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Translation as tragedy and farce

The politics and politicians of translation in post-Soviet Russia

In today's Russia, the problem of translation is one of quality and accessibility rather than quantity.

To the casual observer, almost fifteen years after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Communist regime, the Russian translation market may seem to be booming. Indeed, according to the statistics of the Association of German Booksellers, Russia has been among the top ten buyers of rights on translations of German books for most of the past decade; and the Russian State Statistics Committee tells us that in 2001, translations made up about a third of all fiction titles published in the Russian Federation (though, in 2002, they only accounted for just over 13 per cent of the total number of *copies* of fiction and non-fiction titles.)

Translation, however, is of course much more than a market. It is a skill, an organised activity, and ideally a process of cultural synthesis and creativity. Concerning all of these aspects, translation is in a wretched state in contemporary Russia. In order to understand why, we first need to consider the status and role of translation in the Soviet Union, all the more so since critics of the low level of most literary translations done nowadays sometimes look back to a reputed 'golden era' of translation.

It is true that in Soviet Russia, an unusually high number of gifted writers and especially poets, facing harsh censorship and often excluded from official literature, channelled their talent into translation.

However, this was a phenomenon almost exclusively restricted to fiction (including drama and poetry), and the works of these authors are usually prized for their literary qualities rather than their faithfulness to the original. Indeed, many poets based their work on word-for-word translations because they simply didn't know the original language.

Moreover, not everything could be translated. The Soviet publishing world was closed, centralised and bureaucratically controlled; permission was needed for every publication, and especially translations. Not to speak of the fact that books in foreign languages were often physically hard to obtain. Some *genres*, of course, were privileged: works by foreign socialists (unless they expressed 'unorthodox' views, such as criticism of the USSR), 'neutral' or innocuous classics (including international folk tales and children's literature), and literature written by officially approved non-Russian writers from the USSR. Many writers, such as the Kirgiz Chingiz Aitmatov or the late Avar poet Rasul

Gamzatov, were celebrated across the Soviet Union even though they were known mostly or exclusively through Russian translation.

The peculiarities of Soviet-era literary translation are illustrated by the following anecdote, told to me by a well-known Russian historian and political commentator who has been living in the United States for almost thirty years. In the 1950s, as a young man, he made a living by 'translating' the works of poets from various foreign countries. Unfortunately, like most Russians of his generation, he didn't know a single foreign language. So like most of them he used 'rough' prose translations prepared by those who did. But since he was also a budding poet himself, sometimes he wouldn't bother with translations, simply labelling his own verse as a rendering of some foreign master. One day, he took part in an informal poetry reading organised at someone's flat in Moscow. The 'translator' presented 'works by contemporary Turkish poets'. It so happened that Nazim Hikmet was present. After the reading the great Turkish poet went up to his colleague and said, "You are a talented young man. But I happen to be a personal friend of most of the people you mentioned tonight, and I know for sure that they never wrote anything like what you have recited." Very wisely, the talented young man decided to end his career as a literary translator soon afterwards.

Official ideological predilections bracketed out whole areas of literature: even in fiction, everything that did not fit the official canon was banned or severely limited.

As to non-fiction, and especially the humanities and social sciences, hardly anything of importance was translated. While many foreign books and journals found their way into Soviet libraries, many of them were confined to closed repositories called *spetskhran* and accessible only to those inside the Academy of Sciences system or even more restricted party circles. (There were one or two notable exceptions, such as the Library of Foreign Languages in Moscow, where an unusually broad range of foreign literature was available to everyone – everyone, of course, who had found a way to learn a foreign language well enough.)

Thus, while there were certainly many talented and even well-trained translators, many of the skills and habits needed were inaccessible to them: studying abroad was virtually impossible, and even those specialising in the languages of 'friendly' third world countries were rarely allowed to stay in those countries for long periods of time.

Today, the problem of translation is one of quality and accessibility rather than quantity.

The overwhelming majority of translations published in Russia today are of execrable quality. Words and whole sentences are routinely mistranslated, names are misspelled, and translators' or editors' notes on difficult passages, even when they exist, are often simply wrong. This state of affairs is due to a number of factors, some of which are rooted in the Soviet heritage. There are still very few people who have spent sufficient time abroad to have gained proper knowledge of a foreign language. While there is now a considerable Russian diaspora in countries such as Germany and the United States, few Russians manage to master their new language and not forget their mother tongue, let alone keep up with the break-neck speed of transformation of the Russian that is spoken, and written, in Russia. And even among the truly bilingual, only very few are prepared to work as translators into Russian for

fees that are ridiculously low by Western standards.

