

CROSSING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES – TRANSLATION IN RUSSIA

Guest Editor: Olga Radetzkaja (Berlin)

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## TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

## editorial

The enormous surge of renewal that Russia has experienced over the past fifteen years has been accompanied by a flood of cultural imports. Translation has been crucial in literature and scholarship, in films and TV programmes, in business and advertisement, and in all spheres of everyday life. As a consequence, the issue of translation now serves as a focal point for debate about Russia's cultural identity: how many 'alien' elements can Russian literature, the Russian language and the Russian mind digest? How are foreign concepts, words and works integrated? What is being imported and translated? What are the historical, cultural and linguistic problems that affect translations into Russian (or from Russian)? Is there a Soviet tradition of translation to draw on? Is there a modern system of training translators? And what is the status of translators and translations?

That a country's translation culture says much about its image of itself *and* about its attitude towards the outside world is almost a truism, and yet it has had little impact on studies of Russian culture. The few existing attempts to look at the topic more closely are either purely linguistic or pursue traditional comparative interests, for example in historical studies of the impact of individual works. They rarely touch upon more general issues, such as conceptions of translation that are specific to particular times and places, or changing schools, styles and fashions in translation. Of course, this issue of *kultura* cannot fill that gap; but the authors and editors would like to stimulate further interest in the topic.

Irina Alexeyeva starts with a tour of contemporary translated children's literature. Her comparison of recent books and Soviet-era translations reveals that the differences between the two are mainly content-related. Today, Russian children

are presented with a wider range of literary genres than before. Thus their experience, not only as TV viewers and Internet users, but also as readers of books, has become more differentiated and closer to that of their Western contemporaries, a fact whose importance is often underestimated.

The influence of translations in the humanities and social sciences is also routinely undervalued, as Mischa Gabowitsch writes in an article that closes this issue of *kultura*. He shows the extent to which translations from Western languages have shaped contemporary discourse, and points out some of the fatal misunderstandings that have resulted from this, but also the new opportunities for international communication that are opening up for a younger generation of scholars familiar with new terminologies.

In between those two articles, two shorter pieces, by Anna Shibarova and Yelena Kalashnikova, look at the practice of translation: Anna Shibarova reports on specific issues discussed at the Third German-Russian Translators' Workshop, and Yelena Kalashnikova presents her long-running series of interviews with Russian translators, with special reference to psychological and social aspects.

## ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR:

Olga Radetzkaja studied Slavic studies and comparative literature in Berlin and Moscow, and has been working as a freelance translator since 1993, specialising in Russian authors. Among other authors, she has translated Pavel Florensky, Irina Denezhkina, Pavel Lembersky, and Oleg and Vladimir Presnyakov into German. She co-directed the documentary *Spurwechsel. Ein Film vom Übersetzen* [= *Track Change: A Film about Translating*], Berlin 2003.

SAMSON, ROBERTO AND MUDDLE EARTH.  
 CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN TRANSLATIONS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

## analysis

Irina Alexeyeva

*Contemporary Russian translations of children's books include English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Swedish and Norwegian titles. There have been changes in the genres translated since Soviet times. Gone are loose, ideologically processed retellings. Long-forgotten genres, such as school novels or girls' books, are making a comeback. Fantasy books for children are also popular, especially the Harry Potter series and Russian imitations. The quality of the translations is high, but the editing work is poor. Children love books that promote kindness, justice, creativity and tolerance, and that is an encouraging sign.*

In Russia, children's literature has traditionally been a prestigious genre. This is not only due to classic original works by Russian authors, but also to excellent 20th century translations and retellings. How did this come about, and what is changing today? What kind of translations do Russian editors publish nowadays? How popular are these books with children and their parents? How good are the translations? And what has changed since Soviet times?

A caveat is in order before discussing the status of translated children's fiction on bookshop shelves and in children's hearts: Russia is a large country, where there has traditionally been a considerable cultural gap between the big cities and the provinces. The Internet has done little to level these differences so far, and they are aggravated by a more than tenfold drop in circulation figures since Soviet times. Thus someone who lives in one of the two capitals and is not a specialist in distribution is virtually in no position to determine which children's books are sold, or read, even in cities like Nizhny Novgorod or Vladivostok, not to mention smaller provincial towns. What follows is written from a Saint Petersburg perspective.

#### SOVIET TRADITIONS

European popular children's literature was international from its inception; in its early days, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it mainly consisted of translations. The tales of Hans Christian An-

dersen and the Brothers Grimm, school novels, girls' and boys' books, nature books for children—all these were available in Russia.

After 1917, however, children were inevitably given different books to read, for the rejection of the old traditions entailed creating a new, Soviet children's literature. Translated literature helped flesh out the thematic priorities of this new literature from its emergence in the 1920s.

Of course, children's literature primarily served the creation of Soviet Man, and only secondarily fulfilled the entirely subordinate function of educating children. Hence pride of place was given to works about the misery of children in capitalist countries and in pre-revolutionary Russia, which were supposed to instil a class consciousness. In addition to Russian books of this kind (e.g. Valentin Katayev's *Lonely White Sail*, also known as *A White Sail Gleams*), translated books, including a number of 19<sup>th</sup> century titles, proved suitable for this task. Korney Chukovsky's retelling of James Greenwood's *The True History of a Little Ragamuffin* is a case in point: to match ideological requirements, the translator amplified the author's portrayal of social contrasts.

