



Made under pressure: literary translation in the Soviet Union, 1960–1991

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Made under pressure: literary translation in the Soviet Union, 1960–1991, by Natalia Kamovnikova, Amherst and Boston, University of Massachusetts Press, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book, 2019, 272 pp., \$90.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-62-534340-6, \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-62-534341-3

Recent years have seen an increased interest in translation history that extends beyond western European borders, including that of Eastern Europe and Russia (Burnett and Lygo 2013; Sherry 2015; Baer 2016; Baer and Witt 2018). Natalia Kamovnikova's book makes a welcome contribution to this trend, offering a well-conceived overview of translation and publishing issues, with a focus on the late Soviet period and problems of censorship in particular. Written in a lively and personal style, a distinctive feature of the book is its reliance (in part) on translators' personal accounts.

The impulse for the book came when Kamovnikova realised that 'there were numerous stories waiting to be told about the ways literary translation and publishing worked to make foreign literary works available to Russian readers' (1). Based on interviews with ten leading Soviet literary translators and editors, predominately from the author's home city St. Petersburg, the book thus takes the 'translators' turn' in monitoring conditions within the field of literary translation during the last three decades of the Soviet Union. The task of documenting such experience is an urgent one, as underscored by the death in February 2020 of the remarkable Evgeny Witkowsky, one of the book's main informants. Kamovnikova's oral history approach is laudable and one of the most valuable contributions of her book. As noted by Jeremy Munday, such primary sources 'are under-utilised in translation studies research, yet they are an indispensable resource for the investigation of the conditions, working practices and identity of translators and for the study of their interaction with other participants in the translation process' (2014, 64). It is therefore a pity that the author fails to take into account, or even mention, another book with a similar goal, namely Elena Kalashnikova's collection of 87 interviews with representatives of three generations of Soviet translators still alive when her project was initiated twenty years ago (Kalashnikova 2008). Some of the questions posed by Kamovnikova overlap with Kalashnikova's (e.g., about the reasons for turning to translation, choice of texts, editorial interference) and three of her interviewees (Witkowsky, Golyshev, and Yasnov) are represented in the earlier volume as well. It would have added value to Kamovnikova's book, had she engaged with this broader material.

In Chapter 1, 'The closed society and its literary translation practices,' the author's goal is to study translation practices 'in the context of the political and social situation and the beliefs, fears, and prejudices of Soviet society' (16). Her theoretical and methodological approach grows out of her dislike for 'ideology,' a loosely defined and 'overused' term (17). In addition, the term's usage during Soviet times, Kamovnikova argues,

also creates difficulties in the cross-cultural communication of researchers. Whereas Western researchers mainly employ the word *ideology* terminologically, Eastern researchers may feel unreasonably targeted, reacting to the term *ideology* as to a marker of their historic and cultural past and a negative experience associated with the society they are representing. (19)

This is an interesting point, but Kamovnikova's solution is not without problems of its own. As an alternative to the contaminated term 'ideology,' she (re)introduces Karl Popper's model of

the 'closed society' as opposed to its 'open' counterpart, proposed in his classic 1945 book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*. By comparing each of the seven features of Popper's list of ideas utilised by authoritarian, or 'closed', societies throughout history to existing research on translation and ideology in the Soviet Union and its satellite states, Kamovnikova provides a useful overview and highlights important findings. For example, the first feature on Popper's list – 'Nationalism as the incarnation of Spirit or Blood, which results in the domination of a state-creating nation or race' (22) – is illustrated by Russo-centric Soviet translation policies in Ukraine and Estonia, with the share of translated Russian literature in the latter at one point exceeding 60% of all publications. However, the application of Popper to translation studies in the case of the Soviet Union evokes several questions. First, Popper's model was originally conceived against the background of the Soviet and Nazi totalitarian experiences. Therefore, to compare Soviet translation policies and practices against Popper's list and point out correspondences comes near to circular reasoning. Second, when Kamovnikova talks about 'the neutrality of the term [closed society]' (23) she voices an ahistorical view: given the cold war significance of Popper's philosophy, this term is hardly more 'neutral' than 'ideology' itself. Third, the binary character of Popper's paradigm does not fit well with the more nuanced analysis that Kamovnikova actually performs in several cases, as will be clear in the following.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of censorship and publishing control in Russia prior to the Soviet period. Drawing on Russian research, Kamovnikova presents the development of institutional censorship from its inception in the 16th century to its elaborate legislative underpinnings in the 19th. While highlighting cases of censorial interventions in the works of Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov, the author somewhat surprisingly foregrounds Aleksandr Pushkin as a *proponent* of censorship. The citations brought to bolster this view are interesting and deserve a broader discussion in their own context, but Kamovnikova forgets to mention the fact that Pushkin himself suffered severely from a censorship that prevented works such as *The Bronze Horseman* and *Boris Godunov* from reaching contemporary readerships in their original form. While the author justifies the pre-Soviet focus of the chapter, by claiming that imperial Russia's censorship system was inherited by the revolutionary regime in 1917 as a 'ready-made operating system' (48), some of the information given here is occasionally too detailed or peripheral to the main purpose of the book.

