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Translation and the History of European Communism

Anne Lange, Daniele Monticelli and Christopher Rundle

One of the striking features of Soviet and socialist cultures is the extent to which literary (and artistic in general) aesthetics were bound up in the political ideology. Due to the strong belief of authorities in 'literature's transformational power' (Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2009: 226), even the smallest aesthetic choices, including those made in translations, could have political and ideological implications. This is why literary translation was of paramount importance in enabling in socialist states to advance the ideology of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its concept of progressive literature and also to construct an image of the West as an international field of class struggle. The canon of world literature was consistent throughout the Soviet bloc; next to the new classics of socialist realism it included Western authors like Jack London, Theodor Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and John Reed, who depicted the hard life of the working people under the tyranny of capitalism and criticized Western bourgeois societies and culture. The paratexts of the translations and, more broadly, the reception of foreign literatures emphasized the ideological aspects of the texts, framing their plots, characters, and stylistic features within the logic of class struggle.

This does not mean that, after decades of controlled culture, the USSR or the countries in the Eastern bloc were exclusively populated by 'new soviet people' (Ustryalov 1934) or the notorious *homo sovieticus*. Publishers and translators, like every other citizen living behind the Iron Curtain, learned to discern what was plausible and possible under party regulations and mastered the art of self-censorship in their public conduct. The specific circumstances of each national context and the different dispensations that applied in each, emerges clearly from the differing reception of George Orwell's *1984*, for example. It was published legally in Slovenia in 1967, but only much later in Poland in 1988, when the socialist system was already creaking at the seams – although a secret, CIA-funded, programme for distributing Western books behind the Iron Curtain had smuggled a translation of it into Poland already in 1956. It wasn't published in the USSR until 1988 either, although underground and imported translations did circulate in some of the Soviet republics. Translations that dissented from the official party line – produced either locally or sent in from abroad – constituted a significant part of the translation cultures of the region, which developed well beyond the limiting factors of the ruling ideology. The variety of the translation practices within the Soviet bloc make it clear that we should not imagine there was total repression and control of the cultural field: translation could offer a disguised way of

expressing cultural values and beliefs that were shared before Marxism-Leninism became the mandatory philosophy.

The centrality of cultural policies in socialist countries

Ideally, communism was supposed to be a movement towards a classless society. Instead, it established a new class of privileged party functionaries and bureaucrats (Djilas 1957). In Lenin's pragmatic definition (1920/1965) communism is 'soviet power'. Although the statement was made prior to the official formation of the Soviet Union, it anticipated the way in which the meaning of the Russian word 'совет' ['soviet', i.e. council] would change and acquire the meaning of 'Soviet Union'.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia with the slogan 'All power to the soviets', it demanded the recognition of the councils of worker, soldier, and peasant deputies that had been convened in March 1917 together with the formation of the Provisional Government after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II. The councils were formed to ensure that the Provisional Government did not resort to policies that would override the demands of workers and peasants. Initially it was not the Bolsheviks who dominated the councils but other socialist parties and the meaning of sovietisation was not one-party dictatorship but rather a form of grassroots democracy (Mertelsmann 2007: 13).

The situation changed after the October Revolution when the Bolsheviks began to use the concept of sovietisation to mark their takeover of regional and institutional administrations (Mertelsmann 2007: 14). The question of culture was placed on the agenda almost immediately. Mikhail Heller has quoted the daily newspaper *Novaya zhizn* [New life] of 26 April 1918 that reported on a meeting in Maxim Gorky's home between the Union of Activists in the Arts and Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was then Commissar of Education. The Artists wanted to administer their activities themselves, but Lunacharsky's response was:

> We were against the Constituent Assembly [a democratically elected body formed to draw up a new constitution for Russia] in the political arena. We are all the more opposed to a Constituent Assembly in the arts. (Heller and Nekrich 1982/1986: 191)

As membership of the Bolshevik party was small (Pipes 1995: 121), the only way it could develop and expand was through the forceful indoctrination of 'intellectual cadres' who could master the Bolshevik ideology and disseminate it.

