translations and critical essays related to the literatures of the republics. Translation played an especially visible role and assumed a distinctly symbolic resonance in connection with the Pushkin Centennial in 1937, “and thereafter by national republics in connection with their national poet jubilees” (Kaplan 2020: 90n51), discussed in greater detail below.

Indigenization had for the most part a very positive effect on translation into the languages of the republics. This was especially true in Soviet Ukraine. As the literary critic and translator Elizaveta Starynkevich [Elyzaveta Starynkevych] noted in a 1930 review essay:

A year ago on the pages of *Krasnoe Slovo*, Professor A.I. Beletskii noted the colossal leap forward in the art of translation that has occurred in Ukraine before our eyes over the first decade of the revolution. The author of the article noted that the view regarding the artistic significance of translations into Ukrainian had fundamentally changed. If not long ago,

unscathed; it is telling that between May 1937 and May 1939, the only dekada held in Moscow was that of the Azerbaijani SSR.”

⁵ As Isabelle Kaplan notes (2020: 83), “The Great Terror, which targeted the national elites of the national republics in particular, did not leave dekada planning unscathed; it is telling that between May 1937 and May 1939, the only dekada held in Moscow was that of the Azerbaijani SSR.”

another reader was astonished at the “pointless waste of effort and resources” that he saw in the publication in Ukrainian of canonical texts, “which one could read in Russian,” and if the very idea that it was possible to translate the great works of world literature into the “simple” and “impoverished” Ukrainian language seemed ridiculous, then already in 1928-29 the appearance of many undoubtedly valuable literary translations (of prose and poetry) compelled that very same reader to acknowledge that he had been gravely mistaken. The Ukrainian language has proved itself fully equal to the demands placed upon it by the thematics and stylistics of translated texts, and the expenditure of effort and means to publish classic works [in Ukrainian translations] is fully justified. (Starynkevich 1930: 111)

The end of indigenization, however, brought about a shift in translation practice: translations from Russian into Ukrainian would have to remain closer to the original in terms of word choice and syntax and it became difficult to publish a Ukrainian translation of a foreign work if a Russian translation already existed (see Kalnychenko & Kolomiyets 2022: 160–64; Kolomiyets 2023).

The increasing visibility of translation led, perhaps inevitably, to discussions of translation quality. As Gorkii made clear in his closing address at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers: “It is necessary to publish in the Russian language collections of recent prose and poetry of the national republics and oblasts, *in good translations*. (Applause)” (*Pervyi Vsesoiuznyi S’ezd Sovetskikh Pisatelei* [hereinafter PVSSP] 934, 677; emphasis added). Over the course of the 1930s, however, those discussions of translation quality became increasingly entangled with broader debates over the relationship between form and content in the arts, or how to balance the oneness of Soviet culture with the distinct traditions of the various Soviet peoples. As Gorkii noted in his opening remarks at the First Writers Congress: “Our geographic unity and our unity of purpose do not limit the variety of our creative devices and ambitions” (PVSSP 1934: 1). The end of indigenization did not spell the erasure of national form; rather, it altered “the amount of room allowed for ‘national form’” (Slezkine 2000: 330). As this relates to literary translation, the form, while still important, was made secondary to the content, as evident in the repeated interventions of the Soviet state to prevent “excessive” attention to form, which peaked in the 1930s with the campaign against formalism. The hierarchy of content over form was later reflected in Ivan Kashkin’s concept of “realist translation” (1955), according to which the translator’s primary allegiance is to the underlying reality described in a literary text.

As a result, translators and readers of translated literature had to balance their interest in cultural particularities with a commitment to the underlying socialist reality, or the oneness of Soviet culture. Consider the editors’ statement in the inaugural issue of the journal *Inostrannaia Literatura*:

Every people values the particular, unrepeatable features of its national culture.⁶ A love for the particularities of a national culture, however, does not imply a cult of the solitary: all

⁶ Here the editors are parroting a statement made by Stalin on April 7, 1948: “Every nation, whether large or small, has its own specific qualities and its own peculiarities, which are unique to it and

peoples have common aspirations, a common truth. Committed to the lofty principles of internationalism, the Soviet people respect the cultures of all peoples — big and small. They know that all peoples make their contribution to the culture of humankind. (Editorial Board 1955: 3)

The fact that the amount of room allowed for national form was shifting and ultimately determined by the center made certain translators especially vulnerable, namely, those influenced by Russian Formalism who believed in the equal treatment of form and content, and those working in the Soviet periphery. Mikaelian belonged to both groups.

4. Translation and the Inequities of the Friendship of Soviet Peoples

While the state's promotion of translations of the literatures of the fraternal Soviet peoples resulted in some translation scandals — such as translations of folk poetry from Central Asia done from “paraphrases” with no original, an extreme example of the general tendency toward radical domestication when working with low quality interlinear translations (Witt 2013) — the policy was not all window dressing. The Soviet state did indeed make unprecedented material investment in the translation of the literatures of the republics, with many of those involved, in both the center and the periphery, deeply concerned over the quality of the translations. Moreover, not all translation activity was between the center and the periphery. Friendship of Peoples also promoted translation between the non-Russian republics. Already in 1930, Elizaveta Starynkevich (2011: 445) could boast in an essay on the current state of translation in Ukraine: “From Belorussian writers, we now have translations of Charot, Byadulya, Bahdanovich, from Georgian writers, we have a translation of Dibvadze, and from Yiddish, of Abramovich [Mendele Moykher-Sforim], Sholem-Aleichem, Reyzen and others.” Nonetheless, Gorkii's utopian vision of a multi-ethnic socialist state in which “every work of every ethnic group in the Soviet Union [would] be translated into the languages of all the other ethnic groups” (Gorkii, qtd. in Chukovskii 1936: 7) repeatedly ran into significant institutional and attitudinal impediments.

On a very practical level, the problem was not simply that “the translation of literature into Russian, let alone the other languages of the Soviet Union, was time- and resource-consuming” (Kaplan 2020: 90), but that the Soviet state lacked the necessary cadres of trained translators and interpreters in many of the relevant language pairs; this affected the ability to provide translations at all, as well as the quality of the translations that were provided. Needless to say, these problems tended to affect certain languages more than others, namely, the languages of Central Asia and the Caucasus, resulting in inequalities that paradoxically reproduced, rather than eliminated, some of the linguistic and cultural hierarchies inherited from the Russian Empire. As Katerina Clark notes in relation to the 1920 Congress of the Toilers of the East, held in Baku: The organizers “were faced with the impossible situation of making the speeches,

which other nations do not have. These peculiarities form a contribution that each nation makes to the common treasure of world culture, adding to it and enriching it” (qtd. in Slezkine 2000: 337).

delivered in several languages, accessible to all the delegates, who represented a wide range of languages and educational levels.” Their “solution” further exposed the unequal treatment of the delegates representing the peoples of the former Russian Empire, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the wider East:

Initially, after its delivery, each speech was laboriously translated orally and generally in summary form into some of the major languages of those represented, and into Turkish and Farsi in particular, but also into Chechen, Kalmyk, and other languages of Soviet minority peoples. Nevertheless, angry delegates complained from the floor about not being provided with a translation into their particular language or about translations being too reduced. By September 4, it was clear that at the consequently slow rate of progress in getting the scheduled speeches delivered it would be impossible to finish the congress on schedule, and so Zinoviev declared that from then on they would provide translation in only three languages — Russian, Turkic-Azerbaijani, and Farsi. Those who did not understand them could huddle with a delegate who would translate for them and were often relegated to the corridor for this purpose. Some languages were more equal than others, and most were being marginalized (Clark 2021: 4).

The lack of trained cadres of translators in the languages of the republics led to the dubious practice of using interlinear translations (*podstrochniki*), according to which a literal translation of the source text, typically from a Central Asian or Caucasian language, was then “revised” stylistically by a Russian writer, who typically did not know the source language — or much about the source culture (see Witt 2013). Moreover, the quality of the interlinear translations themselves was often very poor, which gave the end translator further license to take stylistic liberties. As Aleksandr Zhovtis describes the preparations for the Kazakh *dekada* festival in 1936: “Like flies around honey the fellow-travelers were gathering round hastily prepared editions. Hurriedly interlinear trots were produced, hurriedly they were rhymed by people who had never seen a line of Kazakh poetry before, in the pre-holiday turmoil the manuscripts were submitted to type-setting” (qtd. in Witt 2011: 164). While interlinear translations were praised under Stalin as contributing to the “victory of Lenin’s and Stalin’s nationality policy” (Tarlovskii 1940: 266), they were lambasted by members of the Soviet Union’s creative intelligentsia — in private while Stalin was alive and openly after his death. In 1961, the poet and translator Nikolai Chukovskii (son of Kornei Chukovskii) gave a damning assessment of the use of interlinear translations in his essay “The Tenth Muse.” Following a discussion at a recent conference on Central Asian literature, Chukovskii (2013: 117) notes: “Perhaps, the greatest evil which the delegates at the conference unanimously discussed was the established habit of doing interlinear translation.” He goes on to point out that translators of Western literature rarely use them, which explains why there are so many excellent Russian translations of Western literary works, which is not the case with Central Asian literatures. As Chukovskii describes it:

If the translation of an Uzbek novel into Russian is required, the procedure is as follows: Someone called an interlinearist [*podstrochnikist*], a person who knows Uzbek but doesn’t have a good command of literary Russian, hastily translates the novel into very bad Russian. He does it horribly, without even following the rules of Russian grammar. The only reason

for such a translation is to somehow let the reader figure out the general idea on his own. This bad translation is called an interlinear translation. As it is impossible to publish such a work, it is submitted to a person who knows literary Russian but doesn't know Uzbek and who can refine the translation. This person is called the translator of the Uzbek novel, which doesn't make any sense, since refining a low-quality Russian text is what we call editing, not translation. (117)

Chukovskii then calls for an end to the practice, concluding: "the tradition of interlinear translation is a vestige, a holdover from the time when the intelligentsia in our republics was weak and insignificant in number, and there was a dearth of individuals capable of raising translation to an adequate level. This time has passed" (117). This negative view of *podstrochniki* was common among members of the late Soviet intelligentsia as it came to symbolize the top-down cultural production of the Stalinist era.⁷

It is worth noting here that Soviet translations *into Russian* were often praised for being done directly from the original, with indirect or relay translation being cast as unprofessional and outdated. Consider, for example, the blurb for the first Soviet translation of *The Thousand Nights and a Night*:

Unlike the previous Russian editions representing abridged translations from the French or English, *One Hundred and One Nights* in the Academia edition appears for the first time in its entirety, without any abridgements, in a scholarly translation directly from the Arabic original. The translation was done by the Arabist M. Sal'e under the editorship of Academician I. Iu. Krachkovskii. (1929: n.p.)

What was condemned as an inadequate relay practice when the target language was Russian could nevertheless function as an acceptable and even institutionally prescribed method when the target language was not Russian. In fact, for translators in the republics, direct translation could be politically suspect. Consider the case of the Kazakh poet and translator Turmaghanbet Iztileuov (1882-1939) who was arrested in 1937 for, among other things, undertaking a translation of the Persian epic poem *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi directly from the Persian (Zhangyru 2021: 7). Portions of the translation were published only posthumously, in 1961 (Aiagan 2005: 450).

Notably, Chukovskii blames the problem of indirect translation on the underdeveloped intelligentsia in the republics, not on Great Power chauvinism (*velikoderzhavnyi shovinizm*), which was one of the major attitudinal impediments to the equal treatment of the literatures of the republics. In fact, it was a prominent theme

⁷ An interesting counterexample is that of the translator Semen Lipkin. As a Jew, Lipkin was himself a member of a discriminated minority, and in the preface to his fictional account of a translator of Caucasian literature, titled *Dekada*, he discusses how an assignment to translate a Kalmyk poem inspired him to explore Kalmyk language and culture: "I didn't know the Kalmyk language. I had only a vague idea of Kalmyk history and customs. In the face of such ignorance, it was impossible to limit myself to an interlinear trot. I began to study the work of historians and travelers — Pal'mov, Grumm-Grzhimailo, Iakinf Bichurin, Pallas, and others; I acquainted myself with V. Ia. Vladimirtsov's *Comparative Grammar of the Written Mongol Language*, and so on" (Lipkin 2008: 101). Lipkin also acknowledges in his preface and in the novel that he — and his fictional doppelgänger, Stanislav Bodorskii — were exceptions to the rule (for more on this, see Baer 2023).

at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, one raised by Gorkii himself in his opening address:

I feel it necessary to point out that Soviet literature is not only Russian-language literature, but all-Union literature. Since the writers of the fraternal republics, who differ from us only in language, live and work in the light and under the beneficent influence of the idea that unites all working people who have been divided by capitalism, it is clear that we have no right to ignore the literary output of the national minorities simply because ours is greater. The value of art is measured not by quantity but by quality. If we have had the giant Pushkin in our past, this does not mean that Armenians, Georgians, Tatars, Ukrainians and other nationalities are incapable of producing great masters of literature, music, painting and architecture. (PVSSP 1934: 15)

Gorkii then reads a letter from a Tatar writer who, while acknowledging that the work of “writers of previously oppressed and backward peoples” are “far from perfect,” laments that, “the established literary community in the center continues to regard us as ‘ethnographic exhibits’” (ibid.). In his closing address, Gorkii calls upon those assembled to “begin the process of mutual and deep familiarization with the cultures of the fraternal republics” (ibid., 676).

While one perceives a subtle note of paternalism and great power chauvinism in Gorkii’s claim that the literatures of the republics have yet to produce a Pushkin, this attitude is more evident in Gorkii’s refusal to permit an abridged Ukrainian translation of his novel *Mother* (*Mat’*, 1906) for young people — not because the novel would be shortened, but because he considered Ukrainian to be a dialect. As he expressed it in a letter to the editor-in-chief of the publishing house, the writer Oleksa Slisarenko:

Dear Aleksei Andreevich, I am categorically against the shortening of the novel *Mother*. It seems to me that the translation of this novel into the Ukrainian dialect [*narechie*] is not needed. I am surprised by the fact that people who posit the same goal do not only maintain the difference of dialects by striving to make a dialect a “language,” but also oppress those Great Russians who find themselves in the minority in the region where this dialect is spoken. Under the old regime I vigorously protested against such phenomena. It seems to me that under the new regime we should strive to eliminate everything that prevents people from helping one another. And so, it turns out looking rather odd: some strive to create an “international language,” while others do the exact opposite. (Gor’kii 2013: 63)⁸

⁸ This short, one-paragraph-long letter from Gorkii is heavily annotated in the complete collection of Gorkii’s letters published by Nauka. One footnote indicates that another Ukrainian publisher approached Gorkii a year later with a request to translate the same novel, *Mat’*, into Ukrainian, and Gorkii agreed, later praising the translation (Gor’kii 2013: 471). And when traveling across the Soviet Union in 1928, Gorkii met with Ukrainian writers at the Kharkiv House of Literature, where he addressed his earlier reference to Ukrainian as a dialect: “I’m not a philologist and I didn’t mean to insult the Ukrainian language as I didn’t understand the nuances. In general, I consider the entire incident a result of an argument between Slisarenko and me, and in the heat of the polemic, a lot of extraneous things are said” (471n2). While the second part of his excuse is very plausible, the first part of his excuse sounds disingenuous as in the letter Gorkii makes a clear distinction between a dialect (*narechie*) and a language (*iazik*) and then criticizes the attempt to turn a dialect into a language. He does on several occasions declare that he is not a nationalist and believes in a single

Such chauvinism is less extreme though still evident in Usov's *Basic Principles*, which was dedicated to the translation of textbooks from Russian into the languages of the various republics, underscoring translation's role in the Soviet state's "civilizing mission" in regard to its minority peoples. As Usov writes in the introduction:

The growth of the cultures of the peoples of the USSR, proletarian in content and national in form, the polytechnicization of our schools, the introduction of the most backward segments of our society to various branches of science and technology, and active participation in the political life of the country — all this is closely connected to the development and consolidation of the national languages and to the enrichment of the literature in these languages. Such enrichment facilitates the work of translation. (Usov 1934b: 3)⁹

Central to the civilizing mission built into the Soviet promotion of the friendship of peoples was that more "advanced" cultures should support the development of those cultures considered "backward." In relation to the theater, for example, "if a national repertoire was still incomplete, translations from most nineteenth-century Russian and west European literatures were actively encouraged or provided" (Slezkine 2000: 335-336). While Soviet nationalities policy supported translation in both directions — i.e., from the languages of the republics and regions into Russian and from Russian into the languages of the republics and regions — it was through translation into Russian that the literature of the republics and regions could be consecrated, to use Pascale Casanova's term, or as Alexander Fadeev (1960: 447) put it, "enter the cultural fund of the entire Soviet people," reflecting the growing linguistic and cultural chauvinism of the Soviet Union under Stalin.¹⁰

common language, whatever it may be, as "multilingualism complicates communication between people" (471n3).

⁹ That being said, the urgent need to translate textbooks, as well as the works of Marx and Engels, Lenin, and subsequently Stalin, into the languages of the republics led to an expansion of translation theory beyond belles-lettres to consider a type of text that combined elements of scientific and technical writing with elements of belles lettres but having a strong polemical bent. It was alternately labeled *obshchestvenno-politicheskaia literatura* [socio-political], *sotsial'no-ekonomicheskaiia* [socio-economic] (Usov 1934a: 5; Usov 1934b: 3), which was distinguished from *politicheskaiia literatura* [political writing], *obshchestvovedchestkaia* [social-science literature] (Fedorov 1936: 1), and *sotsio-politicheskaia* [socio-political] (Fedorov 1953). This was a crucial stage in the development of text typologies for translators that sought to cover every possible text type (Baer & Hofeneder 2025).

¹⁰ While "the dekady before World War II emphasized music and dance" (Kaplan 2020: 89), over the written word, translation was nevertheless a necessary feature of the dekada celebrations, mostly as a practical affordance rather than a symbol. At the first dekada celebration in 1936, for example, the Kyiv State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater performed at the Bolshoi Theater two operas by Ukrainian composers as well as a Russian classic, sung in Ukrainian. And, as Isabelle Kaplan (2010: 82) notes, "The groups would bring all scenery and costumes from Kiev, as well as a staff of stagehands, along with Ukrainian and Russian booklets with summaries and other information about each opera." The culminating event of the dekada celebrations was typically "an original Western-style grand opera in the republican language" (Kaplan 2020: 84). That being said, translation was far more visible and assumed a symbolic resonance in connection with the Pushkin Centennial in 1937 "and thereafter by national republics in connection with their national poet jubilees" (Kaplan 2020: 90n51).

5. Modes of Compliance

Years before the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, calls to pay greater attention to the literatures of the fraternal peoples of the Soviet Union — instead of kowtowing to the West — increased following the adoption the First Five Year Plan (1928-1932). In the center, compliance was reflected most visibly in works of translation theory. In some cases, the compliance was rather superficial, a strategic nod to the state-sponsored initiative. For example, Dmitrii Usov, a translator who worked primarily from French, offered as the rationale for his 1934 *Basic Principles of Translational Work* the promotion of closer union among the Soviet peoples. The theoretical positions outlined in the book, however, reflected Usov's views on translation developed out of his practice with Western European languages. Similarly, though somewhat less superficially, Kornei Chukovskii increasingly incorporated the literatures of the Soviet peoples into his discussions of translation. In the 1936 edition of *Iskusstvo perevoda* [The Art of Translation], he includes a discussion of Russian translations of the Georgian poet Georgii Leonidze. His attention to the literatures of the republics became considerably more pronounced in the 1941 edition, retitled *Vysokoe iskusstvo* [A High Art], which contained an entire tenth chapter, "Russkie 'Kobzari' (Na putyakh k sovremennomu stilu)" [Russian "Kobzars": On the Way to a Modern Style], devoted to Russian translations of Taras Shevchenko. This 1941 Shevchenko chapter is not merely a token reference to a Soviet "fraternal" literature. Its final sections explicitly discuss "Soviet Style of Translations of Shevchenko" and "Shevchenko in the Great Family." Previous editions of Chukovskii's writings on translation — the 1919 and 1920 editions of *Principles of Literary Translation* (*Printsipy literaturnogo perevoda*) and the 1930 *Art of Translation* (*Iskusstvo perevoda*), co-authored with Andrei Fedorov — discussed only Western authors (see Baer 2022).

One of the major and most performative modes of compliance with Soviet nationalities policy from the periphery as it evolved over the course of the late 1920s and 30s involved expressions of gratitude toward the Soviet state, in general, and to Gorkii, in particular. In an essay titled "A Fighter for the Literature of the Fraternal Peoples" ("Borets za literaturny bratskikh narodov") dedicated to Gorkii following his death in 1936, Mikaelian favorably contrasted Soviet support for the literatures of the various peoples of the USSR to the situation in tsarist Russia. As Mikaelian writes:

At that time the publication of any "inorodcheskoi" [non-Russian] book in Russian translation was a tortuous enterprise. If some "fanatic" got the idea to step across the border of national insularity to acquaint Russian readers with his literature, he would have to find a rich countryman with political connections, a Maecenas, or appeal to some "charitable" organization. And if Armenian literature has turned out to be the exception to these sad "rules," then this occurred entirely thanks to the initiative and support of Aleksei Maksimovich Gorkii. (Bagdasarian 2010: 90-91; quotation marks in the original)

While the Soviet state did indeed support such translation projects, one could also say that the Armenians found in Gorkii a powerful Maecenas.

Another very visible form of compliance from the periphery involved the offering of translations as tribute. This was most obvious in relation to Pushkin centennial celebrations of 1937. Those celebrations also marked a distinct moment in the institutionalization of Russian chauvinism, serving to cement Russian as the primary language of Soviet culture. As Slezkine (2000: 331) notes: “As the [1930s] progressed, the Party began to endow Russians with a national past, national language and an increasingly familiar national iconography, headed principally by Alexander Pushkin — progressive and ‘freedom-loving’ to be sure, but clearly celebrated as a great Russian, not a great revolutionary.” Representatives of the various non-Russian republics followed the rules of the game by boasting of their translations of the Russian poet, vying with one another to show their loyalty to and affection for Russophone culture. As Mikaelian wrote in an article dedicated to the poet’s centennial, titled “Pushkin in Armenian Literature”:

Among the countries that began to translate the works of Pushkin into their language, Armenia occupies one of the first positions. It is also in the lead regarding the number of translations of individual works published before the October Revolution into the languages of the peoples occupying the former Russian empire. Attraction to the artistic genius of the poet began among the [Armenian] intelligentsia already during the lifetime of the poet. (MLA, Karen Mikaelian, N12)

Mikaelian concludes another article on the same theme with praise for the Soviet state, while aligning Pushkin with the basic precepts of Socialist Realism:

Only with Soviet rule has Armenia taken serious steps in understanding the entire depth of Pushkin’s oeuvre, unlocking the “secret” of his simplicity of lexis and form, of his authentic realism. Only with Soviet rule have the greatest works of the poet been translated, some of which have already been published. Never before has Pushkin occupied such a firm place in Armenian literature as he does today, never has he been so near and dear to the Armenian people as in our age of the great friendship of the peoples of the country of socialism. (MLA, Karen Mikaelian, N124)

Soviet nationalities policy, Mikaelian asserts, enhanced the Armenian people’s love for the Russian poet.

6. Modes of Resistance

Resistance to Soviet nationalities policy in the republics took a wider variety of forms, one of the earliest of which was translation criticism. In fact, Gorkii’s mention of the need for “good translations” at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers may have been a reaction to criticism from the republics. Already in 1927 the Ukrainian writer and critic Yurii Savchenko published an article titled “An Initiative” (“Pochin”) in Ukrainian, criticizing the Russian translations of Ukrainian poet Pavlo Tychyn — although not before acknowledging the cultural and political significance of those translations:

The plan to provide the Russian reader with translations of Ukrainian literary works is beginning to become a reality. There is no need to dwell on the immense historical significance of this undertaking in general, and specifically when it is realized through the publication of Tychyna's poetry in Russian. Setting aside the well-known *Anthology of Ukrainian Poetry in Russian Translation*, the not entirely successful translation of Khvylovy's *Blue Etudes*, and a number of other minor attempts to introduce the Russian reader to Ukrainian literature, one must acknowledge that the published volume of Tychyna's poetry in Russian is, in fact, the first serious attempt to give that Russian reader a true impression of modern Ukrainian literature in general, and of Pavlo Tychyna's work in particular. (Savchenko 1927: 63)

Savchenko concludes the essay on a positive note: "An initiative, albeit not entirely successful, yet of great significance" (71).

A year later, Oleksandr Finkel' [Aleksandr Finkel'] published an essay in the journal *Krasnoe Slovo* titled "Ukrainian Writers in Russian Translations" ("Ukrainskie pisateli v russkikh perevodakh," 1928), in which he assesses the state of Russian translations of modern Ukrainian literature during the early Soviet period.¹¹ Written in the context of intensifying Ukrainian-Russian literary relations, the article offers a sharp, principled critique of how Ukrainian writers are represented in Russian. Finkel argues that translation is not merely a technical or artistic task but a socio-literary act that shapes one literature's image in another. Poor selection and low-quality translations can distort cultural understanding and reinforce harmful "great power" attitudes. Finkel's piece is a pioneering example of translation criticism in the Ukrainian-Soviet context, combining detailed textual analysis with broader cultural and ideological reflection. By demanding respect for the artistic integrity and national specificity of Ukrainian literature, the author resists both Russocentric condescension and uncritical "internationalist" simplification.

Two years later, Volodymyr Derzhavyn [Vladimir Derzhavin] published a critical overview of four recently published Russian anthologies of contemporary Ukrainian literature under the title "Russian Translated Anthologies of Ukrainian Literature" ("Russkie perevodnye antologii ukrainskoi literatury," 1930). While noting that their appearance modestly improves a previously catastrophic situation, Derzhavyn argues that the collections nonetheless fall far short in filling the gap in intra-union literary exchange. He systematically evaluates each of the Soviet collections — *The Contemporary Literature of Ukraine* (*Sovremennaia literaturnaia Ukraina*, 1930), *Almanac of Contemporary Ukrainian Literature* (*Al'manakh sovremennoi ukrainskoi literatury*, 1930), *The Revolutionary Poetry of Western Ukraine* (*Revoliutsionnaia poeziia Zapadnoi Ukrainy*, 1929), and *From Ukrainian Poets* (*Iz ukrainskikh poetov*, 1929) — according to the selection of authors and works, the quality of the translations, and the explanatory apparatus. Derzhavyn finds that most of the poetry selections are uneven or unrepresentative (especially of the newest proletarian and Komsomol voices), the translations are often free, inaccurate, or stylistically weak (with rare exceptions, such as Ushakov's work), and the prose sections are outdated or poorly chosen. He is particularly harsh in regard to what he considers arbitrary

¹¹ Many thanks to Oleksandr Kalnychenko for bringing these texts to my attention.

alterations of meaning, inadequate representation of key figures and trends (neo-classicists, certain modernists, Western Ukrainian writers), and the almost uniformly unsatisfactory quality of the paratextual material, such as prefaces, notes, and bibliographical descriptions. The article concludes that such general mixed anthologies have largely outlived their usefulness and should give way to more carefully curated, stylistically adequate, and socially purposeful collections that truly convey the current state of Ukrainian Soviet literature to the Russian reader. Notably, both Finkel's and Derzhavyn's articles were written in Russian, addressing the powers-that-be, demanding from the Soviet center a greater concern over translation quality.

The struggle for better quality translations both into Russian and into the languages of the republics was a central concern of the Armenian writer, editor and translator Karen Mikaelian. While Mikaelian launched his career as an author of short stories and essays, he turned quite early to translation through his involvement with the pre-revolutionary anthology of Armenian literature in Russian translation, *Poeziia Armenii s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei* (*Poetry of Armenia from Ancient Times to Our Days*), under the editorship of Valerii Briusov. Mikaelian would also play a major role in the Soviet collection, *Anthology of Armenian Poetry* (*Antologiiia armianskoi poezii* 1940), under the editorship of Maksim Gorkii (for more on these anthologies, see Frank 2023). Mikaelian's role in both anthologies involved preparing and correcting the interlinear translations that would be used by the Russian end "translators." He also made himself available to explain some of the finer points of those interlinear translations, as evident in his correspondence with the Russian translators (see Bagdasarian 1984). Against the poor-quality interlinear translations that were more or less the norm, Mikaelian's stand out as of another order altogether. As his biographer Robert Bagdasarian (2010: 101) comments, "The high literary quality" of Mikaelian's interlinear translations "did much to ensure that the Russian translations came out accurate and vital (*polnokrovno*)." As Nikolai Tikhonov, one of the editors of the Soviet volume, pointed out, "the contribution of Mikaelian [is] obvious and deserves every kind of gratitude for it is thanks to his tireless oversight that the slightest inaccuracy was removed, that images were not replaced by approximate ones, that precise expressions were not rendered by random lines of verse" (qtd. in Bagdasarian 2010: 101).

Mikaelian's commitment to providing high-quality interlinear translations with commentary was grounded in the notion of "adequate" translation, first formulated by Fedor Batiushkov in his introduction to the 1920 revised edition of *Principles of Literary Translation* (*Printsipy khudozhestvennogo perevoda*). For Batiushkov, an "adequate" translation is one that pays equal attention to the form and the content of the original. In fact, Mikaelian makes frequent reference to Batiushkov's term, using it precisely as Batiushkov formulated it. For example, in an unpublished essay titled "On Translations from Armenian" ("O perevodakh s armianskogo"), Mikaelian writes:

Providing a translation of the ideational content of a work in a form arbitrarily selected by the translator, without observing the distinguishing characteristics of the original employed by the author, can, under our conditions of poetic mastery, be done by anyone endowed with poetic talent. Such a translation can be very beautiful, but it cannot be true, or as we say, *adequate*" (MLA, Karen Mikaelian, N133; emphasis added).

While making use of Batiushkov's term, Mikaelian traces the approach back to Briusov, citing his foreword to the 1916 anthology of Armenian poetry, for which Mikaelian contributed the interlinear translations:

Already Briusov in his foreword to the collection *Poetry of Armenia* [Poeziia Armenii] posited the foundation of translation to be the artistic recreation of the original, while nonetheless considering the preservation of its formal characteristics to be necessary for any cultured translation. (ibid.)

By opening the sentence with “already” (*eshche*), Mikaelian suggests that Briusov was promoting *adequate* translation *avant la lettre*, as the term was only introduced by Batiushkov four years later.

It should be noted that Batiushkov's concept of *adekvatnost'* had particular implications for translators working in the non-Russian republics insofar as Batiushkov asserts that adequate translation is only possible or will only occur when the source and target cultures are at an equal level of “spiritual development” (*dukhovnoe razvitie*). It is likely that Batiushkov had in mind that Russian literature and culture had by the early twentieth century reached a level of parity with the great literatures of Western Europe — Batiushkov was a specialist in Western European literatures and his examples of non-adequate translation involve eighteenth-century Russia and eighteenth-century France. In the republics, however, advocating for “adequate” translation was an assertion that the literatures of the non-Russian republics, in this case, Armenia, were no less developed than Russian. Mikaelian makes this point rather directly in the paragraph of his essay on translations from Armenian immediately following his mention of adequacy. Here he condemns an approach to translation that, according to Batiushkov, stems from the target culture's sense of superiority:

To adopt this principle of translation [i.e., rendering the content at the expense of the form] in relation to Armenian poetry, distinguished over the course of its thousand-year history by an incredible variety and lavish opulence of forms — would mean failing to provide a true representation of it. (ibid.)

As Mikaelian argues, Armenian literature is fully deserving of adequate translation.

Mikaelian invokes adequacy once again in another unpublished essay, “On Armenian Versification” (“Ob armianskom stikhoslozhenii”), which was written to provide greater insight into the formal properties of Armenian poetry for Russian poet-translators working with interlinear trots. As Mikaelian explains:

In compiling the present anthology, the editors set themselves the task not only of providing the precise content of the works, [as well as] the phonic and verbal characteristics of the language, but also, to the extent possible, of recreating the metrical structure of the originals. [...] The desire to provide translations that are *adequate* to the original, in terms of both content and form, inspired the poet-translators contributing to the present anthology who, despite their ignorance of the Armenian language, were able to make skillful use of the interlinear trots and transcriptions with rhythmical-metrical designation provided to them to find a Russian tonic meter corresponding to the original. (MLA, Karen Mikaelian, N131; emphasis added).

The anti-colonialist implications of Mikaelian's use of adequacy are more openly expressed — although safely directed as pre-revolutionary Russian translators — in an article published in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* to advertise the forthcoming *Anthology of Armenian Literature*. In referencing Briusov's 1916 anthology, Mikaelian writes:

It is this anthology that seemed to break the impenetrable ice of indifference toward the literary riches of those peoples inhabiting the periphery of the immense Russia of small nations. For the first time Russian poets, having cast off their semi-disdainful attitude, descended from their poetic tower to cast an eye on the literature of one of these small peoples, revealing literary riches previously unknown to them and presenting them to the Russian public not with the carelessness of a dilettante but by applying the requisite methods of the art of translation. (qtd. in Frank 2023: 57)¹²

Mikaelian's essay on Armenian versification was originally intended for inclusion in the collection *Anthology of Armenian Poetry*, which was released belatedly in 1940, after undergoing another round of censorship. By that time, Mikaelian was in prison, making the publication of the essay impossible. It may be that Mikaelian's scrupulous attention to form was judged to be excessive by the Soviet censor, for while a source-oriented approach — described in Soviet translation discourse as *chuzheiazыchnost'* (foreign languageness) (Fedorov 1930: 118-125; Usov 1934b: 4; Saianov 1934/1937: 8-9) — was an acknowledged and, in some contexts, a defensible option through the mid-1930s, it became increasingly suspect. After World War II, the official position was that translations should not violate the norms of the target language (Fedorov 1953).

In any case, Mikaelian's translation activities were not restricted to producing detailed interlinear versions intended to enable Russian translators to render Armenian poetry more adequately. Mikaelian was himself a translator, and in the 1920s he translated into Armenian a collection of stories by Oscar Wilde. The positive reception of the collection led the Armenian poet Yeghishe Charents, who was then working at the Soviet State Publishing House in Armenia, to commission an Armenian translation of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. A respected poet, Charents was an early proponent of communism and a member of the Bolshevik Party. In fact, his translation into Armenian of "The Internationale," with a musical arrangement by Romanos Melikian, was published in Moscow in 1928. However, his increasing disenchantment with Stalinism and, as a result, his increasingly erratic behavior led to greater oversight by the Soviet authorities; as a result, the distribution of his final collection of poetry, *The Book of the Road* (*Girk' Chanaparhi*), was delayed so as to undergo another round of ideological revision before its eventual release. Charents was arrested in 1937 as a "Trotskyite-nationalist" and died shortly thereafter. And so, when Charents commissioned the translation of *Gulliver's Travels* into Armenian, he was already in the crosshairs of the state, which may explain his instructions to Mikaelian.

Charents made it clear to Mikaelian that he was to translate Swift's novel "from the academic Russian edition, while also taking the English original into account" — and to submit the translation in four months' time (Bagdasarian 2010: 106). He was also

¹² This is my translation of the Russian passage quoted by Frank.

told to translate the Russian foreword as well as all the paratextual material from the Russian edition. Mikaelian could add notes to elucidate obscure passages for the Armenian reader, but those should be clearly distinguished from the Russian annotations. For Mikaelian, whose high standards of translation were grounded in Batiushkov's concept of *adekvatnost'*, Charents' instructions were difficult to follow, especially as he began to discover a great number of divergences between the academic Russian translation and Swift's original. Writing to Charents on 7 October 1931, Mikaelian expresses his increasing exasperation:

The English and the Russian are so different that when I follow the Russian, the translation moves further from the original, but when I follow the original, then the translation comes from the original and not from the Russian, comparing it with the original, as you demanded. And ultimately, that comparative translation has produced a total mess, neither this nor that, so that the reader, if he should compare them, would find a work that is neither the one nor the other. After lengthy deliberation, I stopped translating, although I had already finished one hundred pages. (qtd. in Bagdasarian 2010: 107)

When Mikaelian returns to the translation, he commits himself to following the English original. As he informs Charents: "I will translate the entire work from the original, while keeping the Russian translation close at hand. There are, of course, many divergences, however, my translation is closer to the original. In my translation I attempted to preserve the style, turns of phrase, long paragraphs, and color so characteristic of Swift" (ibid., 107). Mikaelian's commitment to *adekvatnost'* led him to resist — indeed, reverse — Charents's original instruction to translate from the Russian, while keeping the English original at hand. He would translate from the English original, while keeping the Russian translation at hand.

7. Conclusion

Mikaelian is an inspiring though ultimately tragic example of a translator attempting to navigate the shifting and increasingly dangerous terrain of Soviet nationalities policy while retaining his integrity as a translator and an editor of translations. Although he tried to follow the rules of the game through a combination of rhetorical compliance and genuine passion for promoting the literature of Armenia, that very passion, which led him to insist on the right of Armenian authors to high quality, *adequate* translations, might have spelled his doom. He died in a Soviet prison in 1941, supposedly of "heart failure," but his body was discovered only recently in a mass grave of political prisoners (Bagdasarian 2010: 208).

His example, among others, contributes to our understanding of the workings of Soviet culture, underscoring the need to abandon reductive binaries such as loyalist and dissident. Most translators in the Soviet periphery followed a path shaped by some complex combination of compliance and resistance as they negotiated ideological commitment to Soviet internationalism (whether strategic or sincere), national pride, and professional ethics.

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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.

SOVIET LANGUAGE POLICY: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT ON ETHNIC GROUPS AND LANGUAGES

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Abstract: This article examines Soviet language policy from 1917 to 1991. The analysis identifies a transition from the early promotion of national languages under *korenizatsiya* to a later system in which Russian assumed broader functions in interethnic communication, education, administration, science, and professional mobility. The study finds that this process generally increased Russian-language competence while producing diverse outcomes for titular and minority languages. Ukraine illustrates changing institutional conditions for Ukrainian, including the expansion of Ukrainian-language schooling and publishing during the 1920s, subsequent orthographic revision, and the growth of Russian-medium education in later decades. The Caucasian cases demonstrate the importance of local conditions: Armenian and Georgian retained extensive institutional functions, whereas Azerbaijani experienced repeated script changes and smaller languages had more limited support. The findings suggest that Soviet language policy generated patterns of bilingualism and language maintenance or shift that varied according to institutional, demographic, and cultural factors.

Keywords: language policy; Soviet Union; *korenizatsiya*; russification; minority languages

1. Introduction

The USSR's language policy represents one of the most ambitious and far-reaching experiments in state-directed language planning in modern history. Spanning seven decades and encompassing over 100 distinct languages and ethnic groups across the vast territory of the whole country, Soviet language policy evolved from early revolutionary ideals of linguistic equality and cultural autonomy to increasingly

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centralized Russification (Haarmann 1995). Understanding this historical trajectory is essential not only for comprehending Soviet nationality policy but also for interpreting contemporary language politics in the post-Soviet successor states, where language-oriented nationalism has emerged as a direct reaction to decades of Soviet linguistic engineering (Haarmann 1995).

The researchers examine Soviet language policy across multiple dimensions: historical periodization, theoretical frameworks, implementation mechanisms, and impacts on diverse ethnic groups; the analysis draws on comprehensive studies of language planning (Kirkwood 1990; Grenoble 2003), regional case studies from Central Asia (Bruchis 1984; Dickens 1988; Shorish 1984), to the Baltic states (Green 1997; Druviete & Strelevica-Osina 2008), Ukraine (Sichkarenko 2023; Malykhin et al. 2023), and the Caucasus (Hewitt 1990), as well as thematic investigations of specific policy instruments such as alphabet reforms (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014), (Lane et al. 2017), educational policy (Blitstein 2001), and publishing (Rogers 1987).

The article argues that Soviet language policy should be understood neither as consistent support for linguistic diversity nor as uniform Russification. It combined the recognition of national languages with the construction of a Soviet-wide hierarchy in which Russian enjoyed greater prestige and practical value.

The analysis first outlines the historical and ideological development of Soviet language policy and examines its principal mechanisms: status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning. It then focuses on Ukraine and the Caucasus as contrasting case studies. Ukraine illustrates the complete policy cycle – from Ukrainisation in the 1920s to orthographic revision, the growing dominance of Russian, and the contraction of Ukrainian-medium schooling. The Caucasus demonstrates the diversity of regional outcomes, ranging from strong retention of Armenian and Georgian to repeated script reforms and institutional vulnerability among smaller languages.

The article shows that Soviet policies expanded Russian-language competence across the Union but did not produce identical outcomes everywhere. Their consequences were mediated by local institutional and sociolinguistic conditions, which remain important for understanding post-Soviet language politics.

2. Historical Development of Soviet Language Policy

2.1 Early Soviet Period and *Korenizatsiya* (1917-1932)

The initial phase of Soviet language policy, spanning from the Bolshevik Revolution through the early 1930s, was characterized by unprecedented support for minority languages and cultural pluralism. This period, known as *korenizatsiya* (indigenization or “putting down roots”), represented the Soviet state's attempt to win the loyalty of non-Russian populations by promoting their languages and cultures within a socialist framework (Haarmann 1995; Crisp 1990).

During that early period, Soviet language planners embarked on ambitious programs to create literary languages for ethnic groups that had previously lacked

written traditions. Crisp documents how between 1917 and 1932, linguists and policymakers developed alphabets, standardized grammar, and created educational materials for dozens of languages, particularly in Central Asia, Siberia, and the Caucasus (Crisp 1990). The policy closely mirrored the existing situation of cultural pluralism, with language policies designed to reflect and support the multilingual reality of the Soviet state (Haarmann 1995).

The theoretical foundation for this approach derived from Lenin's writings on the national question, which emphasized the right of nations to self-determination while simultaneously promoting proletarian internationalism (Shelestyuk 2019). As Shelestyuk explains, the formula “national in form, socialist in content” encapsulated the early Soviet approach: minority languages and cultures would be preserved and developed but infused with socialist ideology and directed toward building a unified Soviet society (2019). That period saw the establishment of native-language schools, the publication of newspapers and books in minority languages, and the promotion of indigenous cadres in local administration (Hewitt 1990; Crisp 1990).

Shorish characterizes this phase as “planning by decree,” noting that Central Asian language policies were implemented through top-down directives that mandated the use of local languages in education and administration (1984). The literacy campaigns of the 1920s achieved remarkable results, with mass mobilization efforts bringing basic literacy to millions of previously illiterate citizens in their native languages (Crisp 1990), (Kreindler 1990). Publication figures in newly alphabetized languages showed dramatic increases, and the number of students receiving instruction in their mother tongue expanded significantly (Kreindler 1990).

However, Russian maintained a privileged position as the language of inter-ethnic communication and access to Soviet institutions (Pool 1992). The seeds of future Russification were already presented in the asymmetric relationship between Russian and minority languages, though they would not fully germinate until the Stalinist era (Haarmann 1995).

2.2 Stalinist Consolidation (1930s-1953)

The early 1930s marked a decisive turning point in Soviet language policy, as Stalin consolidated power and the state shifted from promoting diversity to enforcing uniformity. That period witnessed the systematic reversal of many *korenizatsiya* policies and the beginning of sustained Russification (Crisp 1990; Kreindler 1990).

One of the most visible manifestations of this shift was the series of alphabet reforms that swept across the Soviet Union. Lane and colleagues document how Soviet authorities mandated orthographic changes for numerous minority languages, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Lane et al. 2017). Many languages that had been given Latin-based alphabets in the 1920s were converted to Cyrillic scripts in the 1930s, ostensibly to facilitate literacy and inter-ethnic communication but effectively tying these languages more closely to Russian (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014; Lane et al. 2017). Those alphabet reforms served multiple purposes: they disrupted continuity with pre-Soviet literary traditions, created dependence on Russian-trained

linguists and educators, and symbolically reinforced the primacy of Russian culture (Lane et al. 2017).

The Stalinist period also saw the suppression of linguists and language planners who had championed minority language development. Kreindler notes that the accusation of “wrecking on the language front” could cost a linguist his life during the last years of Stalin's rule, effectively silencing scholarly debate about language policy (1990). The ambiance brought creative language planning to a virtual halt, as professionals feared that advocacy for minority languages could be construed as bourgeois nationalism (Kreindler 1990).

Blitstein's analysis of obligatory Russian instruction reveals how educational policy became a key instrument of Russification during that period (2001). In 1938, the Soviet government mandated Russian language instruction in all non-Russian schools, marking a fundamental shift from the earlier emphasis on native-language education. The decree established Russian as the compulsory second language throughout the USSR, creating a bilingualism in which non-Russians were expected to learn Russian (Blitstein 2001).

Crisp emphasizes that the period from 1917 to 1953 should not be viewed as a simple linear progression but rather as a series of ideological shifts and policy reversals (1990). Nevertheless, the overall trajectory was clear: from the cultural pluralism of the 1920s to the increasingly centralized and Russian-dominated system of the late Stalin era (Crisp 1990).

2.3 Post-Stalin Era and Gradual Russification (1953-1980s)

The period following Stalin's death in 1953 through the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was characterized by what Kreindler describes as less dramatic but more systematic Russification (1990). Unlike the early Soviet period with its “language fronts” and mass literacy campaigns, or the Stalinist era with its mass purges, the post-Stalin decades saw the gradual, bureaucratic erosion of minority language spaces (Kreindler 1990).

Kreindler notes the absence of upbeat statistics on publication figures in minority languages or increases in mother-tongue instruction that had characterized earlier periods (1990). Instead, that era witnessed the steady expansion of Russian-medium education, the decline of native-language schools, and growing pressure on non-Russians to adopt Russian for social mobility and career advancement (Grenoble 2003), (Dietrich 2006).

Grenoble's comprehensive analysis traces how language policy evolved from the Bolshevik period through perestroika, documenting the systematic expansion of Russian at the expense of minority languages across all Soviet republics (2003). The policy of “drawing together” (*sblizhenie*) and eventual “merging” (*sliyanie*) of Soviet nationalities, articulated in the 1960s and 1970s, provided ideological justification for accelerated Russification (Grenoble 2003).

Liddicoat's scrutiny of language-in-education policies in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan reveals the relentless expansion of Russian-medium instruction, often at the direct expense of native-language pedagogy (2019). Even as

titular languages received nominal endorsement, Russian solidified its grip on elite education and career mobility, embedding structural incentives for generational language shift. That educational tilt, therefore, functioned less as equitable bilingualism and more as a conduit for long-term Russification.

By the late Soviet period, Russian achieved near-universal status as a second language among educated non-Russians, while knowledge of minority languages among Russians remained negligible (Dietrich 2006). This asymmetric bilingualism reflected and reinforced power relations within the Soviet system, where Russian language competence was essential for access to higher education, professional advancement, and participation in all-Union institutions (Grenoble 2003; Dietrich 2006).

2.4 Doctrine of *Sovetskii Narod* and Measures of 1975–1984

The doctrine of the *Soviet people* as a new historical community, introduced in 1961, proclaimed in 1971, and constitutionalised in 1977, provided an ideological framework for linguistic integration. It was associated with the triad of *rastsvet* (flourishing), *sblizhenie* (rapprochement), and *sliianie* (merging), although *sliianie* largely disappeared from official usage after 1973 (Bromlei & Kulichenko, discussed in Alpatov 2000).

In practice, the doctrine was accompanied by measures strengthening Russian instruction. The Tashkent conferences of 1975 and 1979 recommended its earlier introduction, including preschool education. The 1983 decree introduced smaller Russian-language teaching groups and a 15 per cent salary supplement for teachers in non-Russian schools; Resolution No. 313 of 1984 added two to three weekly hours of Russian in grades II–XI (XII).

At the same time, the number of languages used for instruction declined markedly: from 104 in 1934 to 45 across the USSR in the 1970s and early 1980s, including about 35 non-Russian languages in 1980. In the RSFSR, the figure fell from 47 in the early 1960s to 34 in 1977 and 16–17 by 1982 (Isaev 1979; Alpatov 2000; Grenoble 2003).

The doctrine was not conceptually unambiguous. Soviet ethnographers disagreed over whether the *Soviet people* represented a stage towards national fusion or a stable form of coexistence, while *sliianie* was gradually removed from official discourse (Alpatov 2000; Mikhaltchenko & Solntsev 1994). Its practical measures were generally additive rather than openly substitutive: they expanded Russian teaching but did not normally abolish titular-language schooling by decree. The decline of minority-language schooling resulted chiefly from school consolidation and parental choice under the 1959 legislation.

