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CITIZENSHIP”: TRANSLATORS IN
THE SOVIET LITERARY
BUREAUCRACY OF THE 1930s**

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**“GAINING LITERARY CITIZENSHIP”:
TRANSLATORS IN THE SOVIET LITERARY
BUREAUCRACY OF THE 1930s²**

This paper focuses on the history of the Translators Section in the Soviet Writers Union in the 1930s and demonstrates how, and under what circumstances, literary translation was constructed in the soviet culture of 1930s as a profession and as a separate type of writing activity. The author uses the conceptual framework invented by Sheila Fitzpatrick for the soviet social system to the soviet literary history, and concludes, that translators were ascribed to the writers stratum by the bureaucratic machine of the Soviet Writers Union.

Keywords: translation studies, literary translation, Soviet Literature, Soviet Writers Union

JEL Classification: Z

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Introduction

In January 1964 in Leningrad, Joseph Brodsky, a future Nobel laureate, appeared before the court for the specific Soviet era crime of parasitism, that is, a lack of profession and regular job. Apart from unstable mental health, one of the main arguments for the defence was references to the fact that Brodsky worked as a translator (Baer 2006). The attorney pointed out Brodsky's published translations and the opinions of the subject matter experts, Kornei Chukovsky and Samuil Marshak. All three defence witnesses described the young poet as a translator.

Translator Natalia Grudinina informed the court that "Brodsky's translations were done on a high professional level. He possesses a specific talent, not often encountered, for translating poems artistically" (Vigdorova 2014, 192). Answering the questions of the attorney and assessors, she said that the work of a translator requires profound knowledge, "to produce good translations, similar to those Brodsky does, one must know an author's works and delve into his style", that even not knowing the original language a translator can "produce artistic translations of high quality". Answering the question of the defense counsel, if she "considers the use of a literal translation as a reprehensible misappropriation of someone else's work", she answered "God forbid".

Philologist Efim Etkind, the author of several works on the history of literary translation, agreed with the opinion about Brodsky's talent and success as a translator.

The translation of poetry is very difficult work, demanding effort, knowledge, and talent. On this path countless failures can beset the writer, and material reward is a matter for the distant future. One can translate poems for several years and not earn a single ruble. Such work demands unselfish love for poetry and for the work itself. The study of languages, the history and culture of working people - all that is not accomplished swiftly. Everything I know about Brodsky's work convinces me that a great future awaits him as a poet-translator. (Vigdorova 2014, 194)

Nikolay Admoni, professor of the Herzen Pedagogical University, stated that his knowledge of Brodsky's translations of the Polish poet Galchinsky and other authors allowed him to argue,

with complete confidence that they [the translations] required tremendous effort on the part of their author. They testify to the translator's great mastery and culture. But miracles don't just happen. Mastery and culture don't simply come on their own. They require constant and persistent work. Even if a translator works from a literal translation, in order for his translation to be worthwhile, he must form some conception of the language from which he's translating, acquire a feeling for the structure of that language, he must know the life and culture of the people, and so forth. In addition, Joseph Brodsky studied these other languages. (Vigdorova 2014, 196)

It is obvious that all three witnesses consider literary translation to be a specific form of professional writing. They all tell the court that Brodsky cannot be called a parasite because literary translation should be treated not as occasional earnings but as a permanent job. This focused specialisation of a writer has the characteristics of a skilled job requiring knowledge, skills, time and effort, and the characteristics of a creative activity which requires exceptional gifts. In telling the court about the essence and principles of a translator's work, the witnesses appeal to the concept of this profession which they think is generally shared, if not by the whole Soviet society, then at least by its educated part.

Reading the stenograph of Brodsky's trial and other evidence from the 1960-1980s, we see that literary translation is considered a profession and hence the possibility for those engaged in literary translation to be included into the system of social relations and occupy their own cell in the strict Soviet social hierarchy. In this period translation work ensured quite a stable social status for those who played by the rules of the system. In this regard the recollections of Lilianna Lungina about her attempts to obtain a permit to go abroad in the end of the 1970s are telling:

All my colleagues went abroad but I was not allowed to go. And I wrote to Andropov [...] that I received four refusals to go to my friends; people of my rank, that is members of the Translator Section of the Writers Union, all go, if I cannot go I asked why I was an exception (Dorman 2010, 334–336).