Next in importance came works about the new Soviet way of life, in particular the joys of a collectivised childhood, as well as a type of books that may be grouped together under the label of militarism for children, embodied above all by Arkady Gaydar. Translations played no significant role in either sub-genre.

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Seen from today, Soviet children’s reading materials look rather bleak. However, two other genres added a brighter note: fictional popularisations of science and fairy tales.

Popular science-based fiction, which drew on techniques from fairy tales and science fiction, had its heyday in the 1930s. Foreign books of this type underwent significant changes in translation. Firstly, the texts were often rewritten to match the dominant ideology.

Thus, in a 1924 translation of Waldemar Bonsels’ early 20<sup>th</sup>-century novel *The Adventures of Maya the Bee*, the process of swarming—which Bonsels described as a natural feature of bee life—became a social metaphor: the working bees suffer under the brutal yoke of the Queen Bee (a literal translation of the German word *Bienenkönigin*, actually called ‘mother bee’ in Russian), but the servile masses arise from their slumber, change the old tradition and decide to create a better world.

Secondly, translations were often produced in two stages: a literal translation and rewriting. The literal translation was usually sound and close to the original, but could contain ideologically ‘harmful’ statements. Hence, at the second stage, a Russian author would give the text a ‘useful’ twist and sometimes rewrite it in his or her own individual style. These different layers are clearly visible, for example in the Russian

translation of Felix Salten’s *Bambi*. The author of the literal translation was never mentioned, so responsibility for the text was diffuse, and in any case few readers were able to compare the translations with the originals.

Against the gloomy background of the stock Soviet genres, the work of the so-called Marshak Office was an heroic attempt to restore harmony

to children’s literature. In the late 1920s, the children’s literature department at the Leningrad Branch of the State Publishing House for Children’s Literature, headed by Samuil Marshak, began to translate and rewrite fairy tales from across the world, introducing both folk and literary tales from a range of different cultures into Russian children’s literature. Zoya Zadunayskaya, Alexandra Lyubarskaya, Tamara Gabbe and others created Russian texts



Alexey Tolstoy, *The Golden Key, or The Adventures of Buratino* (a loose retelling of Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio*), illustrations by A. Koshkin, Moscow 1981: frontispiece

based on the traditional techniques of the genre. Folklore was not their only subject matter: thus, for example, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* or Selma Lagerlöf’s *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (retold by Zoya Zadunayskaya) also became fairy tales.

The most popular translated literary tales were fantasy narratives with a social slant. This included Alexey Tolstoy’s *The Golden Key, or The Adventures of Buratino* (1936), a loose retelling

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of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio: A Tale of a Puppet* (1883); Nikolay Nossov's books about Dunno (1930s), a new version of Anna Khvolson's *\*The Kingdom of the Brownies. The Adventures of Cholly and the Little Forest People in 27 Stories*<sup>1</sup> (Moscow/Saint Petersburg: Wolf, 1900s), itself based on the cartoon characters of Palmer Cox; Alexander Volkov's *The Wizard of Emerald City* (1939), a recast of Lyman Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900); and Gianni Rodari's *\*The Adventures of the Little Onion* (1951) translated by Zlata Potapova. The Marshak Office did not entirely refrain from ideological rewriting, but literary excellence was always given pride of place, as was the quality of the language, which incidentally was usually high in all Soviet translations.

The strict social emphasis in translated children's books slackened somewhat from the 1950s onwards. A typical children's hit of this new period was Liliana Lungina's translation of Astrid Lindgren's *Eric and Karlsson-on-the-Roof* (1957).

## A TIME OF TRANSITION

Things began to change quickly in the early 1990s. First of all, distinctly ideological children's books—for example stories about Lenin—were no longer being published. Secondly, the range of new translations and re-editions widened dramatically. There was a revival of long-forgotten genres, such as girls' books (Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* being the best-selling title by far), and boys' books, including Frances Hodgson Burnett's great 19<sup>th</sup> century classic *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, published in pre-revolutionary translations since 1988 and in a wonderful new rendering by Natalya Demurova in 1992.

Thirdly, the demise of the large state-owned publishing houses entailed a sharp drop in circulation figures, but also in the quality of the books published. There were no more officially ap-

proved publishing targets, and anyone was free to translate and publish any books they wanted; but the disappearance of censorship also led to looser editorial control. This resulted in what some would call chaos. This period in Russian translation history is usually associated with declining quality standards and indiscriminate-ness. From a contemporary perspective, however, I believe it is much more productive to judge the troubled 1990s by their ultimate results, by what came out of that primeval democratic soup.

## PUBLISHERS AND BOOKSHOPS TODAY

Most of the children's books available in Saint Petersburg bookshops are produced by four publishing houses: *Rosmen*, *Makhaon* and *Eksmo* in Moscow and the Saint Petersburg-based *Azbuka. Harvest Publishers* in Minsk (Belarus), who come fifth, are especially infamous for sinning against copyright by omitting to mention translators' names; so, sometimes, does *Eksmo*.

According to one assistant at the giant *Bukvoyed* chain of bookshops, fairy tales sell best for the 5 and under age category. You can buy all the traditional authors—the Brothers Grimm, Hauff, Andersen, Perrault—as well as collections of folk tales from around the world, all in old translations and retellings. Children's books written by pop stars like Madonna or Paul McCartney also sell well.