The 1989 census suggests that the Union-wide result was primarily expanded bilingualism rather than universal language replacement: 92.7% of the population still identified the language of their nationality as native, compared with 93.1% in 1979, while 81.4% reported command of Russian (Goskomstat SSSR 1991). More substantial language substitution was concentrated in the Slavic republics, urban centres, and communities whose institutional language support had been withdrawn.

3. Theoretical Foundations and Ideological Framework

Soviet language policy combined Marxist-Leninist ideology with the practical objectives of state-building, social transformation, and political control. Its central tension lay in reconciling national self-determination with the creation of a unified socialist society.

Early policy drew on Lenin's position that nations had a right to self-determination within a framework of proletarian internationalism (Shelestyuk 2019). The formula "national in form, socialist in content" sought to preserve national languages and cultural forms while subordinating them to a common socialist ideology (Shelestyuk 2019). Language was therefore treated not as a neutral means of communication but as a political instrument capable of shaping social consciousness and legitimising intervention in scripts, vocabulary, schooling, and public communication (Ornstein 1959).

The initial promotion of linguistic diversity also served the political need to secure support among non-Russian populations (Haarmann 1995). As the Soviet state became more centralised, however, cultural pluralism increasingly gave way to linguistic integration, with Russian acquiring a privileged role as the language of Soviet civilisation (Haarmann 1995).

In the post-Stalin period, Russian was officially presented as the "language of internationalism" and the "language of friendship among peoples" (Grenoble 2003; Dietrich 2006). This discourse represented Russian as a progressive medium of interethnic communication while helping to legitimise policies that expanded its dominance (Dietrich 2006). Although official doctrine continued to affirm the equality of Soviet languages, practical arrangements created systemic incentives for non-Russian populations to acquire and use Russian (Pool 1992). The discrepancy between official equality and linguistic hierarchy became increasingly visible during the late Soviet period and contributed to language-based national mobilisation during perestroika (Haarmann 1995; Grenoble 2003).

Language policy was embedded in broader projects of centralisation and social engineering. Language commissions, research institutes, and specialist training helped align linguistic decisions with Party priorities (Gurbanova & Rangsikul 2018). Control over publishing and media also reinforced unequal linguistic prestige and access to public communication (Rogers 1987).

Overall, Soviet policy moved from early minority-language development towards the increasing prestige and institutional reach of Russian. This legacy persisted after 1991, as Russian continued to function as a language of status and utility even in states pursuing de-Russification (Seiden 2022).

4. Policy Mechanisms and Implementation Strategies

4.1 Alphabet Reforms and Orthographic Standardization

Alphabet reform constituted one of the most visible and consequential instruments of Soviet language policy. The Soviet state undertook systematic efforts to create, modify, and standardize writing systems for languages throughout its territory, with profound implications for literacy, cultural continuity, and linguistic identity.

During the 1920s, Soviet linguists developed alphabets for dozens of previously unwritten languages, particularly in Siberia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus (Crisp 1990; Lane et al. 2017). Those initial alphabets were often based on Latin scripts, reflecting both practical considerations (Latin typewriters and printing equipment were more readily available) and ideological factors (Latin scripts were seen as more progressive and international than Arabic or Cyrillic) (Lane et al. 2017).

However, the 1930s brought a dramatic reversal. Lane and colleagues document how Soviet authorities mandated the conversion of Latin-based alphabets to Cyrillic scripts across Central Asia and other regions (2017). That shift served multiple purposes beyond the stated goal of facilitating literacy. Cyrillic alphabets created orthographic distance from pre-Soviet literary traditions, particularly Islamic texts in Arabic script, while simultaneously tying minority languages more closely to Russian through shared script and facilitating the borrowing of Russian vocabulary (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014; Lane et al. 2017).

Guadagnolo and Guinn provide a detailed case study of Tatar alphabet reforms, showing how the shift from Arabic to Latin (1920s) and then to Cyrillic (1930s) reflected changing Soviet priorities and power dynamics (2014). Each change of alphabet required new textbooks, teacher retraining, and adjustment periods that disrupted educational continuity and created dependence on centralized Soviet institutions (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014). The standardization process also involved decisions about which dialect would serve as the basis for the literary language, often privileging urban varieties and marginalizing rural or peripheral dialects (Guadagnolo & Guinn 2014).

In the last years of the USSR, the Latin script was chosen as the predominant alphabet in the world, and the use of the Cyrillic script became a main task of Russian language policy (Alpatov 2017).

4.2 Educational Language Policy

Education served as perhaps the most critical arena for implementing Soviet language policy, as schools shaped the linguistic competencies and identities of successive generations. The evolution of educational language policy from native-language instruction to Russian-medium dominance reflects the broader trajectory of Soviet language planning.

The early Soviet period saw significant expansion of native-language education. Crisp documents how the 1920s witnessed dramatic increases in the number of students receiving instruction in their mother tongue, with schools established for even

relatively small ethnic groups (1990). The expansion was supported by the development of textbooks, teacher training programs, and pedagogical materials in minority languages (Crisp 1990).

However, the 1938 decree mandating Russian language instruction in all non-Russian schools marked a fundamental turning point (Blitstein 2001). Blitstein's analysis reveals how this policy established Russian as the compulsory second language throughout the USSR, creating an asymmetric bilingualism in which non-Russians were required to learn Russian while Russians faced no reciprocal obligation (2001). The decree framed Russian instruction as necessary for "nation-building" and access to Soviet culture and science, but its effect was to privilege Russian and create structural pressures for language shift (Blitstein 2001).

The post-Stalin period saw the gradual erosion of native-language education through various mechanisms. Parents were given the choice of instructional language for their children, though structured by material incentives that favored Russian (Grenoble 2003; Dietrich 2006). Russian-medium schools typically had better facilities, more qualified teachers, and provided better preparation for higher education and professional careers (Grenoble 2003). Consequently, even parents who valued their native language often chose Russian-medium education for their children as a strategy for social mobility (Dietrich 2006).

Liddicoat's analysis of language-in-education policy in Central Asian republics (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) reveals similar patterns of Russian expansion at the expense of native languages (2019). Despite the support of native-language education, Russian-medium schools proliferated, and knowledge of Russian became essential for access to higher education and professional opportunities (Liddicoat 2019).

5. Regional and Ethnic Group Impacts: Case Study

This study focuses on two contrasting regional cases – Soviet Ukraine and the Caucasus – while referring to other Union republics only for comparative context.

Ukraine represents a comprehensive case of the Soviet language-policy cycle: extensive Ukrainisation in the 1920s, its abrupt reversal in 1933, state-led orthographic and terminological revision, and the long-term contraction of Ukrainian-medium schooling between 1959 and 1989. Its typological similarity to Russian also makes it especially useful for examining how linguistic affinity may facilitate language shift.

The Caucasus illustrates the greatest degree of regional variation. It included languages with stable script and literary traditions, notably Armenian and Georgian; Azerbaijani, which shifted from Arabic to Latin and then Cyrillic; and smaller languages whose institutional support, scripts, or school systems changed sharply over time. The region therefore demonstrates that similar all-Union policies could produce very different outcomes depending on local institutional, demographic, and sociolinguistic conditions.

The analysis covers the period from the early 1920s to 1991. Post-Soviet developments are considered only where they clarify the interpretation of Soviet-era evidence.

5.1 Ukraine

Soviet language policy in Ukraine alternated between the promotion and restriction of Ukrainian, with education, state institutions, and print media serving as its principal instruments. Ukrainisation expanded during the 1920s, was sharply reversed in the 1930s, and was followed by more ambiguous developments in the 1960s–1980s, culminating in the 1989 Law “On Languages in the Ukrainian SSR” amid the broader political changes of perestroika (Malykhin et al. 2023; Sichkarenko 2023).

The legal basis for Ukrainisation was established by two decrees in 1923: one concerning Ukrainian-language schooling and cultural institutions, and another requiring state institutions and officials to increase their use of Ukrainian (Liber 1992; Martin 2001; Masenko et al. 2005). Under Mykola Skrypnyk, People’s Commissar of Education from 1927 to 1933, the policy expanded from primary schools to secondary and higher education, technical terminology, and the press.

Education was central to this process, as instructional language, teacher deployment, and media shaped linguistic transmission and status. Key factors included the activity of nationally oriented organisations, demand for nationally responsive education, pedagogical support for native-language instruction, differentiated educational provision, and the psychologisation of pedagogy (Malykhin et al. 2023).

The statistical record of the decade is unusually complete.

Table 1. Measured Effects in Schooling and Publishing, 1923–1933

Indicator	Early 1920s	Peak
Primary schools with Ukrainian as language of instruction	50.7% (1923)	87–88% (1932/33)
Secondary and higher education in Ukrainian	19% (1923)	28.5% (1926); 69% (1929)
Newspapers published in Ukrainian	minority	89% by 1933 (373 of 426 titles; circulation c. 3.6 million)
Books published in Ukrainian	minority	c. 83%
Ethnic Ukrainians in the CP(b)U	23.3% (1922)	60% (1933)

Sources: Liber (1992); Martin (2001); Masenko et al. (2005)

Two features qualify the achievements of Ukrainisation. The Ukrainian-language press expanded more rapidly than secondary and higher education, suggesting that the main constraint was the shortage of qualified personnel rather than political commitment. Party statistics also reveal a gap between ethnic and linguistic indigenisation: in January 1927, 52% of CP(b)U members were ethnically Ukrainian, but only 31% identified Ukrainian as their native language (Liber 1992).

Corpus planning complemented institutional Ukrainisation. The All-Ukrainian Orthographic Conference, held in Kharkiv on 26 May–6 June 1927 and attended by about seventy-five participants, including delegates from Galicia, developed a standard

intended to unite Eastern and Western Ukrainian traditions. Approved by Skrypnyk on 6 September 1928 and introduced in 1929, the *skrypnykivka*, or Kharkiv orthography, treated both traditions as authoritative, particularly in the spelling of loanwords (Shevelov 1989; Nimchuk 2002; Kubaichuk 2020). At the same time, the Institute of the Ukrainian Scientific Language developed technical dictionaries based primarily on Ukrainian derivational resources rather than Russian models.

The policy was reversed in 1933. Skrypnyk was removed in February and died by suicide on 7 July; a new commission headed by Andrii Khvyliya produced *Pro ukrainskyi pravopys*, approved on 5 September 1933. Its approximately 126 amendments to the 1928 standard included abolishing the letter *r* and generally brought Ukrainian orthography and morphology closer to Russian, particularly in loanwords and foreign names (Shevelov 1989; Masenko et al. 2005; Kubaichuk 2020; Danylenko & Naienko 2019). Terminological bulletins of 1934–1935 replaced about 14,500 technical terms, largely substituting Russian or internationalist forms for vocabulary created during the 1920s (Rozhankivsky 2003; Masenko et al. 2005).

The Ukrainian SSR law of 17 April 1959 made the study of the republic's second language dependent on parental choice. This framework contributed to a later contraction of Ukrainian-medium schooling. Policy during the 1960s–1980s combined a Khrushchev-era relaxation with renewed Russification in the 1970s and early 1980s, when Russian became increasingly dominant in urban life outside western Ukraine (Sichkarenko 2023).

The shift was especially pronounced in cities. By 1987, 73.7% of schools in oblast centres were Russian-medium, while Chernihiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, and Simferopol had no Ukrainian-medium schools (Masenko et al. 2005). As these centres concentrated administration, higher education, and industry, Russian-medium education was closely linked to upward mobility. Ivan Dziuba's *Internationalism or Russification?*, written in 1965 and circulated through *samizdat* from 1966, articulated a contemporary critique using the language of Leninist nationality policy (Dziuba 1998 [1966]).

Census data show a gradual decline in ethnic Ukrainians across the USSR identifying Ukrainian as their native language, from 72.99% in 1959 to 64.67% in 1989; the decline within the Ukrainian SSR was smaller, and rural retention remained high (Goskomstat SSSR 1991; Pavlenko 2015). By 1989, 56.2% of Ukrainians in the USSR reported fluency in Russian as a second language—the highest rate among the large titular nationalities outside the Baltic republics (Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

A further outcome was the spread of *surzhyk*, a mixed Ukrainian-Russian variety. Because census respondents had to report one native language, this repertoire complicates measurement of linguistic identification. Its stigmatisation in both Ukrainian- and Russian-oriented discourse reflects the standardisation history described above, while debates on mixed speech were already present in the 1920s and 1930s (Martin 2001, 353–54, cited in Bilaniuk 2005). Overall, Soviet language policy in Ukraine developed through distinct phases and produced measurable institutional consequences rather than following a single, static pattern (Sichkarenko 2023; Malykhin et al. 2023).

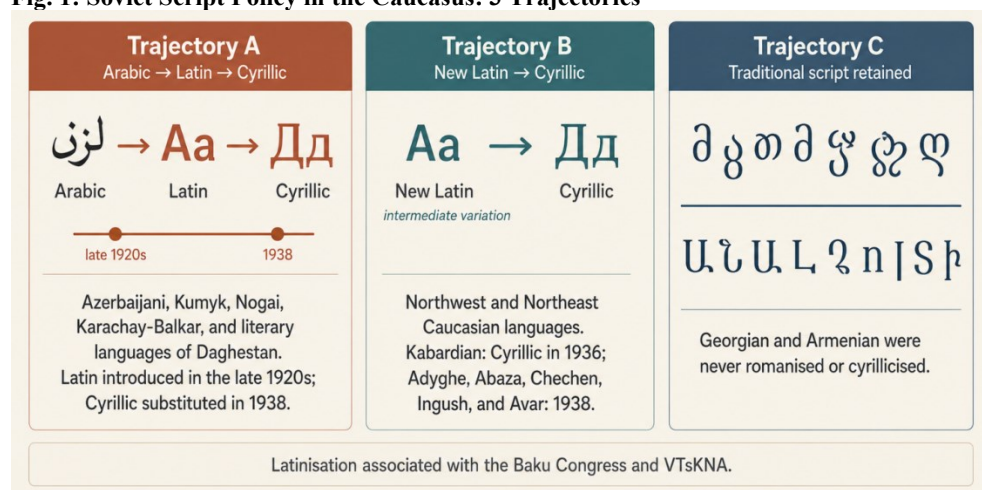
5.2 Caucasus Region

The Caucasus presented Soviet language planners with the densest concentration of linguistic diversity in the Union: languages of the Kartvelian, Northeast Caucasian, Northwest Caucasian, Indo-European (Armenian, Ossetic, Talysh, Tat) and Turkic (Azerbaijani, Kumyk, Karachay-Balkar, Nogai) families, distributed across three Union republics, several autonomous republics and regions, and an unusually complex administrative geography. Two of these languages, Georgian and Armenian, possessed their own alphabets and continuous literary traditions long antedating the Russian Empire; most of the others were either written in Arabic script by a narrow literate stratum or unwritten.

The Caucasus region saw extensive alphabet reforms, with many languages shifted from Arabic or Georgian scripts to Latin and then to Cyrillic (Hewitt 1990; Lane et al. 2017). Those changes disrupted cultural continuity and created dependence on Soviet linguistic institutions (Lane et al. 2017).

The region illustrates all three possible outcomes of Soviet script policy.

Fig. 1: Soviet Script Policy in the Caucasus: 3 Trajectories



Source: AI-generated image created by the authors using OpenAI GPT-4o (2026), based on the authors' textual prompt and the historical sources cited in the text.

Two languages deviated from all three patterns in instructive ways. Abkhaz received a Latin alphabet in 1926, revised in 1928; in 1938 it was transferred not to Cyrillic but to the Georgian script, and only in 1954 did it receive a Cyrillic-based alphabet. Ossetic was written in Latin from 1923, and in 1938 the North Ossetian and South Ossetian variants were separated, the former receiving Cyrillic and the latter the Georgian script; the two were reunified on a Cyrillic basis in 1954 (Alpatov 2000; Grenoble 2003; Hewitt 1990).

Hewitt's analysis of language planning in Georgian and Abkhaz illustrates the complexity of managing linguistic diversity within a single republic (1990). Georgian,

as the titular language of the Georgian SSR, received substantial support and maintained relatively strong vitality. However, Abkhaz and other minority languages within Georgia faced pressures from both Georgian and Russian (Hewitt 1990).

These two cases show that script policy in the Caucasus was not simply a matter of all-Union standardisation. Between 1938 and 1954 the operative script authority for Abkhaz and South Ossetic was republican rather than all-Union, and the alphabet chosen was that of the Union republic in which the autonomous unit was located.

5.2.1 Armenia: Continuity with Orthographic Intervention

Armenia represents the case of maximal institutional continuity. The Armenian alphabet was retained; the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, the university system and a dense publishing apparatus operated in Armenian; and the republic was ethnically the most homogeneous in the Union.

Corpus planning nevertheless occurred. The orthographic reform decreed on 4 March 1922 and associated with Manuk Abeghyan simplified the classical orthography, and a partial rollback under Gurgen Sevak was adopted on 22 August 1940, producing the standard used in the republic thereafter and distinguishing it from the classical orthography retained in the diaspora. The reform is best read as a modernisation measure of the same family as the Russian orthographic reform of 1917–1918 rather than as an instance of convergence with Russian; but its effect on the relationship between the Soviet Armenian reading public and the diaspora press was substantial.

Acquisition planning operated through the compulsory Russian curriculum rather than through the replacement of the medium of instruction. Zolyan and Hakobyan (2020) record that Russian was taught from the early 1930s as a compulsory subject at approximately four hours per week in grades 1 to 10, and that between 20 and 30 per cent of urban schools operated with Russian as the medium.

The outcome, measured by declared native language, is one of stability and even slight strengthening:

Table 2: Armenian as the Declared Native Language among Armenians, 1939–1989

Census	Armenians declaring Armenian native
1939	89.2%
1959	89.9%
1970	91.4%
1989	91.7%

Source: Goskomstat SSSR (1991); Zolyan and Hakobyan (2020)

By 1989, 47.1 per cent of Armenians reported fluency in Russian as a second language — a high figure for bilingualism combined with an equally high figure for retention (Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

5.2.2 Georgia: Institutional Density and the Constitutional Settlement of 1978

Georgia combined an unbroken script tradition with an exceptionally dense national institutional apparatus and produced the highest retention figures in the Union: 96.6 per cent of Georgians declared Georgian their native language in 1959, 96.5 per cent in 1970 and 96.1 per cent in 1979, and only 1.3 per cent of Georgians named Russian as their native language in 1959 (Lewis 1972; Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

Russian nevertheless occupied specific and consequential domains. Gabunia and Gochitashvili (2020) document the requirement that dissertations be translated into Russian for confirmation by the central attestation authorities, and the corresponding position of Russian in the higher reaches of academic and administrative life.

The most-cited episode of Georgian language politics is the constitutional revision of 1978. The draft of the new republican constitution, following the model of the 1977 Union Constitution, omitted the provision designating Georgian as the state language of the republic. On 14 April 1978, a demonstration estimated at some twenty thousand people, predominantly students, assembled in Tbilisi. The provision was retained: Article 75 of the Constitution of the Georgian SSR, adopted on 15 April 1978, named Georgian the state language of the republic. The Armenian SSR adopted its constitution on 14 April 1978 with an equivalent provision, and the Azerbaijan SSR adopted a parallel provision the same month. The three South Caucasian republics were the only Union republics whose constitutions designated the titular language as the sole state language (Hewitt 1990; Tabatadze 2025; Zolyan & Hakobyan 2020).

The episode is instructive about the structure of late-Soviet language management. The provision at issue was declaratory rather than operative — it did not change the working language of any institution — but its symbolic weight was sufficient to produce the largest public mobilisation in the republic since the 1950s, and the centre conceded.

5.2.3 Azerbaijan: the Turkic Trajectory

Azerbaijani illustrates the full three-script sequence and, unlike Georgian and Armenian, a substantial dependency of the modern lexicon on Russian mediation. Latinisation, prepared by the Baku Congress of 1926, was completed by 1929; cyrillicisation followed at the end of the 1930s. Garibova (2020) describes the resulting configuration: Azerbaijani retained a full range of official and educational functions within the republic, while Russian occupied a strong position in Baku, in higher technical education and in scientific publication. Declared retention remained high — Azerbaijanis were among the nationalities with the lowest reported second-language fluency in Russian, 34.4 per cent in 1989 (Goskomstat SSSR 1991) — but the sociolinguistic division between the capital and the rest of the republic was sharper than in Georgia or Armenia.

Azerbaijan is also the republic that, together with Latvia, declined to include the second-language provision in its 1959 education law, with the political consequences (Loader 2017; Smith 2018).

Table 3: Comparative Outcomes within the Region

Nationality	Declaring own language native, 1989	Fluent in Russian as second language, 1989
Armenians	91.7%	47.1%
Georgians	96%	33.1%
Azerbaijanis	high (based on source data)	34.4%

Source: Goskomstat SSSR (1991)

Despite Russification pressures, some Caucasus languages maintained relatively strong positions due to factors including demographic concentration, cultural prestige, and institutional support at the republic level (Hewitt 1990). However, smaller languages without republic status faced severe challenges, and many experienced significant decline in speaker numbers and domains of use (Hewitt 1990).

Across the Union as a whole the 1989 census recorded that 92.7% of the population declared the language of their own nationality as their native language, against 93.1% in 1979; 163.5 million people declared Russian their native language, and 232.5 million, or 81.4% of the population, reported command of Russian either as a native or as a second language (Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

6. Conclusion

Soviet language policy combined support for national languages with the progressive strengthening of Russian as the principal language of state integration, education, administration, science, and social mobility. Its main instruments included alphabet and orthographic reforms, language-of-instruction policies, publishing, administrative regulation, and the expansion of compulsory Russian teaching.

The overall result was not a uniform replacement of non-Russian languages by Russian. Rather, Soviet policy generally produced asymmetric bilingualism: non-Russian populations increasingly needed Russian for access to prestigious social domains, whereas Russian speakers rarely needed to acquire titular or minority languages. The degree of language shift and institutional loss varied considerably across regions.

The Ukrainian case demonstrates the cumulative effect of status, corpus, and acquisition planning. Ukrainisation in the 1920s significantly expanded the use of Ukrainian in schooling, publishing, and administration. The reversal of the 1930s, followed by the post-1959 growth of Russian-medium education, reduced Ukrainian-language institutional space, particularly in urban and professional settings. Linguistic proximity to Russian and the shared Cyrillic script facilitated the process without eliminating Ukrainian altogether.

The Caucasus shows that central policy was mediated by local conditions. Armenian and Georgian retained strong positions because of their distinct scripts, long literary traditions, institutional density, demographic concentration, and republic-level political resources. Azerbaijani retained major functions but underwent repeated script reforms and developed a sharper urban–rural linguistic division. Smaller languages

were more vulnerable when their educational and administrative support was weakened or withdrawn.

The study therefore concludes that Soviet language policy created a hierarchical linguistic order rather than a uniform linguistic outcome. Russian acquired a durable structural advantage, while the vitality of other languages depended on their institutional, demographic, and cultural resources. This legacy continues to shape language policy and identity politics across the post-Soviet space.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

SOVIET LANGUAGE ENGINEERING: INTRA- AND INTER-REPUBLICAN TRANSLATION IN EARLY SOVIET UKRAINE

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Abstract: This article examines the complex landscape of Soviet language engineering through translation policies in Ukraine during the 1920s and 1930s. Under the early Bolshevik policy of *Korenizatsiia* (indigenization), Ukraine served as a multi-ethnic testing ground where translation functioned as a tool to bolster the symbolic capital of the Ukrainian language. The study proffers a detailed historiography and explores intra-republican translation, including the reclamation of Russian-language works by Ukrainian authors and the vibrant bidirectional exchange between Yiddish and Ukrainian literatures. It also details inter-republican efforts that integrated Belarusian, Caucasian, and Central Asian literatures into the Ukrainian sphere through direct translation. However, the article highlights a pivotal shift in the 1930s toward linguistic Russification and state repression. During this period, direct interethnic cultural ties were curtailed in favor of Russian-mediated translation, which aimed to impose a centralized Soviet identity. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how translation served a dual role: while it initially enriched the Ukrainian literary tradition and fostered cultural autonomy, it was eventually co-opted as an instrument of ideological assimilation and Soviet control.

Keywords: *Korenizatsiia* (indigenization); Soviet language engineering; intra- and inter-republican translation; Ukrainization; cultural mediation

1. Introduction

This research, conducted through a series of case studies, examines the prerequisites and processes of literary translation as a form of cultural production under conditions of coercive socio-political change. It focuses on the large-scale translation enterprises, publication policies, and literary outputs pursued by both individual translators/editors and Soviet authorities in Ukraine during the early Soviet period. The article illuminates intra- and inter-republican translation in Soviet Ukraine as a multisectoral, multidimensional, and dynamic phenomenon. It addresses a fundamental question: What can translation reveal about the cultural and political history of Ukraine? Specifically, it investigates how intra-Soviet translation was organized — both

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qualitatively and quantitatively — during the 1920s and 30s. This innovative approach breaks new ground in translation history by illuminating previously overlooked sectors, such as translations from Yiddish, while juxtaposing the outlined volume and character of intra/inter-republican translations through both cultural and ideological lenses.

Conceptualizing translation as a dual-faceted instrument, the study demonstrates that Soviet language and worldview engineering was extensively conducted through a variety of translations, retranslations, and indirect translations (either modeled after Russian linguistic and ideological patterns or produced via Russian intermediaries). These practices encompassed source-language and source-text selection, pre- and post-publication censorship, and the nuances of self-censorship. The methodological grounds for this research are rooted in recent developments within postcolonial theory as applied to the Soviet space, as well as the theory of indirect/relay translation (Annus 2017; Baer 2025; Brandenberger 2002; Bilaniuk 2005; Chernetsky 2011; Dollerup 2000; Kalnychenko & Kolomiyets 2022; Kolomiyets 2020; Monticelli 2011; Rundle 2022; Sherry 2015; Tymoczko & Gentzler 2002; Witt 2017; Witt & Baer 2018).

2. The Early Soviet Policy of Indigenization

During the early Soviet period, the *Korenizatsiia* (nativization/indigenization) campaign was launched to strengthen Soviet rule in national regions, including Jewish, Greek, and other national communities in Ukraine. The policy aimed to integrate local populations by promoting indigenous leadership and cultural development. The all-republican Ukrainization campaign was proclaimed by the XII Congress of the RKP(b) in April 1923 and culminated during 1925-1928. The Bolsheviks initiated the campaign in order to gain local support by promoting Ukrainian in the early 1920s. However, Russian remained the de facto language of Soviet administration. By recruiting local elites and supporting national languages, the weak early Soviet government sought to win the loyalty of the intelligentsia. Republics were granted rights over internal affairs, most notably in education and culture. Every ethnic group, no matter how small, gained the right to use its own language officially. The policy was a tactical move to neutralize separatist sentiments. By granting linguistic and cultural concessions, the central government aimed to prevent diverse ethnic groups from unifying against Soviet authority. For example, in Crimea and southern Ukraine, the Crimean Tatar language was officially institutionalized in the Soviet Union in 1921, with the establishment of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Crimean ASSR), and the Greek language also had some influence outside its respective community.

A primary motivation behind the policy of indigenization was to undermine pan-regional solidarity. By fostering distinct local identities and fragmenting various regions administratively — particularly in the Caucasus and Central Asia — the government ensured these groups would not consolidate into a unified linguistic or cultural bloc. Among all the Soviet republics, Ukraine was the most multi-ethnic and served as a massive testing ground for the indigenization policy — examples of which included Ukrainization, Tatarization, Polonization, and Hellenization. According to the

1926 census, only 18% of the Ukrainian SSR's residents did not belong to the titular nation (Chebotayev 2019). At that, Ukraine was notable not only for its ethnic diversity but also for the high concentration of specific Soviet nationalities living within its borders. Table 1 illustrates the percentage of the USSR's total population of each ethnic group that resided specifically within the Ukrainian SSR (Chebotayev 2019):

Table 1. Data Summary

Ethnic Group	Percentage Residing in Ukraine
Czech	75%
Jewish	52%
Polish	48%
German	40%
Greek	30%
Russian	4%

While Russians were the largest minority by sheer numbers, they represented a relatively small fraction of the total Russian population in the USSR compared to the high concentrations of Central European and Mediterranean ethnic groups found in Ukraine. *Korenizatsiia* involved the development of education, the press, and administration in the languages of national minorities within their concentrated settlements. This was designed to strengthen Soviet authority among diverse ethnic groups and overcome their cultural isolation. Key aspects of *Korenizatsiia* included: education (the establishment of schools and technical colleges, along with the publication of textbooks in national languages), media (the publication of newspapers and magazines in national languages to disseminate Soviet ideology), culture (the development of national theater and literature centered on Soviet life and values), administration (efforts to transition official record-keeping to national languages in regions with non-Russian populations). This process was abruptly halted in the early 1930s, when the policy of indigenization was replaced by a period of state repression.

In the 1920s, direct translations from local minority languages into Ukrainian — the titular language of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic — elevated minority cultures while bolstering the symbolic capital and authority of Ukrainian. However, the rise of Russian intermediaries in the 1930s reversed this trend, weakening local languages and severing cultural ties by imposing Soviet universalism and linguistic Russification. Stalinist purges further decimated translation possibilities, drastically curtailing both minority-language publications and direct translations into Ukrainian.

2.1. Translation Policy

As part of Ukrainization, translation fueled the renaissance of national literature. From the 1920s until the early 1930s, critics openly prioritized direct translations — those from the original source — over indirect ones. For instance, the first complete translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, published in two volumes by the Kharkiv

branch of DVU¹ in 1928, used François Reynard's 1879 French translation as its source text. The translation was done by Leonid Pakharevskyi and Pavlo Maiorskyi (real name – Sabaldyr), and the poems were translated by Marko Voronyi.

This two-volume edition had a print run of 5,000 copies, and the editors (Serhii Rodzevych for the first volume and Pavlo Mokhor for the second) scrupulously checked the text against the Italian original. Despite its overall high quality, the translation drew criticism for its “secondhand” nature. This critique persisted despite the fact that the Ukrainian version contained passages translated more accurately than those in Alexander Veselovsky's recognized Russian complete version (1891-1892), while also restoring omissions caused by Veselovsky's censorship.

The drive to enrich national literature through world classics and to build libraries of foreign literature — both classical and contemporary — was rooted in the post-imperial and pre-Soviet era following 1917. Consider, for example, the Petrograd publishing house *Vsemirnaia Literatura* ([World Literature], 1918-1924). Created under the auspices of Maxim Gorky, it pursued the ambitious task of translating and publishing all foreign classics from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries. A similar objective characterized *Vsevydav* (the All-Ukrainian Publishing House), founded in Kharkiv on May 5, 1919 (*Istoriia vydavnytstv Ukrainy* 2009/2021: 11). Both projects represented more than just enlightening endeavors; they embodied the reformation of translation from pure art into a craft and science² guided by professional principles alongside creative inspiration.

In this environment, a new school of translation began to take shape, alongside what Baskina (Malikova) aptly described as “a new type of editorial work on translations” (Baskina 2021: 11-12). This new editorial approach involved the broad engagement of recognized writers, scholars, and critics, not only as reviewers and compilers, but as stylistic editors for new translations and reprints. These measures elevated the status of translation as both an artistic and philological task. Linguistic accuracy reached new heights, and a translator's high competency in the source language became a mandatory requirement.

These tendencies prevailed throughout the 1920s following the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922. The multi-volume translation projects of this decade laid the foundation for the further development of Ukrainian culture. Signature achievements — such as the 3-volume *Russian-Ukrainian Dictionary* (1922-1932) and multi-volume editions of Western authors, including a complete 27-volume collection of the works of Jack London (1927–early 1930s), a 10-volume collection of Guy de Maupassant (1927–1930), and a 27-volume collection of Émile Zola (1929-1932) — marked the atmosphere of national revival and a new stage in translation development. The emergence of an advanced translation theory in Ukraine at that time (Kalnychenko 2016) energized and interacted with translation practices, promoting institutionalization and the professionalization of editorship.

¹ DVU stands for Derzhavne Vydavnytstvo Ukrainy, which is Ukrainian for “State Publishing House of Ukraine.”

² This purpose was served, in particular, by the brochure *Principles of Literary Translation (Printsipy khudozhestvennoho perevoda)*; Petrograd, 1919; 2nd supplemented ed., 1920), co-authored by F. Batyushkov, N. Gumilev, and K. Chukovsky.

For many interwar Ukrainian literary figures, political leaders, and scholars in Central-Eastern and Western Ukraine — who remained separated by political boundaries until 1939 — translation was inherent to their original creative work. It served as a vital tool for strengthening the authority of the national language and broadening its daily usage. However, the achievements of the Ukrainian national revival were largely undone by Stalinist repressions in the 1930s, culminating in the extermination of the Ukrainian intellectual elite during the Great Terror (Masenko 2005). Subsequently, the practices of Russification (Shevelov 1989; Flier & Graziosi 2017; Strikha 2020) and the Soviet turn to a “Russocentric Bolshevism” (Brandenberger 2002) prevailed.

3. Intra-Republican Translation

Translations of contemporary Russophone literature produced in Ukraine by non-Ukrainian speakers were relatively uncommon. In contrast, translating Russophone fiction narratives by the 19th-century classical Ukrainian authors³ served — alongside other purposes — as a symbolic act of repatriating the authorial voice to its cultural home. Translations of such works which have been geographically and culturally rooted in Ukraine, demonstrate how linguistic mediation operated even inside a single national tradition, with translators acting as agents who re-Ukrainianized texts originally written in Russian and thus reinserted them into the Ukrainian cultural sphere.

A key figure in this process was Mykola Khvylovy, who, under the pseudonym Y. Umanets, translated a substantial selection of stories by Anatolii Svydnytskyi. The 1927 Knyhospilka (Publishers' Association) edition was framed by an introductory article and scholarly notes by Mykola Zerov,⁴ whose editorial presence further anchored the project within the intellectual program of Ukrainian literary modernization. Khvylovy's translations thus functioned not merely as linguistic transfers but as interventions in the canonization of Svydnytskyi, repositioning him within a Ukrainian literary genealogy.

In 1928, Knyhospilka continued this work of internal cultural translation by publishing Mykola Kostomarov's historical novel *A Girl from Chernihiv* (Ukr.: *Chernihivka*),⁵ rendered into Ukrainian by Borys Hrinchenko. Through Hrinchenko's translation, Kostomarov's narrative — rooted in the political and social realities of the late seventeenth century — was reintegrated into Ukrainian historical memory,

³ For a description of translations from Russian literature, see Kolomiyets and Kalnychenko (2024: 295–320).

⁴ Mykola Zerov (1890–1937) was a leader of the Kyiv group of Neoclassicist poets and translators; literary scholar, historian and critic, one of the key figures of the Ukrainian cultural revival decade. Zerov is particularly renowned for his translations of ancient Roman poets such as Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and Catullus, among others. In addition to his own oeuvre, he is also renowned for his translations of French Parnassians, as well as works from Slavic languages, including Polish, Russian, and Belarusian.

⁵ Throughout this article, titles are translated from the Ukrainian versions that appeared in print. In some cases, the English translation is followed by a transliteration of the original title in parentheses.

demonstrating how translation could reclaim texts written in Russian by Ukrainian intellectuals. That same year, the Lviv publishing house Prosvita issued Vasyl Narizhnyi's two-part novel *Seminary Student* (Ukr.: *Bursak*) in a translation by Volodymyr Doroshenko, extending this translational reclamation into the Western Ukrainian publishing sphere. Doroshenko's work exemplifies how translators in Galicia participated in the broader Soviet-era project of reassembling a dispersed Ukrainian literary heritage.

In 1929, the Kharkiv publishing house *Ukrainskyi Robitnyk* (Ukrainian Worker) released Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko's novel *Master Khaliavsky* (Ukr.: *Pan Khaliavskyi*) in a translation by Prokhor Voronin, further underscoring the role of translators in mediating the nineteenth-century Ukrainian prose tradition for new Soviet audiences. That same year, the Kyiv publishing house *Siaivo* (The Glow) published Panteleimon Kulish's folk-tale-based novel *The Fire Serpent* (Ukr.: *Ohnennyi zmii*), translated by Mykola Zerov. Zerov's involvement — both as translator and as one of the leading theorists of Ukrainian neoclassicism — highlights the intellectual stakes of these projects: translation served as a means of reasserting Ukrainian cultural autonomy by reclaiming authors whose linguistic choices had been shaped by earlier imperial conditions.

Together, these translations illuminate a distinctive form of internal transnationalism: Ukrainian translators acted as cultural agents who re-anchored Russophone works by Ukrainian authors within a Ukrainian literary system, thereby reshaping the contours of national canon formation during a period of intense ideological and linguistic negotiation.

At the other pole, translations from the languages of small indigenous communities, like the voices of the Mariupol Greeks, were rather exceptional than common. An example comes from Meotian-Greek (aka Rumaic or Mariupol Greek), language of the descendants of the ancient Greek colonists who established city-states (poleis) along the shores of the Sea of Azov as early as the 6th–5th centuries BCE. A unique anthology, *From the Literature of the Mariupol Greeks*, compiled and translated from Meotian-Greek by Kassandra Kostan (Oleksandra Kostiantynivna Gargala) was published in Kharkiv in 1932. Kostan's role extended far beyond that of a translator: she functioned as a cultural mediator, archivist, and early folklorist of the Mariupol Greek community. The anthology included not only prose but also a significant body of poetic material, most notably the songs of Leontius Balji, better known among his community as Leontius Khonagbey (1853–1918). Khonagbey, a folk poet and singer, had not been systematically documented prior to Kostan's intervention. Her fieldwork — recording approximately twenty of his songs — constituted the first scholarly attempt to preserve and interpret his oeuvre. Through her translations, Khonagbey's voice entered the Ukrainian literary sphere, marking the earliest sustained engagement with Meotian-Greek poetic tradition and establishing Kostan as the foundational figure in its study and transmission.

3.1. The Yiddish Translation Corpus and Its Cultural Intermediaries

The Yiddish–Ukrainian translational exchanges of the 1920s and 1930s formed one of the most vibrant zones of cultural exchange in Soviet Ukraine. This corpus reveals a

literary ecosystem in which translators — often themselves poets, critics, and public intellectuals — served as the principal mediators between Jewish and Ukrainian cultural spheres. Their work not only facilitated the movement of texts across linguistic boundaries but also shaped the contours of Soviet Ukrainian literary modernity, canon formation, and interethnic dialogue. The period witnessed a rapid expansion of translations from Yiddish into Ukrainian, with many Yiddish writers simultaneously active as translators of Ukrainian literature into Yiddish. This bidirectional flow underscores the extent to which translation functioned as a shared cultural practice rather than a one-sided appropriation.⁶

In the late 1920s, the percentage of translations from Jewish literature was rapidly increasing. Its classics were well represented in translations from Yiddish, such as two collections of short stories, *Bontshe the Silent* (Yiddish: *Bontshe shvayg*) and *Song of the Weavers*, by Yitzhok Leibush Peretz, both published in 1931 in the translation by Efraim Raitsyn.

Translations from Yiddish-language literature were frequently published in Ukrainian literary magazines, particularly in the first half of the 1930s. For example, the Kharkiv-based *Chervonyi shliakh* (Red Path) published the following translations: the poem “Brothers” of Peretz Markish, translated by Mieczyslaw Gasco, and the poem “Response to Enemies” of Lev Kvitko, translated by Ivan Dniprovskyi. During this period, the Kyiv literary monthly *Zhyttia i revoliutsiia* (Life and Revolution) also published translations from Yiddish, for example, the short story “Destroyed Nests” by Isaac Kipnis, a Kyiv Jewish poet, novelist, and playwright. Kipnis himself extensively translated into Yiddish the works of Ukrainian classical writers Ivan Franko, Taras Shevchenko, Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, as well as his contemporaries Andrii Holovko, Ostap Vyshnia, Petro Panch, and Oksana Ivanenko.

In 1923, the first translated anthology of Jewish poetry was published in Kyiv. Compiled and translated by Vasyl Atamaniuk, the 30-page volume, entitled *New Jewish Poetry*, was a significant milestone in the promotion of Jewish literature. Anthologies were instrumental in disseminating translations to a broad audience.

Even earlier, in 1920, the Kyiv branch of DVU published a collection of classics of Jewish literature by Yitzhok Leibush Peretz entitled *Folk Tales*, translated from Yiddish by Mykola Zerov in cooperation with Yiddish-speaking writer Oleksandr Ger (real name: Volodymyr Naumovych Vaisblat).

In addition to the works of Yitzhok Leibush Peretz, referenced previously, prominent Yiddish-speaking authors were translated during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Firstly, Mendeley Mocher Sforim, a native of Belarus and the founder of classical Yiddish literature (also writing under the pseudonym Sh.-Y. Abramovich), was represented by several collections of short stories: *The Ring of Happiness*, translated by Diodor Bobyr and L. Volodymyrov, and *The Valley of Tears* (Part 2 of *The Ring of Happiness*, translated by Gershbin and Malochenko (both published in 1928)).⁷

⁶ For more on this topic, see Kolomiyets, “The Yiddish Renaissance in Ukraine,” 98-112.

⁷ Three additional publications of Mendeley Mocher Sforim’s works, all translated by Efraim Raitsyn, include the novels *The Travels of Benjamin the Third* (Yiddish: *Masoies Binyomin Hashlishi*, 1934) and *Fishka the Crooked* (Yiddish: *Fishke der Krumer*, 1936), along with a volume of *Selected Works* (1940).

Sholem Aleichem, a renowned Jewish folk writer, was born in the Ukrainian city of Pereiaslav, which at the time of his birth in 1859 belonged to the Poltava Governorate of the Russian Empire. Since the 1920s, he has emerged as a prominent figure in the literary landscape of Ukraine, garnering widespread popularity among readers. His oeuvre, which includes a short story cycle *Tevye the Dairyman* (Yiddish: *Tevye der Milkhiker*), a novel *Motl the Cantor's Son* (Yiddish: *Motl Peysi dem Khazns*) and numerous other works, has been extensively translated, often directly, due to the universal appeal of the subject matter and its depiction of Jewish life in Ukraine. These literary works would be serialized in Ukrainian journals and consequently become part of the Ukrainian canon. In the context of Sholem Aleichem's extensive corpus, which was translated during the 1920s and 1930s, the following editions were of particular significance: the book of selected stories *My First Novel*, translated by Efraim Raitsyn, and the novel *The Flood*, translated by Gershbín and Malochenko (both published in 1928), *Comedies* (1929), etc.⁸ The two-volume *Selected Works* by Sholem Aleichem were published in 1932.⁹ Sholem Aleichem's *Selected Works* in the format of one volume but of different sizes were published twice — in 1939 and 1940, both translated by Efraim Raitsyn.

David (Dovid) Hofstein, a renowned Jewish poet whose works reflected Ukrainian landscapes, was a native of the Ukrainian town of Korostyshiv. Hofstein is widely regarded as the preeminent translator of Ukrainian classics into Yiddish, particularly with respect to Taras Shevchenko. The American scholar Amelia Glaser has analysed the semantic, stylistic and vocal subtleties of Hofstein's faithful rendering of Shevchenko's book of poetry, *Kobzar*, into Yiddish (Glaser 2017). Hofstein's 1931 Yiddish *Kobzar* translation prompted reciprocal efforts on the part of Ukrainian literati to translate Jewish literature. In 1939, the 125th anniversary of Shevchenko's birth became a catalyst for translation activity, when works in Yiddish appeared in Ukrainian anthologies alongside translations of Shevchenko's poems and the works of Ukrainian modernist poets into Yiddish. In 2018, Hofstein's translations were reprinted in independent Ukraine in the bilingual edition entitled *Kobzar: Selected Works* and illustrated with drawings by the prominent Ukrainian graphic artist Vasyl Sedliar (1899-1937), a member of the Mykhailo Boychuk school, which were previously used to decorate the unique 1931 edition of *Kobzar*. All of the Yiddish translations included here were made by Hofstein during the 1920s and 1930s (Shevchenko 2018).

Hofstein himself as an original author was represented by the edition of his *Selected Poems* in 1938, which contained five direct translations by Maksym Rylsky¹⁰ and was reprinted in 1939. Rylsky's translations were included in the (almost) complete collection

⁸ Efraim Raitsyn's translations of Sholem Aleichem's works include the following 1930 publications: the anthology *Selected Works*; the novella *Song of Songs* (Youthful Romance); and the short stories "Adele (from the *Tevye the Milkman* cycle)," "Great Luck," "The Winning Ticket," "Congratulations, We Are Already in America," and "Gymnasium." Additionally, the short story "Seventy-Five Thousand" was published in a translation by A. Stoyanivskyi (1930).

⁹ Volume 1: *Tevye and His Daughters*; Volume 2: *The Dashing Adventures of Menachem Mendel*.

¹⁰ Maksym Rylsky (1895–1964) was also a prolific translator from English, French, German, and Polish, as well as a folklore and literary scholar. Widely regarded as one of the most distinguished Ukrainian poets of the 20th century, he was renowned for his mastery of the modern sonnet and the long narrative poem. Rylsky was closely associated with the Neoclassicist group of Ukrainian poets, who employed traditional poetic forms with rhyme and meter.

of Hofstein's poetry (Hofstein 2012), entitled by a quotation from his poem in Ukrainian translation, "*O bilyi svite mii...*" (O Light World of Mine).

The head of Jewish impressionism and the founder of the Kyiv period in Jewish literature, the fiction writer David Bergelson must be particularly mentioned. His novel *Throughout* was translated by N. Rotherstein (1928), a book of short stories *Stormy Days* – by A. Pokrovskiy (1930), and a novel *Above the Dnipro River* – by Marko Zisman (1936).

A prominent poet Leib (Lev) Kvitko, known mainly for his children's poems, was published in translation multiple times, for instance, two separate editions, poetry book *The Best Name* (1929) and short story collection *Panats* (1930), appeared in translation by Volodymyr Sosiura.¹¹ The story "Two Comrades", first published in translation by Efraim Raitsyn (1932), was later printed two more times: under the revised title "Two Comrades (Lyam and Petrik)" (Yiddish: *Tsvey khaveyrim: Lyam un Petrik*) in a new translation by Zinaida Ioffe (1935) and as a short story "Liam i Petryk" in Efraim Raitsyn's translation (1936). Kvitko's poems "The Violinist" (1933) and "Piglets" (1938) were printed as separate editions in translation by Pavlo Tychyna,¹² who is considered the best translator of Kvitko's children's poetry and whose translations are gathered and reprinted in the *Anthology of Jewish Poetry: Ukrainian Translations from Yiddish* (2011: 265-275). Also, separate editions of Kvitko's poems "When I Grow Up" (1937) and "Lullaby" (1938) saw the light of day in translation by Natalia Zabila. Kvitko's oeuvre of poetry for children, which was both accessible and aligned with Soviet ideology, was translated expressly for educational purposes and appeared in various journals and anthologies.

The renowned Jewish poet Peretz Markish is widely regarded as one of the most significant Yiddish poets of the twentieth century. It is noteworthy that he gained recognition as a member of the Kyiv group of Yiddish-language poets, which included prominent figures such as David Hofstein (the leading translator of Ukrainian classics into Yiddish), Lev Kvitko (his children's poems "The Violinist" and "Etonka's Garden" were particularly popular), and Peretz Markish himself. The Ukrainian translations of Peretz Markish's Soviet-aligned poems, sometimes via Russian, were predominantly made by Pavlo Tychyna, Mieczysław Gasco, and Anton Shmyhelskyi in the 1920s and 1930s.

Among the Jewish Soviet writers popularized for their Soviet ideological resonance is the founder of Jewish Soviet poetry, Osher Schwartzman, a native of Zhytomyr, who fought as a volunteer in the Red Army and was killed in a battle with the Poles in 1919. His collection of *Poetry* was published in 1938 – in this edition, 14 translations were done by Pavlo Tychyna.

The novelist and playwright Mark Daniel, whose works, imbued with the spirit of revolutionary romanticism, were part of the repertoire of Jewish Soviet theaters, was broadly represented in translation into both Ukrainian and Russian. One particular song

¹¹ Volodymyr Sosiura (1898–1965) was a prolific Ukrainian poet who published numerous poetry collections during his lifetime. During the Ukrainian-Soviet War (1917–1921), he fought in the Army of the Ukrainian National Republic and then in the Red Army.