Here Lungina points out a certain rank, almost a caste of people possessing certain privileges. For example, comparing the circumstances in the Soviet Union with the post-Soviet situation, translator Aleksandra Petrova stresses, probably not without some exaggeration common for reminiscences:

In the Soviet times it was not easy to push through to publication, but translators with established reputations (those whom we call “our eminent masters”) had their path strewn with roses: huge honorarium, long timescales. Now it is the opposite, and to live on literary earnings one has to translate a lot and do it fast. (Kalashnikova 2008, 389)

The notion of literary translation as a profession connected with a certain social status emerged in the Russian culture relatively recently. As early as the 1920s, for private publishers, to whom most famous and would-be writers took themselves, literary translation was more a temporary job than a profession. However, in the 1930s when all spheres of public life were subjected to fierce pressure from the growing totalitarian regime, private and cooperative publishing houses were closed and intellectual labour was possible only within the rigid limits of “artistic unions” such as the Writers Union. It is during this period that literary translation became not a literary gesture, a hobby or a means of earning money, but a way of social legitimation for those engaged in it. This research is a preliminary description of this process.

Soviet translation as a study field and the focus of this research

Translated literature was an integral part of Soviet culture. The classical canon of the Soviet literature, which played an important ideological role, included not only Russian but global classics as well: the works of foreign writers of the past were published in Russian as collected editions and as cheap single volumes. Translations from the national languages of the USSR were also widely published and became an essential ideological operating mechanism of the Soviet colonial system. However, the role of translators was, if not absolutely ignored, then reflected very insufficiently in Russian academic studies. The history of literary translation in pre-revolutionary Russia became from time to time a research subject, but the events and personalities of the history of translated literature in the USSR was not a matter of academic discussion. Indicative in this regard is the destiny of the introduction by Efim Etkind to the anthology “Masters of Russian poetic translation” written in 1968 and accepted for publication. The entire first volume of the anthology was censored because of just one phrase in the introduction. “The social reasons of this process are clear. In the certain period, especially between XVII and XX Conferences, Russian poets who were deprived of the opportunity to express themselves thoroughly in individual creative work talked with the reader using the language of Goethe, Orbeliani, Shakespeare and Hugo” (Etkind 2001). High ranking party

authorities considered the slightest hint that in the period of Stalin's government many writers were engaged in translation work involuntarily as slanderous.

The academic study of literary translation in the social and cultural context of the Soviet era only began after the disintegration of the USSR. One of the pioneers was Leighton who in 1991 published his book "Two worlds, one art: Literary translation in Russian and America" (Leighton 1991). In this work he describes the main principles of the Soviet school of translation and compares the situation with translated literature and translators in the USSR and in the USA. Friedberg (Friedberg 1997) embedded the Soviet period in the history of translated literature and translation practices in Russia starting from the 18th century.

Recently the discussion on the significance of literary translation in the USSR has become an important aspect of the academic study of the Soviet literary system. Baer (Baer 2006) understands literary translation as one of the practices of intellectual opposition of the Soviet intelligentsia. For Witt the ideological contexts of translation in a totalitarian state are analysed (Witt 2013b). Several works are dedicated to the role of translations and translators in the reception of foreign writers who are canonical for the Soviet culture (e.g. Burak). It is also important to analyse the role of translations as a means of constructing the Soviet culture as a multinational project (Dobrenko 2013). Azov covers in detail the discussion on literalism as a method of literary translation (Azov 2013).

Among the variety approaches to the material which is still insufficiently studied, it is important to look at the subject from the perspective of social history. Here I refer to the figure of the Soviet translator, his social role and status. It is essential to outline the position of translators within the Soviet literary field which seems to be known more by first-hand testimonies than by academic research.