In the primary-school age group the picture is different. In addition to traditionally popular foreign authors (Saint-Exupéry, Tove Jansson, Astrid Lindgren, Selma Lagerlöf, Felix Salten, Lewis Carroll), there are many new names and genres (in a ratio of about 7:9!).

But it is the range of books for young teenagers that has seen the most striking changes: translations of new books clearly come top in this category, whereas Russian authors, if published at all, do their best to emulate them.

<sup>1</sup> Books marked with an asterisk have not, to my knowledge, been translated into English. Their titles are rendered in literal translation. – Translator's note.



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WHY DO CHILDREN LOVE SAMSON AND ROBERTO? According to the Central Pushkin Children's Library in Saint Petersburg, two books from Norwegian writer Invgar Ambjørnsen's *Samson and Roberto* series (*\*Cool Buddies*, 2002 and *\*The Heritage of Uncle Rin-Tin-Tei*, 2006, *Azbuka*) are by far the most popular among primary-school pupils. These books are reserved a month in advance. So what is the secret behind their popularity?

*Cool Buddies* has a simple plot: the dog Samson and the cat Roberto run a hotel where they manage to satisfy even the most outlandish guests; even the *Cool Buddies* punk group, consisting of frightful rowdy crows, turns out not to be all that terrible, and indeed quite likeable. Simple values—tolerance, creativity, kindness—enable the protagonists to deal with the most complicated situations. The respected translator Inna Streblova brilliantly renders the author's sparkling humour on every page.

Another book in which all characters are animals is also popular with children: Luis Sepúlveda's *The Story of the Seagull and the Cat Who Taught Her to Fly*, skilfully translated from the Spanish by Sussanna Nikolayeva, a few stylistic flaws notwithstanding (*Azbuka* 2005). This story also centres on kindness, helpfulness and tolerance (in the sense of respect for others' interests and inclinations), but also on concern for nature (the seagull's mother dies due to an oil patch in the sea).

Among other entertaining and well-translated books of recent years, I would also like to point out Luciano Malmusi's *\*Hunting the Woolly Rhino with Neanderthal Boy*, translated from the Italian by Anastassiya Mirolyubova (*Azbuka-klassika* 2005) and Yekaterina Botova's translations from the German of Sabine Ludwig's *\*Pug and Molly Mendelssohn* (*Azbuka* 2004) and *\*Nothing but Trouble* (2006).

Another, entirely different type of book is also consistently popular: entertaining yet provocative stories, a typical example of which is Lemony Snicket's cycle *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, including titles such as *The Vile Village* (2004) and *The Hostile Hospital* (2005). These books are about little orphans fighting adult villains and overcoming an infinite sequence of unexpected misfortunes. The dashing plots make this an exciting read despite the hackneyed language and the rather dark humour.



Dmitry Yemetz, *Tanya Grotter and the magic double-bass*, illustrated by V. Shcherbakov, Moscow 2006: frontispiece

POTTER—GROTTER—PYOTR

There is an extensive Harry Potter literature in Russian. J. K. Rowling's works fill several shelves at *Bukvoyed*; one of her latest books, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* was co-translated by the master translator Viktor Golyshev and reads very well in Russian. In addition to Western rehashes, such as Michael Gerber's *Barry Trotter and the Unnecessary Sequel* (*Astrel-AST* 2004), there is a *Dragonology* purportedly writ-

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ten (and even copyrighted!) by Harry Potter himself (Kharkov: Folio, 2003) and other Russian parodies or imitations with protagonists whose names rhyme with 'Harry Potter'. This includes Yaroslav Morozov's *\*Pyotr Larin and the Time Machine* (Minsk: Sovremenny literator) and Dmitry Yemets' huge series about Tanya Grotter (each one of the eleven books catalogued by the Pushkin Library is in great demand) with rather uniform adventures based on Slavic mythology. The genre also includes various other books about wizards, as well as castles, spooks, ghost ships etc. One fine example is *Muddle Earth* (Eksmo 2004) by the British author Paul Stewart. The story of little Joe who temporarily finds himself in the mind-boggling world of Muddle Earth is replete with literary allusions: to Carroll's *Alice*, Tolkien's goblins, and the giants and ogres of folklore. The novel is written in a rich, energetic, humorous and sometimes very romantic language, but unlike many other books of this kind it is not sentimental; all of this is brought out clearly in Irina Togoyeva's translation.

On the whole, among the 70 or so contemporary

translations of children's books studied for this survey, careful, high-quality translations are more frequent than pot-boilers. Of course, no translator is entirely immune to 'bugs'—lexical errors, slips of the pen, omissions etc.—but these are as much the editors' fault as the translators'. The quality of editorial work is what has most sharply declined in children's books of the new generation.

## SHOULD WE SOUND THE ALARM BELL?

I am coming to the end of my survey. Space has not allowed me to cover the reanimated fashion for honeyed girls' literature (where the best-selling author is Jacqueline Wilson at *Rosmen*), books that continue the tradition of school novels, such as Klaus Hagerup's lovely Norwegian novel *\*Markus and Sigmund*, beautifully translated by Vera Dyakonova, though very sloppily edited (*Azbuka* 2005), and much else.