¹² Pavlo Tychyna (1891–1967) is widely regarded as the preeminent poet of his era, with this distinction being shared by both Soviet and non-Soviet readers and critics alike.

composed by Daniel for his own play was translated into Russian and became all-Union popular under the title “Orlyenok” (Eaglet).¹³

Translations of the works of Jewish writers little known today were also often published as separate editions. For example, a novel by Moïshe Taitsch *The Death of Comrade Wooly*, translated under the editorship of Yevhen Pluzhnyk (1932), a book of *Poems* of the playwright, storyteller, and poet Mikhail (Moïshe) Pinchevskiy, translated by Aron Kopstein (1936), a volume of *Selected Works* of I. Weissenberg, translated by Y. M. Kvitko (1931), and so on.

Dozens of talented Yiddish-language writers were born and lived in Ukraine at that time, and their works were promptly translated into Ukrainian and published in separate editions. Among them were the poet and translator Matvii Talalaievskiy, whose book of poems *Spring Oath* appeared in Ukrainian in 1935, and the writer, storyteller, and poet Hana Levina, whose books of poems *On the Sunny Side* and *The Secret* were translated by Maria Pryhara (and published respectively in 1935 and 1938).

The book of *Lyrics* of Soviet poet and public figure Itzyk Fefer was published in translation by Maria Pryhara as well (1934). Selected poems of Fefer appeared in 1937 under the title *Treasure* in translations by different Ukrainian poets (M. Bazhan, M. Zisman, L. Pervomaiskyi, M. Pryhara, M. Rylsky, V. Sosiura, P. Tychyna), in particular, the popular poem “Give me your hand, beloved!” is given in this edition in the translation by M. Rylsky. Also, a book of Fefer’s poems *Sources* was published in Lviv in 1940.

The prose writer and playwright Abram Kagan was represented by a book of short stories *The Wreckage*, translated by Efraim Raitsyn (1930) and a play *Energy*, translated by Zinaida Ioffe (1932).

Soviet Yiddish modernist Der Nister (Pinchas Kahanovich), whose historical novel *The Family Mashber* was set in a Ukrainian shtetl, became familiar to the Ukrainian reader from his short stories, which were interesting for a symbolist perception of revolutionary reality, in particular, from the short story collection entitled *From My Treasures*, published under the editorship of Olexander Finkel (1930).

The writer and journalist Hershl Orland became known as the author of the novel *The Dams*, where Orland used his memories of working as a reclamation worker in Volyn in 1926 – the novel appeared in Ukrainian translation in 1930 – and of the novel *Agglomerate*, published in translation in 1936, the theme of which was the socio-economic transformations in the life of the Jews of Ukraine (both works were translated by Efraim Raitsyn).

A talented Yiddish writer, journalist, and translator Salvador (Bezalel) Borges (born Bezalel Borodin) was interned from Volyn to Europe during the First World War, moved to Brazil and became a journalist and writer, but for his participation in revolutionary activities he had to leave Brazil and returned to Europe, and from 1935 lived in Birobidzhan. His novel *The Cry of Occupied Volyn* (Part 1) was published in 1931 in translation by Efraim Raitsyn.

¹³ The following works by Daniel were published in Ukrainian: a short novel *On the Doorstep*, translated by Efraim Raitsyn (1930), a heroic tragedy in 3 acts *Four Days (Julis)*, translated by Zinaida Ioffe (1934), plays *Ziamka the Digger*, translated by Zinaida Ioffe and Matvii (Motl) Talalaievskiy (1934), and *The Inventor and the Comedian*, translated by Matvii Talalaievskiy (1937). A separate volume of Daniel’s *Plays* was published in 1937.

A child from an orphanage, novelist Fievil Sito wrote a lot about the homeless, and his style was marked by pathetic and humor. The works of Sito were mostly translated by Efraim Raitsyn – a short story “Orphanage No. 40” (1932) and a novel *Here We Are* (1934). Olena Parkhomovska translated Sito’s novel *Immortality* (1938).

Parkhomovska also translated the works by a famous writer Hryhorii Polianker: *Shoyle from Bapillya. A Story about the People of a Small Town* (1939) and a short story “Shmaya the Robber” (1940).

Two novels of Elia Shechtman, *On the Edge* and *Plowed Boundaries*, were published in translation by Zinaida Ioffe in 1934 and 1937 respectively.

Nehemii (Nechemia) Shmain’s play *A Guest* (Yiddish: *A gast*) was translated by Z. Messin in 1938. Shmain was the brother of Khanan Shmain, the theater and film director associated with the Les Kurbas school.

However, most of the works by the born-in-Ukraine Soviet Jewish writers that were translated in the 1930s have a bigger literary-historical than purely artistic value.¹⁴ Typical works of Jewish Soviet literature were those imbued with themes and ideas of socialist construction, such as the short story collections *The Wells* (1930) and *On the Pass* (1935) of the poet and prose writer Chaim Gildin (both in translation by Efraim Raitsyn). The translated works of the playwright Abram Veviurko should also be noted among separate editions, namely, the play *My Enemy* (translated by S. Dubrovskiy, 1936) and a separate collection of Veviurko’s *Plays* (1937). Among the numerous examples of this kind of politicized literature from the genre of poetry, the poems of Avram Hontar can be mentioned. In his Yiddish poetry collection *A Clear Day* (1938), Hontar glorified the Soviet people’s work as heroic during the first of Stalin’s five-year economic plans (introduced by Stalin in 1928). This poetry collection was published in Hontar’s authorized translation into Ukrainian in 1940.

Thus, many of these translations, especially those aligned with socialist construction — such as the works of Chaim Gildin, Abram Veviurko, and Avram Hontar — reflect the ideological pressures of the period. Yet even within these constraints, translators shaped the reception of Yiddish literature by selecting, framing, and contextualizing texts for Ukrainian readers.

The most productive translators from Yiddish to Ukrainian in the 1920s–1930s were Efraim Raitsyn (for his extensive work on Sholem Aleichem) and Zinaida Ioffe (for translating Soviet Yiddish writers), followed by Maksym Rylsky (for translations of Hofstein and editorial contributions). Mykola Zerov and Vasyl Atamaniuk also had important roles, but they didn’t translate as much. The period’s cultural vibrancy and

¹⁴ Among these works are the prose writings of Petro Altman, specifically the story “Positions,” and of Noté (Noyah) Lurie, whose novel *The Steppe Calls* was published in 1934 (both translated by Efraim Raitsyn). Other notable publications include Lurie’s collection *Ordinary Life*, translated by Marko Zisman and Y. Vyshnevetskyi (n.d.), and his *Novellas*, translated by Semen Katz (1931; reprint 1938). The works of Meyer Alberton also belong to this category, including *Birobidzhan: Impressions of a Journey* and the short story “In the Mine” (both 1930), as well as the story “The BIS Mine” (1932) — all three of which were translated by Zinaida Ioffe. Among the poets, notable editions include Hanan Weinerman’s collection *To Work*, translated by Panko Peda (1932), and Matvii Gartzman’s *Poems and Ballads* (1940).

tragic repression shaped the legacy of these translators, many of whose works were lost or underdocumented due to Soviet policies.

Overall, by the late 1930s, the most prolific translators from Yiddish into Ukrainian — Efraim Raitsyn, Zinaida Ioffe, Maksym Rylsky, alongside Mykola Zerov and Vasyl Atamaniuk — had established a robust translational infrastructure. Their work reveals a literary world in which translation was not merely a technical act but a form of cultural authorship, enabling Yiddish and Ukrainian literatures to circulate within a shared Soviet space while retaining their distinct aesthetic and historical identities.

4. Inter-Republican Translation

In the late 1920s, Soviet nationalities policy peaked with the “Brotherhood of the Peoples” (Russ.: *Bratstvo narodov*), a rhetorical extension of *Korenizatsiia* (indigenization). This campaign emphasized a horizontal, class-based unity, presenting the USSR as a “happy family” of equal republics to contrast with the Tsarist “prison of nations.” Between 1926 and 1929, the state actively “engineered” national identities by promoting local folklore, costumes, and literatures to integrate diverse ethnic groups into the socialist project.

By the mid-1930s, this shifted toward Stalin’s “Friendship of the Peoples” (Russ.: *Druzhiba narodov*) doctrine. Formally inaugurated in 1935 and encoded in the 1936 Constitution, this new policy replaced radical internationalism with a “Great Power” statist narrative. Crucially, it introduced a vertical hierarchy that positioned the Russian people as the “elder brother.” Under Socialist Realism, the arts began to depict ethnic minorities not as equal peers, but as groups “civilized” and “liberated” by Russian leadership, marking a definitive move toward centralized Russification (Martin 2001).

The characteristics and scope of translations from Russian literature in the 1920s and 1930s are extensively covered in the publication “Translating Russian Literature in Soviet and Post-Soviet Ukraine” (Kolomiyets & Kalnychenko 2024: 295-320) and earlier in Ukrainian in Kolomiyets (2015: 36-44). Therefore, the subject will not be addressed in this article, and instead an examination will be made of translations from Belarusian and other languages of the Soviet republics.

4.1. From Belarusian Literature: Translators as Architects of Inter-Republican Literary Circulation

The emergence of Ukrainian translations from Belarusian literature in the late 1920s and 1930s unfolded in parallel with the Soviet Union’s evolving nationalities policy. The 1929 campaign for the “Brotherhood of the Peoples” and, later, Stalin’s 1935 doctrine of “Friendship of the Peoples” created an ideological framework that encouraged inter-republican cultural exchange. Within this environment, translators became indispensable cultural and political agents, tasked with rendering the literary production of Soviet Belarus into Ukrainian and thereby integrating Belarusian authors into the broader Soviet literary system.

A foundational moment in this process was the publication of the Kharkiv almanac *New Belarus* (1929), edited by Serhii Pylypenko. Bringing together works by thirty Belarusian writers, the volume relied on a distinguished cohort of Ukrainian translators — Pavlo Tychyna, Volodymyr Sosiura, Serhii Pylypenko, Ivan Kulyk, Teren Masenko, Andrii Paniv, among others — whose collective labor positioned Belarusian literature within Ukrainian print culture. Their translations functioned not merely as linguistic transfers but as acts of cultural “brokerage,” aligning Belarusian texts with Ukrainian literary discourses and Soviet ideological expectations.

Separate editions soon followed, extending the reach of Belarusian classics and contemporary Soviet authors. Mykhailo Drai-Khmara prepared the 1929 Kharkiv edition of Maksim Bahdanovich’s poetry collection *Wreath*, introducing one of Belarus’s most revered poets to Ukrainian readers. Serhii Pylypenko translated Kindrat Krapiva’s satirical collection *Krapiva’s Fables* (Belar.: *Krapivini baiiki*), which was published in 1928 and reprinted in 1930, while Pavlo Nechai (Kyrylo Kosmin) rendered into Ukrainian Krapiva’s play *The End of Friendship* (1936). Nechai also translated works by several Belarusian Soviet dramatists, including Kuzma Chorny’s *Motherland*, A. Troyetsky’s comedy *Our Trump Cards*, and Yevstignei Mirovich’s *On a Spring Night*. These translations collectively mapped the contours of Belarusian Soviet dramaturgy for Ukrainian audiences.

The early 1930s saw a marked increase in translations of contemporary Soviet Belarusian prose. In 1930, Stepan Kovhaniuk translated Vasil Koval’s novel *Harvest* for Molodyi Bilshovyk (Young Bolshevik) publishing house. The following year, Literature and Art published Kuzma Chorny’s short-story collection *September Nights* in a translation by Ivan Tychyna (Pavlo Tychyna’s brother), whose translational activity intensified after the Second World War. In 1932, the same press issued A. Romanovich’s play *The Bridge*, translated by Andrii Dudka (pen name of Oleksii Varavva), further expanding the Ukrainian reception of Belarusian Soviet drama.

A particularly significant figure in this inter-republican exchange was Yanka Kupala (pen name of Ivan Lutsevich), a leading poet of the Belarusian Red Renaissance and an academician of both the Belorussian and Ukrainian Academies of Sciences. Kupala’s works reached Ukrainian readers relatively late: his poem “Above the Oresa River” (Belar.: “Nad rakoj Aresaj”), translated by Teren Masenko, appeared in Derzhlitvydav,¹⁵ which is an abbreviation for the State Literary Publishing House of Ukraine, in 1936, followed in 1937 by a substantial 284-page volume of *Selected Works (1905–1936)*, edited by Masenko. This edition included translations by Volodymyr Svidzinskiy, whose renderings of “Song and Strength” and “On the Death of Stepan Bulat” exemplify the nuanced poetic mediation characteristic of the period.

The Kharkiv publishing house Ukrainskyi Robitnyk played a notable role in disseminating Belarusian prose. In 1929, it issued translations of the stories portraying the village life, “Liavonicha and Symonicha” and “Once Upon a Sunday” (Belar.: “Za niadzieliu”) by Žmitrok Biadula (pen name of the Jewish-born author Samuil Pławnik), as well as his historical novel *The Nightingale* (Belar.: *Salaviej*). That same year,

¹⁵ Derzhlitvydav is an abbreviation for “Derzhavne Literaturne Vydavnytstvo,” which is Ukrainian for “State Literary Publishing House.”

Lizaveta Kardynalovska translated a story titled “Halia” in this translation, by Michaś Čarot (also spelled Mihas Charot; name at birth: Michail Kudzielka), a central figure of the Maladniak literary association whose career — and life — was cut short by Stalinist repression. Kardynalovska continued her work in 1930 with translations of Michaś Zaretsky’s first major novel and a landmark in Belarusian literature *Paths-Roads* (Belar.: *Ścieżki-darožki*), published by DVU, and his most famous short story “42 Documents,” printed by Ukrainskyi Robitnyk publishing house. Set during the February Revolution and the subsequent Civil War, the novel explored the psychological toll of the revolution and the complex moral choices faced by intelligentsia. In “42 Documents” the author tells the story of a dedicated Bolshevik revolutionary sent to a rural area to establish a Revolutionary Committee (Revkom) and fight against a local anti-Soviet “bandit” group led by a former landowner.

In 1932, Kardynalovska translated for Molodyi Bilshovyk publishers an adventure novel *Amok* by Yanka Maur (pen name of Ivan Fiodaraŭ), further broadening the Ukrainian readership of Belarusian Soviet prose.

Another major Belarusian Soviet writer, Ciška Hartny (pen name of Žmicier Žyŭlunovič) — poet, prose writer, playwright, publicist, and head of the first Soviet government of Belarus — was also actively translated. In 1929 Serhii Pylypenko translated his short story “Strikebreaker” (Belar.: “Shtreykbrekher”), published by Ukrainskyi Robitnyk and reprinted in 1932, while Oleksandr Soroka translated his books of stories *Slivers on the waves* (Belar.: *Treski na chvaliach*) (Knyhospilka, 1930) and *The Landowner* (Belar.: *Haspadar*) (LiM,¹⁶ 1932). Soroka also translated a collection of stories by M. Nikanovich, published as *In the Whirlpool of Life*, further illustrating the breadth of Belarusian prose available in Ukrainian translation.

Taken together, these translations reveal a dense network of literary mediation in which Ukrainian translators — poets, critics, editors, and public intellectuals — served as the primary agents of Belarusian–Ukrainian cultural exchange. Their work not only introduced Belarusian authors to Ukrainian readers but also embedded Belarusian literature within the Soviet project of interethnic cultural integration, making translation a key mechanism through which the ideals of “Brotherhood” and “Friendship of the Peoples” were enacted on the page.

4.2. From the Literature of the Peoples of the Caucasus (Armenian, Georgian, Azerbaijani, Ossetian, Adyghe)

The translation of literary works from the peoples of the Caucasus into Ukrainian during the late 1920s and 1930s formed a significant component of the broader Soviet project of inter-republican cultural exchange. These translations not only introduced Ukrainian readers to the literary canons of Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ossetia, and the Adyghe but also reflected the ideological imperatives of the period, which encouraged the circulation of national literatures within the framework of Soviet internationalism. The following subchapter outlines this activity by republic,

¹⁶ The full name of this publishing house is Literatura i Mystetstvo (Literature and Art), which is commonly abbreviated as LiM.

highlighting the authors translated, the translators involved, and the publishing institutions that facilitated this cultural transfer.

Armenian literature was represented in Ukrainian translation primarily through the works of its most celebrated authors. Hovhannes Tumanyan, widely regarded as the greatest Armenian writer, appeared in Ukrainian in two major editions: the story *Gikor*, translated by H. Ter-Ghevondyan and M. Chuhunenko (Kharkiv–Kyiv: Molodyi Bilshovyk, 1931), and the poetry collection under the title of a poem *Green Brother* (Armenian: *Kanjach Akhper*, Ukr.: *Zelenyi Bratyk*), translated by Pavlo Tychyna (Kyiv: Derzhlitvydav, 1940).

The translation activity of Ter-Ghevondyan and Chuhunenko also included a story by Stepan Zorian, published by DVU in 1930 under the title *The Homeless Arsho* (Ukr.: *Bezprytulnyi Arsho*). Another Armenian author, Karen Mikaelyan, executed during the Stalinist purges in 1937, was introduced to Ukrainian readers through the translation of his *Novels* by Maria Pylynska (Kharkiv: LiM, 1931).

A particularly noteworthy publication was the 1939 Ukrainian edition of the Armenian national epic *David of Sassoun*, issued by Derzhlitvydav. Edited by Liubomyr Dmyterko and Oleksandr Soroka, with general oversight by Pavlo Tychyna, the volume brought together translations by P. Tychyna, V. Svidzinskiy, Ye. Fomin, L. Dmyterko, and others. Given that more than fifty versions of the epic had been recorded by the mid-twentieth century, the precise Armenian source text used for the Ukrainian translation remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the publication marked a major cultural achievement in the inter-republican circulation of literary heritage.

Georgian literature — particularly Soviet-era prose — was translated into Ukrainian with remarkable intensity. In 1930, Knyhospilka published four editions of Mikheil Javakhishvili's story collections, all of which were translated by Heorhii Namoradze. The titles were *Collection of Stories*, *Meeting*, *Lambalo and Khama*, and *Dbacha Was Late*. The story "Two Sons," which was also published separately, was translated by Oleksandr Soroka. Javakhishvili's novel *Khizani Dzhako* appeared in two editions: as *The Scum of Life* (Ukr.: *Pokydky zhyttia*; DVU, 1930) and as *The Barricade* (Ukr.: *Zavala*; Kharkiv: Rukh [Movement], 1931), the latter translated by V. Levytskyi.

Other Georgian authors also entered Ukrainian literary circulation during this period. In 1929, DVU published Maria Dgebuadze-Pularia's novel *On the Ruins of Happiness* in her own auto-translation, edited by L. Pakharevskyi. The works of Konstantin Lordkipanidze appeared in 1930: the novel *Superfluous People* (Georgian: *Zedmeti khalkhi*), translated by O. Soroka and H. Namoradze (published in Knyhospilka), and the short-story collection *The First Mother* (Georgian: *Pirveli deda*), translated by H. Namoradze (issued by DVU).

In the same year, 1930, Knyhospilka published Levan Metreveli's story *The Bolshevik*, translated by O. Soroka, and Kolau Nadiradze's story *Gaspar*, marking the transition of the last Georgian symbolist poet toward socialist realism. LiM issued then a story "The Ferocious One" by Nikolo Mitsishvili (often referred to by his real name Nikoloz Sirbiladze), while in 1931 it published Niko Lortkipanidze's story *The Village Rake* (Georgian: *Soplis Don-Zhuani*), Petre Kutateladze's (pseudonym Samsonidze) novella *The First Storm* (Georgian: *Pirveli karishkhali*), and Demna Shengelaia's novel

Sanavardo (one of the most significant works of Georgian modernism), translated by Ye. Pluh.

Ioseb Tatishvili's prose reached new audiences through the work of O. Soroka, who rendered the story *The Washerwoman* (Georgian: *Mretskhavi*) for Knyhospilka in 1930, and H. Namoradze, who translated both the dramatic novella *The Bride of Two Enemies* (*Ori mtris satsole*, 1931) and the story *A Woman's Fate* (Georgian: *Kalis bedi*, 1932) for the LiM publishing house. The same publishers also issued in 1932 the drama *Rogor* (often translated as *How It Was*) by Karlo Kaladze — a significant work of early 20th-century Georgian theater, staged in the late 1920s as part of the Soviet effort to modernize theatrical repertoires with national motives. The translation was done by H. Tsagareli and A. Dudka (Oleksii Varavva). A classic of 20th-century Georgian children's literature, the story "Chikori" ("The Top or The Spinning Top") by David Suliashvili was also published in LiM that year.

The mid-1930s saw the publication of major Georgian classics in Ukrainian translation. In 1936, Derzhlitvydav issued a complete volume of Nikoloz Baratashvili's *Poetry* translated by Ivan Kulyk, following earlier translations by P. Hrabovskyy, B. Hrinchenko, and S. Palii. The same year saw the publication of Mikheil Javakhishvili's historical novel *Arsena of Marabda* (Georgian: *Arsena Marabdeli*), based on the life of Arsena Odzelashvili, a real-life 19th-century Georgian "Robin Hood" figure, celebrated in Georgian folklore.

In 1937, Derzhlitvydav published Sandro Shanshiashvili's drama titled *Arsen* (translation by O. Varavva and K. Tsagareli), which was a cornerstone of Georgian theater in the 1930s. Like the abovementioned novel, it focuses on the legendary 19th-century outlaw Arsena Odzelashvili, but it was specifically tailored for the high-energy, "heroic" style of the Rustaveli Theater. A play by Amiran Shervashidze *Kravchuk's Tears* (Georgian: *Kravchukis tsremlibi*), translated by A. Novoseletsky in 1940, was particularly noted for its focus on internationalist themes and the historical "friendship of nations." Shervashidze wrote the play immediately following the Soviet annexation of Western Ukraine. It centers on the historical and political "ties" between the Georgian, Ukrainian, and Russian peoples.

A major cultural milestone was the Ukrainian translation of Shota Rustaveli's medieval epic *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* (Georgian: *Vepkhistaosani*), rendered by Mykola Bazhan (Kyiv–Kharkiv, 1937; reprinted 1940). Bazhan also edited the 1940 edition of Simon Chikovani's *Poems*, which included translations by Maksym Rylsky and others, as well as the *Selected Works* of Akaki Tsereteli, featuring translations by P. Tychyna, V. Svidzinskyi, M. Rylsky, and others. In 1939, Bazhan edited the anthology *Poetry of Soviet Georgia* (Kyiv), further consolidating Georgian–Ukrainian literary ties.

Azerbaijani literature was represented in Ukrainian translation primarily through two publications issued in 1930. The first was *Young Azerbaijan*, a collection of contemporary Azerbaijani writers translated by Hryhorii Piddubnyi (Kharkiv–Odesa: Derzhvydav USSR). The second was a story by Sadik Huseyn (also appearing as Sadiq Hüseyin or Huseynov) *On the Way to a New Life* (Azerbaijani: *Yeni Həyata Doğru*), published by Knyhospilka (Kharkiv).

Ossetian literature appeared in Ukrainian translation in the 1931 LiM edition of *Ossetian Stories*, translated by Varvara Cherednichenko. This publication marked one of the earliest efforts to introduce Ossetian prose to Ukrainian readers.

In 1932, a collection titled *Circassian Songs, Legends, Myths* was published in Kyiv, translated from Adyghe by Oleksa Kyrii and edited by Maksym Rylsky. The volume offered Ukrainian readers access to the oral and poetic traditions of the Adyghe people, reflecting the Soviet emphasis on documenting and disseminating the folklore of minority nationalities.

4.3. From the Literature of the Peoples of Central Asia (Tajik, Kalmyk, Bashkir, Kazakh)

Tajik literature was represented primarily through the works of Sadriddin Aini, the founder of Tajik Soviet literature. *The Story of the Poor Tajik: Adine* (often titled simply *Adina*), was translated by Ye. Rebryk (Kharkiv: Rukh, 1931), followed by the novel *Dohunda*, translated by Rebryk and edited by A. Kovalevskyi (Kharkiv: Radianska Literatura [Soviet Literature], 1934). The latter work stands as the first true novel in the Tajik language and is considered a cornerstone of Central Asian literature, marking the shift from traditional storytelling to the modern European-style novel.

The founder of Soviet Tajik poetry Abulqasim Lahuti (also transliterated as Abulkasem Hasem Laguti or Abolqasem Lahouti) appeared in two Ukrainian editions: *Poems*, translated by B. Nikitin (Rukh, 1932), and *Selected Poems*, translated from Farsi by Teren Masenko (LiM, 1934).

Kalmyk literature entered Ukrainian translation through Anton Amur-Sanan's autobiographical novel *Mudreshkin's Son* (Russian: *Mudreshkin syn*; Kalmyk: *Muudran kövün*), translated from Russian by P. Drozdov and published by LiM in 1932.

A Bashkortostan-based women's movement and emancipation activist Antonina Nurkhat (also spelled Nukhrat or Nurpeisova), who traveled widely in Central Asia in the 1920s, was represented by a separate edition of the documentary story entitled *In the Kazakh Steppes* (Russian: *V kazakhskikh stepyakh*), translated from Russian by M. Pashkova and published by LiM in 1932. Published during the period of *Korenizatsiia* (indigenization/nativization), where the Soviet state encouraged works that depicted the transition of "backward" nomadic cultures into the socialist modern era, this book is a representative work of early Soviet "activist literature."

4.4. A Voice from the Far Northern Tundra: The Literature of the Yukaghir

In 1935, Dytvydav¹⁷ published Teki Odulok's story *The Life of Imteurgin the Elder* (also known as *The Life of Senior Imteurgin*), translated from Russian by A. Khodko. The novella was originally published in Russian in 1934 and translated into English

¹⁷ The abbreviation "Dytvydav" stands for "Dytiache Vydavnytstvo," which is Ukrainian for "Children's Publishing House" of the Ukrainian SSR.

under the title *Snow People* (London, 1934). It has also been translated into Estonian, Lithuanian, Polish, and several other languages.

Despite the fact that Teki Odulok (Nikolai Spiridonov) is considered to be the first Yukaghir scholar and writer, he created his most famous work in Russian, as a written form of the Yukaghir language had not been developed in the 1930s. The book brought the author nationwide fame across the Soviet Union and was later translated into many languages of the peoples of the USSR. This book remained the only Ukrainian engagement with Yukaghir literature until the 1970s-1980s, when the work of another Yukaghir writer, Semion Kurilov, appeared in Soviet Ukrainian periodicals (Dziuba 1995). Kurilov composed his work in both Yukaghir and Russian.

Aleksandr Titkov's article, "Tekki Odulok: The Founder of a Non-Existent Literature," provides a window into the Soviet "creative laboratory" responsible for producing the literatures of the Russian Far North. Titkov argues that:

Indeed, the novella *The Life of Imteurgin the Elder* and the book of travel essays *In the Far North* possess certain literary merits, but was Teki Odulok a writer in the strict sense of the word? [...] The novella *The Life of Imteurgin*, which enjoyed resounding success and went through several reprints, was recorded (in Russian) from Odulok's own words by one of the editors, and subsequently given a literary polish by Samuil Marshak... (Titkov 2015)

Titkov underscores the paradox of Odulok's legacy, arguing that the title of "founder" is rendered almost meaningless by the absence of successors:

But even recognizing Teki Odulok as a writer does not settle the question of him being the "founder of Yukaghir literature." Try as I might, I have been unable to find a single other Yukaghir writer besides Teki Odulok, even in the exhaustive bibliographic directory *Writers and Literati of the Small-Numbered Peoples of the North and Far East* prepared by V. Ogryzko. <...> In all probability, Teki Odulok will remain the first and only Yukaghir Russian-language writer for a very long time. As for literature that is strictly Yukaghir (that is, in the Yukaghir language), it seems it may never appear at all... (Titkov 2015)¹⁸

The quoted excerpts reflect a critical (and somewhat skeptical) perspective on the "creation" of national literatures during the Soviet era. They highlight two common themes of that period: the role of established Russian authors (like the famous children's writer Samuil Marshak) in editing and shaping the works of indigenous writers to fit Soviet literary standards (literary "patronage") and the tragic reality that many small-numbered indigenous languages remained primarily oral or transitioned directly into Russian-language literary traditions rather than developing an independent written literature (language extinction).

¹⁸ Both quotations from Titkov's article are translated into English by the present author.

5. Conclusion

Several key conclusions can be drawn regarding Soviet language and translation policy, the role of Ukraine as a translational hub, and the mechanics of literary “engineering” through translation in the 1920s-1930s. Ukraine was a kind of “testing ground” for Soviet multilingualism at that period, holding the majority of the USSR’s Czech, Jewish, Polish, and German populations, as well as other ethnic minorities and indigenous linguistic groups, such as Mariupol Greeks. The positionality of Soviet Ukraine as a multi-ethnic republic made it the primary laboratory for the *Korenizatsiia* policy, with the local languages officially integrated in schools, courts, and administration.

During the 1920s — that period went down into political and cultural history as active Ukrainization (1923-1929) — translation was among the key instruments of Soviet Indigenization and *Ukrainization* processes, albeit hypocritically, but nevertheless initiated and supported by the Soviet authorities. It served as a cultural and structural tool of developing, spreading, and raising the authority of the Ukrainian language as the titular language of the Ukrainian SSR and the language of the overwhelming majority of its ethnic population.¹⁹

The late 1920s saw a massive influx of Belarusian, Georgian, and Armenian literature into Ukraine, supported by high-profile figures like Pavlo Tychyna and Maksym Rylsky.

Direct translations from the minority languages of Soviet Ukraine (like Yiddish or Meotian Greek) strengthened the “symbolic capital” of the Ukrainian language, whilst translations of the works by Ukrainian authors like Mykola Kostomarov or Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko, originally written in Russian, including the literary heritage of Nikolai Gogol (Ukrainian: Mykola Hohol’), particularly his early Ukrainian folk culture-based writings,²⁰ reclaimed these authors for the Ukrainian national canon.

Both intra- and inter-Republican literary translations heavily reflected Socialist Realist ideologies and styles. For small-numbered or nomadic Central Asian and Siberian groups, these early Soviet “national literatures” — such as Yukaghir literature — were often engineered projects designed to meet Soviet standards rather than organic developments.

A major structural change occurred in translation strategies as a means of intercultural communication in the 1930s: the shift from direct to mediated translation. When in the 1920s, cultures engaged directly (for example, Yiddish to Ukrainian, Ukrainian to Yiddish, or Georgian to Ukrainian, Ukrainian to Georgian, and so on), fostering genuine interethnic dialogue, the rise of Russian as the “bridge” language during the 1930s resulted in the substantial severing of direct linguistic connections. The natural, lateral communication between neighboring cultures like Yiddish and Ukrainian was targeted to be intentionally broken. Translation acquired a new and focused function: to serve as a tool for linguistic and cultural assimilation

¹⁹ See the map visualizing data from the 1926 First All-Union Census of the Soviet Union, which illustrates the percentage of residents categorized as ethnically Ukrainian in each district (*raion*) of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic (MAPA Digital Atlas of Ukraine, n.d.).

²⁰ See Hohol’ (1929, 1930).

(Russification).²¹ This ideological push towards erasing unique ethnic identities in favor of a singular, Moscow- and Russo-centric “Soviet” identity, enforced linguistic standardization and Russification. Minority and other Soviet people’s works began to be more and more often translated into Ukrainian via Russian versions.

At that, the same authors and translators who built the bridges between national literatures of the USSR (e.g., Mikheil Javakhishvili, Mykola Zerov, Tekki Odulok, Michaś Čarot, and many others) were largely decimated by Stalinist repressions in the 1930s, effectively halting the development of these national literary and translation projects.

Furthermore, the very authors and translators who had constructed the cultural bridges between the diverse national literatures of the USSR — including figures such as Mikheil Javakhishvili, Mykola Zerov, Tekki Odulok, and Michaś Čarot — were systematically decimated by the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s. This widespread persecution effectively paralyzed the development of numerous nascent national literary and translation initiatives.

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²¹ The institutionalization of linguistic Russification was formalized through three resolutions of the Commission of the People’s Commissariat of Education (NKO) “on the inspection of work on the language front”: “Resolution of the NKO Commission on the Inspection of Work on the Language Front on Comrade Khvyliia’s Report ‘The Nationalist Danger on the Language Front and the Struggle Against It’” (April 26, 1933); “Resolution of the NKO Commission on the Inspection of Work on the Language Front in Matters of Terminology”; and “Resolution of the NKO Commission on the Inspection of Work on the Language Front in Matters of Grammar” (Khvyliia 1933: 115–29). Reprinted in Masenko (2005: 140–52).

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF UKRAINIAN INTERPRETING AND INTERPRETING STUDIES THROUGH THE PRISM OF PSEUDOCOLONIALITY

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Abstract: This paper examines the history of interpreting in Soviet Ukraine through the analytical lens of pseudocoloniality, focusing on the invisibility of Ukrainian interpreters and the subordination of Ukrainian as a working language. The research employs historiographic sources, memoirs, archival materials, and original interviews with former practitioners to reconstruct interpreting practices across a wide range of institutional and social contexts, including diplomacy, courts, military service, tourism, cinema, community settings, and sites of repression. Attention is also paid to the ways in which interpreting functioned not only as linguistic mediation but also as an instrument of ideological control, surveillance, and assimilation. The analysis demonstrates that interpreting in the Ukrainian SSR was rarely recognized as an autonomous profession; instead, it was frequently embedded in other roles and governed by centralized language policy that privileged Russian. The article addresses a significant gap in interpreting historiography and argues for the necessity of integrating postcolonial and pseudocolonial perspectives into the study of interpreting in imperial and post-imperial contexts.

Keywords: interpreting history; Soviet Ukraine; pseudocoloniality; interpreter invisibility; military interpreting; community interpreting; cinema interpreting; interpreter training

1. Introduction

Soviet Ukraine was not a classic colony in the traditional definition, because it officially kept the status of a union republic (the Ukrainian SSR) and had formal (sovereignty-level) institutions (a government, constitution, and even UN co-founding membership). Dependency theory is more insightful in the Soviet Ukrainian context, as it argues why economically and culturally “poor countries” were not “behind” but how

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they were actively underdeveloped by new Marxist/Socialist colonialism-imperialism. Under colonial and pseudocolonial rule, native (indigenous) languages were frequently restricted, marginalized, or punished, though outright legal bans were less common than systematic suppression. Undermining the status and authority of the Ukrainian language within the 20th century resembled the 1843 threats described for the Irish language by Thomas Osborne Davis: “To impose another language on such a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation –’tis to tear their identity from all places – ’tis to substitute arbitrary signs for picturesque and suggestive names –’tis to cut off the entail of feeling, and separate the people from their forefathers by a deep gulf –’tis to corrupt their very organs, and abridge their power of expression” (Davis 2011: 160). The repression of the language signified the gradual destruction of the nation’s collective memory and identity.

The pseudocolonial status of Soviet Ukraine has been examined through the lens of Soviet nationalities policy and linguistic imperialism (Palko 2020; Masenko 2005; Kolomiyets 2020; Odrekhivska 2025), although in translation studies it has mostly been done on the example of translation, while the present article focuses on interpreting.

Interpreting via community enterprises (courts), diplomatic relations (summits), cultural events (cinema demonstrations) boosted national self-confidence and secured its official status. The paper examines how pseudocoloniality impacted practice, institutionalization and visibility of interpreting in Soviet Ukraine. In this context, interpreting is an interesting object of research, since it exists at the intersection of language, power, diplomacy, culture and many other aspects of human life. Interpreting differs from translation in that it is situational and frequently performed in high-stakes situations.

First-hand testimonies of former practitioners further confirm that interpreting in the Ukrainian SSR occupied a paradoxical position: it was simultaneously perceived as an elite activity and structurally subordinated within Soviet hierarchies. While interpreters were granted access to high-level interactions with foreigners, they were not recognized as autonomous professionals but rather as functional extensions of state officials. We do not invoke autonomy here as a normative ideal. It is well established in the literature on diplomatic interpreting that interpreters are frequently aligned with one of the parties they serve and that strict neutrality is a contested, if not illusory, standard (Roland 1999; Gaiba 1998; Kadrić et al. 2021; Gheorghiu 2020). Our argument is different: in the Soviet Ukrainian context, subordination was not the outcome of institutional trust or party alignment in the diplomatic sense, but of ideological control and structural erasure, which is a distinctly pseudocolonial form of professional invisibility. This dual status reflects a broader pseudocolonial logic in which linguistic mediation was instrumentalized for state purposes while the mediators themselves remained deprived of symbolic and institutional capital. Such perceptions persisted across decades and domains, reinforcing the invisibility of interpreters despite their central role in cross-cultural communication (cf. Synhayivskyi 2026; Kitsyla 2026).

Despite the fact that scholars around the world have paid certain attention to the research into the history of interpreting, its history still remains incomplete, even

fragmented and is greatly focused on Western Europe. Regarding the history of interpreting in the Soviet Union, most publications focus on interpreting in Russia, while interpreting in other republics receives little attention. Ukrainian interpreters are often “hidden” behind the generalization “Soviet interpreters,” and it is difficult to find out their national identity. This article aims at making an outline history of interpreting in Soviet Ukraine in some key domains like diplomacy, courts, military contexts, and interpreter training. This history is analyzed through the prism of pseudocoloniality focusing, among other things, on the use of interpreting and the status of interpreters. The paper draws attention to the invisibility of Ukrainian interpreters in the historiographic sources.

2. Literature Review

Interpreting studies as a discipline has been shaped relatively recently. According to Gile, “the emergence of a discipline devoted to interpreting research in the 1970s is due to a large extent to the ambition and leadership of Danica Seleskovitch of Paris” (Gile 2009: 136). However, most research known widely is the research done in several European centers, while not much is known about the research published in other countries and other languages. For example, Gile (2009) claims that little is known about the research conducted in the USSR due to the lack of access to the literature published there and the language barrier. Nevertheless, he shows that out of the total number of publications worldwide, publications from the USSR constituted 5% in the 1950s, 12.5% in the 1960s, 9% in the 1970s, 1.5% in the 1980s.

Baigorri-Jalón (2015) notes that interpreters have been the subject of research in various fields, including classical studies, archaeology, diplomacy, anthropology, history, and theology. However, the research still does not provide a comprehensive history of interpreting. This could be explained by several reasons. Firstly, there is a lack of historical records, which is largely due to the fact that interpreting has long been considered not important enough to be documented. And secondly, it is the interpreters who are mainly interested in the topic, and thus the research is often done not systematically and without an in-depth understanding of historiographic methods.

Pöchhacker writes that the research on the history of interpreting came into focus of attention in the 1960s due to FIT’s efforts to improve the prestige of the interpreting profession by highlighting the role of interpreters in the history of humanity (Pöchhacker 2004: 159). The historiography of interpreting faces many difficulties because of the “evanescence” of the activity itself, as Pöchhacker calls it, as well as because of the scarcity of historical sources that could become the basis for such research. As a result, historians of interpretation are forced to reconstruct elements of history from marginal references in chronicles, correspondence, autobiographies, and literary texts across cultures. First attempts at researching the history of interpreting were focusing on Europe, mainly, however, later on Asia and Africa came into focus of attention as well (Pöchhacker 2004 : 159-160).

Interpreting and Interpreting Studies in the USSR are highly underresearched. Some attention to these matters has been paid in publications by Gelij Chernov (1992) and

his son Sergei Chernov (2016). Their work focuses on Russia, which reflects the broader asymmetry that the present paper seeks to address: the tendency for scholarship produced at the imperial center to stand as the default record, rendering the non-Russian republics peripheral or invisible by omission rather than by intent.

While interpreting studies have gradually expanded their temporal and geographical scope, the Soviet context, and especially the non-Russian republics, remains insufficiently examined. This lacuna is not merely accidental but reflects the political and linguistic asymmetries of the Soviet system. The following section examines how Ukrainian interpreters became marginalized within Soviet structures and subsequently obscured within global historiography.

The Invisibility of Ukrainian Interpreters in Soviet and Global Historiography. Pseudocoloniality in the Ukrainian SSR manifested in interpreting through a combination of a number of factors, including linguistic, professional, and others. Russian was always privileged, and the Ukrainian language and, thus, Ukrainian interpreters remained on the margins. Formally, the Soviet state promoted internationalism, but in fact, systematic Russification was taking place. According to Masenko (2005), starting from the 1930s, the state intervened directly in Ukrainian grammar, orthography, vocabulary, and terminology to align them with Russian. Distinctive Ukrainian forms were labeled “nationalist” or “fascist,” leading to censorship of dictionaries, translations, linguistic scholarship, and the repression of linguists. Lexicographical sources were required to mirror Russian norms. Ukrainian was increasingly excluded from high-prestige domains like science, administration, and education. Instead, Russian became mandatory, including in professional mediation such as interpreting. From the 1960s onward, Russification was presented as “mutual enrichment,” but in practice it remained a one-way replacement of Ukrainian norms by Russian ones. In the 1970s–1980s, Russian became the sole language of state and party communication, and Ukrainian was reduced to a marginal or symbolic role (Masenko 2005). Practical disqualification of Ukrainian from elite institutional domains functioned as a mechanism of linguistic subordination. This view is supported by the interviews (e.g. Synhayivskyi 2026).

Unfortunately, biographical and academic, as well as other official sources, frequently categorize Ukrainian interpreters under the general categories of “Soviet” or “Russian” interpreters. Consequently, the national and linguistic identity of these people is difficult to reconstruct retrospectively.

In many cases, interpreting was not recognized as a distinct occupation; instead, it was subsumed under other professional roles such as referent, guide, or military officer (Synhayivskyi 2026). This administrative erasure further complicated retrospective identification of interpreters and obscured their linguistic and national identities. The absence of formal positions labeled “interpreter” functioned as a structural mechanism that rendered the profession invisible even within the institutions that relied on it.

Saprykin and Chuzhakin indicate that during the early years of the Soviet Union, high-level interpreting was initially carried out by diplomats from the imperial era and specialists inherited from the Tsarist regime (Saprykin & Chuzhakin 2011: 15). It was only later that these roles were gradually transferred to members of the emerging Soviet intelligentsia. This transition illustrates not a democratization of interpreting but

rather a recentralization of linguistic mediation under the new imperial center. The establishment of the Translation/Interpreting Department of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1953 by direct order of Molotov further institutionalized interpreting as a state-controlled, elite service, centered mainly in Moscow (Saprykin & Chuzhakin 2011: 15).

According to available sources, interpreting at high political levels was considered to be an ideologically important activity and could only be performed by select individuals. Saprykin and Chuzhakin note that many of the interpreters who worked for figures such as Yuri Andropov were staff members of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. They were selected not just because of their linguistic competence but for reasons of ideological reliability and insider knowledge of party networks (Saprykin & Chuzhakin 2011: 19). These interpreters rarely appeared in photographs or television footage (Saprykin & Chuzhakin 2011: 19) and remained largely unknown to the general public, exemplifying the erasure of interpreters' identities despite their crucial role in political communication.

This invisibility is also reflected in Miram's reminiscences, where he writes: "Once I served as an interpreter in a Middle Eastern country, and in his reports my supervisor wrote something like this: "At present, the Office of the Economic Adviser of the USSR Embassy consists of fifteen people and two interpreters..." (Miram 2001: 177). The wording is very indicative: interpreters are counted as something separate, elements of infrastructure, which also speaks about their status within Soviet institutional hierarchies. This is also reiterated by our interviewees Lidia Kitsyla and Serhiy Synhayivskyi. Answering the question about the status of the interpreting profession, Synhayivskyi states: "Even the most insignificant official, if he found himself in a situation where he needed an interpreter to communicate with foreigners, treated the interpreter as an extension of himself, belonging to him by the right of the party's and government's high trust. This was an absolutely obvious and general rule, with only rare exceptions" (our translation from Ukrainian; Synhayivskyi 2026: 3). Kitsyla writes: "Interpreters were rather treated as service personnel. Something like: "interpreter, interpret" (this phrase has stuck in memory as a joking remark, although in fact it illustrates the "pseudo-elitism" of the profession)" (our translation from Ukrainian; Kitsyla 2026: 3).

3. Materials and Methods

Data sources

The source base for this study is deliberately pluralistic, reflecting the scarcity of official records on interpreting in Soviet Ukraine and the structural invisibility of interpreters within Soviet institutions. We drew on published academic literature in interpreting studies and Soviet-Ukrainian history; Soviet-period publications and sources published in independent Ukraine; memoirs of practitioners (e.g. Surovtsova 1996; Miram 2001); constitutional and archival documents; and original written interviews conducted with individuals who had professional experience as interpreters

in the Ukrainian SSR during Soviet times. Participants were recruited through self-enrollment following an announcement in a translator and interpreter professional group on Facebook. The interviews consisted of open-ended written questions designed to elicit reflections on professional status, linguistic practices, institutional constraints, and personal experiences of visibility and recognition within Soviet structures. The interviewees represented diverse domains of interpreting practice in the Ukrainian SSR.

The use of personal narratives and memoirs as historical data is methodologically grounded in the growing body of work on (auto)biography in translation and interpreting studies (Kaindl 2025; Kumiko 2014). Given that participants responded in writing to open-ended questions drawing on long-term professional memory, their contributions are treated here as a form of written oral history testimony, which is a practice with established methodological foundations in the field (Kumiko 2014; Footitt 2021).

Analytical framework

The methodology for examining and situating this material historically is based on the principles of climate of opinion, immanence, and adequacy, as formulated in the Ukrainian historiographic tradition (Poluzhyn 2004). These principles allow a concept or practice to be presented against the background of developments in language and literary studies, to identify its key features, and to establish connections with contemporary scholarship. This framework is combined with a pseudocolonial analytical lens, which provides the overarching interpretive structure for the findings that follow.

The following sections present the findings of this study organized by domain of interpreting practice. The authors deliberately adopt a broad overview of interpreting across multiple domains in order to avoid an overly narrow understanding of interpreting as limited exclusively to conference or court interpreting. Such an approach also responds to the concern raised by Cronin (2002), who expresses his concern about the fact that interpreting research is lacking works focusing on the interpreting function in a wide variety of social, cultural, political, and institutional contexts. By examining interpreting in diplomacy, military service, courts, cinema, community settings, and interpreter training, the article seeks to demonstrate the diversity of interpreting practices and the pervasive influence of pseudocolonial structures across these different spheres. It is important to establish the structural conditions that shaped all of these domains. Soviet language policy from the 1930s onward systematically marginalized Ukrainian in high-prestige institutional settings like administration, science, education, and professional mediation while privileging Russian as the language of state and party authority (Masenko 2005). It is within this framework of linguistic subordination that each of the domains examined below must be read. The interpreter invisibility, professional erasure, and lack of institutional recognition documented across diplomacy, courts, military service, cinema, and community settings are not coincidental features of individual domains: they are manifestations of a single pseudocolonial logic operating across the entirety of Soviet Ukrainian public life.

4. Court Interpreting

The diplomacy of the Ukrainian National Republic (1917-1921) heavily used the legacy of the Czarist regime meaning the deployment of personnel schooled in the Russian Empire. Certainly, interpreters used both Ukrainian (their native language) and Russian (the former professional language, being still visible in the transient society) as well as the language required in a specific country or for a diplomatic mission. After a long period, Ukrainian was again a language of diplomacy, Ukraine engaged vibrant international cooperation, and interpreters were unavoidable aids in all envoys, often deployed as secretaries (cf. Matiash 2019: 42, 149, 151, 209, 245, 282, 304, 309, 419, 492). However, the short-lived but dynamic history of Ukraine's independent diplomacy did not have a chance to shape a separate school of interpreters or a distinctive tradition in Ukrainian interpreting history.

Meanwhile, it prepared the general background for community interpreting which, in Soviet Ukraine, was first formalized officially as court interpreting. The first Ukrainian constitutions in the 20th century created a very general milieu of linguistic diversity, banning all types of discrimination and boosting the status of Ukrainian: Paragraphs 6 and 12 of the 1918 UNR Constitution (*Konstytutsiya* 1918), Paragraph 32 of the 1919 UkrSSR Constitution (*Konstytutsiya* 1919) and Paragraph 20 of the 1929 UkrSSR Constitution (*Konstytutsiya* 1929). During the 1920s and increasingly after the year 1930, these declarations were only imaginary, but surprisingly, the new constitution declared the deployment of an interpreter or translator (in Ukrainian, the single word 'perekladach' denotes both translators and interpreters, and a relative adjective-attribute – 'usnyi' (oral) and 'pysmovyi' (writing) – is used where the difference is important).