Comparing the status of the translator and translator's work in the American and Russian cultures, Leighton suggests that "during the entirely history of American letters... translation has been considered as low art, and the translator has been assigned to an obscure place on the outskirts of the American literature". It was no earlier than in the 1960s that "literary translation began to receive greater respect...". In contrast with that picture, Leighton describes the status of the translators in the USSR: "Soviet translators have, above all other advantages, a national platform from which to speak, one that extends from the art itself to theory and criticism and provides an editorial process that oversees standards. [...] There is a translation establishment at the All-Union level, in the republics, and, centered around Russia, among most languages of the

Union. These establishment - called “the Soviet school of translation”.” (Leighton 1991, XV-XVI).

Friedberg vigorously contradicted with Leighton, calling his views “strongly idealized”. He argued that “even in the 1980s they continued to suffer from important disabilities, such as restriction on foreign travel and residence abroad, and even lack of access to ordinary foreign reference books. [... N]ot one of the many translators I met in Moscow in the early 1990s considered his or her profession privileged or influential. On the contrary, many emphasized their subservient status in the Writers Union.” (Friedberg 1997, 117).

Friedberg shows how social ill-being underpinned the rise of the Soviet translation school, he assumes that in the 1930s all translations were performed under duress. In his opinion, because so many translators were themselves frustrated poets or prose writers who, moreover, were denied adequate credit for their work, they frequently viewed themselves as coauthors rather than translators. Literary translations in the USSR often provided authors in political disfavor with the means to sublimate their own creative drive.

Etkind points at the reverse side of this phenomenon in his introduction to the second edition of the anthology “Masters of poetic translation” which came out in the same book series thirty years after the first.

Bosses regarded this [translation from the languages of “brotherly nations”] as necessary and spent a lot of money on it - as a result translation of poetry turned out to be a prestigious job and well paid too. [...] Thanks to the money paid for translations those poets whose poems were not published could survive. Among them were those who did not even try to publish their own poetry, they translated a lot and with success - from the languages of the Soviet East - and provided financial independence to Tarkovsky and Semyon Lipkin. Others, though not being too preoccupied with translation professionalism, also lived mainly on the money paid for translations (Etkind 2008, 40)

The opinions of three researchers who more likely speak as contemporaries of the events, seem to add to the concept outlined in the introduction to this work. The Soviet translator is an ambivalent figure. He appears either as a day-labourer who earns a meagre salary and is deprived of his own poetical voice, or as a qualified professional who achieved social status and success.

A more objective description of the position translators had in the Soviet literary and wider cultural hierarchy can be found by turning to a more general set of concepts which describe Soviet social reality. It is necessary to study a significant number of sources which give insights into the work of Soviet literary translators, in particular the archives of the Writers Union, publishing houses and the surviving personal papers of translators. Being aware of the fact that it is impossible to reach this goal in the framework of pilot research, here I confine myself to only one conceptual frame and a relatively narrow range of sources.

All the evidence provided here demonstrates that literary translation in the Soviet era became a form of social identity. This can be an identity imposed by an advocate upon the defendant in the course of judicial proceedings (as it was in the case with Brodsky), or an identity accepted voluntarily and bringing with it certain social capital. Therefore, the ways of analysing the social identity of the Soviet era can be used as a conceptual frame for our research. The problems of social identity in Soviet society are considered in the work of Fitzpatrick (Fitzpatrick 2005). In the 1920-30s, in the Soviet society under the great pressure of the state everybody had to accurately define their own social identity, to ascribe oneself to a certain class. In reality, claims Fitzpatrick, “the process of revolutionary ascription produces social entities ... that might more accurately be described as Soviet *soslovia*” (Fitzpatrick 2005, 71). Between the new Soviet social classes there were social gaps such as the absence of passports for peasants and “more subtle distinctions in the rights and privileges of different social groups” (Fitzpatrick 2005, 83).