After their victory in the Russian Civil War, the Bolsheviks became more confident and their ideas on the administration of culture more refined. During the first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, the leading cultural ideologue of the Communist Party Andrei Zhdanov said:

> Comrade Stalin has called our writers engineers of human souls. What does this mean? What duties does the title confer upon you? In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as 'objective reality', but to depict reality in its revolutionary development. In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical correctness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in *belles-lettres* and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism. (Zhdanov 1934/1935).

This is the cultural ideal that was exported and implemented in collaboration with local communists of the subjugated territories once the Russian Bolsheviks began to expand across the borders: Ukraine became a founding member of the Soviet Union in 1922, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe began to come under the Soviet sphere of influence with the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 and were brought fully under Soviet control after the Second World War. From the perspective of theoretical Marxism-Leninism, this was justified because, by being sovietised, these peoples were being saved from the miseries and misconceptions of capitalism and directed towards the historically inevitable road of progress. At the same time there is every reason to describe the foreign policy of the Kremlin as both revolutionary and imperialistic (Zubok and Pleshakov 1996: 11–19): the communist world revolution could advance only by strengthening and expanding the Soviet empire. The subjugated territories included not only former parts of the Tsarist Russia but also the other countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkan region. The aggressive *realpolitik* of the Soviets and their attempts to dictate to local administrations, however, provoked dissent among the local people, including local communists.

In order to avoid dissonant ideas spreading in the nations of the Eastern bloc, it was necessary for them to create an effective system of censorship, while at the same time denying its existence. The methods they used to regulate the ideas that could circulate in society were modelled on those of the Soviet Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel'stv [Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs], or Glavlit, which was established in 1922, and worked hand-in-hand with various departments of the Communist Party (Ermolaev 1997, Špirk, 2008, Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2006). The euphemistic names of the institutions and the constitutional declarations guaranteeing freedom of speech could not prevent the general realization that the Party had become the main administrator of culture and literature. But censorship wasn't limited to all-powerful institutions, it was diffuse and capillary, reaching the microlevel of apparently insignificant everyday decisions through the actions of the 'good communists' who were in charge of cultural activity, and through the self-censorship of cultural workers. This is how censorship was exercised even in those countries where there was no official censorship authority, like Yugoslavia and Hungary. When studying the censorship of translations during the

communist period, it is often impossible to determine, due to the lack of documentary evidence, which agents in the publishing process, from the translators to the party functionaries, were responsible for any intervention.

Another means of controlling book production was the state-planned economy. Stalin introduced full central planning in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, and once other countries came under Soviet influence, they adopted the same economic system. Without extensive nationalisation and the establishment of central bodies of economic planning, it would have been impossible to restructure society in line with the Party's objectives. These economic changes undermined the position of the earlier, pre-Soviet cultural elite. In the context of publishing, this meant the nationalisation of publishing houses and printing works, which allowed the State to exert complete control over all the different stages of the publishing process, from the preliminary selection of texts to post-publication censorship – the last check that was made on already printed books before they could be distributed. And, alhough they seem to include a common core of explicitly anticommunist literature like Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and Orwell's *Animal Farm,* the lists of officially or unofficially prohibited foreign literature differed in the USSR and the other socialist countries and constantly changed as the political situation in each context evolved.

The Soviet economy was a command economy rather than planned one (Gregory 2005), that is, the State Planning Commission (Gosplan), ministries and production units had to follow the instructions of the Party, especially its Politburo. Long-term plans gave very general instructions but annual or quarterly plans were the real operational reference in that they allocated resources for production (Jeffries 1993: 11). Publishers also had to follow financial and paper quota plans, which determined the print run of each book. Fulfilling the plan was the watchword of Soviet bureaucracy, yet the many permissions that publishers depended on tended to be delayed and were often incompatible (Möldre 2005: 87–8) as they had to be given by various party-controlled administrative bodies. With the exception of Yugoslavia (Uvalić 2018) and Hungary (Hare and Révész 1992), where decentralized economic systems were introduced in the 1950s and late 1960s respectively, the other socialist states continued to run command economies until the end of the Soviet era (Jeffries 1993).