Thus, Paragraph 109 of the 1937 UkrSSR Constitution proclaims: "Judicial proceedings in the Ukrainian SSR are conducted in the Ukrainian language; in the Moldavian ASSR, in the Moldavian or Ukrainian language, depending on the national composition of the majority of the population of the district, with provision for persons who do not know the language of the majority to be fully acquainted with the case materials through an interpreter, as well as the right to speak in court in their native language" (*Konstytutsiya* 1937). This provision partly regularized court interpreting in the UkrSSR because of the existence of the Moldavian ASSR (1924-1940) as its integral constituent. What is significant and symbolic was the employment of the term "interpreter" in the fundamental legal charter. It was both the recognition of the profession and the raise of the professional visibility and an impact for the further development of translation and interpreting studies.

Paragraph 157 of the 1978 UkrSSR Constitution almost repeats the above clause, though without Moldavia (being a separate union republic in 1940-1991), and the provision sounds with a clearer focus of the oral component: "participation in court proceedings through an interpreter" (*Konstytutsiya* 1978). This Constitution functioned as the Constitution of Ukraine in 1991-1996. When the 1996 Ukraine Constitution was adopted, it did not preserve this formula. So, the term "interpreter" was fixed officially during 1937-1996 in Ukraine's highest legal instrument, although in reality, the conditions were not favourable for Ukrainian translation and interpreting.

Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing the right to participate in judicial proceedings through an interpreter, practical implementation remained inconsistent and largely informal. Testimonies from the late Soviet period suggest that interpreting in legal and investigative contexts was episodic and contingent rather than institutionalized. Interpreters were occasionally summoned when needed, without formal accreditation or professional safeguards, highlighting the discrepancy between declarative legal norms and actual linguistic practices within Soviet judicial and law-enforcement systems (Zayachkivska 2026: 2-3).

Beyond institutional frameworks, interpreting in the Soviet Union was shaped by adaptation, assimilation, and often the erasure of national affiliation. Those become particularly evident when examining the careers of interpreters in the imperial center.

5. The Empire's People

People from various ethnic backgrounds were frequently integrated into the imperial or metropolitan system, where professional advancement often required the suppression or abandonment of their own identity, heritage, country, culture, language, and academic traditions. A number of Ukrainians and other ethnic representatives directly connected to Ukraine are now conceptually integrated in the Russian academic tradition without any mention or contribution to Ukrainian studies and the Ukrainian academic tradition.

Albeit born in St. Petersburg, Valentyn Berezhkov (1916-1998) was of Ukrainian origin, and it is not surprising that the aftermath of Russia's Civil War was experienced by him in Ukraine where he also obtained a university degree. He is well-known as an interpreter in Soviet diplomatic missions and especially as a personal interpreter for Stalin during the 1943 Tehran Conference. His memoirs, published as books (e.g. Berezhkov), were very popular, and he described the profession of diplomatic interpreter briefly but concisely in them.

Another top-rank diplomatic interpreter was Pavel Palazhchenko (born in 1949) who interpreted for the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Although his last name sounds typically Ukrainian, he is allegedly of partly Ukrainian origin, but because of unfortunate familial conditions, he cannot claim it himself (Palazhchenko 2020). His practical books for training interpreters and translators are quite insightful but do not help Ukrainians to be Ukrainians.

Mikhail Tsvilling (1925-2013) was born in the Ukrainian city of Odesa when the city was reviving its Ukrainian identity after the collapse of the Czarist regime. He might have been of Jewish (more probable) or German (less probable) origin. His contribution to translation lexicography as well as translation and interpreting studies is great, but his writings offered room to the Ukrainian "theme."

The main pain for contemporary Ukrainians lies in the fact that people of Ukrainian origin did little to popularize Ukrainian culture or scholarship, contributed almost nothing to enhancing Ukraine's prestige, and failed to promote Ukraine-centred or Ukraine-aware academic traditions. Ukraine was largely erased from their writings – and perhaps even from their hearts. The mechanisms that facilitated such assimilation

were especially pronounced in wartime and postwar contexts, where interpreting acquired heightened strategic and political significance.

6. War, Military Interpreting, International Justice

Baigorri-Jalón (2010) writes about the role Soviet interpreters played during the Spanish Civil War, as well as in other 20th-century wars. Although the author does not explicitly mention interpreters from Soviet Ukraine, it is reasonable to assume that Ukrainian nationals were also represented there.

The problem of interpreter participation without recognition is particularly evident in wartime and postwar contexts. Records from the Nuremberg Trials indicate that Ukrainian was among the languages interpreted during the proceedings, alongside Polish, Yiddish, Hungarian, and Czech. Ukrainian-speaking defendants and witnesses were provided with consecutive interpreters, and Ukrainian was thus acknowledged (“Nuremberg Trials,” n.d.; “A War Crime,” n.d.). At the same time, Ukrainian interpreters themselves were rarely identified as such; figures like Michael Voslensky, a Ukrainian-born interpreter at Nuremberg, are typically remembered within Russian or “Soviet” historiography.

Ukrainian interpreters worked in military contexts. Military contexts were among the few domains in which systematic training in interpreting was provided. Unlike civilian educational programs, military departments focused on more practical interpreting skills and exposure to real communicative situations. Otherwise, interpreter training was limited and theory-heavy. This contrast shows the strategic value attributed to interpreting in military and geopolitical contexts. For example, Synhayivskyy, respondent in our interview, served as a military interpreter in Ethiopia (1984-87) participating in aid missions and military advisory groups (Synhayivskyy 2026: 1).

While military and diplomatic interpreting represented the most controlled and prestigious forms of linguistic mediation, other contexts reveal its coercive and punitive dimensions. Memoirs and occupation-era materials expose how interpreting functioned under conditions of repression, imprisonment, and forced labor.

7. From State Service to Captivity

The memoirs of Nadia Surovtsova¹ offer a rare insight into the everyday realities of interpreting in early Soviet Ukraine. She worked as a translator and interpreter for different bodies in the Ukrainian SSR and later became a victim of Stalinist repression. Surovtsova's example shows the interconnection between linguistic mediation and

¹ Nadiya Vitaliyivna Surovtsova (5/17 March 1896, Kyiv – April 13, 1985, Uman), Ukrainian public figure, journalist, and memoirist; editor of foreign-language publications at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian People's Republic; translator, interpreter and historian; Doctor of Philosophy; victim of Stalinist repression.

political surveillance and control. Her recollections illustrate that interpreting was often an additional, unacknowledged duty. (Surovtsova 1996: 179).

Surovtsova recalls escorting foreign delegates, interpreting political speeches at factories, and mediating spontaneous exchanges between workers and international guests (Surovtsova 1996: 193–194). Even in the Gulag, Surovtsova continued to perform interpreting functions informally, translating for fellow prisoners who did not speak Russian (Surovtsova 1996: 294). Comparable situations of interpreting under great power asymmetry is documented in Nazi concentration camps, where multilingual prisoners (it is worth noting that Ukrainians were among the prisoners as well) were forced to perform the roles of interpreters (Tryuk 2016).

The Ukrainian materials on Nazi occupation and forced labor corroborate this pattern of interpreting as an instrument of coercion, surveillance, and asymmetrical power. Archival documents and reminiscences show that translation and interpreting mediated key moments of domination: orders on the deportation of Ukrainian youth for labor in Germany were officially translated into Ukrainian. During deportation and upon arrival in Germany, communication with deportees was frequently conducted through an interpreter. At the same time, interpreters occupied an ambivalent and often morally compromised position. Testimonies from former forced laborers describe interpreters who acted as intermediaries for the Gestapo or camp authorities, collecting information, denouncing prisoners, and facilitating repression that could result in executions (Halchak 2004).

As in Surovtsova's Soviet experience and in Nazi concentration camps more broadly, linguistic mediation here was inseparable from systems of control: interpreters were embedded in mechanisms of violence, discipline, and political policing.

8. Interpreter Training

Until the late 1980s, professional training of translators and interpreters was provided only by two universities in the Ukrainian SSR – Kyiv University (now Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv) and Kharkiv University (now V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University). Having translation/interpreting departments at other educational institutions was impossible for ideological reasons (Chernovaty et al. 2021: 69). This centralized and politically controlled model was caused by broader Soviet practices, in which aspiring interpreters were typically trained in Moscow, most notably at the Moscow Pedagogical Institute for Foreign Languages, or through military programs, and were subsequently integrated into state service under the authority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Interpreter training was thus closely tied to state and diplomatic structures.

Interviewees consistently emphasized the marginal role of Ukrainian in interpreter training and the dominance of Russian as the obligatory working language. Formal instruction in interpreting techniques was minimal, and students were often expected to acquire professional competence through practice alone. This model effectively reproduced linguistic hierarchies aligned with Soviet language policy and limited the

development of Ukrainian-centered interpreting traditions (cf. Zayachkivska 2026; Kitsyla 2026; Cherednychenko 2026; Kushnirenko 2026).

The United Nations Organization subsidized Soviet training programs in the 1970s. Upon mutual agreement, Russian-language interpreting at the UN remained the exclusive domain of Soviet nationals (Roland 1999: 145-146). Only with the lifting of ideological restrictions in the late 1980s did Ukraine begin to expand its own interpreter-training capacity, which led to the establishment of translation departments across multiple universities by the mid-1990s (Chernovaty et al. 2021: 69).

9. Variety of Community Interpreting

Interpreting in Soviet Ukraine extended far beyond diplomacy and military service. Various forms of community interpreting emerged in response to social needs, linguistic diversity, and institutional gaps, often operating at the margins of official recognition. Interpreting in general and community interpreting in particular can also be viewed as having a lot of other facets, like sign language interpreting.

Sign languages are national or regional rather than universal because they are natural languages that emerge and develop within specific deaf communities. Like spoken languages, they evolve organically, acquiring their own grammar, vocabulary, and discourse conventions, and are shaped by the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which they are used. Sign languages are closely linked to the deaf cultural identity and reflect local traditions, shared experiences, and social norms. The diversity of sign languages mirrors the diversity of the communities that use them, making universal unification neither practical nor desirable. In Ukraine, the sign language has existed for more than two centuries. It first emerged within early deaf communities and in specialized educational institutions for deaf children, notably the Lviv School for Deaf Children, established in 1830, and the Odesa school, opened in 1843 (Kulbida 2004: 173). The development of Ukrainian Sign Language was abruptly disrupted during the Stalinist period. Joseph Stalin exerted a strong negative influence on the use of sign language in the educational practices of special schools. He asserted that deaf people were “abnormal” and “mute,” and claimed that their manual communication was “not a language at all, not even an ersatz language.” As a result of these views, sign languages were effectively eliminated from the teaching process in schools for the deaf for decades (op. cit.). When Soviet TV transmitted some broadcasts with sign interpretation for the whole USSR in the 1980s, it was the Russian sign language that also contributed to the union-level Russification. The Ukrainian sign language reentered the public and official use only after Ukraine’s restoration of its Independence in 1991.

10. Cinema Interpreting

As a form of translation or interpreting, cinema interpreting can be understood as a specific mode of audiovisual translation in which spoken language in a film or cinema-related event is orally translated from a source language into a target language for the

audience. Unlike written forms of film translation such as subtitling or dubbing, cinema interpreting relies on real-time oral mediation. The interpreter listens to the original dialogue or speech and immediately renders its meaning into another language, taking into account not only words, but also tone, emotion, cultural references, timing, and visual context.

Today, cinema interpreting survives mainly in specialized contexts such as film festivals, archival screenings, educational settings, and live events, including post-screening discussions and Q&A sessions. Historically, however, it represents one of the earliest forms of audiovisual translation and played a crucial role in enabling cinema to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. It was once a widespread and essential practice, particularly in the early history of film, before subtitling and dubbing became established forms of audiovisual translation. Live interpreters orally translated dialogue during screenings, particularly in multilingual societies, smaller markets, rural areas, and colonial contexts where technical resources were limited.

Empirical evidence from late Soviet Ukraine demonstrates that cinema interpreting persisted as a localized practice. In Lviv, for example, foreign-language films were interpreted by interpreters to enable their screening for mass audiences. This form of mediated access illustrates both the adaptability of cinema interpreting and its dependence on individual interpreters operating within ideologically constrained frameworks (Zayachkivska 2026: 1).

Cinema in a national language is not tolerated within the empire because it is perceived as a powerful vehicle for cultural identity and political consciousness. The authorities recognize cinema's capacity to reach mass audiences and therefore sought to control its linguistic and ideological content. Dominant languages are promoted in cinematic production and exhibition as a means of cultural standardization and political control. This policy not only limited linguistic diversity in early cinema but also shaped the development of film translation practices, such as live interpreting. Dubbing tends to be more popular in totalitarian states because it allows for greater ideological and linguistic control over audiovisual content than other forms of translation, such as subtitling. By replacing the original soundtrack entirely, dubbing enables authorities to fully rewrite dialogue, adjust tone, and eliminate undesirable meanings without the audience having access to the source language. This is why foreign films were not dubbed in Ukrainian.

11. Conclusion

Ukrainian interpreters were largely invisible in the Soviet milieu because "colonial" power structures were designed to erase local agency while maintaining control over communication. Although interpreting was essential to the functioning of administration, commerce, and culture, interpreters were rarely acknowledged as national or cultural subjects. Instead, they were positioned as neutral intermediaries serving imperial or colonial interests.

Colonial regimes deliberately avoided recognizing interpreters as representatives of national identities, since doing so would legitimize the very cultures and languages

that colonial rule sought to subordinate. Visibility of national interpreters could strengthen local authority, encourage linguistic pride, and foster political consciousness, all of which posed a threat to colonial dominance. As a result, interpreters were rendered anonymous, marginal, or replaceable, even while their labor remained indispensable.

The analysis demonstrates that interpreters occupied a paradoxical position within Soviet hierarchies. On the one hand, they were entrusted with high-stakes communicative tasks in diplomacy, military operations, courts, cinema, and international encounters. On the other hand, they remained professionally invisible, administratively erased, and linguistically constrained. Interpreting was frequently treated not as an autonomous profession but as an auxiliary function embedded within other roles, reinforcing the marginalization of both interpreters and the Ukrainian language.

The Ukrainian case illustrates how interpreting in pseudocolonial settings cannot be understood solely as a neutral communicative practice. Instead, it must be analyzed as a socially embedded activity situated at the intersection of language policy, power, identity, and resistance. Recovering the history of interpreting in Soviet Ukraine thus not only enriches interpreting studies but also contributes to postcolonial and decolonial understandings of language mediation in imperial and post-imperial contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

**AGAINST MYTHISTORY: OLEKSANDR FINKEL'S
THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TRANSLATION (1929) AND
A NON-LINEAR HISTORY OF TRANSLATION STUDIES**

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Abstract: This article reassesses Oleksandr Finkel's *Theory and Practice of Translation* (1929) as a foundational yet marginalized contribution to Translation Studies. It challenges narratives that locate the discipline's emergence in the 1970s by showing that Finkel developed a systematic, theoretically ambitious model decades earlier in the Ukrainian and early Soviet context. Through close textual analysis and historiographic reconstruction, the study demonstrates how Finkel integrated linguo-stylistic analysis, genre differentiation, and cultural-historical reflection across non-literary prose, literary prose, and verse. The article argues that his later neglect stemmed from Soviet Russocentrism and Cold War epistemic barriers, and contends that recovering Finkel enriches contemporary Translation Studies and supports a plural, non-linear historiography attentive to marginalized traditions.

Keywords: history of translation studies; institutionalization; linguo-stylistic translation theory; Oleksandr Finkel; Ukrainian *perekladoznavstvo*

1. Introduction

The historiography of Translation Studies is often organized around a dominant origin story: the discipline is said to have emerged in the early 1970s, with James S. Holmes's programmatic writings serving as a founding moment (Holmes 1972/1988a). Within this teleological account, earlier reflections on translation — especially those developed outside Anglophone and Western European centers — are frequently relegated to “pre-disciplinary” commentary and dismissed as conceptually immature or merely anecdotal (Batchelor & Odrekhivska 2026). Yet this narrative functions less as a neutral history than as a selective “mythistory” (Baer 2020), a term denoting origin narratives that consolidate power within disciplines by marginalizing non-hegemonic traditions. A non-linear historiography, by contrast, attends to multiple, parallel, and interrupted developments rather than teleological progress toward the 1970s

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“founding” moment. The result is paradoxical: a field deeply concerned with translation as a mediator of global knowledge remains structurally under-translated itself, with major theoretical traditions circulating unevenly across languages and academic contexts (Baer 2020, esp. 229–234; Mellinger & Baer 2021).

This asymmetry is particularly visible in accounts of early Soviet and Ukrainian translation scholarship. Within the Soviet Union, the tightening of Russocentric norms from the 1930s onward — intensifying after the Second World War — made citation of non-Russian scholarship politically and professionally fraught. Outside the Soviet sphere, Cold War divisions, restricted access to publications, and the enduring homogenization of “Soviet” thought limited the incorporation of Eastern European theories into Western handbooks and anthologies. Holmes himself lamented the inaccessibility of substantial Soviet scholarship (Holmes 1988b: 99). These dynamics produced a double erasure: internal Soviet structures of recognition and citation, and external mechanisms of visibility, translation, and disciplinary canonization (Hostová et al. 2024: 116–117; Kalnychenko 2025a: 188).

Oleksandr Moiseievych Finkel’ (1899–1968) exemplifies the stakes of this double erasure. A professor at Kharkiv University and a prolific scholar of stylistics and translation, he belonged to the generation of Ukrainian intellectuals who helped define the conceptual foundations of Soviet translation scholarship in the 1920s–1930s (Baer 2024). Yet his work remains absent from internationally circulating histories of the field. The symptomatic nature of this absence is signaled by the title of his posthumous Ukrainian collection, *Zabutyi teoretyk ukrayinskoho perekladoznavstva* (A Forgotten Theoretician of Ukrainian Translation Studies) (Chernovatyi et al. 2007), prepared by Leonid Chernovatyi, Vyacheslav Karaban, Valeriy Podminohin, Oleksandr Kalnychenko, and Vitaliy Radchuk. His most significant contribution, the monograph *Teoriya y praktyka perekladu* (Theory and Practice of Translation) (Finkel’ 1929b), stands out for its early date and the breadth and systematicity of its theoretical ambition.

This article reconsiders *Teoriya y praktyka perekladu* as evidence that sophisticated translation theory existed well before the field’s formal naming in English in the 1970s. Finkel extends translation theory beyond literature to what he calls “non-literary prose,” offering a typology that differentiates scholarly, administrative, and journalistic discourse and grounding this in contemporary linguistic thinking, including ideas associated with Charles Bally’s stylistics (Bally 1909; Finkel 1929b). The monograph addresses themes central to later Translation Studies — translation’s cultural-historical impact, stylistic equivalence, the history of translational methods, the tension between Classicist and Romantic views, and “Humboldt’s dilemma” — while its organization, moving from theoretical foundations to analyses of prose genres, literary prose, and verse, reveals a synthetic model of translation as both culturally embedded and technically analyzable.

Re-reading Finkel clarifies a broader historiographic issue: many developments associated with post-1970s “turns,” including sociological perspectives, institutional analysis, epistemic plurality, and translation’s role in cultural power, have clear antecedents in earlier traditions. While the cultural turn expanded the field’s scope, it also marginalized linguistically informed scholarship and reinforced the assumption

that theoretical maturity required a rupture with pre-1970s paradigms (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990; Hermans 1999). Finkel's work challenges this narrative by integrating linguistic, stylistic, and cultural-sociological approaches. This study pursues three aims: situating the monograph within Ukrainian and early Soviet intellectual history; reconstructing its conceptual architecture in relation to contemporaneous European theory; and arguing that recovering Finkel requires interepistemic translation rather than mere terminological transfer. While previous scholarship has valuably recovered his biography and key ideas (Kolomiyets 2010; Rysicz-Szafraniec 2021; Shmiher 2009, 2024), the present article offers the first sustained English-language close reading of the full 1929 monograph's architecture and reframes it through the lenses of mythistory (Baer 2020) and non-linear historiography to challenge the discipline's dominant origin narrative.

Methodologically, the article combines close reading of Finkel's text with contextual disciplinary analysis. In doing so, it contributes to efforts to reconceive Translation Studies as a plural, non-linear field whose history is shaped by contingent practices of inclusion and exclusion.

2. The Institutionalization of Translation Studies in Ukraine through the Lens of Disciplinarity (Late 1920s–Early 1930s)

Reconsidered through Daniel Gile's criteria for a modern academic discipline (Gile 2012, 2013; Baer 2024), the institutionalization of translation studies in Ukraine during the late 1920s and early 1930s emerges as a remarkably complete — though short-lived — disciplinary formation. Within a narrow historical window, Ukrainian translation culture fulfilled all four defining characteristics of disciplinarity: systematic theorization, disciplinary self-consciousness, institutionalized training and research, and a distinct disciplinary name.

The period marked a decisive shift from sporadic commentary to sustained, methodologically articulated theorization (Shmiher 2009; Kalnychenko 2017, 2023). Volodymyr Derzhavyn contributed significantly through reviews and theoretical articles (1927–1931) that introduced the influential distinction between “homologous” (translation-stylization) and “analogous” translation, enabling comparative evaluation beyond individual cases (Kalnychenko & Poliakova 2015; Kalnychenko 2025a). Oleksandr Finkel strengthened the field's scientificity by extending translation theory beyond literature to scientific and technical texts, seeking general principles of equivalence, accuracy, and textual function across genres — an approach aligned with Gile's understanding of scientificity (Gile 2013). Mykola Zerov reconceptualized Ukrainian literary history by integrating translation as an essential component of the national literary process. He proposed a genre-based periodization (travesty, translation-travesty, and translation proper) and established rigorous criteria for verse translation based on stylistic unity, linguistic precision, and aesthetic adequacy (Bryska 2017; Kolomiyets et al. 2026; Shmiher 2009). Through criticism, textbooks, and his 1932/33 lecture course “Methodology and Methods of Translation” (Kolomiyets 2020, 2023), Zerov articulated foundational principles, distinguishing translation as process

and product, separating history from theory and methodology, and emphasizing translators' role in shaping the target language.

Ukrainian translation studies also exhibited strong disciplinary self-consciousness. Scholars reflected not only on methods (e.g., Ivan Kulyk, Hryhorii Maifet, Yurii Savchenko) but on the nature, cultural role, and future of the field. The late-1920s translation boom helped reassess Ukrainian's linguistic and cultural status, replacing skepticism about its suitability for world literature with confidence in its artistic and intellectual capacity (Oleksandr Biletskyi, Yelyzaveta Starynkevych). University syllabi explicitly included the history of translation studies, signaling advanced disciplinary awareness (Dzhuhastrianska & Strikha 2015; Kolomiyets 2020, 2023).

The most concrete institutional step was the founding of the Ukrainian Institute of Linguistic Education in 1930 in Kyiv, with a branch in Kharkiv (Kalnychenko & Kamovnikova 2020; Kalnychenko 2025b). Translation was integrated into higher education through formal curricula, defined competencies, and research-oriented teaching, supported by journals, reviews, and publishing programs. Within this framework, the discipline gained the stable designation *perekladoznavstvo* ("translation studies"), documented in syllabi by Mykhailo Kalynovych (1932) and Mykola Zerov (1932) (Dzhuhastrianska & Strikha 2015; Kolomiyets 2020, 2023). Finkel's *Teoriya y praktyka perekladu*, the first book-length theoretical study of translation in Eastern Europe, reinforced this consolidation by framing translation as an autonomous, systematic field of inquiry. Viewed through Gile's criteria, early Ukrainian *perekladoznavstvo* represents a fully realized disciplinary formation, interrupted not by conceptual immaturity but by political repression.

3. Oleksandr Finkel as a Pioneer of Ukrainian Translation Theory

Oleksandr Finkel (1899–1968) was a major Ukrainian linguist, translation theorist, translator, and educator whose intellectual career was closely associated with Kharkiv. Widely known in the Soviet period as co-author of the literary parody collection *Parnas dybom* [Parnassus Upside Down], as the translator into Russian of all 154 Shakespearean sonnets, and as co-author (with N. M. Bazhenov) of the university textbook *A Course in the Modern Russian Literary Language*, he also published extensively on linguistics and translation while authoring influential Russian language textbooks. After graduating from the Kharkiv Institute of Public Education (the reorganized Kharkiv University) and completing postgraduate training in linguistics in 1928, Finkel held teaching and research posts at several Kharkiv institutions, including the Institute of Foreign Languages. His scholarly formation coincided with the vibrant 1920s Ukrainian intellectual climate in which translation occupied a central cultural role; his own engagement with translation theory began with his first article in 1922 (Finkel 1922).

Finkel's most significant achievement was *Teoriya y praktyka perekladu* (1929), the first systematic Ukrainian-language monograph devoted exclusively to translation. This work laid the foundations for translation studies as an autonomous discipline in Ukraine and, more broadly, in Eastern Europe. Combining theoretical reflection with

detailed analyses of non-literary prose, literary prose, and poetry, Finkel developed a linguo-stylistic approach grounded in stylistic equivalence, text-type differentiation, and historically conditioned criteria of translation quality. The book rapidly gained institutional recognition and became the theoretical basis for translation courses by Mykhailo Kalynovych, Mykola Zerov, and later Dmitrii Usov in Moscow (Kalnychenko & Kamovnikova 2020; Kalnychenko 2025b). Another pioneering strand of his work concerned self-translation (Kalnychenko & Kamovnikova 2019), beginning with his 1929 study of H. F. Kvitka-Osnovianenko's self-translations and continuing in his 1939 candidate dissertation (Finkel 1939b). He further developed these ideas in his 1962 Russian-language paper "Ob avtoperevode" (Finkel 1962), later published in English translation preceded by a scholarly introduction by the present author (Kalnychenko 2021; Finkel & Bullock 2021). In the 1960s, Finkel further refined his ideas, including attempts to develop quantitative methods for assessing translational closeness.

After Finkel's death, Ieremiia Aizenshtok (1970) offered both a personal and scholarly assessment of his contribution. Since the 2007 republication of his key works, Finkel's legacy has been reassessed by Shmiher (2004, 2009, 2024), Kolomiyets (2010), and Rysicz-Szafraniec (2021), who establish him as a foundational figure in Ukrainian translation studies and a precursor to later linguo-stylistic, comparative-historical, and quantitative approaches. While these studies provide valuable systematizations of his oeuvre, highlight innovations in self-translation and quantitative methods, or offer detailed readings of the 1929 monograph's theoretical core, the present article advances a distinctly historiographic argument: Finkel's work exemplifies a fully institutionalized, linguo-stylistically grounded *perekladoznavstvo* already in the late 1920s–early 1930s, thereby necessitating a non-linear, plural understanding of Translation Studies' emergence and challenging the persistent "mythistory" (Baer 2020) centered on Holmes and the 1970s.

4. Oleksandr Finkel's *Theory and Practice of Translation: Structure and Theoretical Premises*

Oleksandr Finkel's *Teoriya y praktyka perekladu* (1929), first published in Ukrainian by the State Publishing House of Ukraine (DVU) in Kharkiv, occupies a foundational place in early Ukrainian translation theory. Reissued in 2007 as part of the collection *Oleksandr Finkel – zabutyi teoretyk ukrainskoho perekladoznavstva* [Oleksandr M. Finkel — A Forgotten Theoretician of Ukrainian Translation Studies] (Chernovatyi et al 2007), the monograph offers a comprehensive view of his scholarly legacy.

Designed to move from general theory to specific practice, the book integrates historical, theoretical, and applied perspectives across four parts. Part One establishes conceptual foundations, addressing translation's cultural-historical significance, stylistic challenges, Classicist and Romantic theories, Humboldt's dilemma, and the translation process. Part Two broadens the scope to non-literary prose—scholarly, administrative, and journalistic—focusing on terminology, syntax, and functional differentiation. This genre-sensitive expansion beyond literature, underexplored in

prior scholarship, demonstrates Finkel's contribution to a broadly applicable theory decades before Western functionalism. Part Three examines literary prose, including synonymy, realia, tropes, and syntax, while Part Four presents a tripartite model (phonological, semantic, syntactic) for verse translation assessment.

In the preface, Finkel stresses the need for systematic theory amid expanding translation activity and uneven quality. The book does not prescribe rigid rules but clarifies problems and illustrates solutions through contemporary practice; these ideas were later refined in his 1939 article, which foregrounds the historicity of accuracy and equivalence and articulates principles of translation multiplicity and text-type-dependent adequacy (Finkel 1939a; Shmiher 2024).

The detailed reconstruction in the following sections, while necessarily descriptive in places, offers a sustained close reading of the monograph's deliberate architecture—the systematic progression from theory through non-literary prose, literary prose, and verse. This structural fidelity highlights Finkel's methodical ambition and provides a more comprehensive account of its genre-sensitive, linguo-stylistic coherence than prior scholarship (Kolomiyets 2010; Rysicz-Szafraniec 2021; Shmiher 2009, 2024), especially when viewed through non-linear historiographic lenses.

4.1 Part One (“Theory”)

Section I: The Cultural-Historical and Artistic-Literary Impact of Translations

Finkel defines translation's primary goal as introducing one language community to works produced in another. This goal stems from both practical-social needs (administration, science, public instruction) and aesthetic-literary ones; interliterary exchange is therefore constant. Periods of accelerated borrowing, such as Russia's Petrine era, merely dramatize an ongoing enrichment of lexicon, forms, and stylistic repertoires. Early phases typically prioritize “state-significant” literature (technical, administrative, instructional), while artistic translation consolidates and expands the target language's poetic resources. Historical testimonies — from Cicero and Quintilian to Humboldt's preface to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, as well as Russian classicists and Ukrainian writers such as Panteleimon Kulish and Mykhailo Starytsky — illustrate how translation refines style and imports formal resources into the receiving tradition.

Section II: The Stylistic Aspect of the Problem of Translation

Against naïve one-to-one transfer (the Septuagint legend), Finkel argues that the true difficulty begins beyond the word. Following Potebnia (1867/1993), he notes that individual words usually have lexical counterparts; the real challenge arises at the level of the linguistic work, as languages share communicative functions but differ in structural means (lexicon, syntax, metrics). Human language serves two broad functions: communicative-cognitive (oriented toward clarity and precision through “constructive” phenomena) and artistic-expressive (realized through system-relative deviations that produce stylistic “surplus”). Since thematic content is in principle transferable, the essence of translation difficulty lies in stylistic reproduction: finding adequate stylistic means in the target language while respecting the source text's

thematics. Translation is thus the art of reproducing stylistic features under thematic constraints.

Section III: Methods of Resolving the Problem through History

Finkel shows that multiple methods have coexisted historically. Beyond extremes such as transcription or strictly literal mimicry, there are free translations and paraphrases (e.g., Cicero). Tycho Mommsen's triad — (1) "styleless" translation (content without aesthetic form), (2) original creation in a foreign style (imitation), and (3) "strict/stylistic" translation (faithful in both form and content) — clarifies that (1) and (3) constitute translation proper, while (2) is imitation. He critiques Fedor Batyushkov's staged schema (dominant nations translate freely, subordinate nations slavishly, and peers aim at adequacy), noting that it fails even for Russian classicists, whose practice oscillates between freedom and exactitude.

Section IV Classicist and Romantic Theories of Translation

Finkel proposes that translation methods correlate with broader poetic worldviews. Eighteenth-century Classicism — grounded in normative poetics and belief in absolute aesthetic values — legitimates "corrective" translation, allowing the translator to improve a text deemed an approximation of the ideal. Romanticism, by contrast, reorients toward individuality, national specificity, and historical consciousness, demanding preservation of the concrete work and author with all their idiosyncrasies. The Romantics (Schlegel, Tieck, Humboldt, Schleiermacher) reframed translation theory by making accuracy central and shifting focus to the limits of precision, interlingual relations, and quality. After Romanticism, no fundamentally new principled positions emerged; later developments remained largely technical. Since modern linguistics and literary studies arose within Romantic paradigms, Finkel concludes that contemporary translation should largely adopt Romantic positions.

Section V: Humboldt's Dilemma

Finkel revisits Humboldt's "basic problem of all translation": translators oscillate between clinging to the original at the cost of the target language or adhering to domestic norms at the cost of the original. For Finkel, the dilemma is stylistic, not thematic. The dispute clusters around two poles: primacy of foreign stylistics (foreignizing stylization) vs. primacy of domestic stylistics (domesticating analogues). Romantics tended toward foreignization (e.g., Schleiermacher, Humboldt); later practice often favors domestication, especially aiming at thematic equivalence and comparable reader effect (e.g., Wilamowitz Moellendorff).

Section VI: The Culturo-Sociological Dimension

No absolute opposition exists: both extremes undermine translation's purpose. Foreignizing stylization risks "exoticism" and parody; radical domestication risks erasing national and individual character. The translator must navigate cultural distance, recognizing that tropes and stylistic devices carry culturally specific content. "Accuracy" is composite, encompassing both technical reproduction and the transmission of cultural aspects. Temporal and cultural differences complicate transfer, and false proximity poses dangers even between related languages.

Section VII: Thematics and Stylistics: Stages of the Translation Process

For Finkel, legitimate translation preserves both thematics (content) and stylistics (aesthetic system). Transfer of content alone is retelling; transfer of style alone is imitation. Perfect restoration is unattainable; translators must make informed choices rather than invoke the work's "spirit." The "cultured translator" undertakes rigorous hermeneutic preparation — verbal, historical, and technical—grasps authorial intent, and systematically searches for stylistic equivalents within the target language's resources. Arbitrary omissions or additions are condemned. This groundwork motivates the book's architecture: separate treatments of non-literary prose, literary prose, and verse translation, each reflecting distinct methodological centers yet sharing core principles.

In sum, Part One presents translation as a culturally embedded, stylistically governed craft.

4.2. Part Two: The Translation of Non-literary Prose

As part of broader Soviet efforts to theorize scholarly translation — driven by the multilingual dissemination of Marxist-Leninist texts — *Teoriya y praktika perekladu* extended translation theory beyond literary and sacred works to non-literary prose (Baer 2024: 17; Baer & Hofeneder 2025: 319). Finkel argued that non-literary translation is both socially significant and theoretically complex (Finkel 1929: 45). Drawing on Charles Bally, he distinguished scholarly and administrative texts and added journalistic prose as a distinct category for analysis (Finkel 1929b: 47–48, 51).

Section I: Prose Genres

Translation theory has long privileged literary texts. Finkel rejects the notion that prose translation is mere "content transfer." Because function shapes linguistic form, a systematic approach begins with genre differentiation. Prose is primarily constructive language oriented toward clarity and knowledge transmission; over time, each genre develops characteristic lexis, syntax, and phraseology. He identifies three main types: scholarly (focused on knowledge and proof, emphasizing terminological precision), administrative (regulative and operative, with specialized clerical style), and journalistic (a hybrid genre with internal variation). Each demands genre-sensitive translation strategies.

Section II: Scholarly (and Scientific) Prose. Terminology and Lexicon

Adequate translation requires lexical resources (or language planning), strong bilingual competence, and disciplinary knowledge — translation is interpretation before re-expression. Terminology represents the ultimate test of precision: terms are generally stable and often international, so transcription is preferred unless established equivalents exist. Forced national neologisms and competing variants are discouraged. Beyond terms, consistency in scientific lexicon is essential; synonymy and paraphrase risk blurring meaning and ethics, sliding translation toward retelling.

Section III: Syntax

Scientific syntax is “constructive” and oriented toward clarity. It should be rendered through natural target-language forms rather than calqued patterns. A scientific translation should not betray its source language while still preserving the author’s individual traits within the register. Intervention is justified when the original syntax is disruptive; otherwise, excessive restructuring risks undue adaptation. Because syntax encodes logical structure, altering connectors or clause relationships can distort reasoning — making syntactic fidelity as vital as terminological accuracy.

Section IV: Types of Administrative Prose

Legal texts are conservative and rely on frozen formulae; translators should follow authoritative standardization and avoid inventing competing terms. Common failures include inconsistent terminology, arbitrary variation in connectors, and “free” renderings that resemble commentary. Clerical and business prose center on phraseology: word-for-word calques produce unnatural constructions, so source templates should be replaced with functional target-language equivalents. Proclamations and manifestos form a subtype in which rhetorical force brings administrative translation closer to literary translation.

Section V: Journalism – Conclusions

Journalism is stylistically diverse and individualized. Translators must first identify the dominant tendency — scientific-expository, literary, or colloquial — and apply the corresponding principles. Edited speeches usually present no special difficulty; functional equivalence is crucial in politeness formulae and correspondence. Non-literary prose is not “easy”: its difficulty lies in the tight coupling of function and form, which demands fidelity to terminology, logic, and phraseology.

4.3 Part Three: The Translation of Literary Prose

Section I: General Remarks

Finkel maintains that literary prose is inherently more demanding to translate than nonfiction because of its dense stylistic texture and aesthetic organization, in which every linguistic choice may serve an artistic function. As a result, oppositions such as fidelity to the work versus reworking, or preservation of foreign style versus domestic replacement, become particularly sharp. Authentic literary translation requires semantic, technical, and historical interpretation as well as acute stylistic awareness; the assumption that prose is easier than poetry is false.

Section II: The Individual Word – Synonymy

Each word may carry aesthetic value; even slight semantic inaccuracies can weaken the overall effect. Translators must preserve synonymic variation and avoid approximate equivalents, inconsistent mappings, and paraphrase. In prose, semantic precision takes precedence over euphony.

Section III: Words with a Social Function – Couleur Locale

Finkel identifies socially, culturally, and historically specific words as one of the central challenges of literary translation. Greetings, forms of address, titles, professions, institutions, and other culture-bound items become problematic because stylistically neutral terms in the source language often turn into marked “barbarisms” in translation, unintentionally acquiring artistic weight and disrupting the original balance. He outlines three basic strategies — functional substitution with a domestic equivalent, literal translation or calque, and transcription — none of which is universally valid. Excessive domestication erases cultural specificity, while overuse of transcription turns literature into ethnography. Rejecting rigid rules, Finkel advocates case-by-case decisions based on cultural distance, the familiarity of realia, and potential false associations for target readers. His pragmatic approach — rejecting both radical domestication and exoticism—anticipates later realia theories (e.g., Vlahov & Florin 1990) but embeds them within a broader stylistic-functional framework.

Section IV: Words with an Aesthetic Function

Finkel examines words that perform an aesthetic function and distinguishes two principal mechanisms: change of designation without change of meaning (archaisms, neologisms, barbarisms, foreign insertions) and change of meaning (tropes). Stylistic contrast should be preserved: archaisms should be rendered with equivalent temporal distance in the target language, and neologisms should be kept when they express authorial individuality. Foreign words (barbarisms) and quotations usually remain unchanged. Dialect requires special care: because its effect depends on contrast with the standard, Finkel recommends rendering it as non-standard colloquial speech with minimal local color — a view later echoed by Kornei Chukovsky.

Section V: Slang Words, Stylistically Marked Expressions

Socially marked language—slang, vulgarisms, and professional jargon — must not be “cleaned up,” as such practices distort both style and reality. Finkel criticizes translators who elevate low registers to neutral or high style, citing numerous examples where expressive force is lost. Insults, curses, and expletives are culturally specific; full substitution often falsifies tone, while literalism may jar. He allows transcription or literal translation with minimal explanation, prioritizing functional accuracy. Professional jargon is usually translatable, and precision is essential because it contributes to realism.

Section VI: Tropes

Finkel classifies tropes as quantitative shifts (e.g., hyperbole), qualitative shifts (metaphor, irony), and combined shifts (idioms, puns). Quantitative tropes should be preserved without reduction. Qualitative tropes are generally translatable through careful equivalents, with notes where needed. Combined shifts are the most culture-bound: literal translation with commentary or carefully managed foreignness is preferable to flattening meaning. Puns are often untranslatable; inventing new ones should be exceptional, although later scholarship emphasizes recreating their function when the form cannot be retained.

Section VII: Syntax

Syntax expresses relations, not merely meanings; direct transfer is impossible. Translators should seek functional equivalents in target-language constructions that fulfill the same aesthetic role. Particular attention must be paid to sentence length, word order, coordination and subordination, parallelism, repetition, and rhetorical figures. Splitting or merging sentences and ignoring anaphora can cumulatively deform style.

Section VIII: Paraphrasing, Additions, and Omissions

Paraphrase is the most harmful tendency: minor adjustments easily become systematic amplification, simplification, or omission. Treating plot as primary encourages “improvement” and turns translation into retelling. Faithful prose translation remains possible as an artistic act attentive to every formal level; the danger lies in the translator’s license, not the reader’s difficulty. The goal should be maximal preservation of aesthetic structure, with acceptance of inevitable losses but without compensatory distortion.

4.4 Part Four: Verse Translation

Finkel maintains that prose and poetry share an ethic of fidelity, but verse is more demanding because semantic, syntactic, and phonological parameters must align. While lexico-semantic and many syntactic requirements carry over from prose, verse-specific features — euphony, rhyme, meter, stanza, and enjambment — require strict attention. Permissive habits, such as semantic drift in prose or formal liberties in verse, are errors. Finkel’s tripartite model (phonological–semantic–syntactic) prefigures later systemic approaches (e.g., Lefevere’s seven strategies) while remaining grounded in stylistics, thereby complicating narratives that dismiss linguistically oriented theory as inherently pre-theoretical.

Section I: Introductory Notes, Morphological Features

Morphological markers (e.g., diminutives) should be preserved when they carry meaning. Source-language word formation should not be calqued unless it has aesthetic value in the target language. Genre traditions (e.g., Homeric compounds) should be respected without lapsing into mannerism.

Section II: Euphony

Euphony consists of organized sound patterning (alliteration, assonance, instrumentalization). Exact replication is rare across distant languages; the translator’s obligation is to convey deliberate, structurally salient patterns using target-language resources, avoiding invented ornamentation.

Section III: Rhyme and Stanzas

Rhyme should be reproduced where present, with priority given to type and function rather than strict sound identity (e.g., avoid routine verb rhymes if the poet did not use them). Stanzaic architecture — line count, rhyme scheme, and masculine/feminine

endings — must be preserved. Free verse does not license added rhyme, and classical unrhymed meters raise distinct issues.

Section IV: Meter and Rhythm

Two problems dominate: alien metrical systems and the preservation of shared meters. Finkel advocates preserving the original meter, as altering it lacks principled limits and invites arbitrariness. Rhythm (cadence) is a distinct element and equally binding; changing cadence can harm the poem even when foot patterns match.

Section V: Textual Accuracy

Translators must respect verse-specific syntax and the alignment or misalignment of syntactic and metrical units. Enjambment, parallelism, and chiasmus carry rhythmic and rhetorical force and should be preserved where grammar permits. While absolute exactitude is difficult, large semantic shifts or overly comfortable domestications erode the boundary between translation and variation.

Section VI: Analysis of Translations

In his analysis of a Russian translation of Pavlo Tychyna's *Wind from Ukraine*, Finkel demonstrates how losses in iambic structure, rhyme chains, and syntax accumulate. His corrective rendering shows that stricter fidelity is both attainable and preferable.

Section VII: Conclusions

A poem is not merely a sum of devices; without disciplined fidelity to its stylistic system, cultural meaning is lost. Translators must identify the work's dominant features and avoid normalization. When trade-offs are necessary, they should aim for the minimum acceptable loss across content and form, privileging stylistic integrity. Bold, exacting translations that preserve foreignness are preferable to timid, homogenizing ones.

This architectural coherence, as demonstrated above, underscores the monograph's status as a mature, systematic contribution to translation theory.

5. Conclusion

This article argues that Oleksandr Finkel's *Teoriya y praktyka perekladu* (1929b) necessitates a fundamental revision of Translation Studies' canonical origin story. Situated within its Ukrainian and early Soviet institutional context, the monograph demonstrates that a systematic, methodologically explicit translation theory existed decades before the field's formal naming in the 1970s. By integrating cultural-historical reflection with linguo-stylistic analysis and a genre-sensitive account spanning non-literary prose, literary prose, and verse, Finkel dissolves later oppositions between linguistics and culture, prose and poetry, or "pre-theoretical" commentary and modern theory. His historically conditioned notion of equivalence, typology of non-literary prose, functional treatment of syntax and tropes, analysis of socially marked lexis, and ethical critique of paraphrase together form a coherent research

program rather than *ad hoc* advice. Reconstructing this program also reveals how Soviet Russocentrism and Cold War geopolitics produced a double erasure that obscured Finkel's influence. Recovering his work broadens the discipline's methodological repertoire and supports a plural, non-linear historiography in which Ukrainian *perekladoznavstvo* emerges as a central, not peripheral, tradition. Unlike earlier recuperative efforts focused on internal Ukrainian developments or specific theoretical tenets, this article uses Finkel to intervene in contemporary disciplinary self-understanding. Through close structural and conceptual analysis, it demonstrates how early Eastern European scholarship already integrated linguistic, stylistic, genre-sensitive, and cultural-sociological dimensions—anticipating later “turns” while remaining firmly embedded in its historical moment.

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BEFORE ANTON POPOVIČ: SILENCED VOICES OF SLOVAK TRANSLATION STUDIES

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Abstract: This article examines the formative but largely overlooked contributions of Zora Jesenská and Jozef Felix to the emergence of Slovak Translation Studies prior to the work of Anton Popovič. Situating their ideas within the political and cultural constraints of twentieth-century Slovakia, the study demonstrates how their practice-based reflections on translation anticipated key concepts later systematized by Popovič. By contextualizing their work within the socialist period and its ideological interventions, the article highlights these silenced voices as crucial predecessors whose theoretical and practical insights significantly shaped the development of Slovak Translation Studies.

Keywords: Nitra School; Slovak Translation Studies; Soviet-era translation theories; silenced voices

1. Introduction

Due to Slovakia's position in Central Europe, the country exhibits several specific characteristics that have shaped its translation landscape. Slovak translation historian Bednářová (2014) notes that these characteristics are closely linked to shifts in the geopolitical context and are therefore most clearly manifested in relation to the 'political gesture' that has profoundly influenced Slovakia's cultural, literary, and translational history. Systematic reflections on translation began to develop already in the first half of the twentieth century, most often articulated by translators with a philological background. Among the most prominent figures from the 1930s and 1940s – and especially the 1960s – were Zora Jesenská and Jozef Felix, whose approaches to translation will be examined in greater detail in the present study.

From the 1950s onward, the principles of translation were increasingly articulated through an emphasis on a conscious and methodologically grounded approach. Drawing on Russian formalism (Jakobson) and Czech and Slovak structuralism (Mukařovský, Bakoš), translation theory gradually moved to the forefront of these discussions. Rather than focusing primarily on how translation mediates contact

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between two national literatures, scholars began to examine how a text is transferred from its original linguistic form into another language and what characterizes translated text (Valentová 2017: 50). In this period, two centres of translation thought emerged, in Slovak cities of Nitra and Bratislava. The Nitra School – represented primarily by Anton Popovič and František Miko – developed text theory from the perspective of communication and a theory of literary translation. The Slovak school of translation was associated with Bratislava and based its research on translations from Russian.

Anton Popovič (1933–1984) is known as one the most influential translation scholars internationally, and he remains the best-known representative of Slovak Translation Studies abroad (e.g. Bassnett-McGuire 1980; Stecconi 2007; Špirk 2009). Popovič foregrounded the semiotic, intercultural, and sociological dimensions of translation, thereby anticipating many features of contemporary translation studies (Gromová 2014). He developed the so-called communicative model of translation and significantly expanded Catford's originally linguistic concept of shifts to encompass textual, literary, and cultural differences, as well as 'expressive changes' (Popovič 1975, 1976). The term refers to changes in stylistic qualities in the target text occurring at the microstylistic level as a result of the translation process. These changes enable reflections on the stylistic unity of source and target texts, that is, the stylistic differences between the original and the translation. The three main categories are expressive emphasis, expressive correspondence, and expressive reduction.

Popovič's concepts were articulated primarily in *Preklad a výraz* [Translation and Expression] (1968) and *Poetika umeleckého prekladu* [The Poetics of Artistic Translation] (1971) and reached its most mature formulation in *Teória umeleckého prekladu* [The Theory of Artistic Translation] (1975).¹ This framework continues to be studied and applied in Slovak Translation Studies, particularly in translation criticism and in comparative analysis (Valentová and Čechová 2015, Bednářová 2017). Many of Popovič's concepts have become firmly embedded in translation discourse, forming a distinct scholarly tradition (e.g. Vilikovský 1984; Valcerová 2006).