We transpose Fitzpatrick’s arguments to the field of the history of the Soviet literature. The resolution of the ZK VKP(b) of March 1932 on the reformation of literary organisations which resulted in the establishment of the Writers Union, was a signal that the notions of the writers identity had been changing. In the 1920s, the writer was considered as a representative of his or her class, proletarian writers differed fundamentally from bourgeois followers. Created in 1934, the Soviet Writers Union became a class-specific organization, which in return for their loyalty admitted the writers who had earlier been ascribed to the enemy class. Membership in the Writers Union provided authors with the ascription to a certain social stratum without which it was difficult to exist in Soviet society. Moreover, membership in the Writers Union meant the possibility to use class privileges, participate in the distribution of wealth such as housing, and also the opportunity for regular earnings for those who became part of the bureaucratic apparatus (Antipina 2005).

Fitzpatrick's way of describing the social identity of Soviet people is productive for analysing the documents from the archive of the Translators Section of the Writers Union. An analysis of documents and stenographs of the Section's meetings in 1933-1936 is undertaken, paying special attention to the way the participants of these meetings identify themselves as translators.

Translators and the formation of the Soviet Writers Union

Immediately following the publication of the Central Committee's resolution "On reformation of literary art organisations" dated 23 April 1932, the Organising committee of the future Soviet Writers Union chaired by Gorky was formed. The Bureau of Translated Literature was part of the organising committee alongside with other Bureaus. In the execution of the decision, former Writers organisations with different ideological or aesthetic positions were closed. Those who were engaged in translations did not participate in these organisations because translation was considered to be beyond ideology. Now it was assumed that not only the authors of their own writing could enter the Writers Union. From this time translations also appear in the zone of ideology and had to be ideologically acceptable.

In December 1933, the Bureau of Translated Literature held an extended meeting officially called "The Moscow conference of translators". The main item on the agenda was the conditions for joining the Writers Union for translators. To be a member of the Union evidently implied a higher degree of political loyalty than in the past. Ingberg, who chaired the meeting, informed participants that "up to now translation work for the most part was performed primitively and individually without necessary supervision, even without necessary criticism. This situation is absolutely unacceptable"³. The comparison of the translator with socially dubious artisans, who did not fit neatly into the new socialist society of collective work was symptomatic. The Organising committee of the Writers Union intended to supervise translators work politically, constantly highlighting that not all engaged in translation deserved to join the Union and to be acknowledged as "Soviet translators". On the other hand, in exchange for the politicization of translators work, the organising committee offered some material benefits.

³ RGALI. F. 631. Op. 21. D. 4. L.2.

Writer Petr Pavlenko supported this position and pointed at the huge amount of work for translators in the coming years. He admitted that the Writers organisation did not have enough human resources to do the job.

The situation with translation specialists is not good. How has this situation developed? [...] We have dissipated literary translation specialists, those who stayed and work turned out to be in the shade. In general it seems that the pool of our translators has never been large. It has been slowly refilled due to people leaving other fields of literature. Many belletrists left for translation, art critics did translations, around this amateurishness was created, and the impression that the translator is support personnel in literature was produced.⁴

Therefore, the authorities considered translators as a socially indeterminate category, not fully professional and operational. Pavlenko sharply criticized the published translations pointing at their often low quality. However, at the same time the Writers Union was looking to cooperating with writers and pointed out that translators would be considered equal to other writers:

Translators were put in very ineligible material conditions. [They] don't know what they will do tomorrow, are not sure of their literary future. Our task is to create such conditions that translators feel themselves core workers, main literary workers.⁵

Using Fitzpatrick's terminology, we can say that the idea of the organisers of the Writers Union was to ascribe translators to the Writers "soslovie" so that they could enjoy its rights and privileges. Still the criteria for admitting translators to the Writers Union were not as clearly determined as it appears from the speech of Feoktist Berezovsky, member of the Organising committee⁶:

Translators who naturally feel they are literary workers will join the Union [...] In the charter [...] it is said that a playwright, critic etc. with individual creative works published in literary and art central magazines can be a member of the Writers Union. [...] The issue of a translator is decided in the same manner as when entering

⁴ Ibid. L. 7.

⁵ Ibid. L. 8.