Alongside central planning, another way to regulate publications was to inculcate Soviet values in writers and translators. This was done by means of writers unions as the above quote by Zhdanov clearly shows. The Writers Union of the Soviet Union was actually formed by a decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Former literary organizations were dissolved and writers and translators had to join the union in order to be able to publish their work. Members of the Writers Union were paid generously for their work, as long as they followed party discipline and its artistic directives. These concerned not only translation policy and the

selection of authors to be translated, but also textual and translation strategies. The central issue when it came to translating, was the inevitable dilemma of whether to translate sense-for-sense or word-for-word; but these philological discussions had to pay lip service to party jargon as Brian Baer reveals in his reflection on the rewritings of Kornei Chukovsky's thinking on translation (Baer 2021). In accordance with the general pattern of Sovietization of countries outside the Soviet Union, the Writers Union's model for the ideological organisation and control of publishing was adopted by the other Central and Eastern European socialist countries after the Second World War, and translators were generally organized into a sub-section of the Writers Union, with the interesting exception of the Yugoslavian Union of Literary Translators, which was founded in 1953 and was the first autonomous association of translators in the postwar socialist bloc.

The role of translators and editors

Even though the role of the party as instigator of cultural life cannot be overemphasised, that of translators and editors should not be underestimated either. They were keenly aware of the functional value of their work as a form of communication that could either comply or clash with their cultural and political environment (Lange 2012). Translators and editors working under communism often described their activity as a game that had no fixed rules; where one had to be clever enough to get round the censorship regulations (Humprey 2008; Sherry 2013; Lange 2017; Monticelli 2020). Nataliia Rudnytska recounts a fascinating example of this game in Ukraine where Vsevolod Riazanov and Dora Karavkina proposed Herman Hesse's novel *Unterm Rad* [Beneath the Wheel] for publication in 1958, classifying Hesse as 'an outstanding representative of German *critical realism of the 19th century*'. When the novel, the first translation of Hesse within the Soviet Union, was published three years later, it was described as offering 'sharp criticism of the senseless bourgeois system of youth education' (Rudnytska 2021). This is a good example of how the forewords of these books tended to reframe the texts they introduced, though this was not necessarily a demonstration of fidelity to party values, but rather an acknowledgement of these values intended merely to enable the translation to be published. At the same time, it was important to get a hitherto untranslated author on the list of 'approved' writers in the Soviet Union: the presence of a translation in one of the Soviet republics made it easier to justify the translation of the author in others. This did not completely exclude the possibility of translating non-approved authors in the different languages of the republics without a previous Russian translation. However, this required a lot of effort by local editors and often presumed close personal contacts with local censorship authorities, in order to obtain the necessary permissions.

Both empirical research and theoretical reflection on the cultural practices within the Soviet system and, more generally, under communism (Yurchak 2006; Raud 2016: 151–71), indicate that although there were established structures of political power that should have supported the Soviet social order, the popular response to official discourse was ambiguous. The citizens of the Soviet bloc were supposed to take part in constructing a new Soviet culture by destroying the historical one, but this resulted in a mental conflict that was not compensated for by the promised benefits of the new communist future they were building. The experiences people had had prevented them from believing in the possibility of a fundamentally new social era, and thus the rupture and the break with their past that was officially preached remained only partial. This applies also to translation. A very vivid example of this is the case of the Yugoslav communist party official, Milovan Djilas, who translated John Milton's *Paradise Lost* on toilet paper during his imprisonment at the hands of Jozip Broz Tito (Strojan 2017). Although Djilas could never have hoped to publish his translation, the very fact that he resorted to translation in order to maintain his sanity shows that under the conditions of ideological pressure, translation can function as a humanizing refuge. As Baer has argued,

> [o]ne of the unintended effects of communism was to foster an intelligentsia that looked to world literature to express and preserve what it saw as eternal aesthetic and moral values, perceived to be threatened by the regime's vulgar interpretations of Marxist ideology and its centralized cultural policy. (Baer 2011: 9)

Perceived in this way translation cannot be considered an escapist or elitist activity; it was of constructive value.