What is less frequently emphasized, however, is that Popovič also drew substantial inspiration from scholars and translators working on Russian and Romance literature. Through these influences, theoretical reflection on translation in Slovakia developed largely in connection with translation of poetry, which represented both the most common and the most prestigious form of translation in the Slovak context. The most substantial and analytically precise contributions in this area were authored by practitioners who combined translation with theoretical reflections, most notably Jesenská and Felix.

This paper acknowledges Popovič's Slovak predecessors and sources of inspiration as scholars whose work significantly shaped his understanding of translation as a creative process. Active mostly during the socialist period, these scholars engaged in reflections on existing translations grounded in their own practice and translation

¹ These works demonstrate the close interconnectedness between Popovič's research and the scholarship of Czech theorists (Levý, Vodička, Hausenblas, Čermák), Polish scholars (Balcerzan, Sławiński, Głowiński), Soviet theorists (Revzin, Rozenčevjg, Fiodorov, Etkind, Gačečiladze, Lotman), Ukrainian theory (Finkel'), as well as, in the case of his later monographs, Bulgarian (Ljudskanov) and some Western approaches (Catford, Nida, Mounin, Holmes, Reiss).

criticism. Their writing, though primarily essayistic rather than systematic or scientific like Popovič's texts, nonetheless displays clear conceptual affinities with his terminology. Direct references to these 'silenced voices' in Slovak Translation Studies (TS) remain sporadic, largely due to the political restrictions that partially or entirely limited their professional activities.

This paper focuses on aspects directly related to Popovič's later work. The aim is to highlight the significance of figures who, unlike Popovič, remain largely unknown internationally and are insufficiently recognized in the domestic context (Zambor 2000; Maliti-Frašňová 2007), yet whose contributions to the field of translation studies merit acknowledgment and should no longer remain 'silenced.' Before examining the key ideas of Jesenská and Felix, the paper offers an overview of the Slovak historical context, focusing on the period preceding socialism and the socialist era itself. Although brief, this period is essential for understanding the broader historical circumstances that significantly shaped the professional careers of both theorists, as will be demonstrated in the penultimate section. At the same time, it helps to clarify the consequences of these events for translation practice and the social status of translators, while also explaining the exclusion and silencing of voices that played a crucial role in the development of TS in Slovakia.

2. A Brief Overview of Slovak History during the Socialist Period

Throughout the 20th century, translation practices in Slovakia were directly impacted by shifting political ideologies until the Velvet revolution of 1989. These shaped the country's cultural orientation, often resulting in the simple fact of non-translation; regulated the character and direction of translated literature; influenced translation decisions, including text selection and translation strategies; compromised textual integrity through censorship; erased parts of the existing translation corpus; and disrupted the continuity of translation development (Bednářová 2015). At the same time, it significantly affected the visibility, agency, and professional opportunities of intellectuals.

Despite these limitations, the cultural impact of translation and translation theory expanded and gradually became more emancipated over the course of the 20th century. Several milestones crucial to the development of literary translation and Slovak literature coincided with major political transformations. During the first Slovak Republic (1939–1945), translation activity was subjected to strong ideological pressures. Official cultural policy sought to regulate artistic production, including translation as a key medium of contact between Slovak culture and foreign literatures, by promoting nationalist attitudes and conservative traditionalism. This pressure manifested primarily in the selective control of themes, ideas, and authors, as well as in efforts to construct a nationalist concept of Slovak culture (Bednářová 2014, 2015; see also Djovčoš and Laš 2022).

Following the February coup of 1948, the communist regime consolidated its control. Between 1949 and 1989, Slovak literature was incorporated into a system of politically and ideologically regulated culture that mandated the principles of socialist

realism, along with the protection of its ideological ‘purity’ and proclaimed progressiveness. The year 1949 marked the culmination of the institutional restructuring of cultural life and ushered in the repressive 1950s, characterized by severe political pressure and far-reaching ideological constraints on culture.

Bednářová (2015) notes that political interventions and censorship after World War II intensified in successive waves that shaped the subsequent four decades up to 1989. Although four decades may seem a relatively short span in the history of translation as a cultural phenomenon, in the Slovak context nearly each decade constituted a distinct constellation, marked by continual change and repeated shifts in political conditions.

Between 1949 and 1956, translations of Russian and Soviet literature, along with works from other countries of the so-called socialist camp, became a dominant publishing priority (Marčok et al. 2006). While this period produced several high-quality translations of canonical texts, it also generated a considerable body of mediocre translations. This was largely a consequence of the early deployment of young and inexperienced translators, compelled to translate many ideologically prescribed works within a limited time frame. Long-standing calls for the development of a theory of literary translation and for sustained attention to translator education – already articulated at the end of the 1930s – gained renewed relevance with the sudden need for competent translators from Russian. This was reflected in 1949/1950, when Jesenská conducted a seminar on literary translation from Russian at the Comenius University in Bratislava. However, political repression intensified: in 1951, a decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia led to the suspension of several writers and scholars, including Felix, who was subsequently ‘assigned’ to the publishing house as a translator (Drug 2001), relegating him to a subordinate position.

Between 1949 and 1963, translation was expected to serve a normative model of socialist realism by supporting canon formation and influencing patterns of thought (Pašteková 1998). The years 1956–1963 were also marked by the second and third congresses of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, which was a powerful political and ideological institution with a direct impact on the literary field. In this period, cultural and literary life began to cautiously reopen to Western literature (Marčok et al. 2006).

The ‘Golden Sixties’ (1963–1969) were marked by gradual political liberalization and partial democratization that opened the translation space to Western literature (Bednářová 2015). Although Russian and Soviet works remained dominant, Slovak translators increasingly published authors marginalized or suppressed in the Soviet Union and, by the late 1960s, even texts banned there altogether (Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak). The Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 marked a radical rupture in cultural life. Numerous translators were banned from any public activity because of their political views or the authors they had translated, and previously published translations were withdrawn from official circulation. Jesenská was among them. Between 1969 and 1971, the cultural sphere was restructured again and censorship intensified. High-quality translations associated with politically disfavoured authors or translators were systematically removed from official literary circulation (Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* was withdrawn in 1969 because of both the author and its translator, Jesenská) (Maliti-Fraňová 2007).

The period 1971–1980, known as Normalization, was marked by systematic ‘purges’: politically undesirable translations were removed to library depositories, and unwanted translators were reassigned to non-cultural work. Verification mechanisms strictly regulated who could translate and what could be published. This period nonetheless saw a high level of translation quality, supported by sustained reflection in periodicals and theoretical discourse. The Perestroika years of 1980–1989 brought a gradual easing of political control and the return of some previously banned authors and translators (Bednářová 2015).

3. Zora Jesenská (1909–1972)

Zora Jesenská, writer, translator, and translation theorist, did not live to see the post-1989 rehabilitation. She published several theoretical and practice-oriented essays on translation already in the 1940s and 1950s, and while many of her ideas were later stylistically reformulated, the underlying theoretical framework remained essentially unchanged. This chapter builds primarily on works republished in her book *Vyznania a šarvátky* [Confessions and Skirmishes] (1963), which falls within the examined period.

Jesenská compares languages from a grammatical standpoint, arguing that some changes in translation are unavoidable: her description of these as “inevitable [grammar] deviations from the original” and explanation that “a poetic work in another language must necessarily be somewhat different, because the spirit of the language is different” (Jesenská [1950] 1963: 176–177) corresponds with Popovič’s ‘constitutive shift.’ Although ideas about this shift are apparent in Popovič’s work already in 1968, the term itself is first used in 1971, perceived as “an inevitable shift that takes place in the translation as a consequence of differences between the two languages, the two poetics and the two styles of original and translation” (Popovič 1971: 157).

A significant portion of Jesenská’s writing focuses on linguistic and stylistic problems. Along with Felix, Jesenská ([1950] 1963) highlights the need to understand the author’s style and to capture the character of the original. She pays attention to emotionally charged words, where the translator needs to understand their expressivity and thematise the translator’s individuality, anticipating Popovič’s 1975 ‘individual shift’ and ‘translator’s idiolect/poetics.’ Jesenská stresses the importance of maintaining the stylistic nuances in translation, particularly when the author uses an artificially constructed diminutive not used in everyday language that already sounds unnatural in the original. Their constant omission can be seen as a precursor to Popovič (‘expressive lessening/weakening’ in 1968, later called ‘expressive reduction’ in 1975). Similarly, Jesenská ([1950] 1963) suggests that if a translator does not want to systematically ‘impoverish’ their work, the stylistically untranslatable expressions need to be replaced by stylistic innovations elsewhere in the text – once again anticipating Popovič, who argues in favour of ‘stylistic compensation’ (Popovič 1968, 1971), later called ‘expressive inversion’ (Popovič 1975).

Jesenská opposes self-serving ornamentation from a stylistic standpoint, labelling this “[stylistic] deviation from the original” (Jesenská 1942: 10) and “[stylistic] erasure of the work’s character” as well as a “tampering with the author’s style” (Jesenská

[1950] 1963: 177, 182). This idea anticipates some already mentioned concepts used by Popovič in determining the measure of the stylistic (expressive) change in translation. In 1968, Popovič worked with the following concepts in relation to deviation from the original: stylistic (expressive) levelling (a simplification of the original expressive elements leading to a diluted style, which is understood as the contemporary configuration of expressive characteristics), stylistic emphasis (the exaggeration of expressive elements of the original) and stylistic modification (a modification in the expressive element of the original in translation). All these concepts were revised and finalised in 1975 (cf. Šavelová 2026).

Jesenská is critical of what Popovič would later term ‘overinterpretation,’ criticising translations that engage in wilful ‘enhancing’ or ‘embellishing.’ Moreover, in cases where the Slovak language “has no perfectly overlapping expression,” or where the original refers to “an element that is not found in our culture,” Jesenská ([1950] 1963: 186) suggests that translators use “original wording in the translation.” In Popovič’s terms (1975: 275), this is a case of ‘exoticism in translation’ – “a choice of elements that are typical of the culture of the original while being atypical of the style (topic and language) of the translation,” thus a non-traditional choice of expressive elements from the original work.

Jesenská reflects on how the requirement to capture both the full semantic scope of the original and its linguistic character may compel the translator to consciously deviate from normative usage in order to achieve true accuracy. Translation, in her view, must convey not only lexical meaning but also the ‘atmosphere’ or ‘colour’ of the source text in another language and for a different audience, evoking the associative and emotional undertones that are central to meaning making (1942, [1950] 1963). In doing so, she anticipates later reflections on intercultural differences between the source and target text.

The inter-temporal (‘period difference’ in Jesenská 1961: 247) and intercultural differences are also thematized in her later works:

“Both the translator and the reader are children of their generation, which displays its own character in its manner of perception and expression. And the older the work we translate and the more distant the culture which produced it, the more crucial is the question of how to preserve the temporal and national features of the original and to make them accessible to the actual perception of the present-day reader” (Jesenská [1956] 1963, in Popovič 1970: 81).

Similarly,

“[t]here are archaic words (and where to find them with the Slovak language barely a century old?) and neologisms. There is the question of older literary works that used to sound modern, but that are now stained with the patina of old age that offers its own aesthetic pleasure; to translate that patina, or to make it sound modern as the work was at its inception? Both are equally justified... if the translation succeeds!” (Jesenská [1950] 1963, in Šavelová 2026: 280).

Jesenská clearly discusses ‘modernization’ and ‘historization’ in translation (English terms in Popovič 1976). According to Jesenská (1961), the degree to which temporality is transposed in translation corresponds to the translator’s underlying ‘concept,’ understood in the sense of Levý’s ‘translator’s decision-making processes’ (in Popovič 1976).

Jesenská ([1956] 1963) also reflects on different rhyming functions and conventions, anticipating Popovič’s thinking on ‘rhythmic shift.’ According to Popovič (1968), the issue of meter substitution was already known to Slovak scholars in the 1930s from the history of Czech translation, and he refers directly to Jesenská, among others.² Rhythmic shifts are “shifts in rhythm [that] affect the extent of verse, metrical arrangement, rhyme ending, euphonic construction, intonation, the strophic structure of the verse, prosodic systems, etc.” (Popovič 1968: 168).

Jesenská elaborates on what Popovič would later call ‘negative shift’ (first conception 1968; as a term 1975): she gives concrete examples of translations with elements missing or with the wrong word choice, of bad translations, average translations or of wrong interpretations caused by the lack of understanding of the original, deeming such translations ‘harmful.’ If the interpretation contradicts the author’s intention or aesthetic orientation – one of the characteristics of a negative shift in Popovič 1975 – the resulting translation is arbitrary and unjustified. Comparable views, emphasizing that translation must be grounded in the original text, are repeatedly articulated by Felix, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

4. Jozef Felix (1913–1977)

Jozef Felix was a literary scholar, translator, historian, and translation critic, and the first Slovak scholar to engage systematically with Romance literature. He also played a pivotal role in the history of Slovak translation by fostering collaborative models of translation. Felix acted as the scholarly partner, providing ‘podstročnik’ and extensive interpretative materials (often amounting to dozens of pages) based on international scholarship. This well-founded combination of philological expertise and poetic skill resulted in outstanding poetry translations, most notably of Villon and Dante. These translations are still regarded as milestones in Slovak poetic translation, having shaped – and continuing to shape – the principles of translating poetry and interpreting works of earlier literary periods.

Another major contribution of Felix’s work lies in his extensive use of paratexts. Through detailed afterwords, commentaries, analytical studies of authors and works, and translation criticism, he established a robust literary-historical and textological framework that continues to inform both scholarly research and general readership.

² This is probably one of only two direct references to Jesenská in Popovič’s work (the first cited above as a direct quotation, reproduced by Popovič himself in English), likely related to her post-1969 ban. Although Popovič’s 1974 book *Umelecký preklad v ČSSR* [Literary Translation in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic] mentions her translation of Sholokhov’s *And Quiet Flows the Don*, Jesenská’s name is missing.

Felix's approach was characteristic in that it proceeded from close engagement with concrete literary material which led toward theoretical reflection.

In connection with the publication of Slovak literary classics at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, Felix initiated a debate on 'intralingual' and 'intraliterary translation' and its principles, a discussion closely linked to his experience as both a translator and editor (Bednářová 2014b). Intralingual and intraliterary translation subsequently entered translation theory as a distinct type of translation and became an object of systematic research within TS (Popovič 1970, 1975).

In his analytical and critical essays, translation practice emerges as inseparable from the development of translation theory. Felix consistently emphasizes the necessity of translating "with quality and responsibility" (1968: 32). He understood a responsible approach to translation as the "maximum effort to achieve adequacy in translation" ([1939] 1987: 431; [1953] 1980: 103), that is, as a commitment to producing a genuinely creative equivalent of the original and to making a sustained effort to capture and articulate all aspects of the "author's verbal artistry" ([1953] 1980: 104). Such an approach, however, is unattainable without "proper philological or theoretical preparation" (1972: 121–122). In contemporary Romance studies, Felix's approach to translation and interpretation is described as the 'historical translation method.' This is grounded in an effort to render the author and the author's world in their entirety through the reconstruction of all relevant qualities of the original text, based on meticulous and erudite philological, poetological, literary, and historical analysis. Its aim is to translate the work not only at the level of meaning and form, but also across literary, aesthetic, historical, philosophical, and even metaphysical dimensions (Truhlářová 2014).

Felix's credo was "to be faithful to the wording and meaning of the text" (1986: 562), rejecting random or arbitrary solutions both in translation practice and in the evaluation and analysis of literary works. He therefore insisted that translation must be grounded in correct and accurate interpretation, arguing that it should be based on "the deeper intention of the work" (1962a: 69; later 'depth recoding' in Popovič 1976). In Felix's (1977) view, a successful translation can only arise from proper interpretation, understood as an accurate comprehension of the work's ideological and artistic meaning. According to Felix, the aesthetic value of a translation of a classical work is inseparable from accuracy (1987). The translation therefore requires the highest degree of precision (1962a). This requirement, however, does not imply slavish fidelity to the source text or literalism, but rather an engagement with the original's precise meaning. Consequently, it is not individual words that should be translated, but ideas and single "poetic emotions" (1962a: 69), a position likewise emphasized by Jesenská.

Felix also addresses the 'coming on to the reader' ('confrontation of communicative attitudes in translation' in Popovič 1976: 1, in Slovak in 1975). He was well aware of the difficulty of translating allusions and acknowledged that translators must sometimes sacrifice certain allusive nuances of the author's style for the sake of understandability in the target language, even though such a compromise is a form of loss (1962b: 196) (in 1975 conceptualized by Popovič as an 'expressive loss'). In his own translation practice, Felix therefore employed strategies such as generalization when dealing with references unlikely to be familiar to the target audience (1962b,

termed a ‘topical shift’ by Popovič 1976: 17, in Slovak in 1975), or the substitution of an “adequate expression” (Felix [1964] 2005: 299) with one more accessible within the receiving culture. Felix was thus fully conscious of the resulting deviation from strict accuracy in favour of readerly reception.

In his analysis of the French translation of the Slovak poetic composition *Marína*, Felix identifies the translation strategy of ‘compensation’ (1968: 36; ‘stylistic compensation’ in Popovič 1968), whereby a motif omitted at one point in the text is reintroduced elsewhere. Characteristically, Felix places strong emphasis not only on respect for lexical meaning or the preservation of ‘colour’ (the “colour of the times,” [1939] 1987: 299; also, in 1962a; 1968b), but also on the formal, rhythmic, and visual properties of the text (Felix [1964] 2005). He approaches literary works through the prism of the specific features of the author’s writing; in a broader sense, this corresponds to style. Such specificity must be respected in translation, as failure to do so results in serious distortions of the author’s ideas, language, poetic imagery, and the poetic work as a whole (1962a).

According to Felix (1962c: 37), translators must avoid “overexposing the author of the original,” as this risks turning poetic images into caricatures; at the same time, they must not ‘flatten’ them, for instance by softening passages that are intentionally harsh. These two positions rephrase what Popovič (1968) theorized as ‘overinterpretation’ and ‘underinterpretation’ (terms originally by Josef Čermák). The conceptual relationship between Felix and Popovič, however, operates also in the opposite direction. When Felix defines translation as “expressing something by other means, yet with the same effect” (1977: 111), he effectively uses Popovič’s notion of expressive substitution (1975). Similarly, Felix’s characterization of the translation of poetic images as being “relatively accurate and faithful, almost indistinguishable from the original,” yet realized in a “more expressive” or “more refined” form (1977: 111–113), corresponds to Popovič’s 1975 system of expressive changes. Felix’s assertion that “something will always inevitably remain unexpressed in translation” (1977: 118–119) aligns with Popovič’s definition of a translation shift (1975). At the same time, Felix explicitly warns that translators must not substitute the author’s poetic images with their own, as this would result in a “foreign contamination of two entirely different poems” (1962c: 37).

Felix was well acquainted with Popovič’s theoretical work, although he did not explicitly reference it in his own writings; notably, he reviewed Popovič’s *Preklad ako výraz*. Popovič (1975: 84) in turn cites Felix’s translation of Dante as an exemplary case of the necessity of the translator’s knowledge of the “deep structure” of the original, which “enables the translator to realize the meaning-making principle of the author’s poetics in translation.” According to Palkovičová (2014), Felix was receptive to and appreciative of the theoretical contributions of the younger generation of Czech and Slovak scholars, particularly Levý and Popovič, whose work in many respects developed and systematized Felix’s own practice-based reflections on translation, rooted in rigorous comparative analysis of both texts. Felix’s unpublished notes further attest to this conceptual proximity: they contain a diagram later adopted in Popovič’s terminology: *original text* – *reconstructed reality* – *translation text*, rather than a simplified *original text* – *translation text* model. This schema reflects Felix’s

conviction that, to grasp the reality represented by the original author, the translator must first come to understand both that reality and the author himself – an understanding achievable only through thorough scholarly inquiry and the systematic search for contextual and interpretative connections (Palkovičová 2014).

Many of Felix's writings from the 1960s address 'translation errors' or 'incorrect translations,' defined as solutions that contradict the meaning of the original. Felix highlights their consequences, such as unintelligible or unintentionally comic effects, the impoverishment of the poem, and the devaluation of the author, which may alienate readers and undermine trust in Slovak translations. He also criticizes stylistic clumsiness, calques, poor or unsystematic selection of authors, and fragmentary or improvised poetic translation. Omissions, false lexical substitutions, and distorted poetic images resulting from faulty interpretation are likewise treated as serious errors. In this respect, Felix's evaluative framework anticipates Popovič's (1975) 'negative shift' in translation.

A fundamental requirement Felix formulated for the development of translation criticism was the systematic comparison of the translation with the original text (1962b), a principle that is described by Popovič in 1975. An examination of Felix's scholarly output confirms his sustained effort to approach literary phenomena contextually, thereby integrating literary studies, translation studies, and editorial practice into a coherent analytical framework.

5. Jesenská and Felix, Silenced

After taking part in public celebrations of the Czechoslovak ice hockey victory over the Soviet Union in March 1968, during which Jesenská was beaten by state police, she published an article openly criticizing police practices. As one of the first Slovak intellectuals to voice such criticism publicly, she was banned from translating and writing, gradually excluded from all organizations that professionally and politically supported her existence, and had her translations removed from libraries. Jesenská was an exceptionally prolific translator, but due to the ban, a significant part of her Russian classics and Shakespeare's plays were absent from the national literary corpus.

Jesenská fundamentally redefined the role of the translator in national literary history, rejecting the view of translators as mere intermediaries and instead conceiving them as linguistically sensitive creative co-authors, with translation understood as a distinct art form intrinsically bound to language. The principles of the Slovak school of translation are frequently attributed to the Slovak scholar and translator from Russian Ján Ferenčík, regarded as its principal founder (*Biografický lexikón Slovenska* [Biographical Dictionary of Slovakia] 2004), as he also claims in his publication *Kontexty prekladu* [Contexts of Translation] (1982). Jesenská's name is not mentioned by Ferenčík, despite the fact that she largely shaped the school and its principles: she authored both the translation that sparked contemporary debates on translation principles, and a text that defended her translation strategies through a view that a translation should remain artistically faithful to the original. Maliti-Fraňová (2007) has demonstrated that the principles of the Slovak school of translation were the result of

their shared intellectual contribution. For the sake of transparency, however, it should be noted that the omission of her name was also influenced by the fact that she had been banned since the late 1960s.

Felix's life and scholarly work were likewise repeatedly shaped by adverse political conditions. In February 1945, after the failure of the Slovak National Uprising, he was imprisoned in a German prisoner-of-war camp in Nováky; fortunately, his shared passion for French literature ultimately saved him from deportation to Nazi Germany. However, political circumstances affected his 1950's translation of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Although Felix had prepared extensive annotations and a scholarly afterword drawing largely on French sources, ideological constraints led the publisher to replace it with an afterword by the Soviet Hispanist Smirnov, allowing Felix only a brief translator's note.

In 1951, while Felix was working on Villon, a campaign against cosmopolitanism and 'decadent' Western culture was launched and, consequently, he was dismissed from the Slovak Academy of Sciences and assigned the work of an editor. Political constraints prevented him from pursuing a career in academia until the period of political liberalization in the 1960s. Even then, his career was repeatedly impeded by a combination of factors, including "artificial bureaucratic obstacles" (Jurovská 2014: 35), health problems, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

An opportunity for Felix's rehabilitation emerged in 1970; however, the sociopolitical climate of the period of Normalization proved fundamentally unfavourable, and in 1973 Felix was again denied a professorship, as ideological authorities remained inflexible. This refusal may be attributed to Felix's unwillingness to join the Communist Party or his disagreement with Marxist doctrine (Pašteka 2014), as well as to the fact that his participation in the Slovak National Uprising was held against him in official records of the regime (Palkovičová 2014).

6. Conclusion

Both 'silenced voices' of Jesenská and Felix shared closely aligned views on interpretation and translation, as well as similarly shaped fates. Following the occupation of Czechoslovakia, they were expelled from the Union of Slovak Writers, deprived of their professional positions, subjected to severe career restrictions, and forcibly reassigned to other posts, with Jesenská completely excluded from social life. Jesenská was politically rehabilitated posthumously in the early 1990s, but even today, her contributions remain largely overlooked, as confirmed also by Zambor (2000) or Maliti-Fraňová (2007): her theoretical works have not been republished, and only a small number of her translations have been returned to libraries, as her language is already considered archaic.

Felix in contrast made a substantial contribution to the advancement of translation and publishing practices in Slovakia, primarily as a translator, but also as an editor and publisher. He initiated and supported numerous translations from literary classics, particularly from Romance traditions and including *Hamlet*, translated by Jesenská in 1946. His extensive literary-historical and interpretative studies, especially those

devoted to translation criticism, exerted a significant influence on domestic translation theory and practice, as already noted by Popovič (1968), however, unlike Popovič, he remains unknown on a global scale. Despite the political circumstances that shaped his professional trajectory throughout his life, and notwithstanding the adversities he faced during the 1950s and 1970s, Felix consistently succeeded in making a productive use of the positions to which he was assigned, benefiting not only his own scholarly work but Slovak culture more broadly (Bednárová 2014b).

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

PART II

RE-THINKING SOVIET WORLD LITERATURE FROM THE PERIPHERY

GUMILEV, GILGAMESH AND THE TRANSLATOR'S STUDIO

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Abstract: This article reconsiders Nikolai Gumilev's 1919 translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* through Maxim Gorky's *Vsemirnaia literatura* in the years immediately following the Revolution. Rather than treating *Gilgamesh* as an isolated literary experiment, it situates the translation within Gumilev's wider theoretical, pedagogical, and institutional activity: his "nine commandments" of poetic translation, his teaching at the Translators' Studio, his engagement with non-European literary traditions, and his collaboration with the Assyriologist Vladimir Shileiko. The article argues that the fragmentary nature of the ancient epic made it an especially revealing test of Gumilev's theory of translation, requiring reconstruction rather than literal transfer. *Gilgamesh* consequently becomes a stress-test of this model: a text reconstructed from fragments, mediated through scholarship, and transformed into Russian poetic form.

Keywords: Soviet studies; translation theory; Nikolai Gumilev; Silver Age; ancient epic

1. Introduction

How does one negotiate translation if one is trying to translate the world? This is a large and unwieldy question, no doubt, but one that dogged Russian author Maxim Gorky once he agreed to pioneer a World Literature project with the support of the new Bolshevik government. Hundreds of books would be translated between the outside world and the Russian masses, entailing a need for authors, experts and linguists. In his Introduction to the Catalogue for the project, in 1919, Gorky asserted that its mission was to give readers access to "every literary treasure" created by the "European spirit." (1919: 17–21) But delivering this vision was difficult. It would entail broadening the geographical scope of texts to be translated, while training the next generation of translation to continue the job.

Prominent in Gorky's project, actively involved in the teaching of translation, was Nikolai Gumilev (1886–1921). The poet 'spent almost all of World War I in the saddle,' as his wife Anna Akhmatova recalls, "and at night in his sleep would shout: 'Mount your horses!'" (Akhmatova 115) His poetry was unusually global, working variously off African, Babylonian and Chinese texts. Bringing to light Gumilev's

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contribution to early Soviet translation theory, and Gorky project's more specifically, I organize the following article according to the different roles that Gumilev assumed in this brief but busy period, between 1919 and 1921, each of which would open up the question above into more discrete inquiries: (i) How does one negotiate translation through theory? (ii) How much of the world does one need to know already to negotiate with foreign texts? And, finally, (iii) how to teach these things to the next generation? The following article therefore tries to apportion its account between these roles: Gumilev as a theorist of translation; as a translator of an ancient epic; and as a teacher in the Translator's Studio.

2. Gumilev as Theorist

Gorky's project came to questions about translation and world literature through practice, teaching, and fierce debate. One of the most vivid disagreements was between two of its key recruits, Nikolai Gumilev and Kornei Chukovsky. On 12 November 1918, at a meeting of the *Vsemirnaia literatura* editorial board, Chukovsky recorded a "heated clash" with Gumilev over the latter's attempt to formulate rules for translators.

"I had a heated dispute with Gumilev at the meeting. This gifted craftsman had taken it into his head to formulate rules for translators. In my view, there are no such rules. What rules can there be in literature? One translator invents [a solution], and it turns out brilliantly, while another reproduces the rhythm and everything else, yet it leaves you unmoved. What rules, then? And he became angry and started shouting. Still, he is amusing, and I love him." (Chukovsky 1991: 40, translation mine)

Not for the last time, the question of whether a totalizing model for translation was possible would provoke heated disagreement. Out of their initial debate, both felt compelled to lay out their theories of translation in clear and accessible terms. This produced two short essays, on translating poetry (Gumilev) and prose (Chukovsky) as companion pieces. Both were published in a small booklet in early March 1919 as *The Principles of Translation*, an 'in-house guide for translators' (Baer 2026: 201). This would not reconcile their positions, but would come to inspire further disagreement, as its reception will shortly reveal.

Gumilev's most memorable contribution to the booklet was a series of nine "commandments" for the translator. Rather than leaving the principles of poetic translation at the level of general aesthetic intuition, he recast them as a practical code of obligations. The translator was to preserve the number of lines of the original; reproduce its metre and, where possible, its rhyme scheme; attend closely to enjambment and the character of its rhymes; reproduce the distinctive vocabulary of the original; preserve the comparisons and images of the original; retain its special poetic devices; and reproduce changes of tone. Above all, the translation was to correspond formally to the original while remaining a natural and aesthetically convincing Russian poem. Gumilev concluded with a deliberately biblical flourish: "These are the nine commandments for the translator", and since they were "one less than Moses", he hoped, they would "be better obeyed" (Gumilev 1919b: 30).

Responses to the *Principles of Translation* (*Printsipy khudozhestvennogo perevoda*, 1919) came immediately. The first edition appeared in early March, and by 8 March Nikolai Lerner had already reviewed it in *Zhizn' iskusstva*. (Lerner 1919) Gumilev's colleague at the Translator's Studio, Mikhail Lozinsky, took Gumilev's commandments to heart, and even tried to shape his classes around those tenets. Under Lozinsky's direction, groups of translators worked line by line through difficult French verse, generating successive alternatives before settling upon a collective solution. (Page 2018: 141) In a letter to Gumilev, Isabella Grinevskaya (who had translated prolifically from Armenian, French, Georgian, German, Italian and Polish into Russian) accepted much of Chukovsky's account of translation as a creative act, while carefully objecting to what she saw as the rigidity of Gumilev's commandments. From the principal propositions of Gumilev's essay, she concluded that the poet-translator, like the poet being translated, "is not a slave, but a free creator." To drag oneself, chained to the chariot of even the greatest poet, she argued, was unbecoming even for a lesser poet — and would ultimately do nothing to enhance the reputation of the poet being translated (Grinevskaya 1919–1920).

It would be misleading to think that all responses were positive. On 6 May 1919, the Turkologist V. D. Smirnov attacked the booklet at a meeting of the Eastern Series editorial board, calling the booklet "extremely unserious" and declaring that it could serve neither as a basis nor as a model for discussion of the problems of translation (Chechnev 2022: 734). "We too need to make our debut, or better still, bring the series to a conclusion with a special treatise on the principles of translation from Eastern languages, in the form of a collective booklet or even a large book," claimed the Sinologist Vasily Alekseev, "especially since many of those present have not thought about this question, or even discussed it in their books" (Arias-Vikhil & Chechnev 2025: 734–735).¹

Such angry rebukes are important here. None of them hold any more weight than another. But seen together, they prevent the 1919 *Принципы* from acquiring a certain retrospective authority it did not possess at the time. The novelist and translator Fyodor Sologub's annotated copy of the 1919 *Принципы художественного перевода* survives in his personal library. On 12 July 1919, A. N. Tikhonov invited Sologub to participate in a meeting at *Vsemirnaia literatura*, scheduled for 18 July and devoted specifically to "the principles of artistic translation." (Filcheva 2018: 222). A third essay, this time by Fyodor Batiushkov on translating drama, would be added to the 1920 reprint (Baer 2026). Notably, Batiushkov quarrels with Chukovsky's essay, but not with Gumilev's, suggesting a tentative alignment. Importantly, this did not mark a failure in the booklet's reception, or an error in its previous imprint. *The Principles*

¹ "All the students of Alekseev translated poetry. For example, Alexey Shtukin (Алексей Александрович Штукин, 1904–1963), mentored by Alekseev, translated into Russian the verses of the Book of Songs. But Chinese poetry was opened to a broad Russian readership by a small collection, *Anthology of Chinese Lyrics of the Seventh-Nineteenth Centuries* (Антология китайской лирики VII–XIX веков) published in 1923, [...] Alekseev wrote an introductory essay and brief remarks on the chapters. This book was unusually popular; the readers liked the translations immediately and remembered them for a long time." See: Dreyzis (2023: 132).

were published precisely so that translation would be discussed, theorized, and (con)tested.

3. Gumilev as Translator

When the project began, Gorky prioritized Western literature written since the French revolution. This was arguably a gesture of legitimization by positive association. It also betrayed a criterion among the writers who were and were not translated, with a notable preference for authors who personified (or seemed to anticipate) the Marxist class struggle. This soon came to be seen as insufficient. An Eastern Series was established, as an extension to Gorky's project, with the goal of 'publishing a hitherto inaccessible range of literary, historical and religious documents.' This would run the gamut from the oldest literatures of "Egypt, Assyria and Babylon" to the "literary heritage of India, Japan and China." (Khotimsky 2023: 105) The rationale was therefore both literary and scholarly: texts that could not ordinarily be encountered by Russian readers were to be made available through translations supported by the relevant Orientalist expertise.

In June 1919, the Eastern Department considered a proposal from Gumilev and Vladimir Shileiko for a new joint, rhythmically rendered translation of *Gilgamesh*, and accepted the proposal in principle ("Protokol zasedaniia" 1919). This was a new undertaking, however, rather than a decision to reissue Gumilev's recently published version. Shileiko's involvement pointed towards a substantially different translation project, grounded in his direct engagement with the Akkadian text, and the two versions consequently occupied distinct positions within the publishing programme of *Vsemirnaia literatura*.

This distinction also helps explain why *Gilgamesh* brought Gumilev into particularly close contact with Shileiko. An Assyriologist, poet and specialist in the languages of ancient Mesopotamia, Shileiko occupied precisely the position that the Eastern Department's conception of literary translation required: he could provide the linguistic and historical knowledge that Gumilev himself did not possess. The 1919 edition bears their names in complementary capacities, with Gumilev credited as translator and Shileiko as the author of the introduction. Their collaboration should not be reduced to a biographical episode, despite the complicated personal relationships surrounding the Acmeist circle. For the history of the translation, the significant point is that Shileiko mediated between Assyriological scholarship and the poetic culture in which Gumilev was working.

Gumilev's engagement with *Gilgamesh*, moreover, did not emerge in isolation from his earlier poetic encounters with cultural alterity. His repeated travels in North and East Africa, culminating in his 1913 expedition to Abyssinia, had already made questions of geography and ancient civilisation central to his poetic imagination. (Naydan 2018) Yet Africa was not merely a reservoir of exotic imagery. It provided Gumilev with a means of imagining different systems of ritual, memory, geography and historical continuity. 'He told me countless times about the "golden door" that must open before him somewhere in the depths of his wanderings,' Ahkmatova recalls,

‘but when he returned [from Africa] in 1913, he confessed that the “golden door” did not exist. That was a terrible blow for him.’ (119) A ‘terrible blow’ it may have been, but it did not stop the poet subsequently exploring and translating Chinese poetry, Giacomo Leopardi and William Shakespeare (Dreyzis 2023). Sometimes he worked from original language, but (as with *Gilgamesh*) often not. The grasp of another language was secondary to accessing its material, its textures, and its ideas.

The nature of *Gilgamesh* itself made the problem of translation unusually complex. Gumilev was not confronting a single, intact ancient manuscript that could simply be transferred from one language into another. The epic had survived in fragmentary form on damaged tablets and had already required scholarly reconstruction before it reached the modern translator. The Russian translator therefore confronted a text that was itself the product of previous acts of interpretation, comparison and conjecture. Gumilev’s intervention represented another stage in that process. He translated not an untouched ancient original, in other words, but a modern scholarly reconstruction of an ancient poem, while also undertaking its further reconstruction for a Russian poetic audience.

Gumilev makes the nature of this undertaking unusually explicit in his preface. He begins by disclaiming any Assyriological authority: he was, he states, not an Assyriologist and did not intend his translation to possess scientific value in that sense. He identifies Paul Dhorme’s French work as his principal source and acknowledges the occasional assistance of Shileiko. Yet this admission is immediately followed by a declaration of purpose. Gumilev wanted to make the poem accessible to readers who loved poetry. To accomplish this, he reconstructed passages where the text was incomplete, removed what he regarded as tedious repetitions, joined episodes separated by lacunae, and supplied brief passages where the surviving text seemed insufficient to sustain continuity. At the same time, he claimed to preserve the versification of the original and to establish a semblance of rhythm throughout. When Gumilev declares that *Gilgamesh* ‘should be for everyone’ and ‘not just for specialists’ (Gumilev, 1919a, p.XX), was this also a sly dig at the editorial board, who had considered him “extremely unserious”? One can only speculate that this was partly directed to the editorial board of the Eastern Series as it was for the Soviet reader.

The reception of the translation confirms that contemporaries (this time) recognized this combination of scholarship and poetic reconstruction. Nikolai Lerner’s review in *Kniga i revoliutsiia* in 1920 described Gumilev as both “one of our best poets” and a translator who was cautious, thoughtful, and possessed a “scientific method”; he further suggested that *Gilgamesh* had thereby entered Russian artistic literature (Lerner 1920: 52–53). Lerner’s formulation is particularly revealing because it captures the paradox at the heart of Gumilev’s undertaking. Gumilev himself had denied producing a scholarly translation, yet the work could nevertheless be praised for the seriousness of its method. The achievement of the translation lay precisely in the combination of scholarly mediation and poetic reconstruction: Dhorme supplied access to the reconstructed ancient text, Shileiko supplied specialist knowledge, and Gumilev transformed that mediated material into a Russian poetic work.

Gumilev’s negotiation with his knowledge (and lack of knowledge) of the world was to delegate and collaborate where gaps occurred. Translation, in this account, required the translator first to identify what was structurally characteristic of the

original and then to reproduce those relationships in Russian. *Gilgamesh* confirms and complicates this principle. On the one hand, Gumilev's attention to rhythm, versification, and the continuity of the epic demonstrates his commitment to the proposition that literary form cannot be separated from meaning. On the other, almost every condition of the translation challenged the possibility of applying his commandments literally: the ancient text was fragmentary, Gumilev did not know the original language, and his Russian version depended upon Dhorme's French scholarly reconstruction.

Rather than abandoning his theory in response to these difficulties, Gumilev negotiates his object. Rules outweigh language. Fidelity could no longer mean the reproduction of a fully recoverable verbal surface; it meant reconstructing the formal identity of the work as an epic. His removal of repetitions, reconstruction of lacunae and attempts to establish rhythmic continuity therefore look less like departures from his earlier theory than its application under extreme conditions. *Gilgamesh* reveals that the deepest premise of Gumilev's theory was not a literal correspondence, but the preservation of whatever made a work recognizably itself.

4. Gumilev as Teacher

Gumilev's *Gilgamesh* cannot be understood apart from the pedagogical and institutional framework of the Translators' Studio in Petrograd, active between 1919 and 1921 under Gorky's *Vsemirnaia literatura* and held at the House of Arts. Contemporary testimony of Gumilev's classes there consistently emphasize his composure, precision, and clarity of purpose. Anna Akhmatova later recalled that Gumilev "knew exactly what he wanted from poetry" and demanded the same discipline from others (Akhmatova 214). Memoirs by former students and colleagues describe his measured gestures, controlled delivery, and insistence on formal rigor, traits that mirrored his poetics rather than merely his temperament (Hickey 2009: 84–90).

From the outset, the Studio functioned less as a school than as a laboratory in which competing models of translation were tested and argued through practice. Hickey's materials bring the Studio to life with remarkable vividness. Students recall Gumilev standing at the blackboard, chalk in hand, reducing poems to patterns of stress and pause, drawing metrical grids, and asking students to hear what they could not yet understand. He was remembered as austere, even severe, but also intensely focused — less a charismatic performer than a master craftsman. In one recollection, a student notes that Gumilev could dismantle a poem line by line, "as if taking apart a mechanism," only to reassemble it so that its logic became newly visible. Despite their differences, Chukovsky conceded in his diaries that Gumilev had a "wonderful capacity to inspire everyone around him with the belief that poetry was the most important and noble of all human actions and that the calling of the poet was higher than all others" (Hickey 2009: 89).

Chukovsky's own son would attend these classes, later recalling Gumilev's approach to poetry as a system of techniques. At the seminar, Gumilev required

students to construct elaborate tables of metre, rhythm, rhyme, stylistics, composition, and other poetic devices, insisting that poetry could be mastered through the systematic acquisition of such techniques. At public readings, meanwhile, he could assume the role of a *конференсье* [*compere*], introducing each poet before their performance. Chukovsky recalled Gumilev's pronounced *galomania*: he constantly invoked French poets, while placing his mentor Innokenty Annensky above all other twentieth-century Russian poets. His students, including Odoevtseva, viewed him as old-fashioned yet magnetic.

The contrast between Gumilev and Aleksandr Blok provides a useful way of situating this pedagogy historically. In the final years of imperial and revolutionary Petrograd, the two poets occupied strikingly proximate yet divergent positions within the city's literary landscape. They lived near one another, moved through overlapping social and institutional spaces, and were bound by a shared awareness that Russian poetry stood at a historical threshold. Yet their responses to this condition could hardly have been more different. Blok increasingly experienced history as exhaustion: the dissolution of inherited forms, the fading of visionary language, and the sense that poetry itself had reached an impasse. In his 1919 essay "The Collapse of Humanism," he diagnosed this crisis not simply as political or moral, but as formal and rhythmic, arguing that "humanism has lost its style: style is rhythm; and with its rhythm humanism lost its integral unity" (Blok 1931).

Gumilev's pedagogy, in turn, took this interest in rhythm and prosody in another direction, in his surviving "Programme of Lectures on the History of Poetry." Rather than presenting poetry as a succession of great authors, languages or national traditions, the syllabus organizes poetic production into historical stages, social formations, and functional genres. His 1919 course begins with Druidism and the emergence of creative and religious forms, proceeds through the military-priestly caste and the great and small epics of antiquity, folk lyric and the beginnings of theatre, and then moves through classical Greek and Roman poetry, Christian and folk mystical poetry, medieval epic, lyric and theatre. From there to the flowering of poetry from Dante to Milton, the decline of the eighteenth century, the renewal of the nineteenth century and contemporary poetry. The range of these readings are staggeringly transnational: a Mongolian poem about the swan, Assyro-Babylonian texts including *Gilgamesh*, the *Kalevala*, the *Rig-Veda*, the Chinese *Shi-khing*, the *Edda*, Celtic epics, Malay *pantushi*, Egyptian poems, and the *Ramayana* appear alongside the later European canon. The course concludes with "the opportunity to outline the future of poetry" (Gumilev 1991: 230–231).

What is absent from the syllabus is as telling as what is present. There is no emphasis on originality, self-expression, or national character. No privileging of Russian poetry as exceptional. Instead, poetry appears as a transhistorical practice governed by recurrent formal problems and solutions. This makes the syllabus an implicit justification for translation as a central pedagogical activity. From Gumilev's perspective, if poetry is a system rather than a national essence, then it can be dismantled, transferred, and reassembled across languages. Placed alongside student testimonies, the syllabus clarifies why Gumilev's teaching left such a mechanistic impression. Translation in this case is an operation that tests this system's resilience by

forcing it to function across languages, epochs, and cultural boundaries. Most revealing, however, is its conclusion: “Contemporary poetry. Exhaustion of forms. Fragmentation. The possibility of outlining the future of poetry.” This final gesture is extraordinary. Poetry is treated as a system whose future configurations can be anticipated, or possibly even engineered. Such a claim only makes sense when recalling how poetry is understood in these classes as a mechanism with identifiable components and clear trajectories.

5. Conclusion

Ancient epic remains a curious and stimulating lacunae in the history of Soviet internationalism. The prominence of works such as *Gilgamesh* against the backdrop of *Vsemirnaia literatura* suggest that the project of translating ancient literature was never antiquarian. It belonged to a much larger attempt to reorganize Russian literary culture around a genuinely international field of reference, in which the histories of Mesopotamia, India, China, Scandinavia, Africa, Greece and Rome could be brought into a common (if uneven) space of literary comparison. Yet because this program was so ambitious, and because many of its institutional and pedagogical experiments were interrupted before they could mature, its history remains incomplete. *Gilgamesh* offers an especially vivid point of entry into this unfinished history: an ancient epic reconstructed from fragments, translated through layers of scholarship, and made to speak to a revolutionary present through the formal resources of Russian poetry.

Gumilev’s execution in 1921 makes the incompleteness of this project brutally literal. At thirty-five, he was deprived of a further poetic career, but also, the opportunity to develop the pedagogical and translational programme that the Translators’ Studio had only just begun to institutionalize. The poignancy of this interruption is captured by Anna Akhmatova’s later lament that “Gumilev is still an unread poet” (116), followed by the striking declaration: “It is astounding that no one else took this on. His so-called disciples have behaved disgracefully” (117). Her remarks point to a paradox that extends beyond Gumilev himself. The problem is not simply that his work was suppressed or neglected. The very intellectual network around him — the students, collaborators, pedagogical experiments and institutional practices through which his ideas might have continued — was itself fractured. What survives is consequently less a school than a series of fragments: translations, syllabi, memoirs, theoretical statements and unfinished projects.

It is precisely these fragments that make the brief period of early Soviet translation culture so compelling. To revisit its theories and practices today is not to impose upon them the coherence of a school that never fully existed, but to consolidate, provisionally, the pieces of an intellectual formation that was both exhilaratingly experimental and bitterly short-lived. Gumilev’s *Gilgamesh*, his theory of poetic translation, his teaching at the Translators’ Studio, his African writings and his conception of poetry as a system of transmissible forms belong to this larger constellation. Taken together, they reveal a moment in which translation could still be imagined simultaneously as literary craft, historical inquiry, pedagogy and

internationalist practice. The achievement of recovering this history therefore lies not in discovering a finished “Gumilevian” theory of translation, exactly, but rather through recognising anew how much sophistication was present in a field whose development was cut short before its possibilities could be fully tested.

By recovering the institutional circumstances in which translators, poets, philologists and teachers actually worked, it allows us to see early Soviet translation culture not as a prehistory awaiting the arrival of a later, more systematic discipline, but as an intellectual field already experimenting with questions that remain central to the field today. The Gorky-Vostok project, led by Yakov D. Chechnev, with Marina A. Arias-Vikhil and Mark Yurievich Ulyanov, continues to do a brilliant service in bringing this period back to life through a series of archival interventions and revelations. The fragments are incomplete, but they are far from silent. They continue to offer the possibility of recovering an alternative history of translation. A history whose development was tragically interrupted, but whose questions remain very much alive.

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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.

THE FATE OF SUCCESS: ANNA RADLOVA'S SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract: Today, the discussion of Shakespeare translation in the early Soviet era typically centers on the giants Mikhail Lozinskii and Boris Pasternak, whose translations are often contrasted with Anna Radlova's, and usually not in her favor. Indeed, Radlova experienced virtual oblivion in the Soviet postwar period and is rarely mentioned today. In the 1930s, however, Anna Radlova's translations of Shakespeare dominated the Soviet cultural scene, and there was no more successful Shakespearean theater director than Sergei Radlov. This paper revisits the reception of Radlova's translations and Radlov's productions against the backdrop of the history of Shakespeare translation in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the practice of stage translation, and the politics of translation at the height of Stalinism.

Keywords: Anna Radlova; Sergei Radlov; Soviet Union; Soviet theater; Shakespeare; translation

1. Introduction

In early January 1936, the first All-Union Conference of Translators took place, featuring prominent scholars, critics, and translators such as Iogann Al'tman, Pavel Zenkevich, Boris Pasternak, Mikhail Smirnov, and Mikhail Lozinskii (see Witt 2013; Zemskova 2015). The conference focused on the methodological and ideological principles of translation, translation into the languages of the peoples of the USSR, and the role of translators as "communication engineers" (a phrase used by Ezra Levontin at the Translators' Section meeting in October 1935, echoing Stalin's idea of writers as "engineers of human souls," Witt 2013: 141). Beyond routine work, the conference also sought to reinforce the ambiguous norms of socialist realism in translation practice, as did the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.