⁶ Berezovsky is name only by his last name in the stenographic record, but it is nearly clear from the context, that it was a literary functionary Feoktist, but not Yury Berezovsky, an 'ordinal' translator. On Berezovsky see (Maksimenkov 2003)

*the Union with the creative work providing evidence of the established creative individual. [...]It goes without saying that every writer can be a member of the Union if they are participating in the socialist construction.*⁷

The speeches of the Translated Literature Bureau members were delivered in the spirit of the “self criticism” ritual developing at that time. They considered their own work on the preparation for the Congress as insufficient, but at the same time pointed at the “objective nature” of the problems and the possibility of improving the situation with the help of the work of the members of the Bureau. Bureau member Inna Zusmanovich observed:

*The work of the Translation Literature Bureau was extremely poor. I must say that there's the feeling that we work in vain, that there is nobody behind us. There isn't enough force because all the translation crowd are extremely passive, the organising committee didn't see the translators. At the same time I say with absolute assurance and can provide quite a few examples that the scandalous incidents Pavlenko talked about and which still happen in translation practice, actually are about those who are not members of our organisation. [...] Having qualifications our respected and competent translators known to you all, masters of translation, didn't find themselves in such situations*⁸.

All who spoke on behalf of translators were eager, one way or the other, to persuade the meeting that admitting them to the Writers Union on equal grounds with other writers would have the best possible effect on the quality of their work. Different efforts of the bureaucratic apparatus of the future Union had to contribute to improving the quality of literary work. The members of the Bureau suggested holding evenings of translated poetry (which in a way was similar to socialist competition in industries), to organise development courses for translators, to cooperate with publishing houses on recruitment for translation work. At this meeting it was also announced that the Bureau would prepare the report about literary translation for the Congress of Writers.

Many translators became delegates of the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers which took place during two weeks in August 1934 in Moscow, though in the programme there

⁷ RGALI. F. 631. Op. 21. D. 4. L.57-58.

⁸ Ibid. L. 19 – 20.

was no separate report on literary translation and the important role of translators in the development of the Soviet literature (Pervyy Vsesoyuznyy 1990).

The majority of the speakers did not touch on the problems of translation. The only exceptions were the speeches of the representatives of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic praising the translations of Georgian poetry provided by Boris Pasternak and Nikolay Tikhonov (Zemskova 2013). None of those who participated in the meetings of the Translated Literature Bureau spoke at the Congress. The mandates commission registering the delegates did not record translation as a separate category of literary activity. In contrast with prose writers, playwrights, critics and even children's book writers, translators were not officially included in the register of writing professions. This point seems to be very important because once again the unstable, ambivalent character of the translators existence within the writers bureaucratic apparatus was emphasised. People without other published works rather than translations were admitted to the Writers Union, translators were ascribed to the creative category. However, inside this category there were social borders translators could not overcome: playwrights, prose writers, critics publishing ideologically correct texts under their own names occupied higher positions in the writers hierarchy.

From the First All-Union Congress of Writers to the First All-Union Conference of Translators

The Translator's Section in the Writers Union was created immediately after the Congress and held regular meetings initiated by the Bureau of Translated Literature. In October 1934, the Section Bureau consisting of Dmitry Gorbov, Olga Galpern, Georgy Shengeli, Boris Yarkho and Pavel Zenkevich was elected⁹. All five and the majority of the Writers Union members who took part in the meetings produced translations, but previously could not say that translation was their profession and would not identify themselves as translators. Boris Yarkho who before 1929 worked in GAKhN¹⁰, and Dmitry Gorbov, one of the leading literary critics in the writers group "Pereval"¹¹. By May 1936 the Bureau was re-elected¹² and substantially renewed, Yarkho had already been arrested, Gorbov had stopped participating in the meetings due to illness, and Galpern had taken the job in the Foreign Committee of the Writers Union. Four of the six new

⁹ RGALI. F. 631. Op. 21. D. 14. L. 3.