What can we conclude? In the post-Soviet period, translated children's literature has become more varied; it has freed itself of censorship and shed its blinkers, while the Soviet-era cult of literary translation has probably had a beneficial impact

## GROTTER &amp; GOBLIN:

## STYLIZATION, PARODY AND TRAVESTY AS A SPECIAL CASE OF CULTURAL TRANSFER

*At the age of ten, Tanya Grotter learns that she has magical powers. She is admitted to Tibidokhs Wizard School, but the evil sorceress Chuma del Tort, who murdered her parents, is a powerful enemy...*

Dmitry Yemets's *Tanya Grotter* series, running to eleven volumes so far, has been published by Eksmo since 2002, with an overall print run of 2 million copies. Joanne Rowling sued Yemets in the Netherlands, obtaining a publication ban there, but not in Russia. Nor does Dmitry Puchkov aka Goblin, a well-known film translator, get into any trouble for producing parodies in addition to 'serious' commissioned work. He adds entirely new, comical or absurd dialogue and soundtracks to blockbusters such as *Lord of the Rings*. Are these lucrative side-effects of Russians' infamously lax attitude to copyright and intellectual property? Yes, but there is much more to it than that.

(continued on next page)

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on its quality. Russian children still read books, and we translators bear a large share of the responsibility for the way in which the books they read will shape their perception of the world. For the books we translate become part of Russian culture and form a bridge into the future.

*Translated from the Russian  
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Irina Alexeyeva is a scholar and translator of German literature as well as a writer. She has published several works on translation theory and the methodology of translation teaching.

Among other authors, she has translated Ludwig Tieck, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Gottfried Keller, Georg Trakl, Hermann Broch, Robert Menasse and Paul Nizon, as well as several children's books into Russian. She teaches German philology at Saint Petersburg State University and is pro-vice-chancellor for research at the Saint Petersburg Foreign Language Institute.

## READING SUGGESTIONS:

- Lathey, Gillian (ed.), *The Translation of Children's Literature : a Reader*, Clevedon / Tonawanda, NY, 2006.
- Blinov, Valeri, *Russian Children's Books 1859–1940*, London 1989.

(continued from previous page)

Parody is a notoriously ambivalent genre: it may be both a symptom of the influence of overpowering models, and a means to fight that influence. Thus the enormous popularity of parodies and travesties, especially those spoofing Anglo-American cultural imports, above all signals the intensity of their assimilation. In a cultural climate where widespread fascination for the Western mainstream goes hand in hand with resentment against America, Hollywood or generally 'the West', mainstream cultural artefacts are not only being translated, but also imitated and transformed, and, tentatively, 'replaced'.

Whereas *Goblin*'s parodies essentially exploit the comical effect of profaning cult objects, the *Tanya Grotter* series is mainly based on appropriation: Yemets replaces 'alien' English motifs with Slavic folklore and Russifies scenes, references and allusions, etc. Accordingly, those who argue that his is a series of novels in its own right like to invoke the tradition of literary adaptations in Russian children's literature.

Yemets' supporters often stress that the Russian 'reply to *Harry Potter*' has the added advantage of contributing to national self-assertion. But then again, *Grotter* fans do not usually switch their allegiance to the Russian heroine to the extent of abandoning the *Potter* series. Likewise, some familiarity with the originals is required in order to fully appreciate the humour of Dmitry Puchkov's parodistic film translations.

Incidentally, both *Tanya Grotter* and *Goblin* are so enormously popular that they are in turn spawning profitable spinoffs. Thus, for example, Puchkov's website vehemently condemns the use of his name on covers of the hit movie *Night Watch*—incidentally a Russian production—sold on DVD in a fake 'Goblin translation'.



## IMPRESSIONS FROM THE THIRD RUSSIAN-GERMAN TRANSLATORS' WORKSHOP

Anna Shibarova

## report

The Third Russian-German Translators' Workshop with literary translators from Russia, Germany and Austria took place in July 2006, this time at the European Translators' College in Straelen (Germany). The small, constantly changing group (participants are selected on a competitive basis) and the nature of the work (discussions of participants' ongoing projects) make each meeting unique. But the main thing never changes: the workshop gives literary translators a valuable chance to discuss their work with colleagues coming from the opposite direction, i.e. native speakers of the source language. Since space does not permit an extensive description of the seminar discussions, I shall restrict myself to a few examples.

This year, Roman Eyvadis (Saint Petersburg) presented an amusing passage from Helmut Dietl's and Patrick Süskind's film script<sup>1</sup> *Rossini or The Murderous Question of Who Slept with Whom*, which features a mixture of Rhenish, Bavarian and Hungarian accents. How does one translate dialects and a foreigner's broken German? Although this is a well-known difficulty, there are no stock solutions. Does the dim-witted blonde's pretentious manner of speaking have to be translated using lexical means—with a mixture of clichéd lofty expressions and colloquial phrases—or can the translator use phonetic ones as well? Some participants thought the latter possible provided the 'worn Rhinedaughter' does not speak with an accent familiar to the Russian ear. Antje Leetz (Berlin) is very familiar with the problem of how to render 'unprocessed' oral and written language. The novel she is translating—*Number One or In the Gardens of Other Possibilities* by Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, who is brilliant at reproducing live oral speech—is full of slips of the tongue, interjections, omissions and unusual abbreviations. Understanding the func-

tion of all these elements and finding a German equivalent requires a keen ear and filigree precision. In the course of two hours—the average length of a seminar—the participants scrutinise the rough texture of a short extract.