United in difference? Times and local cultures of the Europ(ean Communist regimes

The ideological clarity and relative homogeneity of communism is in marked contrast to the heterogeneity of the right-wing European regimes that are generally labelled fascist, such as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, or para-fascist, such as the Franco regime in Spain and the *Estado Novo* in Portugal (Griffin 1991; Rundle 2018). Nevertheless, any comparison between the different contexts of European communism is challenging when we consider that there were nine different communist countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia), including a multilinguistic and multinational Union and a Federation of Republics, and that these regimes lasted between 40 to 70 years.

The socialist states can be divided into two distinct groups: communist Russia and the first Soviet republics that were founded before the Second World on the one hand, and the Soviet Republics that were annexed after the war as well as the countries of Eastern Europe that became

socialist after the war, on the other. While the uncontested leadership of the USSR within the Eastern bloc and the process of Sovietization which quickly reshaped post-war socialist countries had a strong homogenizing impact on their social and cultural spheres, it is clear that the specific experiences of pre-war Soviet communism, the diverging positions of Eastern European countries in the Second World War, and the different patterns of the post-war communist take-overs in these countries, led to a degree of heterogeneity in their respective processes of Sovietization. This generated explosive tensions in some cases, such as East Germany and Hungary in the 1950s and Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, or even an explicit refusal to follow Moscow's dictates, as in the case of Yugoslavia, which officially defined itself as a socialist country but actually followed its relatively autonomous 'third way' between the socialist and the capitalist blocs. This means that even for post-war communism, it is far too exaggerated to speak of the 'same constraints' and 'identical conditions' (Chalvin et al 2019: 367) for all the communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

Translation is a revealing indicator of the diachronic and synchronic complexity of communist power. In the earlier years of revolutionary Russia, the massive translation project of world literature led by Maxim Gorky's *Vsemirnaia Literatura* [World Literature] served the ideals of internationalism and cultural emancipation of the masses which lay at the basis of the revolution (Rudnytska 2021), while in the earlier years of Soviet Ukraine, a similar translation renaissance was related more to a local, national agenda (Kalnychenko and Kolomiyets 2021). With the rise of Stalin and Stalinism, culminating in the Great Purge of the 1930s, translation lost its revolutionary *elan* and was bent to the more internal priorities of cultural circulation and homogenization, or Russification, of the different republics of the USSR. The emerging canon of socialist realism dictated also the criteria for the choice of texts from foreign literatures, and the number of non-USSR texts translated dropped sharply in all the republics of the Union (Brandenberger 2002; Clark 2011). During this period translation became for many banned and repressed Soviet authors not only a way of earning a living, but also an opportunity to continue their activity as writers, albeit in a secondary position (Baer 2015). This later became a general pattern in all the Eastern bloc which ensured a minimum of cultural continuity, through translation, even during the bleakest periods of post-war Stalinist repression.

The early Sovietization of the newly acquired republics of the USSR and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe was extraneous to the revolutionary fervour and creativity of the earlier 1920s; it was almost exclusively based on the strictly codified form that Soviet culture had assumed under Stalinism. The exemplifying character of literature, which followed the style of socialist realism, became a means to transform the cultural and social character of the new socialist countries and peoples. Thus, the translation of canonical Soviet authors and their imitation by local writers were, not surprisingly, the primary means with which socialist realism was canonized in the whole of the post-war Eastern bloc – even in Yugoslavia, where extensive

translations of Maksim Gorky's works were planned immediately after the end of the war. This canonization of the Soviet model was soon consolidated by cross-translations of local imitations of socialist realism in all the new countries of the Eastern bloc. Accompanied as it was by extensive bans on pre-war translations of Western literature and ideologically unfit local authors, this process provoked a quick and significant cultural break in many Eastern European countries.