¹⁰ On biography and works of Boris Yarkho see (Akimova, Shapir 2006)

¹¹ On Dmitry Gorbov see (Belaya 2004)

¹² RGALI. F. 631. Op. 21. D. 14. L. 33-38.

members of the Section's Bureau, Natalia Kasatkina, Osip Rumer, Valery Tarsis and Vera Toper, in their professional life were primarily engaged in translation, and from the point of view of "new social strata" ("новая словность" - Fitzpatrick) could be identified as "Soviet translators".

In 1934-1936 the Section's plan of work, which had been declared at the Conference in December 1933, was almost implemented. Scientific meetings and evenings with authors were held regularly. All Section members regarded the question about professional translation education as most important. Boris Yarkho wrote the draft programme of a two-year seminar on upgrading the skills of translators from European languages¹³. Evidently, it was a special professional education that was a sign of developed professionalization of the translators work and as a result a guarantee of social status for professionals, especially for those engaged in teaching and fostering experts.

One of the most interesting documents in this regard is a memorandum most probably written by Yarkho¹⁴. This document dedicated to the necessity of introducing special training for translators, examines the social origin and translation skills of people doing translations. The author defines several groups of translators indicating their education, which in fact was the indication of their social origin and their ability to translate a given text. The first group was comprised of the translators with academic historico-philological education many of whom had a good command of several foreign languages "practically" (that is speak foreign languages) and "only philologically" (that is have the skills of critical reading of texts in foreign languages). As Yarkho puts it, this group

[...] has one drawback: for the most part the workers from this category had received their education before the World War: after that they didn't go abroad, some don't know Western European life at all. They are badly provided with modern literature. This is why being the best translators of classics, they are of little use for modern literature translation¹⁵.

It is clear that in this phrase Yarkho describes people of his own circle and social origin, people who formed the older generation of the Section. Representatives of old "bourgeois

¹³ RGALI. Op. 21. D. 1. L. 21-22.

¹⁴ Ibid. L. 23-26.

¹⁵ Ibid. L. 23.

intelligentsia” do not claim to translate modern ideological writings but they think they can have the role of mediators between new Soviet readers and foreign classics. This category is opposed by translators of the new generation who “graduated from linguistic and pedagogical universities” after the revolution:

One can notice that these translators lack practical linguistic knowledge. Historical education (even in the field of language history) for the most part is nominal. Not many have the knowledge of literary theory. At the same time due to good political training, familiarity with modern, and especially newspaper, language this category has a big advantage in translating post-war literature: but even here in the case of more difficult artistic texts their expertise at times turns out to be insufficient¹⁶.

Next the document states the necessity of training for politically literate but undereducated translators and for all translators in general. In this memorandum it is not said who was to teach them, still from the draft programs of these courses for translators we can figure out that members of the Bureau and the Section were planning to take an active part in this process. They presumed themselves to be the examples of these high professional standards. In fact an academic program on translation started 1936 in the *Gorky Literature Institute*¹⁷ and the Head of the Department of literary translation Prof. Boris Griftsov was also elected to the Bureau of the Translators Section¹⁸.

The important bureaucratic success of the Translators Section, and, as we can see from the documents, of the Section’s chairman Pavel Zenkevich, was the First All-Union Conference of Translators held in January 1936 and organised by the Writers Union together with *Goslitizdat* (The State Literature Publishing House). The all union event which was covered in detail by *Literaturnaia gazeta*, along with the obvious ideological messages related to the necessity to have political control over the communication in different national languages of the USSR, meant the acknowledgement of translation as a literary profession by the state. Nevertheless, the status of translators within the Writers Union remained problematic and this was stressed in the very beginning of the Translators Section meeting devoted to the preparation for the Conference. Zenkevich suggests that in his future report he will talk

¹⁶ Ibid. L.24.

¹⁷ RGALI. F. 632. Op. 1. D. 408, 409.

¹⁸ RGALI. F. 631. Op. 21. D. 14. L. 37.

[...] almost for the first time about the status of translators in our country, about their everyday situation, material status, juridical status [...] It is time to think that if translators are now members of the Writers Union family, we need to see if they have equal rights with other members of this family¹⁹.