Reinhardt Jirgl's 1997 novel *Dog Nights* features a number of stylistic similarities with the final pages of Petrushevskaya's book. His translator Tatyana Baskakova (Moscow) considers the parallel important: 'This means that Jirgl's language is not totally alien to the Russian tradition.' Reading this prose is like treading a minefield: 'Storm, muzzle flash of 1 weapon or explosion directly in front of glazed façade: 1 cold-glaring spring tide of light :/ nails down 1 shred of night town, roused & spellbound, under marble sky.' How does one preserve the force of this blast in a language where compound nouns need to be translated into longer strings of words, inevitably disrupting the staccato rhythm of the sentence? In a case such as this, what is the best correlation between faithfulness to the original and the freedom that is indispensable for making Jirgl sound natural in Russian?

Translating explicit and hidden quotes, a stumbling-block for every literary translator, is also a matter of faithfulness vs. freedom. Marina Moskvina's *My Dog Loves Jazz*, a story for children that is being translated by Sabine Grebing (Linthal), ends in a dashing jazz version of *The Little Birch Tree*. In Russia, every schoolchild knows the lyrics and tune; not so in Germany. How should one bridge the cultural gap? Does one replace the song with a different, better-known one, or keep the important image of the Russian birch, but make the lyrics sound like those of a German folk song?

In translating Elfriede Jelinek's *Michael: An Adolescent Novel for an Infantile Society*, Irina Alexeyeva (Saint Petersburg) faces an even more

<sup>1</sup> None of the books mentioned in this article has, to my knowledge, been translated into English. Their titles are literal translations into English. – Translator's note

report

difficult task. The book parodies the tone of voice of TV entertainment show hosts from the early 1970s, which sounds antiquated to contemporary readers. The translator boldly opts for a change of register: in order to translate the invisible and omnipotent show host's aggressively didactic manner of speaking—'the others should do their homework'—she uses a hackneyed passage from a Lenin quote: 'The others should learn, learn and learn again.'

The range of texts discussed was as broad as always: it included early poems by Paul Celan (translator: Vladimir Letuchy, Moscow) and mass literature like Max Fray's *Stranger* (Claudia Zecher, Vienna); the reserved Peter Stamm's short story *The Kiss* (Svyatoslav Gorodetsky, Moscow) and the ecstatically verbose Dmitry Prigov with *My Own Private Japan* (Christiane Körner, Frankfurt); the young Berlin-based author Julia Kissina's short story *Russian Forest* (Ganna-Maria Braungardt, Berlin) and

Oleg Grigoryev, an icon of Soviet underground literature, with *Summer Day (A Youngster's Tale)* (Thomas Weiler, Leipzig); Arno Geiger's *We're Doing Fine* (Tatyana Nabatnikova, Moscow), a novel filled with historical facts, and short descriptive fragments written by the participants themselves as part of an exercise in verbalising gestures led by Andreas Tretner (Berlin).

Our seminar does not aim to provide definitive answers to all questions; the point is to broaden our understanding of the texts. The participants

of all three workshops—both older masters and younger colleagues—found this approach highly productive. To quote a comment by one of the participants of the second workshop in 2004, Olga Radetzkaya: *It is the polyphony of the workshop discussions (where opinions often diverge) that creates a sense of the almost spatial depth of each text such as can probably not be achieved by any other means (although it is precisely what*

*one would like to achieve always, in every translation!).*

*Translated from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Anna Shibarova holds a diploma in Slavic Studies from Tartu University. She lives in Berlin (since 2001) and works as a literary translator and language teacher. Among other authors, she has translated Jürgen Habermas, Wolfgang Hilbig and Hans Ulrich Treichel into Russian.



*Astrid Lindgren, Eric and Karlsson-on-the-Roof, translated by L. Lungina, original illustrations by Ilon Wikland, Moscow 1981: frontispiece*

In 2006, she was awarded the Zhukovsky Prize in the Young Translator category. She initiated and co-directs the German-Russian Translators' Workshops, which took place in Berlin in 2003, in Saint Petersburg in 2004 and in Straelen in 2006.

READING SUGGESTION:

Rachel May, *The Translator in the Text: on Reading Russian Literature in English*, Evanston (Ill.), 1994.

## CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATORS IN RUSSIA: A GROUP PORTRAIT

## sketch

Yelena Kalashnikova

*In 2000, Yelena Kalashnikova, then a student of literary translation at the Moscow Literature Institute, decided to interview a number of famous colleagues about their work. Little did she suspect that this largely private initiative would grow into a long-term project in the online magazine Russky zhurnal (<http://old.russ.ru/authors/kalashnikova.html>): a series of over eighty interviews published over five years. In 2007, the publishing house Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye is publishing an abridged and updated selection of her translators' interviews, which impressively document Russian cultural history in the 20th and early 21st century. In this article, the author briefly presents her project. (OR)*

My interview partners included acknowledged masters of the trade and cult translators as well as younger colleagues, working in different genres and with different languages. The interview series presents a wide range of views, professional attitudes and personal experience, and features both practical examples and theoretical reflection. Among other questions, I usually asked my interlocutors why they had become translators.

Assar Eppel (born in 1935, writer and translator of Polish prose and poetry: Henryk Sienkiewicz, Bruno Schulz, Wisława Szymborska): 'I began my literary activities in the bleak Soviet period, when translators were the only ones who brought a different culture into our hermetic Soviet world and acquainted us with the imagery of hitherto unknown or little-known writers.'