While in Yugoslavia this imposed Sovietization came to an end after the rift with the Soviet Union at the end of the 1940s, for the rest of the Socialist bloc it was Khrushchev's denunciation of the cult of personality and Stalinist terror in 1956 which opened a new political and cultural phase. Khrushchev's Thaw was an attempt to humanize socialism and, despite continuing censorship, it was understood as a push towards liberalization, touching first and foremost the cultural sphere as a kind of 'second cultural revolution' (Buchli 1999; Kozlov, Gilburd 2013; Zalambani 2009). The Thaw didn't only affect the USSR, but all socialist countries, although to varying degrees and according to different local circumstances: liberalization in Hungary ended with the repression of the 1956 Revolution and in the GDR with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961; and the liberalizing experiment was terminated throughout the Eastern bloc following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

One of the principal outcomes of the Thaw was the opening of the cultural borders of the socialist bloc (Gorsuch and Koenker 2013) which resulted in an unprecedented invasion of Western and, more broadly, world literature, including authors such as Faulkner, Kafka, Sartre, Camus, T. S. Eliot who were banned in the previous decade. The flourishing of new, relatively autonomous literary magazines devoted to translations of foreign literature such as *Innostrannaya Literatura* (1955) in Soviet Russia, *Loomingu Raamatukogu* (1957) in Soviet Estonia or the Czech magazine *Světová literatura* (1956) are important early signs of this shift in the cultural policies of the Socialist bloc, which took longer to have an impact on the centralized book publishing system. Thus, in the USSR and many socialist countries, the 1960s saw the rise of a new generation of young intellectuals who were strongly influenced by this renewed contact with previously inaccessible foreign literature. Censorship was still imposed during this period, but its focus shifted from political to puritanical issues (Sherry 2015).

It is therefore no coincidence that one of the immediate effects of the ideological turn of the screw that was applied during what Mikhail Gorbachev called the Era of Stagnation, the period under Brezhnev's leadership which followed the Thaw, was a new closure in the USSR towards Western culture and increased state control over the quotas of translated literature, which now privileged authors from the Soviet Republics and the socialist countries. As always, this increased closure in the Soviet Union also impacted the other countries of the Socialist bloc; though there were differences and exceptions here too, such as János Kádár's 'Goulash Communism' in Hungary, and the cultural leadership of Ljudmila Zhivkova in Bulgaria: both of

whom maintained liberalizing policies in the cultural field well into the following decade. The new constraints imposed during the Brezhnev era triggered a strong revival of *samizdat* [self-published] literature which had developed in the USSR after Stalin's death. This underground system of distribution served not only as a channel for the circulation of explicitly anti-communist literature, but also as a venue where translators could more freely develop their own literary agenda, becoming the initiators of independent translation projects aimed at complementing the official publishing scene in different ways. The same translators and the same authors were often active in both the official publishing system and *samizdat;* this generated an interesting interaction in the 1970s and the 1980s between official and underground cultural activities (Looby 2021).

The phenomenon of *samizdat* translations gradually came to an end in the second half of the 1980s when Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* began a progressive liberalization of the social and cultural atmosphere in the Soviet Union and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The publication of official translations of many of the most taboo works of the previous decades – such as Orwell's *1984* – in several languages of the Communist bloc marked the progressive collapse of the censorship system and opened a new era in which an initial effort to fill the important cultural gaps of the Soviet period with quality literature was rapidly overtaken by the capitalist logic of the international market. An unintended, though interesting, consequence of this has been the quick reprint of many unrevised translations from the communist period which involuntarily reproduce for the new 'free' readership the cuts and adjustments of communist censorship.

Communism through the lens of translation

The thorough politicization of culture played a crucial role in the ideological transformation, or what we have been calling the 'Sovietization', of society in the USSR and the other socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Culture thus became a frontline in the struggle to eradicate prerevolutionary, bourgeois values and establish the new values of communist society. This is the reason why the Party was so obsessed with cultural issues and constructed an enormous bureaucratic apparatus to direct and control every sphere of cultural production. Translation is a particularly revealing standpoint from which to study this cultural struggle because the liminary position of its processes and agents make it possible to observe the tensions which crossed the extensive ideological use of cultural policies under communism (see Monticelli and Lange 2014).