The participants of this preparatory meeting commented on their social status and the status of translators in the Writers Union rather emotionally. The reasons for these comments were concerns about possible attacks by literary critics which set translator mistakes equal to political unreliability, and their unstable material situation and failure in the struggle for material resources distributed via special department, so cold Litfond.

These feelings were summed up in Alexander Romm's speech. In his opinion the Translators Section and its initiatives were ignored by all those who had the reputation of being "not only a translator". Romm thought that nobody chooses the profession of translator wilfully, for everybody it is involuntary work:

Somebody here has said that we are treated as second-rate writers. If it were like this it would be quite all right. We are treated as second-rate translators and first-rate translators strain at us. We don't see Soviet young people coming to the profession of translators. People don't want to be translators because the sense of social deficiency the translator is born with, develops and dies honestly, prevents people from wanting to be translators. People do this against their own will²⁰.

The next meeting participant Pavel Karaban pointed out at the fact that the majority of translators were not admitted to Litfond, which means they were shut out from main material privileges of the Writers Union. Karaban suggested that the speaker at the Conference should take into account this circumstance "so that we were not in the situation of bereaved and dependant". Once again let us pay attention to the usage of the Soviet social identity vocabulary in relation to translator's status. "Bereaved" were persons stripped of electoral rights on the grounds of their social origin, and "dependants" were under age children and nonworkers.

It was Section chairman Pavel Zenkevich who had to answer these remarks. He argued that

¹⁹ RGALI. F. 631. Op. 21. D. 8. L. 7 ob.

²⁰ Ibid. L. 28.

*translation criticism is dissatisfactory, but lessons should be also learnt, and now that the doors of the Writers Union have been opened for translators, granting them literary citizenship, the rest is up to us. That is not say we should act as if we were geniuses, but I object to this line as humiliating translators. Our work is not that unworthy*²¹.

The optimistic tone of Zenkevich's remark could be explained by him being Head of the Section. Romm had spoken of the low appeal of the Translation Section for those members of the Union who, though actually being translators, at the same time had the opportunity to be classed as poets or a prose writers. As Romm put it, and other speakers agreed with him, the bureaucratic resources of the Section were too limited to assert a translator's status within the Union. In reply to his colleagues, however, Zenkevich mainly spoke as a bureaucrat, dwelling on the failures and successes in the Bureau. In this context, the very fact of acknowledging the status of the translator as a writer was viewed as a serious bureaucratic achievement, as was the existence of a separate Translation Section, which, its Head thought, could, through purely bureaucratic means, elevate the status of its members. Zenkevich did not argue with his colleagues on a matter of principle, but invited them instead to view the situation as the interim result of work that is far from finished. Judging by the resolution prepared by Zenkevich and other organizers of the Union Conference, they hoped to establish a better material status for translators. One of the points of the resolution project was to:

*bring up for discussion the question of a higher fee for belles-lettre translations and request publishing houses in national republics to raise the fees for translations of world and Russian classics to the level of authors' royalties, request the Union of Soviet Writers and the Unions of Writers of national republics to hear reports by publishing houses on payment systems and plan specific arrangements to improve translators working conditions*²².

However, at the All-Union Conference of Translators itself where within two and a half days four big reports were debriefed and forty-five people spoke in a debate, translators material problems and their status among writers receded into the background. The participants from the union republics talked over each other about their success, comparable to Stakhanov's, in translating Russian classics and party documents to their languages. The second main theme

²¹ Ibid. L.56.

²² RGALI. F. 631. Op. 21. D. 9. L. 1.

were the principles of literary translation, which were very politicised in the first report by literary critic Iogann Altman. However, both the status of translation as a profession, and the problematic social origin of translators remained as a background to many speeches. For example, the representative of Karelian Republic, Virtanen, made an excursus from his report and raised laughter among the audience:

Some people say that translators are usually rotten elements (laughter). There is some grain of truth here. It sometimes happens that a man was dismissed for drinking or for some other misconduct and he starts doing translation (laughter). Or people released from prison start doing translation. So there was some reason in the comrades' statements. But of course we cannot think that only rotten elements do translations. I have already said we do not know how to raise this question to the necessary level. This meeting is a great event for us and we hope to benefit greatly from this meeting²³.