Viktor Toporov (born in 1935, translator of English and German prose and poetry: Rainer Maria Rilke, W. H. Auden, Norman Mailer): 'I wrote poems, but I knew that nobody would print them; I pursued philological studies but on the one hand I abhor academic scholarship, and on the other hand I knew that given my temperament I could never make an academic career. Merging the two occupations for which I was talented, I naturally became a translator of poetry.'

For Ilya Smirnov (born in 1948, translator and scholar of classical and contemporary Chinese literature), one of the motives was the 'decent pay'. 'At the time, a junior research fellow received a monthly salary of 120 roubles; but one

line of literary translation was paid 1 rouble 40 kopecks, and at the Library of World Literature [a prestigious Soviet book series—*E.K.*] they paid over 3 roubles per line.'

Alexander Bogdanovsky (born in 1952, translator of prose and poetry from the Portuguese, Spanish and English: Jorge Amado, José Saramago, Paulo Coelho): 'It's great: there's no boss, and you're even paid.' For Anna Glazova (born in 1973, poet and translator of poetry and prose from the German: Paul Celan, Robert Walser), who has long been living in the United States, 'poetry is a form of life, not only literary life', a 'lifelong aesthetic programme'.

All my interview partners had their own motives for becoming translators. Some were interested in contemporary literature—mostly Western, of course. Some found other activities less enticing or indeed unacceptable. Some wanted independence in their everyday life, e.g. not having to go to work every day. Others chose translation because it was well-paid. For others still, translation became a part of their own creative work. While all these are mentioned by translators of the older, middle and younger generation, there is one important difference: since the late 1980s, translation, especially poetry translation, has been a badly paid occupation.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of dramatic changes in Russian culture and literature: the forms of literary life, the literary canon and conceptions of literature, readers' expect-

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tations, the publishing industry and the role of journals were all in flux. Similarly drastic changes occurred in the status of translated literature, the choice of books for translation, translators' backgrounds and attitudes to translation.

Compared to Soviet times, translators of fiction today have greater scope for self-expression, particularly regarding the choice of authors to translate and (paper or online) publication venues, but they are also faced with harsher economic conditions. Many publishing houses no longer employ staff editors; often the editorial processing of a manuscript is limited to proofreading. Publishers set tighter translation deadlines. My interlocutors have to translate between four and eight sheets (of 24 pages or 40,000 characters, roughly equalling 5–5,500 words) per month, for fees that leave much to be desired. Apart from their favourite occupation, many of them therefore work as interpreters, translate technical texts or articles for glossy magazines, do editorial work, give private lessons, teach, or work as journalists or publishers. Most of my interview partners support themselves with work involving foreign languages.

For many of those I interviewed, translating fiction is a means of self-realisation no less important than their own original creative work. Translators, especially those who are also writers, choose texts which allow them to develop their creative skills. As in Soviet times, translation is

for many of them a form of artistic expression in its own right. It is an activity that both provides legitimacy under conditions of censorship and enables writers to overcome their own creative crisis, leaving them refreshed. But the main motive for translating is love of literature, of an author or a specific text...

*Translated from the Russian*

by *Mischa Gabowitsch*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Yelena Kalashnikova graduated from the Moscow Literature Institute in 2000 with a diploma in literary translation, and from the Cultural Studies programme at the Institute of European Cultures at the Russian State University of the Humanities (RGGU), Moscow, in 2003. She is currently working on her doctoral thesis on *The Socio-Cultural Role of Translators of Foreign Fiction in Russia at the Turn of the 21st century* at the Institute for Advanced Research in the Humanities at the RGGU.

## READING SUGGESTIONS:

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## SPREADING THE NEW: RUSSIAN TRANSLATIONS IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

## analysis

Mischa Gabowitsch

*In Soviet times, very few texts in the humanities and social sciences were translated into Russian. Synopses and translations of foreign texts were often made available only to selected staff at the Academy of Sciences. Since the late 1980s there has been a translation boom that has had far-reaching consequences for scholarly terminology and communication. Translators and editors of foreign scholarly texts are facing numerous problems, and the solutions found so far are often less than satisfactory.*

## DISCOURSE AND GLAMOUR

In Viktor Pelevin's latest novel, *Empire V*, a young vampire is trained in two arcane arts which enable him to control and manipulate the human race from behind the scenes: *diskurs* and *glamur*. While 'glamour' stands for the beautiful world of illusions as embodied by glossy magazines and Moscow's *dolce vita*, 'discourse' symbolises the unintelligible yet persuasive language of a small circle of 'experts'. Ultimately the two turn out to be the same.

As usual, Pelevin is in tune with the times. In Russia, the word 'discourse' has indeed come to epitomise a new type of academic language: imported from the West and incomprehensible to most ordinary Russians, this terminology has become indispensable to its practitioners. While the translators who have introduced it to Russia do not have a high public profile, they nonetheless have an essential role to play.

## TRANSLATING PROHIBITED

Although their line of work is much older than literary translation (think of Bible translators such as John Wycliffe or Martin Luther, or the men who translated Greek philosophy into Arabic), translators in the humanities and social sciences are often treated like poor relations—not only in Russia. Of course the two professions have much in common. In contemporary Russia, the main similarity is the great backlog of untranslated major works that has piled up during decades of intellectual seclusion. But there are also enormous differences. In philosophy, sociol-

ogy, and especially religious or political studies, Soviet-era restrictions and censorship were even harsher than in fiction, for every deviation from the Marxist-Leninist canon was considered tantamount to an attack on the foundations of the official worldview.