Not coincidentally, it was at the same Writers' Congress in 1934 that Shakespeare was canonized as one of the classics of a new proletarian literature; his name was repeated alongside the giants of world literature, and Sergei Dinamov, in his speech, urged the new generation of proletarian artists to learn from Shakespeare.¹ In the same

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¹ "We need Shakespeare's art as much as lungs need air. [...] Our playwrights must absorb Shakespeare, master him, and breathe the air of creativity of this genius artist, who cuts through the

year, the Shakespeare Cabinet² was opened at the All-Russian Theater Society to mark Shakespeare's 370th birthday, which was celebrated on the scale of a national holiday (Ostrovsky 2006: 58). The wave of Shakespearean enthusiasm continued until the 1940s,³ and *Othello* — somewhat unexpectedly — became Shakespeare's most popular play in the Soviet Union.

The 1936 All-Union Conference of Translators was covered in detail by the newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta*, but no discussion of issues related to Shakespeare translation was recorded in the reports or articles. The only hint that this topic was relevant — although it was not yet as politicized as it would be in the late 1930s — was a caricature by Aleksei Radakov⁴ titled “To the Discussion of *Othello*” published on 15 January 1936, in the third issue of *Literaturnaya gazeta* dedicated to the event (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. “To the Discussion of *Othello*.” Caricature by Aleksei Radakov.
Literaturnaia gazeta, 15 January 1936.

centuries yet remains alive and close to us” (Dinamov 1934: 449–450). Together with Alexander Smirnov, Dinamov co-edited the first Soviet complete works by Shakespeare in eight volumes between 1936 and 1950.

² The Cabinet was the precursor to the Shakespeare Committee at the Russian Academy of Sciences. It was created to conduct research, organize conferences and symposia, and advise theaters on matters related to Shakespearean scholarship. In 1937, Mikhail Morozov became head of the Cabinet, and in 1938 its scope was broadened; it was renamed the Cabinet of Shakespeare and West European Theater. In 1975, after Aleksandr Anikst's proposal, the Cabinet's was incorporated into the Academy of Sciences.

³ In 1939, Shakespeare's 375th anniversary reconfirmed the Bard's status as a “titan of Renaissance,” and a “realist,” “humanist” writer. See, e.g., Zabludovskii (1939).

⁴ Aleksei Aleksandrovich Radakov (1877–1942) was a well-known caricaturist, poster artist, and illustrator who worked with various Russian and Soviet publications, including ROSTA (Russian Telegraph Agency) and the journals *Satirikon* (1908–1914) and *Krokodil* (1922–2000).

The caricature depicts Othello, the protagonist of Shakespeare's play, standing on stage and addressing critics seated before him, who glare at him unfriendly. The critics wield giant, spear-like quill pens. Othello points to a woman in the front row whose profile bears an unmistakable resemblance to that of poet and translator Anna Radlova. The verse accompanying the image, likely written by Radakov himself (who often wrote short poetic captions for his caricatures), reads:

Нас с Радловой любовь соединила,
Никто из вас те узы не порвет.
Она меня за муки полюбила,
А я ее за бранный перевод.

In English translation:

Love united Radlova and me,
None of you shall break those bonds.
For my *woes* she fell in love with me,
And I loved her for her *militant* (cursing) translation.⁵

The caricature references both Petr Veinberg's and Anna Radlova's translation of two lines from Othello's speech in I.3:⁶

She loved me for the dangers I had passed
And I loved her that she did pity them.

Она меня за муки полюбила,
А я ее – за сострадание к ним. (Veinberg)

Она за бранный труд мой полюбила,
А я за жалость полюбил ее. (Radlova)

For the uninitiated reader, the caricature may be puzzling: Why are the critics hostile to Othello? What ties bind Radlova and Othello? And what is meant by the "militant/cursing translation"? Radakov's verse plays with the word *brannyi*, from *bran'*, which means both war, battle, and cursing, swearing, but it is not obvious why. To answer these questions, we must take a long excursus into the cultural and political contexts of the 1930s.

Anna Radlova (née Darmolatova, 1891–1949) began writing poetry in 1915. In the 1920s, she was associated with Mikhail Kuzmin's "emotionalist" circle,⁷ and at one point, she even hosted a literary salon in Petrograd. After the revolution, she focused primarily on translating works from French and English literature. Her popularity as a

⁵ Here and henceforth all interlinear translations from Russian are my own, — A.S.

⁶ Shakespeare is quoted according to the 1988 Oxford edition, with the traditional (act.scene) indication in the text.

⁷ The declaration of emotionalism was published in the Petrograd almanac *Abraksas* in February 1923. The almanac saw only three volumes in 1922 and 1923 and was edited by Mikhail Kuzmin and Anna Radlova.

poet and socialite is reflected in Kuzmin's poetry, who dedicated to her the first part of his last book, the poem "The Trout Breaks the Ice" (1927):

Никто не видел, как в театр вошла
И оказалась уж сидящей в ложе
Красавица, как полотно Брюллова.
Такие женщины живут в романах,
Встречаются они и на экране...
За них свершают кражи, преступления,
Подкарауливают их кареты
И отравляются на чердаках.

No one had seen her enter the theater,
And suddenly she was seated in the box,
A beauty, like a painting by Briullov.
Such women live in novels,
Sometimes you see them on the screen...
Because of them people steal, commit their crimes,
Carriages lie in wait for them,
And men poison themselves in attic rooms.

Radlova began translating Shakespeare in 1933, and by 1935 she had translated *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Richard III*. Later, she translated *Hamlet* in 1937 and *Anthony and Cleopatra* in 1940. Her translations were especially popular for their modern vocabulary and stage-oriented approach. Radlova's husband, Sergei Radlov (1892–1958) — who organized his first theater in 1928 as the Molodoi (Young) Theater — was one of the most prolific theater directors of the time and had staged eight Shakespearean tragedies in various Leningrad theaters by 1939, predominantly using his wife's translations (Ostrovsky 2006: 68). What concerns *Othello*, until 1935, it was mostly staged using Petr Veinberg's 1864 translation, so Radlova's version quickly became the most sought-after for theatrical productions.⁸ Aleksandr Ostuzhev, who played Othello in Radlov's production at the Mali Theater, later said that he readily — though not without difficulty — abandoned Veinberg's translation in favor of Radlova's, praising it for "Shakespeare's earthiness, his clarity and the purposefulness of his language" (Ostuzhev 1966: 164).⁹

This explains the "ties" between Radlova and *Othello*. Now, let's turn to the hostile critics.

⁸ In April 1936, *Othello* premiered at the Moscow Realistic Theater under direction of Nikolai Okhlopkov. Okhlopkov used the translation initiated by Ivan Aksenov and completed by Iulian Anisimov after Aksenov's death in September 1935. The production faced criticism of formalism, and Okhlopkov had to denounce his own play before its premiere; see Semenenko (2020: 21–42).

⁹ Published in the English-language collection *Shakespeare in the Soviet Union* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966). Among other publications, the volume includes articles by Alexander Blok and Anatolii Lunacharskii, Konstantin Stanislavskii's reminiscences, and Nikolai Okhlopkov's notes on his production of *Hamlet*.

2. Shakespeare's "Earthiness"

As I mentioned, Radlova's translations were considered revolutionary. She was praised for her focus on "stage expressiveness," use of contemporary vocabulary, and emotional depth. Shakespeare scholar Alexander Smirnov wrote in his 1933 article "Renewed Shakespeare": "Shakespeare is reborn in Russian. This is the true Shakespeare we have not known or had until now" (Shchedrina 2013: 702). In the *Literary Encyclopedia*, Nadezhda Presman (1935: col. 502) concluded: "Recently, her [Radlova's] Shakespeare translations have gained great fame. Faithfully recreating the character of the original, they are masterpieces of translation."

Radlova's orientation toward modern spoken language made Shakespeare sound like a contemporary stage text, creating a sharp contrast with the canonical nineteenth-century translations (by Andrei Kroneberg, Aleksandr Druzhinin, Aleksandr Sokolovskii, Pavel Veinberg, and others), which by then felt outdated. This feature drew both praise and criticism for Radlova. Critic Iosif Iuzovskii argued,

Radlova brings Shakespeare down from the stilts on which translators, directors, and actors have placed him. She wants to return Shakespeare to the earth. Not a rhetorical, oratorical, or legal Shakespeare, but all his flesh and blood, his meat and muscles. This is Radlova's significant cultural achievement. But isn't it too much of this flesh and this earth? (Zobnin 1998: 251)

In the same vein, the renowned theater director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko recollected that the impression of Radlova's translations was eye-opening:

'Lord, this Shakespeare is quite rude!' [...] This led Radlova to such roughness [in translation]; she caught it perfectly. But as always, everything novel becomes slightly exaggerated. (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1967: 238).

Furthermore, Radlova faced strong criticism for "vulgarizing" Shakespeare's language — something that became her unfortunate "trademark," hence Radakov's caricature. While working on the first Soviet edition of Shakespeare's collected works for the *Academia* publishing house, Radlova conflicted with editor Gustav Shpet, who insisted on near-literal accuracy. In one of the letters, Radlova emphasized the practically irreconcilable clash of their translation strategies and ideologies:

[...] I am ready to take into account G. Shpet's philological clarifications (I don't think there will be many if he doesn't show bias toward my work), but I can never submit to the artistic taste and poetic technique of the translator of Byron's *Mysteries*. (Shchedrina 2013: 91)¹⁰

Chief editor Aleksandr Smirnov, who held Radlova's translations in high esteem, often had to step in as mediator.¹¹

¹⁰ Radlova refers to the 1933 Academia edition of Shpet's translations of Lord Byron: D. G. Bairon. *Misterii*. Transl. by G. Shpet. Academia, 1933.

¹¹ See, for example, Smirnov's letter to Shpet on 8 August 1933 (Shchedrina 2013: 46–47).

In a 1934 article, Radlova set out to defend her method by appealing to the highest canon of Russian literature:

My adversaries say that I am an advocate of a contaminated, unstable (*tekuchii*) street language. That's not true... The only language we should strive for when translating Shakespeare is the language of our father Pushkin. (Gavruk 1968: 127).

In 1935, in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Radlova (1935: 4) reaffirmed her focus on Pushkin and her conviction that Shakespeare's dramas should be heard, not read:

The spectators must and have a right to understand everything in Shakespeare's text [...] you cannot expect them to bring to the theater several multivolume dictionaries and a German commentary to Shakespeare. [...] I think that the language of Pushkin's dramas should be our ideal, albeit unreachable, standard. I do not mean that the translators should stylize their language to resemble Pushkin's [...], but [they should] feel the life force (*zhiznennyi poryv*) that Pushkin gave to Russian poetry.

Radlova discussed her translation method in the press, but she did not describe it as thoroughly or in as much detail as, for example, Mikhail Lozinskii did. In her 1934 article titled "How I Work on Translating Shakespeare," she criticized the nineteenth-century translations and claimed a qualitatively different approach to translating Shakespeare's tragedies. She directed her focus toward modern Soviet audiences and opposed the overly liberal translations of the nineteenth century, as well as the bookish archaization of Lozinskii's translations. She also stated that it is inevitable to sacrifice the least important details in translation in order to avoid literalism (Radlova 1934). In a foreword to the book dedicated to the *Hamlet* premiere on 15 May 1938, Radlova declared that, although she was in principle positive toward equirhythmia and equilinearity, she "did not make a fetish of them" and that she considered the tropes that require scientific commentary to be the least significant (cited in Chekalov 1960: 185).

3. Stage before Text

Although the in-depth analysis of Radlova's translations is not the focus of this article, certain distinctive features of her translations warrant mention. Translating Shakespeare, Radlova combines an elevated, archaicized style with modern, everyday speech and often replaces Shakespearean and English idioms with more familiar Russian ones. For example, she translates "отрок" for "noble youth," "парень" for "fellow," "шиты-крыты" for "hugger-mugger," "малюете" for "you make yourselves another," "горло драть" for "mouth ... rant," "гони деньги" for "make money," "поиграем в прятки" for "hide fox, and all after," and "губка вы такая" for "sponge." Radlova also uses such modern words as "вербовка" (for *levies*), "съезд" (for *convocation*), "инвентарно" (for *inventorially*), etc. In most cases, Radlova ignores wordplay and puns and translates literally; on the other hand, it is notable that Radlova usually retains all forms of address, such as "milady," "my Lord," "sir," etc.,

but “gentlemen” is still replaced with *господа*, alongside such Russicisms as *бердыш* or *по-царски*.

Radlova’s “earthiness” often stems from literalist translation and/or misunderstandings, which were not unusual in the translation practices of that time and were also characteristic of other translators. That is why there are such examples as “настоящий карп” (carp of truth); “все лучше и все хуже” (Still better, and worse); “в дохлой собаке, приятной для поцелуев падали” (sun ... being a good kissing carrion); “дорожка дружбы” (beaten way of friendship), etc. Similarly, with unwavering consistency, Radlova translates interjections *Fie* (on ‘t)! and *Pooh!* as “Фу” или “Тьфу”; as an example, Horatio says, “Тьфу, тьфу, не явится” (Tush, tush, ‘twill not appear).

At times, Radlova resorts to borrowings from Lozinskii’s translation, particularly when the passages are ambiguous, and interpretation may vary, for example, “шум земной” (Lozinskii’s “бранный шум”; mortal coil); “глум” (Lozinskii’s “глумление”; scorns); “ползущее молэчо” (Lozinskii’s “крадущееся малечо”; miching malhecho).

In sum, Radlova’s translation is best characterized as *eclectic*. On the one hand, it is filled with literal translations — apparently the result of the translator’s attempt to remain as close as possible to the original. On the other hand, it contains errors, liberties, and additions, and is stylistically heterogeneous. It was precisely this stylistic inconsistency that elicited a negative reaction from many critics. However, what may appear to be a translator’s inconsistency and stylistic dissonance can be viewed differently if we consider Radlova’s *skopos*, that is, her deliberate *orientation toward the stage*, and not in an abstract way, but as concrete goals for translating individual scenes. Below, we will see an example of how the logic of performance dominated the written word.

4. (Hostile) Critics

The reputation of “vulgarizing” or at least “bringing down” Shakespeare’s language was hard to shake off, even though Radlova’s poetic talent was also acknowledged. For example, Dmitrii Mirskii ([n.d.]: l. 83) in his internal review of Radlova’s *Othello* for the Academia publishers criticized her for “equirhythmic troubles” but commended the quality of her blank verse.¹² Mikhail Morozov’s afterword to the 1937 edition of *Hamlet* in Radlova’s translation is typical of this time for its combination of admiration for the refreshed language of translation and the affirmation of the socialist realist norms supposedly expressed in the translation:

¹² Concluding his review, Mirskii ([n.d.]: l. 87) made a special point about equirhythmia: “We must keep repeating and insisting that equirhythmia is for Shakespeare, not Shakespeare for equirhythmia; that we are translating Shakespeare, not engaging in squaring the circle; that we must not force Shakespeare to speak in a kind of Russian language invented especially for the ‘equirhythmic’ reworking of Shakespeare. I believe that if the editors do not adopt such a ‘scholarly and pharisaic’ attitude on this issue, Anna Radlova will be able to convey Shakespeare in Russian, and not in an equirhythmic manner.” Mirskii’s review in the RGALI archive is undated, but the upper temporal limit of this archival unit is set as 8 August 1936.

Studying Radlova's translation, one involuntarily recalls the "cleaning" of a painting in a restorer's workshop. The "gloom" is removed from an old painting, and once again the bright and vivid colors come to life. And if someone feels sorry for this "thoughtful gloom," let him remember that this "gloom" is nothing but darkened, dirty varnish [accumulated] with time. In her translation of *Hamlet*, Anna Radlova managed to restore in Russian the most essential features of a remarkable work belonging to a full-blooded (*polnokrovnyi*) and passionate writer, a great realist, true Shakespeare. (Morozov 1937: 254)

In 1940, however, Morozov (1940: 121-124), apparently under the impression of Pasternak's newly published translation of *Hamlet*,¹³ changed his opinion of Radlova's translations, declaring them "extremely one-sided," in which "solely the Marlow line is adequately expressed."

Radlova's harshest critic was Kornei Chukovskii, who situated her translations within the debate over equanimity and equirhythmia in translation. In 1939, after the new edition of Radlova's *Othello* had been published, Chukovskii (1939: 4), in an article titled "The Maimed Shakespeare," argued that Radlova "mutilates" not only the English original but also the Russian language:

The main problem with her translations [...] is the total annihilation of Shakespeare's intonations. Almost all the characters in these great tragedies speak in abrupt, jerky, and truncated phrases. [...] All these stumps of human speech have nothing to do with Shakespeare's poetry. If every actor [...] is forced to speak as if they are suffering from asthma, what lively intonation can there be in their gasping, convulsive, interrupted shouts? [...] For some reason, the reviewers only noticed the roughness (*grubost'*) of her vocabulary. But honestly, that roughness is nothing compared to the roughness of her intonations.¹⁴

Radlova was fully aware of Chukovskii's opinion of her work but never cared to respond in public. In this particular case, it was the renowned actor Aleksandr Ostuzhev who took it upon himself to defend Radlova's method on the pages of *Pravda*. He stated that Shakespeare's text must always be viewed as an element of performance and that the laconic nature of Radlova's translation allows him to maintain the right tempo for a particular scene (as we will see later, it was not just a formal excuse but a demonstration of the method adopted by the Radlovs). He also stated that he had never received any complaints from fellow actors or the audience that the text was difficult to understand (Ostuzhev 1930: 4). It was an important opinion voiced by a very popular actor with the title of the People's Artist of the

¹³ Pasternak published his first version of *Hamlet* translation in the spring issues of the journal *Molodaia gvardiia* (5-6). Already in 1939, Nemirovich-Danchenko, after hearing Pasternak read excerpts from his new translation of *Hamlet*, cancelled his contract with Anna Radlova, whose translation he had previously agreed to use, and commissioned Pasternak for the (never-to-be-fulfilled) production at the Moscow Art Theater (more on that in Semenenko 2012).

¹⁴ Later, Chukovskii republished his critique in the book *High Art*, tempering its tone to some degree; see Chukovskii (1964: 175-195). Interestingly, in 1934 Chukovskii harshly criticized Mikhail Kuzmin's translation of *King Lear*. When Radlova later served as editor, she significantly improved the text, prompting a surprised reaction from Chukovskii, who remarked that it had become "ten times better"; see Kuranda (2015).

USSR, but Chukovskii did not leave the matter there. The next month, he published an extended criticism of Radlova's *Othello* titled "Desdemona's Asthma" in the journal *Theater* (Chukovskii 1940).

Despite these attacks, the Radlovs seemed resilient in the face of various forms of criticism and effectively navigated the pitfalls of the ideological landscape of the 1930s. In 1935, like many other theater directors, Radlov (1935: 4) had to ritualistically criticize his earlier productions, acknowledging his "formalist" and "idealist" mistakes. The most serious accusation appeared in 1938 in a newspaper article titled "On the Wrong Path," which resembled an informant's report. The author, M. Bolotin, accused Sergei Radlov of nepotism (his wife and son worked in the theater), neglecting young artists, and preferring old classics to new Soviet dramas, thereby creating an "undemocratic, ideologically poor" climate in the theater. When published in print, such accusations could easily end one's career, but Radlov's theater survived, albeit through (formal) reorganization. In 1939, it was renamed the Theater of the Leningrad Soviet, or simply the Lensovet Theater, a name that, in 1953, was assigned to the former Novyi Theater (which, to this day, causes confusion).

To put the atmosphere of the late 1930s in perspective, let us return to where we began, the 1936 translators' conference. Some of the prominent scholars and writers who appeared at the conference went on to experience dramatic turns of fate: Pasternak, hailed as one of the best Soviet poets and translators, soon fell out of favor; Pavel Zenkevich, one of the organizers, was arrested in 1936; Sergei Dinamov was arrested and executed in 1939.

5. *Hamlet*

In 1940, a 119-page book by the Leningrad section of the All-Russian Theater Society was published, devoted exclusively to Radlov's production of *Hamlet*, in which a couple of pages addressed Radlova's translation in a generally positive light. Admitting some "unevenness" of translation and stating that the translation "had not fully absorbed Shakespeare's philosophical thought," the author concluded by saying that Radlova's translation is a "serious contribution to the work of our translators on Shakespeare" (Berezark 1940: 43-45).

In general, reviews of the *Hamlet* production at Radlov's theater generated much less controversy than those of *Othello* and, at first, were largely favorable, acclaiming Sergei Prokof'ev's score and Vladimir Dmitriev's scenography. Iogann Al'tman's (1938: 4) review is characteristic in this regard; he celebrated Dudnikov's performance as Hamlet, commended Radlov for "the correct concept of *Hamlet*," and at the same time branded his production of *Othello* as a product of a "vulgar sociological school," a common political epithet of the late 1930s. Aleksandr Smirnov (1938) was even less critical than Al'tman and proclaimed this production a "great victory not only of the theater but also of the entire Soviet art," praising Radlova's "very Shakespearean," "truly realistic" translation that "reflects the flexibility of Shakespeare's speech."

A rare glimpse into the practice of stage production at Radlov's theater is offered by a personal copy of *Hamlet* that belonged to the actress Tatiana Pevtsova (1908–2000), daughter of actors Illarion Pevtsov (1879-1934) and Elizaveta Zhikhareva (1875-1967)

(Fig. 2). Pevtsova played Ophelia in the 1938 production and left performance-specific notes on several pages of her 1937 *Iskusstvo* edition of *Hamlet* (Radlova 1937). The author of this article serendipitously obtained that copy from a bookstore in Tallinn, Estonia, where Pevtsova attended school in the 1920s and where she spent her last years, from 1967 onward.

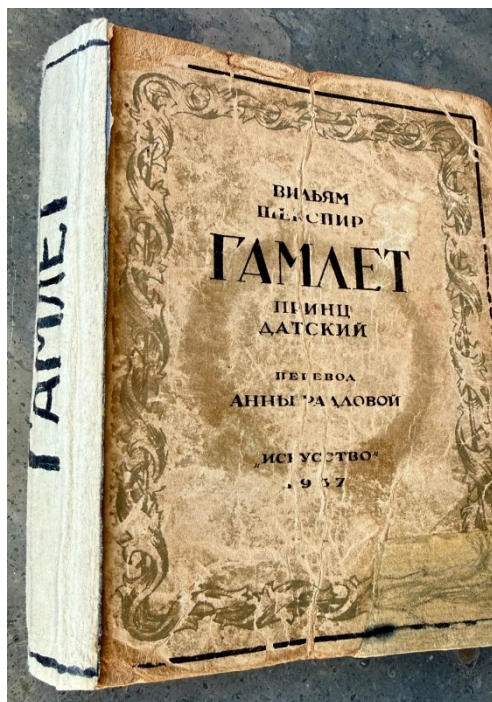


Figure 2. Tatiana Pevtsova's personal copy of the 1937 translation of *Hamlet*.
Photo by the author.

Apart from the usual cuts of the play, for example, the dialogue between Polonius and Reynaldo in II.2, or Hamlet's instructions to the actors in III.2, some notes made by Pevtsova reflect the Radlovs' orientation toward a dynamic, rapid stage action. In several lines, the order of words is altered, for example, in the last scene of Act I, the phrase "Я вам / С любовью доверяю господа" is changed to "Вам доверяю, господа, с любовью," — apparently in order to preserve the specific rhythm of the scene. Furthermore, Pevtsova marks the first scene of the third act as follows: "The rhythm of the scene: Big scene. People are very busy with 'a lot of fuss' (*суетятся «в заботе обильной»*)." Other cuts in the text seem to follow the same logic; even Ophelia's short monologue "Какой высокий ум здесь брошен за борт!" (O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!), which is usually preserved in theater productions, was cut from III.1, along with the dialogue between Claudius and Polonius, probably because it slows the action after the intense exchange between Ophelia and Hamlet (the "Go thee to a nunnery" scene).

Understandably, the majority of scene directions were left undocumented, but even these scarce remarks still tell us a great deal about the Radlovs' preference for the live word on stage over the logic of syntax on paper.

6. Conclusion

World War II became a reality for the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. On 8 September 1941, the siege of Leningrad began, but Sergei Radlov's theater remained in the city and even toured to Moscow, Piatigorsk, and other cities.¹⁵ In March 1942, Radlov's theater was evacuated from the besieged Leningrad to the Caucasus, specifically Piatigorsk, although it had initially been planned to move to Uzbekistan. In August 1942, the Germans took the city without any struggle, but left it already in January 1943, taking Radlov's theater with them, first to the occupied Ukraine, then to Germany, and then to the occupied France. After the war, the Soviet government invited all relocated persons to come back home, and when the Radlovs returned to the USSR, they were arrested and sentenced to ten years in labor camps near Rybinsk. Even in a gulag, Sergei Radlov continued to teach drama as the director of the Volgostroi Theater of the Cultural and Educational Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, staging performances and concerts with amateur performers. Radlova died in the camp in 1949, and Radlov was released in 1953. He appeared in Daugavpils, Latvia, and then in Riga; his first production in 1954 was *Hamlet* in Daugavpils Drama Theater, in Radlova's translation. The Radlovs (Anna Radlova posthumously) were rehabilitated only in 1957; Sergei Radlov died a year later in Riga, thereby bringing to an end the story of the most successful Soviet Shakespearean theater of the 1930s and 40s.¹⁶

Despite the rehabilitation, Anna Radlova's name was practically erased from the Soviet literary history. In the post-war period, apart from Radlov's productions, I am aware of only four productions based on Radlova's translations: *Richard III* (1972 and 1980), *Othello* (1984), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1985). One of her translations reappeared in print only 25 years after her death: the Shakespeare scholar Aleksandr Anikst, in his 1974 book on Shakespeare (Anikst 1974), used Radlova's translation of *Richard III*, probably as a commemorative gesture (together with a dedication to Viktor Shklovskii).

The tragic story of Anna Radlova—from the peak of her popularity in the 1930s to her fall into total obscurity after the war — reflects the grim reality of Stalinism at its height. We can only guess what could have happened to the Radlov theater if Sergei Radlov hadn't insisted on going to Piatigorsk. Given the theater's favorable position on the Soviet theatrical scene, Anna Radlova's translations could well have competed with Pasternak's after the war, potentially altering the course of Soviet theater history.

¹⁵ See, e.g., a report about the Radlovs' visit to Moscow in April 1942 ("Iskusstvo Leningrada..." 1942: 4).

¹⁶ On Sergei Radlov's life in Latvia see Ravdin (2012: 180–202).

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

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 enstrangement, 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.

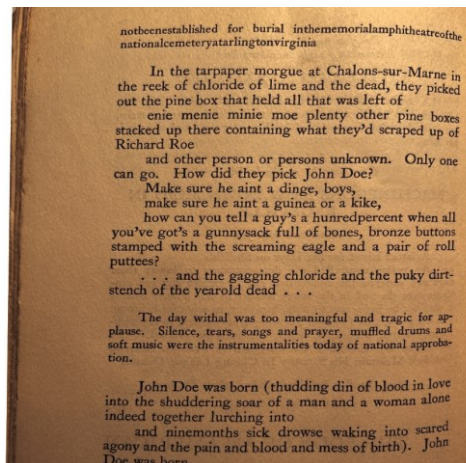


Fig. 1: Typographic experimentation in Dos Passos' "Body of an American" from *1919* (1932)

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 Dzhan 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 comradeship, 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 clichés 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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The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

“I STRUGGLE, PENCIL IN HAND”:
MARIYA PETROVYKH’S MASTERY OF TRANSLATION AND POETRY

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Abstract: The renowned Russian translator Mariya Petrovykh (1908-1979) wrote original poems throughout her life. Although her poetry was little known outside her circle of friends and admirers, many collections of her works include a selection of both her verses and translations. However, the mutual influence between these two creative activities has not yet received scholarly attention. This article highlights the presence of fruitful echoes in Petrovykh’s work as a translator, poet, and editor. Reading Mariya Petrovykh’s translations against the background of her original poetry (and vice versa) enables a deeper analysis of her poetics and translation approach.

Keywords: Mariya Petrovykh; Soviet translation practice; Russian translation; Russian poetry; poet-translator

1. Introduction

“She was like an actress preparing for a new role. Like a sculptor who studied not only the model, the image to be sculpted, but also the site, the space where the monument was to stand. She did not adapt, like Chekhov’s *Dushechka*, to the new character in her translation works. No, she touched upon a character that was new to her, comprehended it, and in comprehending it, to a certain extent she became that character. She belonged to the category of translators who translate not words and lines, but characters. Poetic characters, that is, entire worlds”¹ (in Petrovykh 1986: 329). With these words, the poet and translator Lev Ozerov described Mariya Petrovykh’s mastery of translation. For her, translation was “not a means of earning money, but a need of the soul to express another soul”, states Emiliya Aleksandrova, herself a translator; “Petrovykh never went against her artistic conscience, but as a rule, selected only what resonated with her. Thus, what was translated ceased to be something translated, it became a fact of Russian poetry” (in Petrovykh 1986: 360). Even Samuil Marshak and Korney Chukovsky, reference points for translation in the

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¹ All translations from Russian are mine.

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Soviet Union,² appreciated her work; the latter named Petrovykh among the best representatives of the new generation of translators who managed to finally reveal the beauty of Caucasian and Central Asian poetry to Russian readers (Marshak 1971; Chukovsky 1968).

Recognized during her lifetime for her ability to give a powerful and authentic voice to the authors she translated, Mariya Petrovykh, in her later years, held seminars for young translators³ and received special honors from Armenia for her significant role in making Armenian poetry accessible to the Russian public: in 1970, she was awarded the title of “Honored Worker of Culture of Armenia” and in 1979, just before her death, she received the newly established Charents Prize of the Writers’ Union of Armenia for translators.⁴ Remarkably, the renowned Armenian artist Martiros Saryan painted her portrait in 1946.

However, Mariya Petrovykh’s writing activities did not begin with translation. Her creative journey started with her own poetry, which accompanied her throughout her life – sometimes reflecting, as a mirror, her translation work, inspiring and being inspired by it, and at times “half-suffocating” under the weight of translations (Chukovskaya 1997: 334). Her original poems existed in the shadow of the acclaimed translations she authored, reaching publication only once – except for a handful of poems that appeared in periodicals – during her lifetime (Petrovykh 1968).⁵ Interestingly, this collection of poems, along with many that were edited after her death, contains both her original verses and a selection of her poetic translations (Petrovykh 1968, 1986, 1991, 2000).

Although her poetry was little known outside her circle of friends and admirers, as the poet and translator Yakov Khelemsky noted, Petrovykh’s poems and her translations “are truly branches of the same tree, nourished by the same sap” (in Petrovykh 1986: 259). These branches have not yet been studied in their fruitful exchange. The very few analyses that have been produced so far have focused on specific aspects of her poetry (Bogdanova 1991; Kastarnova 2009; Mentszyao 2022) and have reconstructed her biography,⁶ too often, however, reading Petrovykh’s original texts in light of concrete episodes and encounters, thus projecting a one-sided autobiographical dimension onto her verses (Skibinskaya 2020).

² The publication of the volume *Principles of Literary Translation* (Printsipy khudozhestvennogo perevoda) written by Chukovsky and Gumilev in 1919 marked “the birth of modern translation studies” and inaugurated “a tradition of sophisticated reflection on the nature and practice of translation” (Baer&Witt 2018: 10).

³ These seminars (1959-1964) were held together with her colleagues Vera Zvyagintseva and David Samoylov. This collaborative practice demonstrates the importance of teamwork for translators (see Jones 2011).

⁴ Petrovykh was awarded this prestigious prize in particular thanks to the efforts of Levon Mkrtchyan (see Saakyants 2015).

⁵ This publication, which did not appear in Yerevan by chance, was made possible through the mediation of Levon Mkrtchyan. Petrovykh emphasized this special “co-authorship” when signing the copy she gave him: “To Levon Mkrtchyan, author of this publication” (Saakyants 2015).

⁶ Petrovykh’s granddaughter, Anastasiya Golovkina, is also actively working on this subject and has published several works about her grandmother’s biography, including personal letters and other archival materials.

This article aims to shed light on the close relationship between the translation and poetry of Mariya Petrovykh, illustrating the points of contact and mutual influences of these two creative activities. As Aleksandrova emphasized in the quotation above, Petrovykh's translation work harmoniously echoed her sensibility and artistic perception in an original way. This stimulating and productive dialogue with the authors she translated⁷ will be illustrated through an analysis of her poetics (with special attention to the motif of "mutism") and a selection of translated poems from Slavic languages (namely, Croatian, Polish, and Bulgarian). Additionally, since Petrovykh was an indefatigable editor of others' texts and translations as well, her editing suggestions and instructions will provide useful information on her understanding of the poetic word.

2. From Poetry to Translation – From Translation to Poetry

Mariya Petrovykh was born in 1908 in the Yaroslavl governorate. She attended school in Yaroslavl, where in 1922 she began participating in meetings of the local Union of poets.⁸ By the time a collection of works by these young poets was published in 1926, *Yaroslavskie ponedel'niki* (Yaroslavl Mondays), Petrovykh had already left the city and enrolled in the Higher literature courses in Moscow, possibly at the suggestion of Georgy Shengeli, then head of the All-Russian Union of poets and a frequent attendee of the Yaroslavl meetings (Skibinskaya 2020: 260). This formative period was crucial both because of the quality of the teaching staff and of the important encounters and friendships Petrovykh made during these years: in particular, she and her fellow student Arseny Tarkovsky became lifelong friends.

Her chances of securing herself a place as a poet during those years were rapidly diminishing though. Despite a productive period in Crimea within Maksimilian Voloshin's creative circle in 1930, Petrovykh's poetry had little prospect of publication in the Soviet Union. Additionally, her first unhappy marriage to Pyotr Granditsky (a Yaroslavl poet, then employed as a specialist in agro-economics) ended in 1934, and the harsh destiny of her second husband, a repeatedly arrested talented poet, Vitaly Golovachev (he died in prison camp in 1942), placed Petrovykh among the many widows of Russian poetry of that era – most notably alongside Anna Akhmatova, a close friend and confidant of Mariya Petrovykh in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ This situation

⁷ The relationship between poet-translators and the authors they translate has been studied in (Mata Buil 2016).

⁸ The Yaroslavl branch of the Moscow Union of poets was established in 1919, shortly after the organization opened in the capital (see Skibinskaya 2020).

⁹ From a letter sent by Petrovykh to Atanas Dalchev (December 26, 1974): "I will try to write to you about Akhmatova and Pasternak sometime, but today it is still difficult. They are both my life. I met Pasternak in 1928 and Akhmatova in 1933" (in Glen 1996: 262). For her part, Akhmatova considered Petrovykh's poem "Naznach mne svidan'e..." (1953) a masterpiece of twentieth-century Russian poetry (Osetrov 1965: 187).

possibly pushed Petrovykh to willingly accept Georgy Shengeli's invitation to turn to translation in the 1930s.¹⁰

Petrovykh's first translations were verses by the Jewish writer Peretz Markish, the Kazakh author Abai Kunanbaev (Qunanbaiuly) and the Turkmen poets Ata Salikh and Mollanepes. A collection of selected poems by the latter (published in 1940) was the first volume entirely translated by Mariya Petrovykh. Her renowned Armenian translations, especially those of young poets,¹¹ appeared after her trip to the country in autumn 1944, a period that resulted in deep ties between Petrovykh and Armenia. Another work trip for her translations took her to Lithuania in 1950 and 1951. Her poor health prevented a final trip to Bulgaria in her later years, when poems by Atanas Dalchev embodied her last translation efforts.¹²

The number of languages and cultures that Petrovykh brought into Russian is remarkable: in the Soviet Union, the use of a *podstrochnik* (interlinear translation) was an established – yet little investigated¹³ – practice (Vanechkova 1978; Gasparov 2001; Witt 2013, 2019), so she did not have to know these languages.¹⁴ Yet, Petrovykh's study of the author, context, culture, style and poetic features is attested by many of her

¹⁰ At the time, Shengeli worked in the section of Literature of the Peoples of the USSR within Goslitizdat (State Publishing House for Literature) and was also appointed editor for Western classics. He provided translation work to a great number of poets, especially young authors (Tarkovsky, Shteynberg, Lipkin, as well as Akhmatova and Mandel'shtam, to name just a few). As Susanna Witt summarizes, Shengeli's "role as provider of translation work for unpublished and unpublishable poets is legendary" (Witt 2016a: 27). For an analysis of the management of translation practices by the Soviet literary apparatus, within which Mariya Petrovykh's work and life were situated, see (Witt 2019). Further studies on Petrovykh could assess her role and status among her generation of fellow translators (and poet-translators) as well as for her younger colleagues, while keeping in mind that "each particular translation represents the intersection of the broader ideological context with translators' own literary and personal evaluative approaches" (Khotimsky 2018: 234-235).

¹¹ Maria Khotimsky highlights Petrovykh's strategic choice of translating Armenian women-poets in particular: "While few Russian women-authors, including Petrovykh herself, could publish original poems devoted to private subjects, they found an outlet for such themes in translating works by contemporary women-authors. Such were Petrovykh's translations of Armenian poets Silva Kaputikyan, Maro Markarian, and Amo Sahian" (Khotimsky 2018: 232).

¹² From a letter sent by Petrovykh to Atanas Dalchev (June 9, 1974): "I deeply regret that I cannot come to Sofia – I was invited to take this trip, but I had to decline: my heart is not entirely well, and I am not strong enough for such a journey" (in Glen 1996: 253-254).

¹³ "The technology required for creating these translations based on a *podstrochnik*, without knowledge of the original language, requires a separate analysis of each case and is virtually unexplored" (Zemskova 2022: 185). Susanna Witt defines the *podstrochnik* practice as an "eternally temporary phenomenon" of indirect translation (typically by an anonymous author), whose regular use in the Soviet context makes it "one of the distinctive features of the Soviet translation project as a whole" (Witt 2013: 184, 157).

¹⁴ Her second husband, Vitaly Golovachev, reportedly had an aptitude for languages. In a letter to his wife from the prison camp (August 29, 1941) he wrote: "I studied the Armenian language extensively with a well-educated Armenian man. As a result, I have mastered the entire grammatical system and have a vocabulary of 500 words. [...] I must admit that the language is very difficult and foreign in structure and spirit. My main difficulty in conversation right now is that all the phrases are constructed in the opposite way, and as soon as you start to speak, it confuses you. But it is okay, I will manage, and we will translate from Armenian together. They say that Georgian seems like child's play after it. All the better" (in Golovkina 2024: 7-8).

colleagues, students, friends, and her biography as well.¹⁵ Her engagement with the source text and investigation of its context were fundamental to recreating the original in translation; she did not force the original text into a personal poetic framework but strove to do justice to the many nuances of the source text. The careful and thorough research behind Petrovykh's translations suggests the role that this work, only apparently a substitute for her own poetry,¹⁶ played for her throughout her life.¹⁷

As Skibinskaya incidentally suggests, translation became a "personal creative expansion" for Petrovykh (Skibinskaya 2020: 338). If translation functioned as an "expansion," Petrovykh's original poetry – even if unpublished – served as an intimate accompaniment, at times providing a cathartic and redeeming experience. While her first attempt to join the Soviet Writers' Union as a translator failed in 1937, in 1942 (when evacuated in Chistopol due to the war) she was welcomed in the Union thanks to her poetry. "The Chistopol period of evacuation became significant for Petrovykh: here she was recognized by the professional literary circle" (Skibinskaya 2020: 345), a circle animated by such prominent figures as, among others, Pasternak, Tarkovsky, Fedin, Lipkin, Aseev. Here, in 1942, Petrovykh was thrice invited to read her poems to the audience at the local Teacher's House (Dom uchitelya). After the first event, on May 19, 1942, Pasternak exclaimed: "Mariya Sergeevna, I am creatively envious of you" (in Skibinskaya 2020: 356). Konstantin Fedin, chair of the Writers' Union in Chistopol, wrote to Aleksandr Fadeev: "The big sensation here is Petrovykh's poetry: she captivated and amazed everyone with her maturity, purity of voice. Actually, we enrolled her into the Soviet Writers' Union" (in Skibinskaya 2020: 357). The result of this success was twofold: on the one hand, in 1943 *Znanya* published three her poems ("Noch na 6 avgusta"; "U menya bol'shoe gore..."; "Zavtra den' rozhden'ya tvoego..."); on the other hand, she was encouraged to submit a collection of her poetry for publication but received a rude rejection, which led to a temporary pause in her writing in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

3. "The Happiness of Being Music"

Pauses in writing proved particularly hard and suffering for Mariya Petrovykh, converting into a pervasive, painful sense of "mutism" (*nemota*), a key word and frequent image throughout her oeuvre (more occasionally, *molchanie*, being silent). Mutism appears in her earliest poems ("Otryvok", 1928) but grows into a recurring

¹⁵ "The paths leading to [the translation of texts by] Tilvytis were lined with books about Lithuania, Lithuanian customs, Lithuanian folklore," wrote Ozerov, for example (in Petrovykh 1986: 329).

¹⁶ Many scholars have shown how misleading it is to view translation as a secondary form of authorship, especially for Soviet authors. Brian J. Baer describes translation as perhaps "the most Soviet of the arts" (Baer 2016a: 119) and notes that it enabled processes of "reimagining authorship" (Baer 2016a: 131). For many authors, it answered "the question of *how to be a writer*" (Zemskova 2013: 186). For an overview of the global phenomenon of poet-translators (and translator-poets) and of their role as agents in the literary field, see (Mata Buil 2016).

¹⁷ Her translation work and her poetry demonstrate a remarkable internal coherence over time, suggesting a consistent artistic maturity in Mariya Petrovykh throughout her life.

motif especially in her mature works.¹⁸ This debilitating condition, this crippling inability to express the poetic word signified for her the loss of the highest gift of poetry. The young Petrovykh wrote in a 1931 poem (“Neukrotimoyu trevogoy...”): “Но за величие такое, / За счастье музыкаю быть, / Ты не найдешь себе покоя” [“But for such greatness, / For the happiness of being music, / You will find no peace”].¹⁹ For Petrovykh, poets are thus music, but they are also careful recorders:

Стихов ты хочешь? Вот тебе —
Прислушайся всерьез,
Как шепелявит оттепель
И как молчит мороз.

Как воробьи, чирикают,
Кропят следками снег
И как метель великая
Храпит в сугробном сне.

Белы надбровья веточек,
Как затвердевший свет...
Февраль маячит светочем
Предчувствий и примет.
[...] (“Stikhov ty khochesh? Vot tebe...”, 1935)²⁰

[...]
Безмолвие страницы разграфленной
Как бы неволит что-то написать,
Но от моей ли немоты бессонной
Ты слова ждешь, раскрытая тетрадь!
[...]
Я только позавидовать могу,
Как, не страшась ошибок и помарок,
Весна стихи писала на снегу. (“Kakoy obil’ny snegopad v aprele...”, 1956)²¹

¹⁸ See for example: “Zima ustanovilas’ v marte...”, 1955; “U tvoey mogily vechny nepokoy...”, 1956; “V minutu otchayan’ya”, 1958; “Armeniya”, 1966; “Oglyanus’ – okameneyu...”, 1967; “Ni akhmatovskoy krotosti...”, 1967; “Sverchok poet, zapryatavshis’ vo t’mu...”, 1969; “Kogda slagat’ stikhi talanta net...”, 1971; “O ptitsakh”, 1975; “Kogda molchan’e pereshlo predel...”, 1975; “Uzh luchshe by mne cherep raskroili...”, 1976.

¹⁹ All excerpts from Petrovykh’s poems and translations are quoted from the 1991 edition. The English translations provided here are designed to offer readers a literal rendering of the original texts, prioritizing semantic accuracy and informational value over literary recreation.

²⁰ “So, poetry is what you want? Here you go – / Listen carefully / To the thaw lisp / And the frost hushing. // To the sparrows chirping, / Sprinkling snow with footprints, / And to the great blizzard / Snoring in a snowdrift sleep. // The brows of the branches are white / Like hardened light... / February looms like a beacon / Of premonitions and omens.”

²¹ “The stillness of the lined page / As if forcing me to write, / But it is from my sleepless mutism / That you wait for words, open notebook! // [...] I can only envy the spring / That, no fear of mistakes and blots, / Wrote verses on the snow.”

The ability to listen, capture, encode, and recreate the melodies of beauty found in nature is what makes poets worthy of their role. In this sense, poets are “like gods or magicians” (“Prikosnovenie k bumage...”, 1967). If poets are deaf to music and, especially, mute, they are virtually dead:

[...]

Меня сковало смертной немотою,
Одно твое звучание простое
Могло б меня от гибели спасти, —
Лишь песенку твою, где нет потерь,
Где непрерывностью речитатива
И прошлое и будущее живо, —
Лишь эту песню мне передоверь! (“Sverchok poet, zapryatavshis’ vo t’mu...”, 1969)²²

Healing from such mutism is not found in graphomania: poets should “keep silent until they get to verses” (“Domolchat’sya do stikhov”, 1971) and avoid “the noise of newspaper odes, / Of magazine chatter” (“Zaveshchanie”, 1970s). The only hope for ‘mute’ poets is to regain their ancestral ability, to have “the speech restored to the deaf and mute” (“Zima ustanovilas’ v marte...”, 1955). Otherwise, only death awaits the poet:

[...]

Тоска молчит, тоска мычит без слов.
За что мне, Господи, такие муки!
Убил бы сразу, только и делов.
О Господи мой Боже, не напрасно
Правдивой создал ты меня и ясной
И с детства научил меня слагать
Слова... Какую даровал усладу!
И вот с немой тоскою нету сладу.
Ты прав. Я за грехи достойна аду,
Но смилуйся, верни мне благодать! (“Uzh luchshe by mne cherep raskroili...”, 1976)²³

Petrovykh did not conceal the pain caused by her ‘muted’ condition from her friends²⁴ or even from the authors with whom she corresponded. In several letters sent to the Bulgarian poet Atanas Dalchev in the 1970s she described the affliction she felt:

²² “I am paralyzed by mortal mutism, / Your simple sound alone / Could save me from death, — / Only your song, where there are no losses, / Where the continuity of recitative / Brings the past and future to life, — / Only this song, entrust it to me!”

²³ “Melancholy is silent, melancholy moans without words. / Why, Lord, such torment for me! / Kill me right away, and that would be all. / O my Lord, it was not in vain / That you created me truthful and clear / And taught me from childhood to compose / Words... What joy you have given me! / And now, with silent melancholy, there is no relief. / You are right. I deserve hell for my sins, / But have mercy, restore my grace!”

²⁴ To Levon Mkrtchyan she wrote: “I never forgot my poems. They forgot me, sometimes for long years, and it was very painful” (Saakyan 2015).

Verses... this does not depend on us: they either come from a strong emotional shock (and this is not always the case) or from profound loneliness. (At least, that is how it is for me.) But they always come from melody, that is, if you do not hear the melody, you cannot write a poem (August 12, 1974).

[...]

Nowadays only single lines rush in; I sometimes write them down, but I do not return to them, and the poem does not develop. How I envy those who write a lot! Even if it were just a few, even if it were only ten poems a year, I would be happy. Silence [*Molchanie*] is painful (February 19, 1975) (in Glen 1996: 256, 265).

Just as poetry begins with a melody, hearing the music is also crucial when translating another author. In her careful work, “stunned by the love for poetry and the fear of damaging it,”²⁵ Petrovykh aimed to preserve the “intonation” of the original (in Glen 1996: 256, 250). A representative of a new generation of Soviet translators, she criticized literal, word-to-word translations,²⁶ even when the translator was a revered friend like Akhmatova or Shengeli: “in his [Shengeli’s] translations there is a painful rigidity, a desire to squeeze the entire original text into a line at the expense of the Russian language, at the expense of free breathing, of free intonation” (Petrovykh 1991: 366).