Chapter 3 describes the workings of *Glavlit*, the main Soviet censorial body, including the difficulties writers and publishers faced due to the absence of 'any clearly formulated norms and requirements for literary works' (56), other than the general and highly abstract prescriptions of socialist realism. It is in this chapter that Kamovnikova rightly places issues of translation norms. The requirements of socialist realism, she points out, however abstract, favoured domesticating practices and 'free' translation: the prescribed properties could, as noted by Maurice Friedberg in his pioneering monograph (1997, 105) very well justify interventions in the original works. The chapter also appropriately includes an overview of translation theory trends in post-WWII USSR – the 'linguistic' approach taken by Andrei Fedorov as against the 'realist' translation propounded by translator and editor Ivan Kashkin. Problems arise, however, with Kamovnikova's historiography. She argues that Kashkin's 'attempt to develop a strict methodology' was a result of a 'general outcry in favor of creativity' at the time (67). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Witt 2016), Kashkin's 'methodology' can also be seen as more of an attempt to transfer the tenets of socialist realism into the literary translation field, an operation that well illustrates the difficulties of separating 'theory' from 'ideology' in the Soviet context. Bound up with struggles for power and influence within the translators' collective, Kashkin's concerns had less to do with 'creativity' than with making theory instrumental in forming the canon, and not in terms of which foreign works were to be translated, but in terms of who would be chosen to translate them. The binary 'closed society'

model adopted by Kamovnikova in lieu of the concept of ideology has difficulty clarifying and accounting for complex issues such as the one at stake here.

The process of becoming a translator in the Soviet publishing system is the topic of Chapter 4. Drawing extensively on interviews with Soviet translators, this chapter provides the most independent and interesting contribution of the book. It begins by summarising the history of Soviet literary translation, intimately linked with the remarkable World Literature project of the first postrevolutionary years and Soviet aspirations to become the rightful heir to 'world literature.' Due emphasis is placed on the significance of this project for Soviet editorial culture and the development of translation theory in the country. Kamovnikova also dwells on the controversies between 'free' and 'faithful' approaches to translation, which peaked in the 1950s, and briefly touches on important translators of the mid-century such as Mikhail Lozinskii and Boris Pasternak and their respective *Hamlet* translations.

It is when turning to the cultural phenomenon of the translation seminar that Kamovnikova finally arrives within the timeframe of the book's title. These semi-formal groups of translation students led by experienced professionals emerged during the Thaw and the tradition persists in some form or another to this day. The author convincingly relates the seminars to the state-initiated project of LITOs – literary associations for young writers intended to revive poetic culture from under the dead hand of the Stalinist period – and points out its significance as an initiation step for aspiring translators. Some of the teachers had recently returned from the Gulag system: Ivan Likhachev, leader of the English prose seminar; Tatiana Gnedich, leader of the English poetry seminar; and Sergei Petrov, leader of the Scandinavian seminar, had all pursued translation in captivity (partly from memory) and now became legendary figures for a new generation. The book's focus is on the French translation seminar led for 35 years by former deportee Elga Linetskaia. Kamovnikova's interviews with Linetskaia's students Maia Kviatkovskaia and Viktor Andreev highlight the broader cultural significance of the seminars: apart from providing creative discussions, professional critique and publishing opportunities (seminar leaders would sometimes take on large commissions and distribute them among their students), the seminars were important for sustaining continuity with the past, especially with the literary tradition previously repressed. As recalled by her students, Linetskaia introduced them to Russian books that were forbidden or disapproved of at the time (e.g. by Kuzmin, Khodasevich and Tsvetaeva) as well as *samizdat* literature. The students developed longlasting relationships with each other and their teacher and formed loose networks, which would merit further studies in terms of their impact on translation philosophy and style. From a theoretical point of view, Kamovnikova's description of the semi-official seminars with their unbounded professional discussions as 'a unique alternative to existing reality' (105) and 'an alternative reality, a subculture' (106) resonates better with Alexei Yurchak's picture of the alternative life styles that became possible during late socialism and were located simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the system (Yurchak 2006, 128), than with her own application of the binary 'open-closed' paradigm. Yurchak's study is relevant also for Kamovnikova's discussion of the Thaw generation as a social phenomenon in Chapter 3. It is to this generation, 'influenced by the ideals of freedom and unconventional thinking' (75), and the following generation of the 1970s, that her interviewees belong. While noting the alleviations that marked the beginning of the 1960s, Kamovnikova nevertheless emphasises the continuity with the previous period, pointing out that all seven traits in Popper's model of the 'closed society' remained in force (74–75). She thus fails to capture the distinctive development of post-Stalin Soviet society as described by Yurchak.