Of course, Western ideas were not entirely unknown. Ideologically unacceptable foreign books were collected in the *spetskhrany*, the 'special collections' of a few hand-picked libraries, above all at the Institute for Scientific Information in the Social Sciences (INION). Staff from a number of departments were granted access to those collections, especially from the 1970s onwards; they were allowed to make synopses of certain works under the guise of a 'critique of bourgeois ideology', and in rare cases even translate some excerpts. Even the choice of texts for translation was often handed down from political bodies, or at least needed their blessing. The fruits of this work were not usually made available to the general public; instead, the synopses or translations were printed in limited and numbered editions and sent only to selected institutions and libraries.

This made a real dialogue with foreign authors virtually impossible, since the ideas reported or translated were ideologically processed and thus inevitably corrupted. The late translator and philosopher Vladimir Bibikhin, best known for his translations of Heidegger, recalled in 2001:

'In our rendering, the philosophers and essayists of the free world [...] turned into radicals, we made their voices sound shrill and rebellious.



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This fatal change of tone, the inevitable omission of the original context, made the whole mass of ideological information problematic. [...] From the outset, we had no sense of our readers' expectations, and so these translations sounded strange; when they were published in huge print runs in the 1990s, it became clear that they had to be rewritten. [...] But at the time, we were happy if we could just *mention* important names.'

## THE TRANSLATION BOOM

The system of secret synopses and translations existed until 1988; only towards the end of perestroika did freely available translations appear in massive print runs that ensured them an intellectual and terminological impact beyond narrow scholarly circles. Books by authors of entirely different persuasions and from a wide range of periods and disciplines were translated simultaneously, although there was at first a notable lack of interest in some currents of thought, such as Western varieties of Marxism.

Interwar authors were in especially high demand: the ultra-conservative German philosopher of history Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) and the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) suddenly became pop stars. Jung's 'archetype' still remains a buzzword, and even liberal authors use expressions such as 'pseudomorphosis' (Spengler's term for one civilisation unnaturally adopting elements from another, introduced in *The Decline of the West*) as a matter of course.

In philosophical circles, a 'French revolution' set in, continuing to this day, not dissimilar to the impact of 'French Thought' on literary studies in the English-speaking world. Authors such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida or Gilles Deleuze became cult figures; their complicated language often became even more opaque in translation,

but this only served to boost their prestige. As in many other countries, terms such as *discourse*, *deconstruction* and *post-modernism* trickled down to the media; yet since most readers did not understand them, they ended up as glamorous all-embracing metaphors.

## WHAT IS TRANSLATED?

Confusion still reigns supreme on the Russian market for translations in the humanities and social sciences. There are high expectations to be met: while few people in any country have a really systematic grasp of the international state of the art in any given discipline, Russians often feel they first need to zoom through the entire 20th century before they can join an international debate.

In introducing theories or approaches from different times and places, scholars and translators often fail to ask in what sense they are relevant to contemporary Russian problems. Although excellent work is done in Russia, for example in empirical social research, its authors still largely look to the West for their theoretical tools.

Old and new works have to be translated simultaneously. Precisely because few people know foreign languages, works by foreign authors are usually registered only once published in Russian; yet the scholarly and terminological traditions these new works are based on are not usually well-known either. How do you read Derrida if you have not read Heidegger? Can you understand Habermas without knowing Adorno? What point is there in studying contemporary analytic philosophy as long as Wittgenstein and Quine remain untranslated? And what happens when all these authors are translated simultaneously, as contemporaries as it were, as indeed happened in post-Soviet Russia?

The compatibility of intellectual, but also termi-

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nological, traditions is an important factor determining what is translated. Thus, for example, the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger was translated into Russian relatively early, and well, despite the notorious complexity of his language. He had continued the tradition of German idealism, which had decisively influenced the language of Russian philosophy since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

French post-structuralism also fell on fertile ground (terminologically if not intellectually), for structuralism had been decisively influenced by Russian authors such as Roman Jakobson, and thus the scholars of the so-called Moscow-Tartu schools of semiotics were, in a sense, distant cousins of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida and their likes.

By contrast, analytic philosophy, the dominant philosophical school in the contemporary English-speaking world, still remains little-known: its austere, almost mathematical idiom is exceedingly remote from the Russian philosophical tradition, which as in other countries of the European continent is rooted in metaphysics and not averse to a literary style. But much remains to be done even regarding the classics of political theory: thus, for example, there is still no complete translation of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), the earliest manifesto of modern political conservatism.

## NEW TERMINOLOGIES

The situation is even worse in the social sciences. In the Soviet Union, they had at first been entirely neglected and then subjected to strict ideological restrictions. To give a few examples: to this day, there is no complete translation of Max Weber's classic *Economy and Society*, and none at all of Georg Simmel's *Philosophy of Money*, a landmark in the history of sociology.<sup>1</sup> Several books by Jürgen Habermas are available in Rus-

sian, but none of his major works.

In economics, by contrast, many classics have been translated, but contemporary work, in many areas, is not. In history, a book is likely to be translated only if it deals with Russia or has theoretical ambitions.

After the long barren spell, the lack of a firmly established Russian terminology is even more noticeable in the social sciences than in philosophy. The sociologist and translator Tatyana Bar-chunova asks:

‘What do we do in a situation where there are no generally acknowledged conventions for transcribing and declining certain names, no rules of stress (*diskurs* or *diskurs*) and no universally accepted equivalents even for such widely used concepts as “grounded theory”, “attitudes”, “actor”, “agency”, “subjectivity”, “participant observation”, “community”, “modernity” (“modern”) and others?’