However, the role of music, sound and hearing is not the only key to understanding Mariya Petrovykh’s poetics. As if constantly underlining what poets should be, her verses stress that these verbal artists cannot be deaf, mute, or blind: hearing, reproducing, and seeing are essential to poetry (“Эта сказочка стала стара, / Потускнели виденья ранние, / И давно уж настала пора / Зренья, слуха и понимания”; “О kakie mne snilis’ morya!...”, 1967).²⁷

The poetic word has a melody, but it also has its own light: “Весь век лишь слова ищешь ты, / Единственного слова. / Оно блеснет из темноты / И вдруг погаснет снова” (“V minutu otchayan’ya”, 1958).²⁸ The barren soul of the ‘mute’ poet is “severely unable to listen, unable to see” (“тяжело неслышащая, незрячая”) (“Kogda slagat’ stikhi talanta net...”, 1971).

That is why, alongside silence, mutism, and sounds (voices, bird chirping, rumblings, creaks, groans, roars...), colors – and especially the opposition between light and darkness – play an important role in Petrovykh’s poems: “Лишается земля примет, / Когда над ней исчезнет свет, / Все дело в свете, но и он / Лишь темнотой на свет рожден” (“Nas predrassvetnaya zarya...”, 1969).²⁹

²⁵ As much as she feared damaging the translated text, she did not want to “enrich” it: “God forbid if I am ‘enriching’ Nairi Zaryan! You [Mkrtchyan] know the original and you know that there is no enrichment here. I translated this poem very accurately, and that is my only merit” (Saakyants 2015).

²⁶ On the different and evolving approaches to translation in the Soviet Union see (Azov 2013; Baer 2016b; Witt 2016b; Baer&Witt 2018; Baskina 2021).

²⁷ “This fairy tale has grown old, / Early visions have faded, / And long ago the time came / For sight, hearing, and understanding.”

²⁸ “All your life you search for the word, / That only word. / It will flash out of the darkness / And suddenly fade away again.”

²⁹ “The earth loses its signs / When the light will disappear above it, / It is all about the light, but it too / Was but born from darkness.”

Yet, based on Petrovykh's original poems, her translation practice, and her editing suggestions, it is possible to consider the sound dimension as preeminent, dominant in verbal poetic composition. Not only are the motifs of hearing and mutism particularly recurrent, but stylistically, sound effects also appear in a variety of poems (through alliterations, repetitions, etymological figures, homophones, and semi-homophones):

[...] Умолк? Умаялся? Умялся? [...] ("Otryvok", 1928)³⁰

[...] В неполитом, в неполотом саду [...] /
Единственным неповторимым сердцем,
Таинственной единственной душой ("Osennie lesa", 1943)³¹

[...] дрожмя дрожит ("Dal'nee derevo", 1959)³²

[...] Здесь ты со мной, ты здесь со мной [...] /
А небо синее? А снег?
А синева ручьев и рек?
А в синем небе облака? ("K tvoey mogile podoydu...", 1959)³³

[...] Лишь весть о вести [...] /
Все про себя: судьба, судьбе,
Судьбы, судьбою...
Нет, вы забудьте о себе,
Чтоб стать собою. [...] /
Отправьтесь в путь, в нелегкий путь,
В путь — от причала ("O, vetrom zyblemaya ten'...", 1960s)³⁴

[...] Красотою красота [...] ("Est' khudozhnik nepodkupny...", 1968)³⁵

[...] Заря – не зря [...] ("Nas predrassvetnaya zarya...", 1969)³⁶

[...] Исчез мой давний дивный сон [...] ("Net, ne poedu ya tuda...", 1960s)³⁷

[...] никто, никогда,
Ни за что, никуда, ниоткуда [...] ("Na miru, na yuru...", 1971)³⁸

³⁰ "Gone silent? Worn out? Beaten down?"

³¹ "In an unwatered, unplowed garden [...] / With an only unrepeatable heart, / With a mysterious only soul."

³² "Violently trembling."

³³ "Here you are with me, you are here with me [...] / And the blue sky? And the snow? / And the blue of streams and rivers? / And the clouds in the blue sky?"

³⁴ "Only news about news [...] // Everything about yourself: fate, to fate, / Of fate, through fate... / No, forget about yourself, / To become yourself. [...] // Set off on a journey, a difficult journey, / A journey – from the pier."

³⁵ "Beauty through beauty."

³⁶ "Dawn – not in vain."

³⁷ "My ancient marvelous dream has vanished."

³⁸ "Nobody, never, / For nothing, nowhere, from nowhere."

Her work as an editor reflects the attention given to the translated text and to the beauty, the purity of the Russian poetic word. As her colleagues, such as Khelemsky and Ozerov, have reported, “her comments on the manuscript [of a translation] were, as a rule, sniper-like in their accuracy, she instantly detected the slightest sloppiness or minor flaw” (in Petrovykh 1986: 237); “Both (Petrovykh and Zvyagintseva) overwhelmed each other with examples of such distortions [of the Russian language] that reached the point of absurdity. Not the right meaning, not the right emphasis, not the right nuance of the word. Both loved dictionaries and not only consulted them but carried them within themselves” (in Petrovykh 1986: 313). The poet Grigory Levin recalled a specific episode that happened to him:

There is so much that could be said about Maria Sergeevna’s sense of language. I will limit myself to one personal example. My poem “Ya tebya drugoy khotel by videt” [I would like to see you different] was published in the twelfth issue of *Yunost* in 1956. Maria Sergeevna drew my attention to the line “Ne khochu sovsem tebya obidet” [I don’t want at all to offend you] and said something like this: “So you don’t want to offend her at all? But you do offend her, don’t you? Here you should have said ‘vovse’ instead of ‘sovsem.’” Maria Sergeevna said it with some irritation, as if offended on behalf of the language she loved and felt so deeply. I felt ashamed that I myself had failed to notice this annoying inaccuracy. And once, in conversation, I used the word ‘yazykóvaya’. Maria Sergeevna said with indignation: “Remember: there is a sausage called *yazykóvaya* [tongue sausage], but when talking about language, you have to say *yazykováya*” (in Petrovykh 1986: 368).

As Samoylov underlined, “She became upset and disappointed when the feelings and thoughts of the author being translated were distorted by the translator’s willfulness. She always loved the person she was translating. She cared deeply about every line, as if she had written it herself” (in Petrovykh 1986: 336). The colleagues she edited sometimes took offense, Samoylov continues, and someone even called her a “beast” for her passionate attitude toward the translated text. Even the poet Boris Slutsky received her meticulous comments on his translations of the Polish poet Julian Tuwim: the rhyming expression “zychno ya” [loud I] sounded, to Petrovykh, too ambiguously close to the neuter adjective “zychnoe” [loud], while in the line “krov’ zalivaet gorlo diko” [the blood floods the throat wildly] the last two words, in her view, merged too much. She was also very careful in terms of gender choice: “I think it would be better to replace ‘mal’chik’ [boy] with ‘mladenec’ [baby], so as not to offend the girls”, Petrovykh wrote to Slutsky (in Skibinskaya 2020: 446-468).

We will now focus more specifically on some of her translations to identify features of her work with the text. As Anait Tatevosyan has analyzed Petrovykh’s Armenian translations, highlighting the variety of styles and poetic features she mastered (Tatevosyan 2014), the following section will concentrate on Petrovykh’s translations from Slavic languages, namely Croatian (Miroslav Krleža), Polish (Bolesław Leśmian), and Bulgarian (Atanas Dalchev).

4. Mariya Petrovykh's Translations from Slavic Languages

The 1991 edition of selected poems and translations by Mariya Petrovykh includes a wide range of translated texts, from "Poetry of the Peoples of the USSR" (Armenian, Georgian, Jewish, Kabardian) to "Foreign poetry" (Bulgarian, Polish, Czech, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, al-Andalus, Vietnamese, Indian).³⁹ Despite their popularity among readers and recognition from fellow translators and even Soviet authorities,⁴⁰ these translations have not yet received scholarly attention, except for the previously mentioned Tatevosyan's article devoted to Petrovykh's Armenian translations. We will now focus on her work on the poems of three Slavic-language poets: Miroslav Krleža (Zagreb, 1893–1981), Bolesław Leśmian (Warsaw, 1877–1937) and Atanas Dalchev (Thessaloniki 1904–Sofia 1978). Interestingly, the work of these authors echoes the motifs and styles that characterize Petrovykh's original oeuvre; her apt translations of these texts attest to the stimulating dialogue between her translation and writing activities.

In "Što znači ružin miris?" by Miroslav Krleža ("Čto znachit zapakh rozy?" [What does the smell of roses mean?], 1937), Petrovykh makes an effort to maintain the repetitions ("kad kao *kaplja kaplje za kapljom* noćni sat?"; "когда за каплей капля мгновения скользят?")⁴¹ and the list of verbs ("*razlistava se, cvate, truni se, niče, vene*"; "цветет и доцветает, средь листьев темных вянет")⁴² that give the original its distinctive rhythm.⁴³ However, when she cannot match the pace of the Croatian, she compensates in her own way, by constructing an etymological figure around the words 'mute/mutism': "цветенье розы *немо* всей *немотой* природы."⁴⁴

In Krleža's "Pismo" ("Pis'mo" [Letter], 1937) Petrovykh preserves the list of nouns at the end of the first stanza, though this comes partially at the expense of the original meaning: "Pismo je ko miris što ne prestane / da miriše *lipom, tijelom, kosom, svilom*"; "Письмо [...] / исчезнет в полете, / оставив дыханье пленительной *плоти*, / и *липы* в цвету, и *шелков*, и *тепла*."⁴⁵

Less, in terms of meaning, is sacrificed in "Loza" ("Vinogradnaya loza" [Grapevine], 1937), except for the syntactic repetition at the beginning of the second

³⁹ On the choice of languages and cultures systematically translated in the Soviet Union see (Witt 2013; Baer 2016b; Clark 2018; Zemskova 2018).

⁴⁰ In 1951, together with her colleagues who had worked on the translation of the Kabardian *Nart saga*, Petrovykh was nominated for the Stalin Prize and received the honorary medal "For Valiant Labor" (Za doblestny trud). Skibinskaya also states that Iosif Stalin appreciated Petrovykh's translation of the Lithuanian poet Tilvytis, praising the "good language" of the translation (Skibinskaya 2020: 427).

⁴¹ "When the night clock drips drop by drop?"; "When drop by drop the moments slip away?" (Here and elsewhere, italics in quotations are mine).

⁴² "Unfurls, blooms, rots, sprouts, withers"; "blossoms and fades, withering among dark leaves."

⁴³ The analysis of metrical patterns in these translations (as in the poems mentioned above) is beyond the scope of this article. The meters employed are very diverse and deserve a specific study.

⁴⁴ "The blooming of roses is mute of all the mutism of nature." The original text reads "ruža nijemo cvate" [the rose mutedly blooms].

⁴⁵ "A letter is like a smell that never fades / that smells of linden, body, hair, silk"; "A letter [...] / will vanish in flight, leaving behind the breath of captivating flesh, / and linden trees in bloom, and silks, and warmth."

stanza (*“Iz blata i kiše, iz blata i pijeska”; “На лозах, пророслих из грази, из глины”*)⁴⁶ and for the image of the sun under which the grapes are ripening. In this case, Krleža’s poem itself contains key words that are close to Petrovykh’s poetics, namely mutism and blindness: *“Loza se tiho i nijeto penje, / o, divno je njeno slijepo htijenje!”; “Лоза вырастает неспешно и немо / в слепом и прекрасном желании неба.”*⁴⁷

Bolesław Leśmian was, according to Petrovykh, “the most significant, the most talented” of Polish poets (in Glen 1996: 253). It appears that in this author she found a truly resonant chord, evident in her convincing translations of his poems, where she manages to stay close to the original meanings while reproducing their intrinsic melody (see, for example, the poem *“Zakłęcie”, “Zaklyat’e”* [Spell], 1936).

In texts like *“Noc zimowa”* (*“Zimnyaya noch”* [Winter Night], 1912), *“Wieczorem”* (*“Veчерom”* [At Evening], 1920), *“Pierwszy deszcz”* (*“Pervy dozhd”* [First Rain], 1920), and *“Samotność”* (*“Odnochestvo”* [Loneliness], 1936), Petrovykh notably preserves the sound structure, rhythm, and deliberate repetitions, while also finding motifs in Leśmian’s texts that resonate with her own poems and that she accurately maintains in Russian: sounds, mutism, silence, light, darkness, visions, dreams. The sound play of the verse *“Bez róż – bez zórz”* in *“Noc zimowa”* is rendered, for example, as *“Без лоз, без роз.”*⁴⁸ The studied repetition of the adjective *“pierwszy”* [first] in the opening stanza of *“Pierwszy deszcz”* is preserved in Russian, as is the anaphora created by the expressions *“Niechaj”* and *“Niech”* [Let] translated with the equivalent *“Pust’,”* which closes the poem *“Zakłęcie”*.

Her approach in *“Mrok na schodach...”* (*“Mgla u vkhoda...”* [Darkness on the Stairs / Darkness in the Entrance]) to handling the insistent repetition of the word *“śnieg”* [snow] throughout the two stanzas is different and creative: initially substituting *“sneg”* [snow] with *“metel’”* [blizzard], Petrovykh accepts Leśmian’s challenge and works with verbs derived from the required terms:

Trzeba teraz w śnieg uwierzyć
I tym śniegiem się ośnieżyć —
I ocienić się tym cieniem,
I pomilczeć tym milczeniem.

В этот снег поверить надо,
Оснежиться снегопадом,
Затениться тенью нежной,
В тишине притихнуть снежной.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “From mud and rain, from mud and sand”; “On vines, born from mud, from clay.”

⁴⁷ “The vine climbs silently and mutedly, / oh, its blind desire is wonderful”; “The vine grows slowly and mutedly / in the blind and beautiful desire of the sky.”

⁴⁸ “Without roses, without dawns”; “Without vines, without roses.”

⁴⁹ “Now is the time to believe in snow / And be snowed up with snow – / And be shadowed with that shadow, / And be silenced with that silence”; “It is necessary to believe in this snow, / To be snowed up by the snowfall, / To be shadowed by the gentle shadow, / To fall silent in the snowy silence.”

Atanas Dalchev's poems were Mariya Petrovykh's final translation project, completed when she was already seriously ill. They were published some months after she passed away. Her correspondence with the Bulgarian author (published in Glen 1996) clearly shows her appreciation and high regard for his oeuvre. Samoylov suggests that Dalchev was "possibly closer to her" than other poets she translated during her long career (in Glen 1996: 248). His own struggle with the pain of creative mutism was something Petrovykh could deeply relate to.

In the poems she translated, silence, mutism, blindness, and darkness are present in both the original and her Russian version. Yet sometimes, likely in search of a rhyme, these terms appear in the translation even when they are absent in Dalchev's text, as in the case of "с небес немых" [from the mute skies] in "Snyag" ("Sneg" [Snow], 1929) and "кровь моя немеет" [my blood turns muted]⁵⁰ in "Pladnya" ("Polden" [Midday], 1929).

In any case, Petrovykh's translations of Dalchev's texts display an elegant and inventive recreation of sound images and rhythm. In the poem "Vecher" [Evening] (1930), the closing lines are a balancing act between sense and sound (even though Petrovykh chooses to add a verse to render it completely):

Ний непрестанно мрем и бавно чезнем
веднѣж от туй место, подир от друго,
докле изчезнем най-подир съвсем.

Мы непреодолимо умираем,
вседневно умираем, исчезая
оттуда и отсюда — отовсюду,
пока совсем не сгинем наконец.⁵¹

In general, in the poems of these Slavic-language authors, Mariya Petrovykh seems to have found common ground in terms of poetics and style, which may have helped her recreate the texts in the Russian language.

5. Conclusion

Reading Mariya Petrovykh's translations against the background of her original poetry (and vice versa) allows for a deeper analysis of her poetics and translation approach. The crucial role that translated texts, contexts, and authors played for her is also evident in Petrovykh's poems such as "Armeniya" (1966), "Srednevekov'e" (1967), and "Osen' sorok chetvertogo goda..." (1968), where her ties to the Caucasian country are emphasized, or in a text like "Perevodya Tagora" (1966), where her hard work as a translator is directly reflected. Interestingly, in her later years, she collected a series of

⁵⁰ The original text reads "my blood dries up."

⁵¹ "We are ceaselessly dying and slowly disappearing / once from this place, then from another, / until we will finally disappear completely"; "We are inevitably dying, / dying every day, disappearing / from here and there – from everywhere, / until we will finally vanish completely."

poetic sketches under the working title *Kniga skorbi* [Book of sadness, or Book of lamentations], choosing thus the same title as the mystical long poem by the Armenian monk-poet Grigor Narekatsi (X-XI c.), the Russian translation of which she edited (Petrovykh 2025).

The mutual influences among Petrovykh's poetry, her translations, and her editorial work are thus evident, yet still require systematic analysis. This research has raised many questions that call for further investigation into Petrovykh's precise and meticulous work with the poetic word, a practice that allowed "no deceptions, no substitutions," as she herself wrote in the poem "Redaktor" (1970s):

Борюсь с карандашом в руке.
Пусть чья-то речь в живом движенье
Вдруг зазвучит без искаженья
На чужеродном языке.⁵²

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⁵² "I struggle, pencil in hand. / Let the speech of the other in lively motion / Suddenly sound without distortion / In a foreign language."

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

RINGING UNDER CONTROL: THE SOVIET TRANSLATION OF PARUYR SEVAK'S *THE UNSILENCEABLE BELFRY*

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Abstract: The article offers a comparative study of the 1982 Russian translation of Paruyr Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* by Harold Registan, examining it in relation to the Armenian original published in 1959. It primarily focuses on the mechanisms of Soviet censorship at the level of translation. Although the poem addresses the life of Komitas Vardapet, it is profoundly rooted in the memory of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, a subject that remained politically sensitive throughout much of the Soviet period. The study argues that the significant delay in translating the poem into Russian reflects the ideological caution surrounding genocide discourse and national memory within the Soviet Union. Through close textual analysis, the article demonstrates how the translation systematically softens or reframes elements considered ideologically problematic. Ethnic references are generalized, religious symbolism is secularized and direct accusatory language, particularly the explicit use of the term "genocide," is either mitigated or carefully repositioned. Entire sections that foreground independent national resilience or religious continuity are omitted. These interventions do not obscure the central theme of the poem but shift its semantic and ideological emphasis. The study suggests that translation functioned as both a means of disseminating national literature across the Soviet Union and a mechanism of ideological control. By mediating Armenian historical memory through Russian, Soviet authorities were able to influence how that memory circulated and how explicitly it could be articulated. The case of *The Unsilenceable Belfry* is a vivid example of how translation practices operated within the ideological framework of the late Soviet period.

Keywords: The Unsilenceable Belfry; Komitas Vardapet; genocide discourse; Soviet censorship; ideological control; translation shifts; historical memory; political sensitivity

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1. Introduction

In examining translation, one can often discern the historical period in which a text was produced. Translators, whether consciously or not, cannot detach themselves from the socio-political environment of their time, which inevitably shapes their intellectual horizon, value system and interpretive stance. Translation is therefore never created in a vacuum. It is embedded in the cultural and institutional frameworks that define what is acceptable, desirable or even permissible. The strategies adopted, the omissions made, the tone selected and the terminology preferred frequently reflect broader ideological currents and dominant discourses of the era.

Viewed from a broader perspective, this observation aligns with the understanding that intercultural exchange of any kind takes place within a specific social context structured by complex relations of power. Such exchange involves agents who are conditioned by these power structures or at least deeply entangled in them and who may attempt to strategically exploit them in pursuit of individual or collective aims. These structures encompass not only political and economic authority but also various forms of cultural authority and symbolic power operating within the sphere of cultural production. Faced with multiple possibilities, agents must make choices and decisions about how to act within these constraints (Hermans 1996: 27).

The translator is precisely one such agent. This becomes particularly visible when we turn to concrete examples. For instance, numerous prominent translators have rendered Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Russian¹ and a comparison of these versions clearly reveals the ideological and temporal imprint of their respective periods. A striking case is the Russian translation of *Hamlet* by Boris Pasternak. Pasternak reshaped the tragedy under Soviet pressure. By employing the political language of his time and presenting a more restrained and controlled version of *Hamlet*, he ensured that the translation conformed to the expectations of the Soviet censorship apparatus. Yet, this adaptation does not necessarily imply full ideological compliance. Within the political climate of that period, adjusting a text could function as a strategy of survival while still allowing room for personal expression. The translation can thus be read both as a response to ideological constraints and as a subtle reflection of Pasternak's own inner position (Gallagher 2009: 129).

Russian readers value this version because they recognize that Pasternak presented a deeply human Hamlet, reshaped in a way that reflected the fears and inner tensions people experienced during the Stalinist era (Leighton 1991: 199). As Brian Baer puts it, "translation — not only the practice of translation but also commentary on translation — became a site of resistance to official Soviet culture and values. Through the selection of texts for translation, the various choices made in the course of translation and commentary on translation in the form of footnotes, prefaces and reviews, literary translators in the Soviet period became adept at encoding resistance for a select

¹ Beginning in 1748, twenty-two translations were produced directly from the original *Hamlet*, alongside numerous additional Russian renditions derived from it. Yet, within the broader history of Russian literature, only four of these versions — those by Mikhail Vronchenko (1828), Nikolay Polevoy (1837), Mikhail Lozinsky (1933), and Boris Pasternak (1940) — attained canonical status in their respective historical periods (Semenenko 2007).

intelligentsia audience. Moreover, the successful decoding of subversive content automatically constructed the reader as more insightful, if not more intelligent” (Baer 2006: 537).

Following the October Revolution, an instinctive fear gradually evolved into a deep-rooted, almost hereditary anxiety within the Soviet society and *intelligentsia* in particular. Given the strict censorship apparatus of *Glavlit*, which supervised every sphere of literary life in the Soviet Union, many writers and translators practiced self-censorship, excessively revising their works at the expense of the literary value to conform to the communist ideology. Any foreign literary piece would be heavily censored during the translation process to fully fit the expectations of the Soviet regime. Anything that was likely to go against the norm had to be modified or even eliminated.

During the Stalinist purges, what was perhaps even more hideous than the physical repression was the psychological destruction of human beings. This trauma inevitably left its imprint on the writers and artists of the time. The ideological terror had reached such an extreme that an author could be arrested and executed for a single poem. In her memoirs, Anna Akhmatova recalls conversations with Osip Mandelstam about the talented poet Nikolai Klyuev, who was arrested for one poem entitled *To the Revilers of Art* (Хулителям искусства). Any poem that was deemed ideologically dissenting could become a death sentence. Writers of that period lived under tremendous psychological pressure, expecting arrest and death at any moment. Akhmatova recounts one haunting episode regarding Mandelstam: “We were walking along Prechistenka Street (February 1934). What were we talking about? I do not remember. We turned onto Gogol Boulevard, and Osip said: ‘I am ready for death.’ Twenty-eight years have passed and I remember that moment every time I walk by that place” (Akhmatova 1983: 323).

However, the Khrushchev Thaw, which began in the mid-1950s after Stalin’s totalitarian rule (1927–1953), allowed a brief moment of liberalization. This period witnessed the emergence of more independent thinkers and translation practices began to flourish again. The relative abundance and diversity of translated literature from the Western world constituted one of the defining hallmarks of the cultural vitality and intellectual excitement that marked the early post-Stalin years (Friedberg 1977: 1).

The Thaw became a time of permissions and returns from oblivion. Many works of literature — both national and foreign — that had previously been banned were published or gradually brought back into circulation. For instance, a collection of works by Isaac Babel was published shortly after his rehabilitation in 1954 and Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita* appeared in 1966 (in a samizdat version) in the journal *Moskva*. Among the most popular newly permitted foreign writers were Erich Maria Remarque and Ernest Hemingway (Culture.ru 2026).

This ideological approach to foreign literature had already been articulated in the 1930s. In his speech at the First Congress of the Writers’ Union in 1934, Karl Radek drew a clear distinction between foreign authors who could serve the Soviet cause and those who stood against it. Literature was assessed not only for its artistic value but for its political usefulness (Sherry 2015: 73).

Foreign works were expected to support Soviet discourse, especially in portraying imperialism and fascism as common enemies. In this light, later translation choices of foreign authors appear far from accidental. In fact, they were influenced not solely by literary taste but also by censorship and ideology. Erich Maria Remarque was known for his anti-fascist views. After the Nazis came to power, he was persecuted, his books were banned and they were publicly burned in Germany. In the Soviet context, presenting or translating Remarque helped show that the fight against fascism was not only a Soviet struggle but part of a broader international resistance. It suggested that even well-known Western writers opposed fascism, placing the Soviet war against Nazi Germany within a wider global movement.

Ernest Hemingway, although an American writer, had a strong connection to Cuba. After the Cuban Revolution, Soviet discourse described Cuba as an “island of freedom.” Hemingway’s well-known attachment to Cuba could therefore be used in a way that supported this image. For the Soviet Union, emphasizing Cuba as a symbol of resistance to Western capitalism was politically useful, especially given the close alliance between the USSR and Cuba and the presence of Soviet military bases there. In this way, translating Remarque and Hemingway was not simply a literary act but could also serve broader political and ideological aims.

During those years, literature from abroad began to occupy more and more shelves in Soviet apartments. Many of the *shestidesyatniki* (the Sixtiers)² recall these years as the best period not only of their own lives but also in the history of the Soviet Union. The brief period of the Thaw — just twelve years, from 1956 to 1968 — changed virtually everything. It was a remarkable time of freedom within an unfree country — a freedom that was, of course, relative, yet immensely fruitful (Culture.ru 2026).

Yet this liberalization had clear limits. Glavlit continued to exert significant influence, carefully monitoring which authors could be published and, crucially, which could be translated into the languages of the Soviet republics. National literatures, many of which had historically developed through translation, suffered as a consequence of this selective openness. While certain rehabilitated or ideologically acceptable works were permitted, others remained strictly prohibited. Major works such as Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* in its full uncensored form, Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* and *Cancer Ward*, as well as later works by Aksyonov, Voinovich and Iskander were banned from publication and translation alike.

This restrictive policy extended to the non-Russian republics, which, despite their formal federal status, functioned in many respects within a colonial cultural framework. Authorities feared that translating system-critical literature into Armenian,

² The Sixtiers (*shestidesyatniki*) were a generation of Soviet intellectuals, writers, poets and urban cultural figures who emerged during the Khrushchev Thaw of the late 1950s and 1960s. They are often described as Westernizers, though this characterization is not entirely accurate. Rather, they were drawn to the idea of openness to the world, the rejection of boundaries and an orientation toward goodwill. Among their most prominent representatives were Bella Akhmadulina, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko. While often remembered above all for these major poetic figures, the term more broadly refers to an urban milieu shaped by cautious optimism about change within the Soviet system (Bykov 2019).

Georgian, Lithuanian or other republican languages might nurture dissenting, anticolonial and freedom-seeking sentiments beyond the Russian-speaking center. Thus, even during the Thaw, translation remained an instrument of ideological management, revealing that the celebrated liberalization operated within carefully guarded boundaries.

Many Armenian authors encountered similar restrictions when their works touched upon sensitive historical or national themes. Such authors as Paruyr Sevak, Hrant Matevosyan, Hovhannes Shiraz, Gurgen Mahari were similarly silenced.

Paruyr Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* was banned by *Glavlit* for condemning the Armenian Genocide, an act that, by affirming national identity, defied the colonial order of Soviet Armenia. By bringing historical memory and national continuity to the forefront, the poem ran counter to the official Soviet narrative, which required particular national tragedies to be absorbed into the broader story of socialist unity.

The censorship of Sevak's work was therefore not only a matter of political ideology in a narrow sense. It was part of a broader system designed to prevent literature from becoming a means of independent national self-expression.

Against this background, this article focuses on Paruyr Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* — one of the significant works in Armenian literature. By examining the fate of this particular text, the study moves from general observations about censorship to a concrete case. Through the example and analysis of Sevak's poem, we seek to demonstrate how censorship functioned in practice, how editorial intervention, omission and ideological reframing operated not only at the level of policy but within the text itself. In doing so, the article shows how the mechanisms of control discussed above were implemented in the cultural life of Soviet Armenia and how literature became a site of negotiation between national memory and imperial authority.

2. Ideological Control of Historical Memory and National Voice in Sevak's Poem

*The Unsilenceable Belfry*³ (Arm. «Անլռելի զանգակատուն» [*Anlreli zangakatun*]) was published in 1959, when Sevak was thirty-five. The poem is dedicated to the life of Armenian priest and musicologist Komitas Vardapet⁴, yet at the basis of the poem lies the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Interestingly, Sevak wrote *The Unsilenceable Belfry* during his studies in Moscow (1951–1959), at the height of the Khrushchev Thaw. The metropolitan environment provided Sevak with intellectual and creative possibilities

³ An English translation of Paruyr Sevak's poem by Svetlana Vardanian has been published under the title *The Incessant Bell-Tower* (2015). In the present study, however, we use the title *The Unsilenceable Belfry*, which more closely reflects the literal meaning of the Armenian original and, in our view, more effectively conveys the poem's thematic content. Vardanian also provides English renderings of the poem's structural divisions. While we retain the term *Peals* for the poem's six major sections, we depart from her translation of the forty-six subdivisions and designate them as *Rings*.

⁴ Komitas Vardapet (1869–1935), born Soghomon Soghomonyan, was an Armenian composer, musicologist, singer, and clergyman and a major figure in Armenian musical culture. His extensive work collecting, studying, arranging, and performing Armenian folk songs played an important role in the preservation and development of Armenian national musical traditions (Gasparyan 1961).

that would have been far more constrained in Soviet Armenia. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the atmosphere of the *shestidesyatniki* influenced the conception of the poem in ways that may not have been possible if he had remained in Armenia at the time.

The topic of the 1915 ethnic cleansing remained largely taboo in Soviet Armenia and the public discussion of those atrocities was restricted. Needless to say, awareness of these events was even more limited in other Soviet republics, where the subject was virtually absent from official discourse and public knowledge.

While studying in Moscow, Sevak experienced firsthand the gradual changes brought about by the Khrushchev Thaw. After the Stalin Purge, the country seemed to be breathing again and it was those currents and new breath of freedom that inspired him to write about this tragic chapter in the history of the Armenian nation. The poem was published in 1959 by HayPetHrat — the state-sponsored publishing house in Soviet Armenia.

Yet, it should be underlined that the developments in the Soviet Union's foreign policy played a crucial role in bringing the Armenian Genocide into the spotlight in 1965 amid ongoing tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States as well as NATO. Ultimately, the international recognition of the Genocide functioned as a political lever through which pressure could be exerted on Turkey, a key NATO member that bordered not only the Soviet Union but also Armenia. By assuming a new resonance, the poem was republished in 1965 with the addition of a new section entitled *Heroic Ring* (*Դոճալիճ հերոսալիճ*). In 1965, the Soviet Union officially commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and a memorial was erected in Armenia in remembrance of the victims. Although Khrushchev resigned in 1964, the effect of the Thaw continued for some time.

In the years after Khrushchev's rule, when Brezhnev took power, the boundaries of freedom grew narrower. During the Brezhnev era, many translated literary works published in *Novyi mir* — a Russian-language monthly literary magazine — addressed themes aligned with the Soviet ideological position, as numerous Western writers of the time were themselves critical of their own social and political systems (Lygo 2015). This approach was widely fostered throughout the Soviet period even during the years of the Khrushchev Thaw with the translation of Remarque's and Hemingway's works as mentioned above bearing testimony to this.

A gradual control was exercised over all spheres, particularly the ideological sphere and the first target was literature and art. Naturally, Stalin's totalitarian repressive methods could no longer be relevant and applied, yet, the control continued being strict notably over literature.

The link between Soviet republics and Western countries was limited. Publishing houses, editorial boards of journals could not publish any literary piece, nor its translation without Glavlit's *dobro* (approval). The translation of *The Unspeakable Belfry* is a vivid example of this, which was done only 24 years later in 1982. The gap is clearly huge. Although genocide-related topics could function as a political lever for bringing the issue into the public spotlight, they also had a significant downside linked to the internal condition of the Soviet Union. Such topics had the potential to stimulate nationalist and patriotic sentiments among the population posing a risk to internal

stability. Mobilization of these sentiments in one republic could easily trigger similar reactions in others, such as Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic republics. For this reason, genocide-related discourse was treated as politically sensitive and subject to strict control, which explains why the translation of the poem was repeatedly postponed. The Novocherkassk massacre⁵ in 1962 serves as a vivid example of the ruthless suppression of worker unrest by the Soviet government, highlighting the willingness of the regime to use deadly force against its own citizens to maintain social order and ideological control.

The poem was translated into Russian by Harold Registan who was the son of Gabriel El-Registan — the co-author of the lyrics of the State Anthem of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics along with Sergey Mikhalkov who was a staunch propagandist of Soviet ideologies. It is not a coincidence that the translation was done by El-Registan's son who was born and raised in Soviet Uzbekistan. Presumably, the translation was entrusted to him not merely because he was originally Armenian, but also because he was expected to produce a version that would remain fully compliant with the ideological principles cherished and propagated by the Soviet Union. As a figure closely associated with the Soviet cultural establishment, he could be relied upon to subject the poem to ideological censorship at the translation stage. The resulting text would not challenge the colonial order of Soviet Armenia, while any patriotic sentiment capable of strengthening Armenian national consciousness would be effectively nipped in the bud. Although he did not attain the high-ranking status enjoyed by his father, he remained a staunch Soviet patriot and a loyal representative of its ideological values. Thus, supposedly, much of his professional advancement was closely tied to the prestige and influence of his family background.

Interestingly, Harold Registan provides a noticeably vague and generalized account in the preface to the Russian edition. When referring to Komitas's deportation and psychological collapse, Registan writes that Komitas was "taken away among the first condemned and miraculously saved" and that "he lost his sanity after what he had witnessed" (Sevak 1982), yet he avoids explicitly naming the Armenian Genocide at this point. Instead, he formulates the event in broader and less specific terms, stating that "in Turkey, more than a million Armenians were brutally killed within a short period of time." The historical catastrophe is thus acknowledged, but it is framed in a generalized manner that distances it from direct and explicit designation from the very outset. Only later does he briefly mention "the most terrible tragedy of [the nation's] centuries-long history, the genocide," (ibid.) but here the formulation is immediately reframed through a comparison to Hitler and fascism, noting that the atrocity was one that "only Hitler's fascists were later able to surpass" (ibid.). This rhetorical move shifts the emphasis toward a familiar and ideologically sanctioned Soviet narrative, thereby aligning the Armenian tragedy with the broader anti-fascist discourse central to

⁵ The Novocherkassk massacre refers to the violent suppression of a workers' strike and demonstration in Novocherkassk on June 1–3, 1962. The protests began amid reductions in wage rates and increases in the prices of essential foodstuffs and developed into a broader workers' mobilization. Soviet forces opened fire on the demonstrators, killing 24 people and seriously wounding 69; 114 participants were subsequently tried, seven of whom were executed (Mandel 2012: 3).

Soviet political culture. Before concluding his remarks, Registan turns to a positive and ideologically safe generalization, describing the poem as a work that demonstrates how an unbreakable bond with the people gives rise to and sustains genius. The preface therefore does not engage directly with the historical details or the full moral gravity of the Armenian Genocide. Yet the poem itself centers precisely on the inhumane massacres of the Armenian nation, with Komitas functioning as a symbolic figure through whom this collective trauma is articulated. Registan's cautious framing can therefore be understood in the context of the strict censorship of the period, which limited direct discussion of the genocide and encouraged its reinterpretation within acceptable Soviet ideological narratives.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Soviet policy underwent certain changes and the signs of confrontation with Turkey became less evident. The Soviet Union thus sought to distance Turkey from NATO as much as possible by exploring new pathways of cooperation. This shift required the removal of the most sensitive issues for Turkey from the political and ideological agenda, foremost among them the Armenian Genocide, which Soviet policy had previously treated as a means of exerting pressure on Turkey.

The long-awaited translation of *The Unsilenceable Belfry* in 1982 coincided with that shift in foreign policy and Brezhnev's death, a point when the structures of his long-standing system of stagnation were beginning to crack. The poem, being one of the literary treasures of the Armenian nation, condemned the genocide committed by the Young Turk government against Armenians, framing it as a crime against humanity that went beyond the mass killing of a nation and regarded it as a crime threatening humankind as a whole. It was not merely a literary work but a manifesto against crimes against humanity and the aim of Armenians and the Armenian diaspora was for it, like the genocide perpetrated against the Jews during the Second World War, to be acknowledged and made accessible to the peoples of the Soviet republics in line with official cultural policy. This policy was directed at making the national treasures of the Soviet republics available to everyone.

Russian served as a lingua franca for these nations and it was therefore logical that the literatures of the Soviet republics were translated into Russian. This was also due to the fact that the Russian school of translation was unmatched in its capacities compared with that of the other republics and capable of fully conveying the ideological nuances inherent in such works. Although the poem was translated into Russian, the task of the translator was nevertheless to smooth out all pointed corners, particularly those concerning Turkey:

Armenian	Russian
Կրակը վառվեց ծեր աչքերի մեջ՝ Հենց նոր սկսվող ժպիտը հանգավ: Առաջի՛ն անգամ,	И вспыхнул гнев В глубинах старых глаз, Мгновенную улыбку погасив, —

⁶ Extracts from the Armenian original of Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* are cited from *Collection of Works in 6 Volumes: Volume 4* (1973), published in Yerevan. The Russian translations are taken from Sevak's *Selected Works* (1983), published in Moscow. Both editions are listed in the references and the page numbers provided next to the excerpts correspond to the respective volumes.

Առաջի՛ն անգամ

Ա՛ստ՝ Վեհարանի հին պատերի մեջ,

Սրբապղծորեն թուրք երգ է մխում...

Ա՛ստ՝ հայոց հոտի այս սուրբ

փարախում,

Հովվապետն ինքը ականջ է կախում

Ինչ-որ մի մանկան անօրեն երգի...

Ա՛ստ, ուր հնչել են մեղեդիք ոսկի՝

«Հայր մեր», «Միայն սուրբ»,

«Արեգակն արդար

«Ով զարմանալի»

Կամ «Խորհուրդ խորին»,

Ուր գրաբարն է հնչել դարեդար,

Եվ շարականն է հուզել բոլորին,-

Ա՛ստ՝ Վեհարանի հին պատերի մեջ,

Առաջի՛ն անգամ, Առաջի՛ն անգամ

Սրբապղծության մանանելս ընկավ... (p.

19)

В старинных стенах храма

В первый раз

Дымился святотатственный мотив...

В святом загоне паствы

пастырь сам

Внимает нечестивым словесам

Какого-то мальчишки, что поет

Греховные слова...

А этот свод

Лишь золотым мелодиям внимал —

Здесь «Отче наш», здесь «Лишь святой»

звучал,

Веками здесь грабар и шаракан,

Как гимны, волновали всех армян.

В покоех патриарших, где вокруг

Все свято,

В первый раз под чуждый звук

Здесь горечь святотатства пала вдруг... (p. 137-138)

A close comparison of the Armenian original and the Russian translation reveals a deliberate shift in the semantic focus and ideological framing. In the source text, the line *Սրբապղծորեն թուրք երգ է մխում* (lit.: A Turkish song is blaring sacrilegiously) explicitly invokes the presence of a historically antagonistic figure — of a Turk — within a sacred Armenian space. Furthermore, the tragedy is heightened by the fact that the song emerges from a Turkicised child's mouth, transforming innocence itself into a vehicle of desecration, a child who has been deprived of his parents, yet worse, of his mother tongue through slaughter and who sings in the language of those responsible. The writer has portrayed the tragedy of this fact with great artistic mastery. In the Russian translation, the word *թուրք* (Turk) disappears altogether and is replaced by the abstract phrase *дымился святотатственный мотив* (lit.: a sacrilegious motif smoldered), shifting the image from a historically specific act to a generalized sense of desecration. Here, the downfall from artistic heights and tragic drama is evident. This lexical substitution transforms an accusatory, historically anchored image into a depersonalized, clichéd one. While the Armenian text confronts the reader with a charged act of desecration tied to a specific historical adversary, the Russian version seems to neutralize this confrontation by dissolving its ethnic referent. Such a move exemplifies a broader translation strategy characteristic of the late Soviet period, whereby ideologically sensitive elements were not eliminated outright but reframed in a manner that retained poetic intensity while rendering the text politically acceptable. Also noteworthy is the repetition *Առաջի՛ն անգամ, Առաջի՛ն անգամ* (lit.: For the first time, for the first time!), which intensifies the tragic weight of the moment. The repetition foregrounds the sense of moral shock associated with the event. In the Russian translation, however, this repetition is lost resulting in a more descriptive rendering of the scene.

Armenian	Russian
Որսալ մեղեդին հույն-բյուզանդական, Հայոց խաղերում՝	А в тагах армянских напев византийский найти,
Թուրք-թաթարական բայաթի-շարքի-ն: (p. 64)	В армянских частушках турецкий размер баяти. (p. 170)

A similar tendency can be observed in another passage of the poem. In the Armenian original, the lines *Որսալ մեղեդին հույն-բյուզանդական, / Հայոց խաղերում՝ թուրք-թաթարական բայաթի-շարքի-ն* (lit.: “To capture the Greco-Byzantine melody, within Armenian songs — the Turkic-Tatar bayati mode) explicitly identify the cultural sources of musical influence, referring to both Greek-Byzantine and Turkish-Tatar traditions. The compound expression *թուրք-թաթարական* (Turkic-Tatar) is particularly significant as it points to the historical origins of the Turkish ethnos. Here the term ‘Tatar’ functions as a historical designation for the Turks. Yet, it carries sensitive implications in the Soviet context, where the term ‘Tatar’ is more likely to be understood by lay readers in its contemporary ethnic sense. Tatars constituted one of the largest ethnic groups within the Soviet Union and many members of the Soviet political and administrative elite were of Tatar descent. Obviously, linking Turks and Tatars in this way could produce ideological discomfort and tensions as it risked associating an internal Soviet population with an external political adversary⁷. In the Russian translation, this potential tension is mitigated by reducing the compound ethnic reference to the more neutral formulation *турецкий размер баяти* (lit.: the Turkish bayati meter), thereby preserving the musical reference while eliminating a politically sensitive ethnic conjunction.

Armenian	Russian
Բսկ ճեմարան՝ում...	А как в академии время питомца течет?.. (p. 140)
Թուրքախոս սանի կարոտ բերանում, (p. 23)	

The above said is also evident in the rendering of the line *Բսկ ճեմարան՝ում... Թուրքախոս սանի կարոտ բերանում* (lit.: And in the Seminary... the Turkish-speaking pupil with longing on his lips). In Armenian, *ճեմարան* clearly refers to the seminary, a term loaded with liturgical, ecclesiastical and cultural meaning. The phrase places the scene within a religious institution and reinforces the tension between sacred space and the presence of a Turkish-speaking pupil. In the Russian translation, however, *ճեմարան* is rendered as *академия* (academy), a secular and institutionally neutral term that removes the explicit religious dimension of the setting. As a result, the liturgical context is blurred and the scene is reframed as taking place in a general educational environment rather than a clerical one. This lexical shift weakens the

⁷ Contrary to many ideologically motivated views of Russian–Tatar friendship, the attitude toward Tatars among Russians is vividly reflected in Pushkin’s fairy tale *The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights*: «Иль башку с широких плеч / У татарина отсечь» [lit.: Or else to chop off, from broad shoulders, a Tatar’s brute head] (Pushkin 1936: 14).

religious context of the original and contributes to a broader depersonalization and secularization of the poem's imagery.

Armenian	Russian
Սուրբան Համիդը, ի փառս ավսահի, Ի նշան ահի Ամեն մի հայի Եվ ի գիտություն	Во славу аллаха султан Гамид Решил — К устрашению Всех армян И к сведению
Իր երկար քթով ամեն տեղ մտնող Այդ Եվրոպայի, –	Старой Европы, Что длинный свой нос норовит
Սուրբան Համիդը տարավ ու բերեց Եվ – Ապտակի տեղ, Ապտակի նման – Շրը խկ՝	Засунуть в дела отдаленных стран, Не думая долго — султан не мудрил — Бац! — Вместо пощечины, Словно пощечину — Трах! —
«Հայաստան» բառը արգելեց, Լեզվից, քարտեզից, գրքերից քերեց. (p. 22)	И слово «Армения» он запретил, Стер с карты, из книг, С языка соскоблил — ... (p. 139)

The Russian translation introduces a shift by adding the epithet *старая* (old) to Europe, an attribute that is absent from the Armenian original. In the source text, Europe is characterized through irony *իր երկար քթով ամեն տեղ մտնող այդ Եվրոպայի* (lit.: that Europe which pokes its long nose everywhere), emphasizing interference rather than age or historical status. By contrast, the Russian phrase *Старой Европы* points to a familiar ideological cliché within Russian and Soviet discourse, where ‘Old Europe’ often functioned as a marker of moral exhaustion or political decline. This addition reframes Europe not merely as intrusive but as outdated and ideologically inferior, rendering the passage in accordance with the established Soviet rhetorical conventions.

In the Soviet Union, attitudes toward foreign cultures were often mixed and at times openly hostile and translated literature was therefore especially shaped by the dominant ideological climate. Fears about Western influence were central to how the Soviet state understood itself and played a key role in controlling how foreign ideas and voices entered the cultural space (David-Fox 2011).

Thus, the lexical adjustments observed in the Russian version seek to reinforce the oppositional stance of the Soviet Union towards Europe, more specifically present it in a negative light. A similar shift appears in the translation of *ամեն տեղ մտնող* (lit.: meddling everywhere) as *Засунуть в дела отдалённых стран* (lit.: meddling in the affairs of distant countries), which implicitly implies that idea that Europe interferes in the affairs of far-off countries, particularly the Soviet Union, where it has no legitimate place.

The chapter *Ring of Guard* (*Ղղաճ հսկման*) is entirely omitted from the Russian translation. In fact, it stands in clear tension with core Soviet ideologies. At the

center of this chapter is the idea of *khaz*, presented not as a technical system of musical notation but as the very “breath, soul and pulse of the nation” («Շն ինչը, հոգի՛ն, տրոն՛ին ազգի»⁸). It can be assumed that this understanding runs counter to Soviet materialist and secular principles, which rejected metaphysical ideas of national essence and tended to view culture as a historical and social construct rather than as a form of sacred continuity⁸. In the poem, Armenian liturgical heritage is depicted as a living, almost organic system, whose paralysis is experienced as a kind of national suffocation. By giving religious tradition such an active role in shaping collective identity, the text challenges Soviet attempts to strip religion of its symbolic power and to subordinate national traditions to a unified socialist framework. The section is equally problematic in the way it treats loss. Loss is not portrayed as something settled in the past but as an ongoing condition that calls for responsibility and action in the present. Images of *sealed treasures*, *fossilized chants*, *unreadable manuscripts*, and “*dead*” *sermons* suggest that cultural heritage has been deliberately immobilized rather than simply rendered obsolete by time. The repeated call to search for the key, to decipher and to revive what has been silenced places responsibility on the present generation instead of safely relegating loss to history. In this way, the poem disrupts the Soviet narrative of linear progress and introduces an alternative logic centered on recovery and accountability.

The omission of the *Ring of Guard* chapter appears less a matter of poetic reduction than a deliberate act of ideological control and censorship aimed at suppressing ideas that could not be easily regulated.

Armenian	Russian
Խաչը վերստին դրոշակ տնկեց, Ճորտության գիրը կրկին հերքելով՝ «Սուր ու թուր, գնդակ ու հրացանը Մեր խաղալիքն է» խրոխտ երգելով: (p. 88)	Не крест, а знамена подняв над собой, Ты записи рабства пути преградил. «МЕЧ, САБЛЯ И ПУЛЯ, РУЖЕЙНЫЙ ПРИЦЕЛ — ВОТ НАШИ ИГРУШКИ», — врагу ты пропел. (p. 185)

In this passage from the *Heroic Ring*, we encounter another instance of censorship that alters the semantic and symbolic value of a religious image. The semantic transformation is not explicit at first glance but becomes apparent on closer examination. The Cross, which for centuries had been used by the Armenian Church as a means of enforcing obedience and which also functions as a marker of Armenian national identity, given Armenia’s status as the first Christian nation, is reinterpreted by Sevak as a symbol of rebellion. In Sevak’s text, the Cross undergoes a semantic shift and comes to function like a flag through which Armenians have ensured their historical continuity through struggle for survival. The Russian translator, however,

⁸ Grounded in Marxist-Leninist thought, Soviet secularism treated religion as both a remnant of earlier social orders and a challenge to the state’s claim to ideological authority. Unlike purely philosophical atheism, Soviet atheism functioned as an instrument of governance, aimed at dismantling religious institutions and replacing them with a materialist worldview through the promotion of “scientific atheism,” in service of building a socialist society (Luehrmann et al. 2021).

sets the Cross in direct opposition to the flag: *He կրест, а знамена* (lit.: not the Cross, but flags). By stating this so explicitly, the translation does more than replace a religious symbol with a secular one. It changes the meaning of the passage. In Sevak's text, the Cross is used metaphorically as a kind of flag under which the Armenian people have survived and maintained their continuity. In the Russian version, this metaphor is removed. The Cross no longer carries this meaning and the idea of survival is instead attached directly to the flag. As a result, the Cross loses its symbolic force since in the Soviet context it was not acceptable for a text to present Christian faith as a unifying or guiding principle.