The financial factor is crucial in many ways. In most countries with a highly developed and differentiated publishing culture, professional translators tend to specialise in particular disciplines and know the special terminology of these disciplines in all the languages they work with. Very often, translations of difficult works are done by high-level specialists in their respective fields, and they are either paid a comfortable fee or live on academic salaries that allow them to spend sufficient time on their translation work without having to worry about their financial future. In Russia, translators in the humanities and social sciences are paid very little: while tariffs vary widely, \$4–5 per page is not usually considered a low fee in Moscow, and rates are much lower everywhere else. Translators of fiction are typically paid even less. Only a few journals and publishing houses can afford to pay more, and as a result there are very few professional translators who can afford to take the time to perform their task with sufficient care. The bulk of translations is done by non-professionals, mostly students or mid-level academics who specialise in topics other than those which they are required to translate.

This unprofessionalism means that there is no effective organisation, be it a lobby, a trade union or even a system of continuous professional training, to cater for the needs of translators. Consequently, there is no community of translators that could exercise any form of quality control or negotiate better fees. The real tragedy, however, is that generations of Russian readers will have to make do with the miserable translations that have been produced since Perestroika, for even in the event of a qualitative leap in the professional skills of Russian translators and a prolonged economic boom it is unlikely that many titles aside from the most popular works will be re-translated.

From the publisher's point of view, translation is usually the single greatest cost in publishing a book by a foreign author, and though this is not peculiar to Russia, in this country, except for mass literature (crime novels, popular psychology and the like), few of the new independent publishers can afford to pay for translation without external funding. This funding has mainly come either from national programmes such as the French *Projet Pouchkine*, or international foundations such as the Open Society Institute (or Soros Foundation) which financed a large-scale *Translation Project* in the 1990s.

Thus the people who sit on these foundations' committees have been the most powerful *politicians of translation*. Ironically, often the decision on whether to fund the translation of a particular book is taken not by Russian publishers but by foreign officials; thus e.g. the French embassy's judgment on what is representative of French literature (including non-fiction) often weighs at least as much as the local publishers' view of what would be important to translate from the point of view of Russian culture or what titles could be successfully sold here. Decisions on support for translations of German titles are taken by a committee in Germany. While the work and support of these foundations, and the national cultural centres in Moscow, have been crucial, they have also created a strong slant in publishers' translation strategies. Thus, only works from the 'major' languages (English, French and, to a lesser extent, German) are being translated more or less systematically. Those languages which do not have a national cultural centre to fund them are very badly represented, and Russian's knowledge of the literatures of most countries remains extremely patchy, to say the least. A few authors from outside the 'main European countries' have become bestsellers recently, but most educated Russians would be hard-pressed to name a contemporary Turkish writer other than Orhan

Pamuk or maybe Yasar Kemal, or a Japanese one outside three or four standard names such as Haruki Murakami, not to speak of all the countries lying between Japan and Turkey. In terms of cultural exchange, the old adage that Russia is both a European and an Asian country is clearly false: it is definitely European – a provincial European country, to be exact, since non-European literatures are much better represented in the United Kingdom, France or Germany than in Russia. Moreover, the bulk of books published under these programmes are classics in their respective fields which should have been translated decades ago and which, although necessary, often bear little relation to the contemporary social realities in Russia – or in the countries in which they were written, for that matter.

Quite independently of the problem of financing translations, translated books face a serious accessibility problem. Firstly, there is the problem of physical accessibility, which translated works share with books by Russian authors: unlike France, Germany or the United States, Russia has no centralised book distribution network, mail order system, or full-fledged database of books in print. Thus readers are dependent on the choices of their local booksellers, and given the extremely low income levels outside the capital and the high costs of transportation (sometimes in the rucksacks of local shop owners), only few books which are not proven bestsellers find their way to Saratov, Perm or Khabarovsk. The problem is aggravated by the fact that most publishers simply ignore the law obliging them to send obligatory copies of every published book to 16 major libraries across the country, and the state does not have the resources to enforce the law systematically.

Even more seriously perhaps, there is the problem of cultural accessibility. In the Soviet Union, disciplines such as political science or sociology were practically non-existent. Many of the non-fiction works translated over the past decade or so use a terminology which simply has no equivalent in Russian, and translators are forced to use calques or neologisms which are still far from being standardised even within any given discipline. The overwhelming majority of readers, educated in Soviet or even most post-Soviet schools and higher education establishments, simply don't have the cultural baggage necessary to understand this terminology, and many of the problems that are raised in these books; and this problem is exacerbated by the aforementioned poor quality of translation and editing. There is now a caste of authors in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg (and to a much, much lesser extent in other big cities) who are 'fluent' in the new language that consists of words such as 'discourse' or 'identity' (*diskurs* and *identichnost'*), but most of *their* writings are as esoteric to most middle-aged or elderly readers as those of the foreign authors they translate.

Over the past one or two years, there has been a new tendency, at least with a few Moscow-based publishing houses, to translate books about globalisation (and anti-globalisation), the challenges of US world dominance etc. However, rather than a serious attempt to tap into an international debate, so far this has been mainly a gesture aiming to provoke scandal, and indeed the same publishers often issue the most extreme nationalist and xenophobic titles.