The first interesting aspect here is the tension between, on the one hand, the emancipatory and internationalist character of the communist reconstruction of society, which included ambitious translation projects such as Gorky's *Vsemirnaia Literatura*, and on the other hand, the need to

maintain ideological purity, both by shutting out the external (particularly Western) world, and by engaging in an implacable battle against bourgeois cosmopolitanism. On the translation front this led to foreign literature being categorized under a series of ideologically charged labels: 'critical realist', 'progressive' and 'communist' authors, 'engaged literature of colonial countries', 'bourgeois', 'formalist' literature, 'anti-communist' literature, to name but a few; and it also led to the imposition of translation quotas and bans, and the ideological framing of translated books. As Baer (2015) and Monticelli (2016) have argued, censorship did not only have a repressive and destructive function in this context, but also a constitutive and creative one: it shaped new sensibilities, new forms of expression, new ways of thinking and behaving. The construction of a new shared canon of foreign literature homogenized the cultural reference points of the communist bloc and helped to consolidate the cultural unity, first of the USSR and later that of the other countries within the bloc, under the leadership of Moscow.

Transformed into one of the ideological fronts of Soviet cultural policy, translation remained a highly contested and contradictory site (Baer 2021). Even if, as Kalnychenko and Kolomieyts (2021) explain, in the vision and practices of the party all the different agents in the translation process were conceived as a single, impersonal team with strictly defined goals, in real practices this was actually not always the case: translators, editors, stylistic editors, publishers, critics, translation scholars, reviewers, and censors did not all work to the same agenda. Particularly interesting from this point of view are the clashes between initiatives 'from above' and initiatives 'from below' (Witt 2011), where translators, editors and publishers often struggled to keep a window open on the outside world due to the party's restrictions. Both underground and official translations became a fertile ground for 'Aesopian' language and discursive dissimulation; more so than was possible with the strictly monitored original production (Witt 2021). The marginality of translation, and its polyphonic character (author/translator), became advantages that created a relatively more open and less controlled space for expression. Particularly during the Thaw of the 1960s, translations of previously banned authors and texts helped to constitute an alternative canon for the intelligentsia of socialist countries and played an important role in the renewal of local cultures, shifting the attention of cultural agents away from the limited topics and strict formal requirements of socialist realism.

Research on translation thus helps to add nuance to our understanding of the political and social options that were available under communist rule, allowing us to avoid the inadequate dichotomies that are often employed to describe this period: compliance vs resistance, censorship vs freedom, and officialdom vs dissidence. Between the two poles of the official, centralized and ideologically tuned state publishing system and the underground anti-communist publications, we find a whole series of official, but peripheral cultural venues which developed a cultural agenda that was not explicitly dissident but was nevertheless incompatible with the prescriptions

of the regime, such as journals, magazines, public readings and other cultural events. It would be a mistake to underestimate the impact that these venues had on cultural life and its agents.

A final question we should consider is the hierarchical political structure of the communist bloc which was also mirrored in its social, cultural and linguistic interaction and stratification. The evidence on translation flows confirms that within the Soviet Union, Russian dominated over the other languages and literatures of the union (Kamovnikova 2017); and also that Soviet literature dominated the other literatures of the communist bloc. In the other socialist countries a correct ideological framing and interpretation of translated texts was often achieved by translating paratexts and reviews by Soviet literary scholars. However, a careful analysis of translations also reveals local agendas which were not in line with the colonizing aims of the Soviet Union and which were a sign of the influence that local cultural traditions, and the international interactions which had forged them during the pre-communist period, still had on the 'new' Sovietized culture and society (Annus 2018). Both old translations which continued to circulate, and new significant translations brought out in difficult circumstances, maintained a degree of cultural anachronism and dislocation within socialist societies (Monticelli, Lange 2014); this prevented the complete ideological closure of the social and cultural fields within their communist present, and kept open a significant relationship with the local past and the contemporary external world, particularly the capitalist West.

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