This observation was made in a satirical mood, the only possible mood which can be used to describe the reality which does not fit into the official ideological framework. and in the end by all means appears the obligatory for Soviet satire indication at the prospective of changing of the situation for the better.

Another example of dealing with the uncomfortable fact that translators appear under suspicion because of their social status and the very nature of translation as the means of intercultural communication is in the speech by Inna Zusmanovich. She asked the audience to compare the present translators status with their recent situation:

Here are together - bad or good - but experts in their profession, people working in a certain field, literary people. After all, we cannot forget that several years ago translators were in fact people of very different social groups and from very different social backwater districts, if one can say so. They were people who received books from abroad from their emigrant relatives and translated them in our publishing houses. Let us not forget that now we are in a kind of a family, as if we have large mutual tasks and about these task we were going to talk²⁴.

²³ RGALI. F. 613. Op. 1. D. 8480. L. 131.

²⁴ Ibid. L. 224.

Notable in this fragment is the repeating conjunctive “kind of, as if” giving away the uncertainty and solicitude of a woman articulating something which does not fit the general picture of Socialist success and is potentially in danger of becoming the reason for an accusation of anti-Soviet activity. In a sense, the Conference organisers were lucky that they held it before the campaign against “formalism” which was unleashed three weeks later with an article in “Pravda” about the music by Shostakovich. After this article, practically any artist became vulnerable to charges of anti-Soviet activity.

Translators Section and political repressions

It is evident that the most important context of all the events in the Translators Section of the Soviet Writers Union were political repressions. It is also evident that from the meeting records we cannot tell if some participants were absent because they had been arrested, because of a silent taboo absences were not recorded either in reports or in speeches.

Two of many political cases fabricated by NKVD directly affected the permanent members of the Translators Section. In February 1935, with regard to “The case of the accusation of a German-fascist counter-revolutionary organisation on the territory of the USSR” Dmitry Usov who participated in numerous meetings was arrested, later in autumn Boris Yarkho was arrested. This case known under the name “the case of the German-Russian dictionary” was the cause of the arrest of many former employees of GAKhN and translators of the publishing house *Academia*²⁵. When Yarkho, who was head of the Sector on literary translation study, left regular scientific meetings ceased. Less than a year after Yarkho was arrested, Pavel Zenkevich and Pavel Shleiman-Karaban were arrested with regard to the case of “Ukrainian nationalists - literary workmen”²⁶. After Zenkevich’s arrest, the activity of the Translators Section decreased, in 1937 and 1938 some meetings were held under the chairmanship of Georgy Shengeli, and in 1938 the Section was dissolved. Translation activity shifted to the Nationalities’ Section. A separate Translators Section specified as the Section of “Translators of Western Literature” was reinstated only after the war.

²⁵ On these case see (Neshumova 2011, 51 – 56).

²⁶ See information on Pavel Zenkevich by Kirill Finkelstein. URL: http://kfinkelshteyn.narod.ru/Tzarskoye_Selo/Uch_zav/Nik_Gimn/NGU_Zenkevich.htm

Provisional results

In this part of my research I show how and under what circumstances literary translation started to be constructed in the 1930s as a profession and as a separate type of writing activity. The Translators Section of the Soviet Writers Union tried, with the help of the Writers Union bureaucratic apparatus, to grant translation the status of a profession requiring a certain educational level and specific qualifications, and therefore to grant a more or less determinate status to people forced to do translations because of the prohibition on scientific activity or teaching. This social experiment on “ascribing” not quite reliable members of society to the “soslovie” (stratum) of intellectuals was possible because the society needed loyal specialists to bring into life the ideological project of creating Soviet literature including translations from each of the national languages of the USSR.

In this article I observe the history of only one institute where the professionalisation of translation took place in the 1930s, namely the Soviet Writers Union. To create a more complete and complex picture of this process, we have to examine the history of other institutions, first of all the history of publishing houses and the institutes reproducing translation specialists - translation seminars and the Translation Bureau of Maxim Gorky Literature Institute.

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