Conversely, much of what is produced (in the way of 'scientific' literature) by most Russian authors of non-fiction outside a few intellectual centres in the capitals is of absolutely no interest to foreign readers: the products of new 'disciplines' such as 'culturology' are mainly collections of Soviet-era clichés jumbled together with superficially understood notions of pre-revolutionary or émigré Russian philosophers and a mostly helpless and disoriented reaction to

post–Soviet realities.

Thus foreign interest in Russian literature largely remains limited to fiction. Just as with most countries, foreign publishers tend to judge both mass literature and fiction produced for more restricted circles of the intellectual elite by their value as 'ethnic' literature depicting 'specifically Russian' realities and reproducing stereotypes about Russia. Incidentally, this trend coincides with a fashion that has been prevalent in Russia itself since the mid–1990s. Taken together, these factors push many Russian writers, especially those who live on foreign grants and fees, to stress the purportedly specifically Russian traits of their characters and style. In line with common stereotypes about Russia, those Russian works which have been successful abroad in recent years are mostly full of chaos, violence, murder, mafia, and alcohol – or the kind of 'spirituality' and 'sentimentality' traditionally associated with Russia. (On the other hand, of the few Russian authors who do enjoy success abroad, some are virtually unknown in Russia. In non–fiction, the obvious case in point is the late Igor Timofeev's brilliant biography of Kamal Djumblatt, whose Arabic and French translations have been best sellers in the Arab world since 2000. The Russian original was only published in 2003, with a print run of 1000, and has only ever been ordered by a single specialised Moscow book shop. In fiction, one could mention Andrei Kurkov, who lives in Ukraine and has been one of the most popular Russian–language authors with a Western European readership in recent years. Patrons of Russian bookshops would be hard–pressed to find any of his texts in hard copy – luckily, many of them, as for a lot of contemporary Russian writers, can be downloaded for free on the Internet.)

To be fair, it must be admitted that although a rich new literature emerged from under the debris of the Soviet (and anti–Soviet) literary culture, few contemporary Russian authors of fiction address questions of universal import, or even those social issues which are common to Russia and most other European countries, such as migration, getting to terms with the crimes of the past, or the condition of the individual in a world torn between globalisation and nationalisms. If considered together with the above mentioned scarcity of serious literature in the social sciences, this helps to explain why most foreign publishers usually see Russian authors not as partners in a global or pan–European dialogue but as figures illustrating the peculiarities of their country. Russian publishers have little leverage to influence this attitude: unlike many Western publishing houses, especially large conglomerates such as Bertelsmann or Random House, they cannot afford the financial investments (waiving rights etc) needed to present a new author to an international audience, and unlike France or Poland, for example, Russia has no centralised agency facilitating the introduction of Russian authors to a foreign public. The sorry performance of the Russian press ministry at the Frankfurt book fair in October 2003, where Russia was the guest of honour, is a case in point: most of the talks organised by the ministry were not even interpreted into German or English, and the brochures printed to present Russian writers to a German audience were produced by technical translators who had never worked with literary texts before and therefore simply got everything wrong.

This paves the way for those Russian authors who look to foreign countries mainly to enhance their prestige at home, or to gain symbolic capital abroad by acting as self–styled representatives of Russian culture where there is no–one to disclaim their simplistic and cliché–ridden generalisations. Tatyana Tolstaya, a well–known writer who spent many years in America, is an example of a 'biased cultural translator' who likes to write ironically and

pejoratively about Russian exceptionalism while in the United States, but happily engages in West-bashing back in Russia and sees no harm in promoting extreme nationalist writers in a TV show she co-anchors.

A more extreme case in point is the recent performance (in December 2003) of the neo-Fascist intellectual Alexander Dugin at Istanbul University, talking about his so-called 'neo-Eurasian' ideology (an eclectic collection of nationalist and mystical ideas that has little to do with the discourse about *Avrasya* such as can be found in Turkish diplomatic circles). Flanked by two senior Russian diplomats, Dugin was welcomed in Turkey as a member of the Russian delegation to a conference on Iraq and Cyprus. It is alarming enough that a representative of the radical right such as Dugin is regularly able to reach a large audience in Russia through newspapers and TV broadcasts controlled by, or loyal to, the current political regime; the fact that he could be received as an honoured guest by political circles in Turkey without an uproar in the media has perhaps something to do with the traditional weakness of 'Russian studies' in Turkey. But even in countries with a strong tradition of 'Russia-watching' there is not always enough expertise available to critically contextualise the pronouncements of those purporting to speak 'for Russia', be they politicians or writers.

There is of course nothing uniquely Russian in any of this. Translation is subject to the same kinds of restrictions and influences all over the world. However, the Russian case is exacerbated by the long tradition of closure to the outside world and the new nationalist provincialism that has replaced the Occidentalist euphoria of the late 1980s and early 1990s. With time, however, and unless the current neo-authoritarian tendencies manage to muzzle intellectual life and the independent publishing scene, one may hope that the material and intellectual problems of translation may be mitigated by the enthusiasm of a new generation of specialist translators.

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