Another clear case of softening appears in the translation of the chapter title *Ring of Massacre* (*Ղողանջ կոտորածի*) as *Звон злодеяния* (lit.: Ring of an Evil Deed). In Armenian, 'կոտորած' directly names a massacre and leaves no doubt about the scale of the violence. The Russian word 'злодеяние,' however, is more general and abstract, referring to an evil deed rather than slaughter of the Armenian nation. As a result, a concrete and historically charged event is turned into a vague moral notion and the tragic force of the original is noticeably reduced.

A similar pattern can be observed in the chapter *Ring of Carnage* (*Ղողանջ նախաճիքի*), where the Armenian original explicitly uses the word *եղեռն* ("genocide"). In the phrase *Եղեռնի դասեր*, the term functions as a direct accusation. It presents Europe as a force that, without shame, passes on the experience and knowledge of genocide to the descendants of the Bloody Sultan.

Armenian	Russian
Հիմա լուսավոր այդ նույն Եվրոպան Առանց շիկնանքի այնտեղ էր հասել, Որ ժառանգներին Կարմիր սուլթանի Դասեր էր տալիս՝ Եղեռնի դասեր, Դասեր նախաճիքի՝ բարբարոսությամբ, Իրեն պահելով... դերը բոգության: (p. 181)	И та же Европа — культуры оплот! — Уже не краснея, уроки дает Султана Кровавого внукам сама — Как сделать, чтоб разум окутала тьма, Как лучше убить, как усилить разбой, А сводницы роль бережет за собой! (p. 256)

In the Russian translation, however, this term is avoided and replaced with *разбой*, a word that refers to robbery or violent criminal behavior. While *разбой* implies brutality, it does not denote mass extermination or systematic violence against a people. By avoiding the word *genocide*, the translation mitigates the accusatory tone. The crime is no longer presented as a planned and collective act but as a form of generalized violence that can be attributed to individual wrongdoing. The translator's decision to omit the word *genocide* is closely linked to its political implications. Using this term would have amounted to an explicit condemnation of Turkey, since *եղեռն* in the Armenian context directly refers to the Armenian Genocide.

The title *Ղողանջ եղեռնակալան* (*Ring of Genocide*) is translated literally as *Звон геноцида*, which may at first glance seem to contradict the observations made above, since the translator does use the word *genocide* in this case. However, this choice does not undermine the overall pattern identified in the text itself. The use of the word 'genocide' in the title functions in a different semantic and discursive register than its

use would within the body of the poem. Detached from the textual context, the term ‘genocide’ in the title does not carry the same intensity and direct accusatory tone as it does within the poem itself. The same tendency can be seen in the *Ring of Exile* (*Ղողանջ արքայի*), where *էղենակաւ ալի զարնաւ* (lit.: of that genocidal spring), is translated as *Вихрь злодеяния роковой / В Константинополе весной* (lit.: The fatal whirlwind of atrocity / In Constantinople that spring). Here the lexeme with a clear genocidal connotation in the Armenian original is replaced in Russian by a more generalized term denoting evildoing.

The omission of a lengthy excerpt from the *Ring of Rebirth* (*Ղողանջ վերածննան*) is particularly significant. This is in fact one of the most significant chapters in the poem since it presents the rebirth of the Armenian nation as rooted in the strength of its unbreakable national spirit. Recalling the 1915 massacres that the Armenian people endured, the poet emphasizes their survival and the preservation of their historical continuity and national identity. Although he briefly invokes the image of the phoenix, he immediately rejects the comparison, insisting that Armenians did not rise like a phoenix but like Armenians - «Եվ... ո՛չ որպէս փյունիկ թռչուն, Այլ... հայի՛ պէս...» (lit.: “And... not like a phoenix, But... like an Armenian!”). This idea, repeated throughout the chapter in the formula «ո՛չ որպէս... Այլ... հայի՛ պէս...» (“not like ... but like an Armenian”), underscores that the resilience of the Armenian nation is self-defined rather than borrowed from myth. At the same time, a closer reading of the second half of the chapter reveals a shift in tone. Here, the poem begins to echo Soviet ideological discourse, suggesting that Armenian revival became possible within the framework of the Soviet Union, metaphorically portrayed as ‘a powerful family’:

Արցունքն՝ աչքին,
Վերքը՝ կրծքին,
Պատառ-պատառ ո, ծվատ թեպետ,
Քո ժողովուրդը, Վարդապէ՛տ,
Զնդանումիդ քսան տարում
Զանազ ասել մնաս բարև
Ամեն բանտի ու զնդանի,
Մտալ հզոր մի ընտանիք,
Ուր հույսը նույն
Դարձել էր պուն,
Նույն երազը՝ ծածկող տանիք... (p. 221)

It should also be noted that alongside the censorship mechanisms imposed by the Soviet regime, the author himself appears to have exercised a degree of self-censorship. The episode related to the heroic struggle for survival is conveyed only through indirect references and Sevak avoids mentioning specific historical events or naming particular heroes. As a result, the narrative leaves open the question of whom this survival should be attributed to, allowing the interpretation to remain somehow ambiguous.

It is not by chance that the first part of the chapter, which highlights the resilience of the Armenian nation and presents it as self-reliant and not dependent on any broader political framework, is omitted in the Russian translation. This omission provides strong grounds to assume that this emphasis on autonomous national strength was precisely what made the passage problematic. Registan chose to translate only the section in which national histories are interpreted within a broader narrative of communist development and collective unity. The absence of the earlier part may therefore reflect sensitivity to the poem's reference to independent national continuity. In fact, the translator has omitted the section devoted to the Armenian heroic struggle, thereby creating a more direct link between Armenian survival and the Soviet regime.

Such examples are numerous, yet discussing each of them would deviate from our primary objective, which is to demonstrate the functional mechanisms and aim of Soviet censorship. This study is methodologically challenging, as it is a first attempt to examine the poem through the lens of translation. It therefore cannot entirely avoid elements of subjectivity or interpretations that may not be fully substantiated. The analysis presented here reflects a particular text and a specific episode extracted from the Soviet censorship of the late 1970s and early 1980s. A more comprehensive investigation of Soviet censorship in translation would require a broader chronological scope and a more multifaceted approach, including a wider range of authors and texts. Accordingly, the present study does not claim to offer definitive conclusions. Rather, through the analysis of a single literary work, it seeks to provide a glimpse into how Soviet censorship operated in practice.

3. Conclusion

The comparative analysis conducted between the Armenian original of Sevak's *The Unsilenceable Belfry* and its 1982 Russian translation by Registan shows that Soviet censorship did not fully silence a text but transformed it from within. The most sensitive elements, particularly explicit references to Turks, the direct use of the word "genocide," the religious symbolism of *the Cross* and passages highlighting independent national resilience, were either softened, obscured or eliminated. What remains is still recognizably Sevak's poem, yet its tone, intensity and historical resonance are carefully diminished. The Russian translation of the poem is representative of the broader mechanism of Soviet cultural policy. Russian functioned as a lingua franca through which the literary heritage of the republics was made accessible across the Union. However, this mediation also meant ideological and political supervision.

Translating into Russian a literary work that recounted the dark chapters of Armenian history allowed it to reach a wider audience, yet it also gave the authorities the power to keep a close eye on how that history was presented. Translation thus became both a bridge and a boundary.

It is worth remembering that the poem was written in 1959 but translated into Russian only in 1982. This considerable delay highlights the political sensitivity surrounding genocide discourse and suggests that the subject remained tightly

controlled for decades. Although references to the Armenian Genocide could at times serve Soviet foreign policy interests, especially in relation to Turkey, they also carried the risk of awakening strong national feelings within Armenian and beyond. For that reason, the accusatory force of the poem had to be restrained. Religious imagery was secularized, ethnic identity obscured and the idea of independent national continuity excluded. These changes made to the text witness that the Soviet authorities constantly tried to prevent art and literature in our case, from awakening feelings or instilling ideas that could challenge communist ideological unity.

At the same time, the case is not entirely reduced to censorship alone. Sevak himself appears to have written within the limits of his time, occasionally leaving room for ambiguity. Likewise, even in its altered form, the Russian translation did not completely erase the historical trauma at the heart of the poem. The bell still rings, but its sound is controlled, its resonance adjusted to fit the ideological climate of the late Soviet period.

This study does not claim to offer final conclusions about Soviet censorship as a whole. Rather, by examining one major literary work and its translation, it seeks to show how ideological control could operate subtly, at the level of words, images and structure. *The Unsilenceable Belfry* thus becomes an important example of how translation functioned as a site where literature, politics, and historical memory came together and where meaning was not completely silenced but carefully reshaped.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

MORE THAN WORDS: ROBERT BURNS IN ARMENIAN TRANSLATION THROUGH RUSSIAN

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Abstract: This article examines the Russian and Armenian translations of selected poems by Robert Burns, focusing on the versions produced by Samuil Marshak and Vahagn Davtyan. Rather than evaluating the translations in terms of fidelity to the source text, the study approaches them as instances of cultural reinterpretation shaped by distinct literary traditions, historical circumstances and aesthetic values. Particular attention is paid to the role of indirect translation, as Davtyan's Armenian versions were produced not from the Scottish originals but through Marshak's Russian translations. Drawing on a comparative analysis of several well-known poems, including *Comin thro' the Rye*, *Wha is that at my Bower-door?*, *Song — (O Whistle, and I'll Come to Ye, My Lad)*, *The Joyful Widower*, *For a' That and a' That* and *John Barleycorn*, the article demonstrates how poetic meaning is transformed as texts move across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The analysis reveals that Burns's poems acquire different tonal, ethical and symbolic dimensions in Russian and Armenian. Marshak's translations tend to foreground musicality, emotional immediacy and the conventions of Russian lyric poetry, while Davtyan's versions reinterpret Burns through Armenian cultural perceptions of memory, fate, endurance and collective experience. The study argues that translation should be understood not merely as the transfer of meaning between languages but as a process of cultural mediation and poetic recreation. In this context, the Russian and Armenian translations of Burns do not represent different degrees of accuracy but different ways of reading and reimagining the poet. The article concludes that the enduring vitality of Burns's poetry lies in its ability to sustain multiple cultural lives while remaining recognisably its own. Translation, therefore, emerges not as a distortion of the original but as a mode of literary continuity through which poems acquire new voices, new meanings and new cultural homes.

Keywords: Robert Burns; literary translation; indirect translation; cultural transfer; Samuil Marshak; Vahagn Davtyan; comparative translation studies

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1. Introduction

In the Soviet Union, Western authors were selected for translation not only on the basis of their literary merit, but also according to ideological considerations, established traditions, translators' personal preferences and the prevailing political climate. As Lefevere argues, literary works do not enter a target culture in an unmediated form. Through processes of rewriting, translators, editors, critics, anthologists and publishers adapt and manipulate texts to conform to dominant ideological and poetological currents (Lefevere 1992: 6). Within the Soviet literary system, this mechanism contributed to the preferential selection and promotion of foreign authors whose works could be interpreted as sympathetic to the working classes, critical of social inequality or oppositional toward established political, religious and economic institutions.

The ideological framing of translated literature extended beyond the translated text itself. As Kaloh Vid notes, one of the principal objectives of Soviet translation policy was to present foreign authors in ways that aligned them with Soviet ideological values and to promote officially sanctioned interpretations of their works. Translations of foreign literature were frequently accompanied by explanatory prefaces intended to guide readers toward the 'correct' interpretation of the text. These paratexts formed an important mechanism of ideological mediation, shaping the reception of foreign authors and, in some cases, assuming a significance that rivalled or even surpassed that of the translation itself (Kaloh Vid 2011: 89).

When a poet's voice was considered excessively provocative or politically sensitive, translators could smooth over or soften its sharper elements. Yet censorship did not operate exclusively through omission, prohibition, or direct textual intervention. Within Soviet literary culture more broadly, it could also give rise to indirect strategies of expression. Loseff (1984: x) conceptualizes "Aesopian language" as a literary system that developed under the influence of censorship, enabling communication between author and reader while concealing inadmissible content from the censor. Censorship could thus become not only a restrictive force but also a condition shaping literary form and strategies of communication.

The relative freedom afforded to translators could, however, also facilitate intervention in the opposite direction. As Friedberg argues, the official preference for 'free' translation was partly motivated by the fact that it provided a convenient mechanism for censorship and ideologically driven intervention in foreign texts. The doctrine of *vol'nyi perevod* afforded translators considerable latitude in their treatment of the original, allowing omissions, additions, and reformulations that could bring foreign works into closer alignment with Soviet ideological expectations (Friedberg 1997).

At the same time, literary translation in the Soviet Union often attained a remarkably high artistic standard. Western literature was frequently translated with considerable linguistic care and literary sophistication. Yet Soviet translation was rarely a neutral act of linguistic transfer; it was also an act of interpretation and ideological mediation. In fact, the Soviet school of translation may be regarded as one of the strongest and most influential in the world, but it invariably operated at the intersection of artistic creativity and censorship. Brian James Baer attributes the high

status of translation in Russia partly to the multilingualism of the educated elite. The participation of many distinguished writers in translation activities “lent prestige and cultural ‘legitimacy’ to those translated texts” (Baer 2011: 7-8).

Russian functioned as the principal language of interethnic communication in the Soviet Union, while knowledge of Western languages was not always encouraged. Armenia had a strong tradition of Russian studies and many highly qualified specialists in Russian language and literature, whereas experts in English, French, and other Western languages were comparatively few in number. Publishers generally preferred texts that had already been tested and approved. If a work had been translated into Russian, passed censorship, and been accompanied by an ideologically acceptable preface, it was considered a safe candidate for translation into Armenian. In this sense, the Russian translation served as both an ideological filter and a guarantee that the work would withstand further scrutiny by the censorship apparatus. The selection and adaptation of foreign literature in the Soviet Union were instrumental in establishing ideological links between the Western and Soviet literary canons, effectively incorporating foreign texts into Soviet cultural discourse. Yet the Russian text itself was often not merely a translation but also an interpretation (Sherry 2015: 95-96).

As a result, Armenian translators frequently worked not with Burns, Hemingway, or Flaubert directly, but rather with Marshak, Kashkin, or Turgenev's mediated versions of those authors. This practice was not an incidental feature of Soviet translation culture but formed part of an institutionalized system of indirect literary translation. Drawing on archival material, Witt (2013) shows that various forms of indirect translation played a significant role in the construction of the Soviet literary canon, with intermediary texts, particularly *podstrochniki* (interlinear translations), being widely used within Soviet translation practice. She further demonstrates that such practices became institutionalized within the Soviet literary apparatus from the early 1930s and continued throughout the Soviet period (Witt 2017). Natalia Kamovnikova similarly observes that translations into Russian “regularly served as intermediary texts for further translations into other languages of the Soviet Union” (Kamovnikova 2018: 54). The Armenian reception of Robert Burns must therefore be understood within this broader system of indirect translation. In the process of indirect translation, important features of the original — authorial style, dialectal nuances, rhythm, and syntactic particularities — were often diminished or lost. Once these elements had been smoothed out in the Russian version, they tended to disappear altogether in the Armenian translation.

What, then, did Armenian literature, readers and society gain from this process? Here we encounter a striking paradox. Armenian translators were highly accomplished stylists who worked with Russian texts of exceptional literary quality. Through their translations, they produced remarkable works of Armenian prose and poetry that enriched the national literary tradition. In many cases, these translations were not mere replicas of the originals but literary works in their own right. Rather than simply reproducing a foreign text, they reimagined it within the expressive possibilities of the Armenian language, creating works that could stand on their own as significant achievements of Armenian literature.

In the Soviet Union, the body of Western literature available in Armenian was not, strictly speaking, Western literature as such, but rather Western literature refracted through Soviet publishing practices and translated into Armenian. This corpus played a significant role in shaping literary taste, influenced the development of Armenian literature during the Soviet period, and fostered a sense of engagement with Western cultural values. At the same time, access to those values remained mediated through Russian and conditioned by the ideological priorities of Soviet cultural policy. While it appeared to open a window onto the West, it often presented Western literary and intellectual traditions in ideologically reframed forms, thereby limiting Armenian readers' exposure to those traditions in their original cultural and historical contexts. From the perspective of contemporary translation studies, indirect translation, understood as "the historical process of translation from an intermediary version" (Pym 2011: 80), should not be regarded merely as a deficiency or distortion, but rather as a historically conditioned mode of cultural transfer.

2. The Afterlife of Burns: From Scotland to Armenia and Beyond

There are poets who arrive without 'knocking at the door.' They enter literature and begin to speak as though they have lived there for centuries. Robert Burns is one of them. At that moment, the translator is neither host nor guest, but a neighbour, listening to the voice through a thin wall and wondering whether to translate the words themselves or the breath that can be heard between them.

In the case examined here, two such neighbours are Samuil Marshak and Vahagn Davtyan, who listened to the same Burns, though the walls through which they heard him were different. Marshak encountered Burns from within the Russian poetic tradition, while Davtyan approached him through Armenian poetry and, importantly, through Marshak's Russian translations. The fact that both translators were themselves established poets is particularly significant. As Mata Buil (2016) argues, poet-translators may function as a "double link" in the literary system: they introduce foreign poets to new audiences while their translations also interact with their own poetic production. In this process, poet-translators may both assimilate elements of the original poet's style and introduce marks of their own style into the translation. The Burns–Marshak–Davtyan trajectory therefore involves not simply the transmission of a text across three languages, but successive acts of poetic mediation shaped by translators who were poets in their own right.

This becomes particularly apparent in the different ways in which Marshak and Davtyan make Burns speak within their respective literary traditions. At times, translation appears to demand precision. Yet Burns prefers to be sung. Marshak sings him as though he wishes Burns to become his own — almost Russian, marked by clarity of intonation and directness. His role in shaping the Russian reception of Burns extended far beyond the production of individual translations. Kaloh Vid (2018) shows that his translations dominated the Russian reception of Burns for decades and remained the versions most frequently republished even after the end of the Soviet period. His interpretive choices consequently played an important role in shaping how

generations of Russian readers encountered Burns. Indeed, Marshak's translations were so influential that they effectively created a distinctly Russian Burns, to the extent that, in a well-known Russian saying, "We say Marshak and we mean Robert Burns; we say Robert Burns and we mean Marshak" (Kaloh Vid 2011: 166). Marshak's achievement lay not merely in translating Burns but in recreating him within the Russian literary tradition. Through his characteristic clarity, directness, and lyrical fluency, he produced a version of Burns that felt remarkably familiar to Russian readers and became inseparable from their understanding of the Scottish poet.

However, Davtyan sings him differently. His approach to Burns can also be situated within his broader practice as a poet-translator. As Manukyan (2024) observes, Davtyan regarded the translator's own poetic individuality and the affinity between poet and translator as important conditions of poetic translation. Particularly relevant here is his conviction that a skilled poet-translator could produce a work of genuine artistic value even when working through an intermediary rather than directly from the original. This position is especially significant in the present case, since Davtyan encountered Burns through Marshak's Russian versions. He does not, however, simply reproduce Marshak's Burns. Rather, he allows Burns's Scottish voice to resonate through the Armenian text, preserving traces of a cultural and poetic world beyond the target culture. The result is not a fully domesticated Burns, but a poet who remains recognizably Other even as he speaks in Armenian.

In comparing these translations, we are not seeking to decide which of them is right. Rather, we witness the same voice living two different lives. In one, it becomes part of a larger literary conversation, where restraint, clarity and the reader's trust are of paramount importance. In the other, it enters a culture in which the word itself has always carried a special weight.

We are speaking of what happens to a poet when he is truly loved. And perhaps, too, of the fact that translation is not a bridge, but an encounter along the way — a meeting place where everyone arrives with their own accent and leaves, however slightly, transformed.

Vahagn Davtyan most likely encountered Burns through William Saroyan, who borrowed the titles of two of Burns's poems for his own works: *My Heart's in the Highlands* and *Comin Thro' the Rye*. Yet this was more than a simple literary acquaintance. Yet this was more than a simple literary acquaintance. It was an encounter between kindred poetic temperaments, whose affinities transcended the geographical and cultural distances that separated them.

Davtyan saw in Burns not so much Scotland as a chronicle of rural life and experience. He was drawn to Burns not because of the lofty aesthetics of his poetry, but because Burns speaks of human beings as though they have already endured catastrophe and yet have not lost their voice. That, perhaps, was what mattered most. Burns does not weep — he sings.

Saroyan had already demonstrated that simplicity is the ultimate form of depth. He showed that the language of loss can be luminous and that memory need not be vengeful. And Davtyan, even if he never quite took Saroyan by the hand, breathed the same air — the air of a writer who had managed to remain alive in every essential sense and therefore felt compelled to speak with clarity. If Saroyan is the prose of a lost

home, then Davtyan is the poetry of accumulated echoes. And Burns is the spring at which both could quench their thirst.

Literary influences have long ceased to be mere ‘borrowings’, they have become part of a living bloodstream through which nations converse with one another in lines of verse and poets recognize their kindred spirits across the centuries.

William Saroyan is Armenian not merely because he was born into an Armenian family, but because his writing dwells simultaneously in loss and in song. That is the key. Saroyan is the writer who speaks in a simple, unburdened voice about things heavier than stone. And it is here that he encounters Robert Burns.

Burns is not merely a ‘Scottish poet.’ He is an Orpheus of the fields. His poetry does not belong to the salon but to the open landscape, where human beings stand alongside the wind, labour, and memory. In Burns, Saroyan recognises something of himself—not in a stylistic sense, but in an existential one. Burns writes, “*My Heart’s in the Highlands*,” and this is not a matter of geography. It is an anthology of exile. The heart is not where the body resides; it remains in the place that has been lost forever. For Burns, the Highlands are neither Scotland nor Armenia. They are humanity’s lost home, the place where people have not yet forgotten how to be simple and kind. For Armenians, this line from Burns becomes a prayer. Saroyan does not merely borrow it; he reclaims it as his own. Burns’s ‘field of rye’ is a meeting place for lovers. Saroyan’s field, by contrast, is time itself, stretched out like a harvest season. The rye field becomes a space through which a person walks as through the course of a life. Some things break, others endure, and some leave their mark upon the palms of the hands. Saroyan transforms Burns’s folklore into everyday life. He suggests that for the ordinary person, life is not a heroic journey but a walk through the days, where every moment remains alive, even when it appears insignificant.

One of the most distinctive voices in American literature, J. D. Salinger, also takes up this same image, though by then it has already become part of a broader cultural inheritance. For Salinger, the rye field becomes a place of falling. A child may fall. Innocence may disappear. Growing up is no longer a process of growth but a loss of balance. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the adolescent protagonist Holden Caulfield wants to stand at the edge of the field so that he can prevent someone from falling. This is no longer Burns, nor even Saroyan; it is the last person who still believes that it is possible to save another human being.

Burns sings. Saroyan remembers. Salinger keeps watch.

This is a shared human quality — a person standing at the centre of the world and asking: Is it possible to remain alive without becoming cruel? Is it possible to remain simple without becoming naïve? Is it possible to keep one’s heart in the Highlands when the Highlands themselves no longer exist? Literature answers neither yes nor no. It answers with a song, and each poet sings that song in his own voice.

3. Cultural Mediation and Poetic Reinterpretation in the Translations of Robert Burns

Vahagn Davtyan translated Robert Burns's poetry not from the original, but through an intermediary language — Russian. Burns was translated by many Russian translators, yet Davtyan chose to work from the versions of Samuil Marshak. In 1977, the publishing house *Sovetsky pisatel* issued a separate volume of Burns's poetry in Davtyan's Armenian translation under the title *My Heart's in the Highlands*. The collection contains twenty-two poems by the Scottish poet. In what follows, we shall focus on six of them.

One of the most delightful of Burns's poems is *Comin thro' the Rye* (1782). This is not a moralizing poem. There is a smile in it, but not an innocent one. Written in Scots dialect, it speaks in a language that is vivid and alive. In this poem, the unspoken carries greater weight than the event itself. The kiss is neither a tragedy nor a transgression. It is neither romantic lyricism nor licentiousness, but rather a form of rural philosophy and bodily freedom. Bodies meet by chance, the sky sends down rain and a young woman's skirt is soaked. Burns makes a remarkable poetic move: he veils the subject in mist. It is not an 'I' and a 'you' who encounter one another, but bodies themselves.

The Russian text embodies the mindset of a different culture. Here there is an observer, there is judgement, and there is explanation. The girl is cold, she is shivering. This is no longer a playful encounter of bodies but a social scene. In Burns's poem, the kiss is a natural occurrence; in Marshak's translation, it becomes an event that demands interpretation.

Take, for example, the line: "*Что с него возьмёшь!*" (p. 351)¹ [Eng.: "*What can you expect from him!*"]²

This is the Russian formula of fatalism and indulgence. Burns knows nothing of it. He offers no excuses; such things simply do not interest him. The Russian text draws the poem closer to the realm of morality, but it does so subtly, even tenderly. It does not condemn; it sympathizes. And in this lies an entire Russian tradition: human beings are weak, life is difficult, but what can one do? This is no longer Burns; it is Russian Chekhov.

The Armenian text, translated from the Russian, is the most restrained and intimate of the three. Paradoxically, it is also the most physical: wet stockings, a trembling body, chattering teeth.

In the lines "*«...Ի՞նչ կարող ես պահանջել.*

Եվ ի՞նչ հոգսն է մեր ամենքի..." [Eng.: "*What can you demand? / And what concern is it of any of us?*"] (p. 5)³ society makes its presence felt through the

¹ All English source texts and Russian translations discussed in this article are taken from Burns's bilingual volume *Stikhotvoreniya* [Poems], compiled by I. M. Levidova (1982). To avoid repetitive bibliographic references, only page numbers will be provided in the citations.

² All English translations of Russian and Armenian quotations are the authors' own unless otherwise stated.

collective voice — we, all of us. If Burns suggests that the world need not know, the Armenian text suggests that the world would do better not to interfere. This is neither the bodily freedom found in Burns's poem nor the sympathy of the Russian version. It is an ethic of silent consent: do not speak, do not look, do not judge. Let the night and the field conceal everything. If we are to be honest, the Scottish text is the freest, the Russian the most humane, and the Armenian the most restrained. In Burns, the body exists before sin; in Marshak's translation, the body appears under the gaze of society; for Davtyan, the body exists within tradition.

Burns laughs. Marshak sighs. Davtyan remains silent.

Why is this so? Because translation is always a culture's self-portrait. An eighteenth-century Scot could allow himself a kiss without confession. A twentieth-century Russian felt compelled to explain it. An Armenian poet felt compelled to conceal it. And none of them is lying. They are simply speaking the truth in the language of their own shame and their own freedom. Burns writes, "*need a body cry*" (p. 350), Marshak responds, «Что с него возьмёшь!» (p. 351), [Eng.: "*What can you expect from him!*"], Davtyan answers, «Եվ ի՞նչ հոգսն է մեր ամենփ...» (p. 5), [Eng.: "*And what concern is it of any of us?*"]. Three cultures, and one eternal question: who has the right to know that the body was happy?

One of Burns's best-known poems is *Wha is that at my Bower-door?* (1783). It is more than a courtship but a verbal duel. Burns writes in Scots rather than in standard English, and this is important. As Smith (2007) emphasizes, Burns was highly self-aware about linguistic nuances, an awareness that is important to understanding his artistic achievement. Expressions such as "*wha*," "*bower*," "*gae your gate*," and "*ye'se nae*" give the poem its distinctly Scots linguistic character. There is no pathos here, yet the poem is charged with eroticism. The sense of intimacy arises not so much from the relationship between the characters as from the poem's intonation. Structurally, the poem follows the pattern of antiphonal singing: the woman poses a question or expresses a concern, and Findlay responds each time with the same formula:

Եթե ես քո դուր դուրք քաղ անեմ...
«Բա՛յ ց արա», - ասում է Ֆինլեյլը: (p. 11-12)

[Eng.: *If I open the door to you...*
‘Open it,’ says Findlay.”]

The repetitions are a crucial element of the poem. They dismiss the heroine's objections and create an effect of relentless insistence. Findlay does not persuade; he persists. The original contains no explicit erotic imagery. Yet there is night, a door, an awakening from sleep. This is eroticism that is implied rather than stated — anticipated, theatricalised, and unabashed. Findlay is both forceful and seductive, while the woman neither forbids nor rejects him; instead, she tests him. In the original, Findlay exerts a certain pressure, repeatedly asserting his desire. Burns writes: "*Indeed*

³ All Armenian translations discussed in this article are taken from Vahagn Davtyan's translation volume *Im sirte lernerum e* (1977). The references to these texts will be indicated by page number only.

will I, quo' Findlay.—" (p. 270). In the Russian translation, this becomes: «*Могу!*» [Eng.: "I can"], «*He дам!*» [Eng.: "I won't give"], «*Найду!*» [Eng.: "I'll find"] — *сказал Фундлей* [Eng.: "said Findlay"] (p. 271). The Armenian version reads: «*Կարն ի եմ*», «*Չե՛մ թողնիմ*», «*Կգտնեմ*», — *սունւմ է Ֆինլէյը* (p. 11-12), [Eng.: "I can," "I won't let," "I'll find" — "says Findlay"].

The English — or, more accurately, the Scottish — text has no plot in the conventional sense. There is pressure. The female voice expresses fear, prohibition, and conditions. Findlay neither explains nor persuades; he simply affirms the inevitability of what is about to happen.

Indeed will I, quo' Findlay
Let me in, quo' Findlay
Let it pass, quo' Findlay (p. 270).

The Scots dialect plays a crucial role here: it is earthy, bold and unapologetic. The poem's eroticism arises not from imagery but from voice and repetition. In Burns's poem, the woman is not a victim; she is the one who directs the game, the one who sets the terms. Burns creates a rare model of erotic equilibrium in which 'yes' and 'no' coexist at the same time.

The Russian text follows a different poetics. The dialect has disappeared, along with the acoustic monotony of the original. In its place we find a clearly defined rhythm, dramatic clarity and a distinctly theatrical dialogue. The Russian Findlay emerges as a recognizable literary figure: bold, shameless and slightly comic. He is a man carried away by his own enthusiasm. Cheerful, audacious and somewhat comical, he resembles the hero of a popular urban folk song. The Russian translation makes the encounter more concrete and immediate through temporal markers such as "*all night long*" and "*until dawn*." The female voice becomes more defensive, while Findlay grows more resolute. The delicate equilibrium between the two is somewhat compromised. Vahagn Davtyan's Armenian translation is based not on Burns's original poem but on the Russian text, and this is of crucial importance. What we encounter is not Burns's poem itself, but an Armenian interpretation of a Russian translation of Burns. Elements that had already been weakened in the Russian version disappear altogether in Armenian. Repetition ceases to be hypnotic, and the dialogue loses its acoustic uniformity. Davtyan's Armenian text is more literary, smoother, and more polished. Even its conversational intonations seem refined. Burns's erotic boldness yields to poetic decorum. The ending is particularly revealing. In the Russian version, we read: ...

Молчи до крышки гробовой!
«Идет!» - сказал Фундлей (p. 271).

[Eng.: "Keep it secret until the day you die!
 'Done!' said Findlay."]

In the Armenian text, we read: «*Դու պիտի լռես, լռես անհավերս*» / «*Թխի՛ զաւ*», — *սունւմ է Ֆինլէյը*» (p. 12), [Eng. "You must remain silent, remain silent forever." /

“*High five*” — says Findlay]. Here a note of fatality enters the poem; the exchange takes on the character of an oath. This is no longer a playful conspiracy between lovers but an existential promise. In the Armenian version, Findlay is no longer shameless; he becomes a symbol — of the human being as fate, as a recurring choice. The heroine, too, is more restrained, less ironic, and more guarded. In Burns’s poem, the two protagonists engage one another as equals. The Russian version turns their encounter into a performance, while Davtyan’s interpretation becomes a dialogue infused with moral reflection.

Three versions, three cultural codes. In Burns’s text, poetics takes precedence: sound, rhythm, and repetition. The Russian translation foregrounds character, humour, and theatricality. The Armenian translation privileges symbol and meaning. In Burns’s poem, the inevitable “yes” unfolds gradually through the course of the night. In the Russian version, it becomes the triumph of a bold and determined man, though not without a touch of irony. In the Armenian text, it is transformed into a man’s promise. What changes in these translations is not merely the language, but the very understanding of desire, of words, and of responsibility.

For the purposes of comparative analysis, we are presented with a rare and valuable text: *Song — (O whistle, and I’ll come to ye, my lad)* (1793). The translations by Marshak and Davtyan are not merely translations, but three distinct cultural manifestations of the same lyric poem. Burns’s poem is a work of exceptionally simple vocabulary and extraordinarily subtle poetics. Its power lies in its language of trust, its form of a vow, and its expression of intimacy. It is precisely for this reason that the translations become interpretations of the poem rather than mere linguistic reproductions of it.

Burns’s poem is built upon three fundamental principles. The repeated line, “*O Whistle, and I’ll Come to Ye, My Lad,*” is not merely a refrain; it is a speech act, carrying something of the force and enchantment of a spell. It brings together a signal — the whistle — and social risk in the form of parents, and the Church. Repetition becomes a means of sustaining resolve. Let us also consider the poetics of the word «*uuulu*» (p. 6), [Eng.: “*as though*”]. In this poem, pretence is not deception but a mode of affection, a way of expressing love.

*Արհ՛, քայլ ասու ինձ մոտ չես գալիս,
Ասու թէ իսկի՛ ինձ մոտ չես գալիս:* (p. 6)

[Eng. “*Come, but as though you were not coming to me,
As though you were not coming to me at all.*”]

There is love in these lines, though it is veiled. This is not romantic rebellion but peasant defiance, almost a national strategy. It is a necessity, a means of preserving affection and human relationships. Burns’s Scots dialect is not a decorative device; it is the language of a community in which love is expressed through action rather than confession:

Թե եկեղեցուս հանդիպենք, նայի՛ր,
Իմ ընկերուհուն, ոչ թե ինձ նայիր: (p. 6)

[Eng. “If we meet in church, be sure to look
At my companion, and not at me.”]

This is a minimal yet sufficient act of expression. Burns’s poem is a lyric of restrained boldness, in which love and desire are articulated through instructions.

In the Russian translation, instruction gives way to heightened expressiveness. Judging by the conventions of twentieth-century Russian style, it is most likely an adaptation intended for singing, which means that the poem has been fundamentally transformed. Burns’s line “*tent when ye come*” (p. 308), which literally means “*be careful when you come,*” is rendered by Marshak as «Но в оба гляди, пробираясь ко мне» (p. 309), [Eng. “*But keep your eyes open when you’re making your way to me*”]. Here, Burns’s caution is transformed into a sense of adventure and suspense. The Russian text systematically raises the emotional temperature. In «Ты свисти — тебя не заставлю я ждать» (p. 309), [Eng. “*Just whistle, and I won’t make you wait*”], the anxiety of waiting gives way to impatience. In Burns’s poem, the heroine promises that she will come; in the Russian version, she hurries toward the meeting. This is a significant shift in meaning: determination is replaced by emotional impulse. Burns reinforces the song-like quality of the stanza through a network of recurring long /i:/ sounds (*me, wee, be*), particularly at line endings, producing a musical effect that complements the playful and intimate tone of the poem. The drama of secrecy is preserved, the refrain is highly musical and the text reads with ease and lyric fluency, which means that it remains alive as poetry.

What is lost in Russian and Armenian, however, is Burns’s strategy of concealing love as a cultural code, along with the irony embedded in the dialect. The Russian translation turns Burns into a romantic poet viewed through the prism of Russian lyricism. Here, feeling is more important than the manner in which it is concealed. The Armenian text creates a different impression. It comes close to a folk ballad: «Հիւ ծառի շուքը գտի՛ր, ցանկալի՛ս...» (p. 6), [Eng. “*Find the shade of the old tree, my beloved...*”]. There, where Burns employs functional points of reference (back-yett, back-stile), the Armenian text introduces a visual landscape: ...

Ու շատ վախեցիր, որ մի անհոգի,
Քեզ գրկիս միջից հանկարծ չպոկի...: (p. 6)

[Eng. “*And be very afraid lest some heartless soul
Should suddenly tear you from my embrace...*”].

The climactic sentence in the Armenian translation does not closely resemble its counterpart in Burns’s poem. It is an interpretation, yet one that remains true to the poem’s inner tension. What in Burns is concealed within social anxiety is brought to the surface here through bodily imagery. Unlike the Russian translation («не смотри», «не со мной говори», «идёшь не ко мне» [Eng. “*don’t look,*” “*talk not to me,*”

“*coming not to me*”]), the Armenian version carefully preserves the code of secrecy («Արի՛, բայց ասես ինձ մոտ չես գալիս», «ոչ թե ինձ նայիր», «չասես» [Eng. “*Come, but as though you are not coming to me,*” “*look not at me,*” “*don’t say*”]). At the same time, however, it infuses that code with an Eastern plaintiveness. Among the strengths of this translation are its heightened emotional intensity and its preservation of the dramatic element inherent in concealing a love affair. Davtyan’s translation is distinctive because it is shaped by the traditions of Armenian song. What it lacks, however, is the lightness of Burns’s poem; in its place stands a more pronounced sense of drama.

Burns suggests that to love, one must master the art of discretion. The Russian translation becomes an impatient declaration of love. In the Armenian version, love becomes fate.

Particular attention should be paid to the poem *The Joyful Widower* (1890s). What we encounter here is not merely a set of texts in different languages, but a chain of cultural transformations in which each link alters not only the language, but also the intonation, humour, ethics, and even the metaphysics of the poem.

In this poem, Burns is a cruel jester, a folk moralist whose smile is so broad that one can almost see every last tooth. The English text possesses the simplicity of a ballad, a coarse, almost tavern-like humour, and an irony entirely free of remorse. The close relationship between lyric and song is a significant feature of Burns’s poetic practice. As McCue (2012: 69–70) demonstrates, Burns’s songwriting was closely connected to melody, with the structure, rhythm, and cadence of a tune playing an important role in the creation of the lyrics written to accompany it. The lyrical speaker offers no justification. He is happy. His happiness is morally questionable, yet entirely sincere. That is where the poem derives its power. “*Now, now her life is ended.*” The repetition of “*now, now*” is more than a rhythmic device. It is almost song and dance. And the culmination comes in the final image: the wife is in heaven, yet her voice...

*For why,—methinks I hear her voice
Tearing the clouds asunder.* (p. 382)

This is not a domestic quarrel but a cosmic conflict between characters. Burns’s protagonist does not suffer, repent, or philosophize. He is a ‘joyful widower,’ a figure whose very title sounds indecent. The Russian text, however, is already a different work. Noticeable shifts occur, including changes in dates and other details. In Burns’s poem, the date is the fourteenth of November; in the translation, it becomes the beginning of May. This is not accidental but a deliberate alteration. November is cold and muddy. In the Russian text, it is May, a choice that introduces an ironic tone and turns the scene into a parody of a wedding. The protagonist also becomes gentler. Burns writes, “*She made me weary of my life*” (p. 382), whereas Marshak translates this as «*He раз мечтал повеситься*» (p. 383), [Eng.: “*More than once I dreamed of hanging myself*”]. In the Russian version, the protagonist complains, shares his suffering, and almost seeks sympathy, whereas Burns laughs. Burns’s poem ends with a note of mockery in which the protagonist openly delights. The Russian translation, by contrast, concludes with a cautious joke: «*Боюсь, что черт не принял в ад / Моей*

жены покойной» (p. 383), [Eng. “*I fear the devil did not admit / My late wife into hell*”]. The word «боюсь» [Eng. “*I fear*”] introduces doubt and a measure of propriety. Russian culture does not permit the protagonist to be entirely shameless. This is no longer a mock-ballad but a satirical confession. The humour remains, but it has been softened, and the protagonist becomes almost sympathetic to the reader. The Armenian translation is a tragicomedy of fate. And it is here that the analysis becomes most interesting. Davtyan’s translation is mediated through the Russian text and therefore loses some of the audacity of the original, yet it acquires an existential density of its own. The movement from humour to fate is evident from the very first lines: «Ես կհնձունիս լի չար ժամի» (p. 18), [Eng. “*I took a wife in an ill-fated hour*”]. This is the language of fatality. The marriage is presented not as a mistake or a foolish decision, but as an encounter with an ill-fated destiny. The protagonist no longer mocks; he is a man broken by circumstance. The Armenian translation is also saturated with Christian vocabulary: «Սուրբ հայրն աղոթք արարի» (p. 19), [Eng. “*The holy father said a prayer*”]. What we encounter here is a ritual world in which the protagonist’s fear of hell becomes visible. Where Burns mocks the devil, the Armenian text introduces a genuine metaphysical anxiety.

«Հավատացե՛ք, ես վերնից

Ծախնո՞ւմ ձայն եմ լսում» (p. 19), [Eng. “*Believe me, from above / I hear a familiar voice*”], make it clear that the protagonist is no longer joking. This is almost a confession. The thunder ceases to function as a caricature and becomes a manifestation of memory, guilt, fate, and the voice of the past.

Each of these translations is distinctive, shaped by its own cultural code. Burns continues to be read because his poetry allows for multiple modes of interpretation. He wrote not about a whistle itself, but about the language of signs that lovers customarily share. And each translator — Russian or Armenian — has added a personal intonation to that language. This is not a distortion of the original, but the highest form of fidelity to one’s own national poetic tradition.

When examining the Armenian translation of Robert Burns’s *For a’ That and a’ That* (1795), the presence of the Russian intermediary text becomes evident in both the poem’s rhythm and semantic structure. This mediating process introduces a number of noticeable shifts, as the Russian cultural and literary context inevitably influences the translator’s choices. Although these modifications may enhance the poem’s accessibility for the target readership, they simultaneously distance the translation from certain nuances of Burns’s original. The first significant point of divergence appears in the title itself. Burns’s *For a’ That and a’ That* was rendered, through the Russian version, as ‘*Honest Poverty*’ (Честная бедность; and similarly *Ազնիվ աղքատություն* in Armenian). This change not only signals the translation’s reliance on the Russian intermediary text but also redirects attention away from the original title’s rhythmic and refrain-like function. At the same time, it reflects Vahagn Davtyan’s preference for a more explicit rhetorical statement, replacing Burns’s understated emphasis with a title that foregrounds the poem’s social and ethical message. Despite these departures, both the Russian and Armenian translations preserve the poem’s underlying rhythmic organisation. This fidelity is particularly evident in the treatment of Burns’s recurring lines, where the translators strive to retain

not only the semantic content but also the essential rhythmic movement of the original. The repeated refrains are reproduced in a manner that closely approximates Burns's metrical pattern, demonstrating a conscious effort to preserve the poem's formal core even as other aspects undergo cultural and linguistic transformation.

Burns's *John Barleycorn* (1782) occupies a unique position in its Russian and Armenian translations. It is not merely a source text; it is both victim and victor at once, much like John Barleycorn himself. He is killed, processed, distilled, and then returns in an entirely different language, rhythm, and national mythology. *John Barleycorn* is not so much a poem as an agricultural myth disguised as a song. From a Romantic perspective, it is not 'poetry' but ritual. Burns writes as though language itself has grown out of the soil. The apparent simplicity of the narrative is deceptive. Beneath it lies a cyclical vision of the world in which death is not a tragedy but a necessary stage of existence. John is killed not out of malice, but because that is how time is structured. The bones, the blood, and the millstones are not metaphors but agricultural implements. The final lines of the poem are not a hymn to drunkenness; they are a wink at fate: you may break me and grind me down, yet I shall still bring you joy. Burns is not a moralist. He is a shepherd of the cosmos.

In the Russian text, Marshak introduces an important yet almost imperceptible shift. John is no longer a force of nature but a character. He is no longer the grain of barley that embodies a deeper truth, but a popular figure, almost a folkloric hero. In the original, John is simply 'he' — not a fully individuated personality. In the Russian translation, however, "he" becomes a "good fellow," a "dashing fighter," an "old man." This is a clear example of humanization: «Славный Джон», «боец лихой», «старый Джон», «покойный Джон при жизни молодец» (pp. 36-41), [Eng: "Gallant John," "dashing fighter," "old John," "The late John was a fine fellow in life"].

The Russian translation places particular emphasis on John's heroism. His death becomes an act of heroism, while his enemies are cast as villains, even as class adversaries. The widow's song serves chiefly as a source of consolation. What the Russian text loses, however, is the cosmic coldness of the original, the mechanical rhythm of agricultural time, and Burns's characteristic wry smile. The Russian version is beautiful, musical, and persuasive, yet it moralises the poem. It explains. In Burns's poem, events simply take their course.

And this is where things become truly interesting — namely, in the Armenian translation. We already know that the Armenian text was translated, not from Burns's original but from the Russian version, and this is readily apparent. It is not the shadow of the original, but the shadow of a shadow — one that has nevertheless acquired an originality of its own.

In the Armenian translation, the ballad gives way to the parable. John is no longer so much a hero as a martyr. The language is expressive, marked by an inner warmth and an almost soul-stirring epic quality. Particular attention should be paid to such words as 'spirit,' 'hope and faith,' and 'heart':

Նրանց հոգու վիշտն է այրում,
 Տալիս հույս ու հավատ,
 Եվ սրտի մեջ որբնայրում
 Երգում է նա զվարթ: (p. 22)

[Eng. “It burns away the sorrow of their souls,
Giving hope and faith,
And in the heart of every widow
It sings cheerfully”].

John is no longer a seed, nor merely a hero; he becomes the bearer of a people’s vital force. What disappears in the Armenian translation is Burns’s neutrality, his irony as a philosophical outlook and the cycle of life as a natural law. In their place emerges an ethics of survival.

The paradox is that Burns would probably have liked these translations. *John Barleycorn* exists precisely in order to be ground, milled, brewed, and drunk — and translated. The Russian translation turns it into a drinking song. The Armenian translation turns it into a song of courage. But Burns’s *John Barleycorn* is a song of the earth. And if we are to raise a glass, let it be not to the ‘accuracy’ of translation, but to the fact that *John Barleycorn* has drowned in neither Russian nor Armenian.

4. Conclusion

Robert Burns’s translations are not replicas but dialogues between cultures, each of which hears in his poetry a voice that feels intimately its own. As a poet of song and the folk tradition, Burns lends himself to multiple interpretations. His texts are not ‘closed’; they are open works, capable of taking on different shades and meanings as they move across languages and cultures.

Samuil Marshak made Burns part of the Russian poetic heritage, not as a foreign classic, but as a living presence within Russian culture itself. His translations deliberately depart from literal accuracy in favour of musicality, clarity, and a distinctly popular intonation. As a result, Burns in Russia became not an object of philological inquiry, but a poetic experience capable of speaking directly to the reader. Vahagn Davtyan, translating Burns through the intermediary language of Russian, continued this process, though within a different cultural framework. His version does not seek to reproduce the original source text; rather, it reinterprets it through an Armenian sensibility shaped by notions of fate and memory.

In this multi-stage process — from the Scottish original to the Russian translation and then to the Armenian text — one form of accuracy is inevitably lost, yet another is gained: cultural accuracy. Each translation reflects not only the meaning of the poem, but also the state of a language, the spirit of an age, and the experience of a nation. For this reason, the search for a single ‘correct’ version is ultimately misguided. What matters more is understanding how one poem can live many different lives.

Burns remains recognisable in all of these incarnations precisely because his poetry endures translation as it endures an ordeal. Its tone may change, its genre may shift, and even its underlying philosophy may be recast, yet it does not disappear. In this case, translation is not a distortion but a form of continuation — a distinctive means of giving poems a new memory, a new home, and a new voice.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

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.

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