Of course, this is not a uniquely Russian problem: many of these terms have no obvious German equivalents either. But German scholars will usually state the English words in brackets and can reasonably hope to be understood. In Russian, the Anglicisation of academic language that has long taken place in other countries was started by the translations that appeared in the 1990s. More and more often one hears Anglicisms such as *modernost* (modernity) instead of the traditional *Novoye vremya*, itself a loan translation of the German term *Neuzeit*.

Introducing ‘alien’ terminologies is not a new task: in Russia, theology has spoken with a Greek accent from time immemorial; nautical terminology has been Dutch since Peter the Great, and many everyday objects have French or German names. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century if not earlier, Russian culture has been dubbed a culture of translation, similar, for example, to that of Turkey.

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, complete English translations of both works only appeared in the late 1970s.

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It is unsurprising that new concepts in the social sciences and humanities should initially remain incomprehensible to a broad public. But since, for decades, every schoolchild was familiar with the terminology of Marxism-Leninism, many Russians expect the conceptual apparatus of disciplines such as sociology to be universally intelligible.

While some authors advocate systematically using Russian etymological roots and the characteristic style of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian religious philosophy, others, such as the German-based historian of philosophy Nikolaj Plotnikov, propose to abandon this antiquated idiom and consistently adopt Western terminologies in order to take part in international academic debates.

In translation criticism, one of the most discussed issues is whether certain concepts already have Russian equivalents. For five years, a debate raged in two Russian philosophical journals as to whether the English word 'proposition' should be translated as *propozitsiya* or using the 'authentically Russian' word *suzhdeniye* ('judgment'). The foreign-sounding versions are likely to prevail over time, just as earlier the Greek loanword *filosofiya* triumphed over the literal translation, *lyubomudriye*.

## WHO TRANSLATES?

But in most translations, terminological issues are not the main difficulty. Insufficient language skills, even among translators, are a far more serious problem. This may sound surprising, since bilingualism is usually regarded as a precondition for a career in translation. Throughout history, translators have often had a multilingual background and shuttled back and forth between different cultures. In Russia, however, until recently things were different.

Yelena Kalashnikova has published interviews

with dozens of translators of literary, but also scholarly texts (see her article in this issue of *kultura*). Only a handful of them learned foreign languages abroad, let alone grew up in a bilingual environment. This comes as no surprise: travelling abroad, especially to 'capitalist' countries, was long impossible for most Soviet citizens, and contacts with foreigners were invariably suspicious. Even among respected translators of the older generation who work with several foreign languages, there are some who cannot communicate orally in any of them.

Towards the end of the Soviet Union, few people had managed to acquire the necessary qualifications for translating (or editing) scholarly texts, i.e. a combination of linguistic competence and specialist knowledge. Those who had were usually staff members of the Academy of Sciences or major libraries who had been granted access to 'secret' foreign publications early on and had studied foreign languages before specialising in a particular discipline.

Today most translations are done in a great hurry and for very low fees by inexperienced, usually young translators. Young scholars who have learned a foreign language well enough, for example by studying abroad, usually lack incentives to translate: most of them—luckily not all—are not interested in a career in Russia and publish only in English or French.

Foreign-funded support programmes provide some relief, above all the now-closed *Translation Project* financed by George Soros' Open Society Foundation. Other programmes, such as the French embassy's extensive *Programme Pouchkine* or the rather meagre support provided by the German Goethe Institutes, cover both fiction and non-fiction. However, given the huge backlog, all this is only a drop in the ocean. Moreover, there are neither effective translators' unions nor funding programmes targeted specifically at young

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translators in the humanities and social sciences.

## WHO READS?

The problem of bad translations would be far less tragic if Russia had a 'critical mass' of readers who have a command of foreign languages and access to foreign literature, enabling them to judge the quality of translated texts. But most people cannot afford foreign books, and given the lack of a functioning book distribution system, even Russian versions are only available in a few bookshops in the large cities.

As a consequence, academic communities at provincial universities, and indeed many institutions in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, have developed jargons that are out of touch with international scholarly debates: mostly a mix of Soviet newspeak, Russian religious philosophy and the occasional term from recent translations.

Nevertheless, the new, Western-inspired discourse is more than just glamour. In history, sociology, philosophy and other fields, a new generation has grown up imprinted by translations from the 1990s. These young scholars do not perceive the new terminologies as alien. They speak and think in a new idiom, and despite considerable

language barriers, they often have more in common with Western colleagues of the same age than with their seniors in Russia. Their texts, in turn, are increasingly being translated into other languages. While the race to catch up with the international literature is still going on, we translators are gradually turning into mediators of true international communication.

*Translated from the German by the author*

## URL:

Translation Project (Open Society Foundation)  
web site: [www.hse.ru/science/igiti/literature\\_eng.shtml](http://www.hse.ru/science/igiti/literature_eng.shtml)

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Mischa Gabowitsch is a sociologist, editor and translator and currently lives in Berlin. For four years he was editor of the Moscow-based journal *Neprikosnovenny zapas* and is currently involved in creating a new social science journal in Saint Petersburg. He translates articles and essays in the humanities and social sciences from and into Russian, English, French and German.

For technical reasons, the publication of *kultura* 12/2006 was delayed. In Januar of 2007, there will be no issue of *kultura*.