The working conditions facing translators who successfully passed the initiation stages are detailed in Chapter 5. Due attention is devoted to the Union of Soviet Writers. This organisation played a key role in the disciplining of literature following the First Congress of Soviet

writers in 1934, and Union membership was obligatory for translators if they were to make a living in literary translation, work that was well-paid, but also well-guarded in several senses. This chapter also draws on personal evidence from translators and editors. Several of them touch on the selection and commissioning of foreign literary works, which involved top-down as well as bottom-up processes. The discussion of the latter is particularly interesting as it reveals a certain dependence of the publishing houses on individual initiatives. Applications from well-established translators arguing for the inclusion of particular works in the publishing plan seem to have been a valuable source of information about new books. Interviewees also emphasise political, economic and organisational differences between publishing conditions in Leningrad and Moscow, and Kamovnikova discusses at length the distinctive translation schools associated with these cities. In the capital, for example, translators enjoyed more freedom and wider opportunities for publication. Missing, however, is any mention of the monumental book series *Giants of Literary Translation: The Petersburg School*, which launched in 2011 (Linetskaia 2011). To date, 12 volumes have appeared, featuring translators such as Elga Linetskaia, Efim Etkind, Tatiana Gnedich and Aleksandra Koss, all of whom figure prominently in Kamovnikova's book.

In Chapter 6, Kamovnikova turns her attention to poetry and translation from what she calls 'languages of limited circulation', namely, the Soviet Union's non-Russian languages. Since the available linguistic competence of many of these languages was limited, indirect translation practices gained wide currency, especially in the politically important project of creating a Russophone canon of multilingual Soviet literature. Such literature, Kamovnikova maintains, acquired specific significance during the period in question (which included Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) as a sign of peaceful coexistence within the Soviet multinational state to counterbalance external images of its militaristic aggression.

The practice in focus here is translation via interlinear trots (*podstrochnik*, an intermediary Russian prose translation), the quality of which could vary significantly. The persistence of the method and its paradoxical acceptancy is illustrated by the following view, cited by Kamovnikova and voiced as late as 1981: 'the main quality of the translator is not the knowledge of two or more languages (the translator may not know languages and yet remain a translator), but the knowledge of his/her role. Rather than the one who knows languages, the translator is the one who behaves like a translator' (137). The application of this indirect practice was not limited to minor or marginalised languages; a student of Linetskaia's seminar describes how she was commissioned to translate poetry by Rafael Alberti without knowing any Spanish and learned it while working with interlinears (146). Well-known poets also worked in this indirect way, as Kamovnikova discusses here with an example from Anna Akhmatova, touching implicitly on a general problem for researching indirect translation in the Soviet Union: interlinears are seldom preserved in the archives. While some of her informants give a largely positive picture of their experience of working with interlinears, enabling contacts and friendships across the Soviet republics, Kamovnikova rightly points out that this kind of translation was by nature domesticating and facilitated cultural appropriation (141). Nevertheless, she concludes that the 'practice cannot be denounced as an absolute evil,' since it 'became a source of creative opportunities and new knowledge' (147). This is true with regard to the Russian 'poet-translators' involved, but the author could have elaborated further on the power aspects inherent in this type of indirect translation, which in reality became an index of Soviet colonialism (Witt 2017).

Chapter 7 gives an overview of different kinds of censorial interventions. Censorship of translations could be triggered not only by taboo topics such as sex and 'anti-Soviet' content, but by author, and even translator, biographies; foreign authors could cause trouble by signing

open letters or voicing opinions that automatically made them unpublishable in the Soviet Union, and the inclusion of emigrée (or repressed) translators in collected volumes was also problematic. Such instances are reflected upon by several informants, who emphasise the significance of self-censorship, especially when it came to proposing original works to publishing houses. The political affiliation of the author could sometimes, as noted by Kamovnikova, prove more important to their decision-making than the proposed works per se. Thus, the boom of translations from Latin-American literature in the 1960s–1970s, which, as expressed by translator Viktor Andreev, was ‘incredibly interesting and different from what we knew here’ (158), was made possible by the communist leanings of many Latin American writers. The chapter also foregrounds individual agency on the part of translators and editors in promoting ‘unwanted authors’ such as Kipling (an ‘imperialist poet’), ‘unwanted topics’ (politics, sexuality, religion, Soviet realia) and ‘unwanted styles’ such as the slang, swear words and colloquial speech in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (an analysis of Rita Rait-Kovaleva’s canonical translation and her use of omissions, euphemisms and paraphrases is provided in Appendix A). Political censorship is discussed against the background of the translation of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hemingway’s novel, which highlights controversial Soviet involvement in the Spanish civil war, was first proposed in 1941, but the translation by Natalia Volzhina and Evgeniia Kalashnikova was rejected four times before its eventual publication in 1968, a process that has previously been analysed by Ekaterina Kuznetsova (2018) on the basis of archival material. A contrastive textual analysis (also in Appendix A) shows significant alterations in the depiction of potentially sensitive persons such as Spanish communist leader Dolores Ibárruri and the French Communist André Marty. But (and this is one of Kamovnikova’s main conclusions), ‘in the case of a closed society, self-censorship cannot be looked upon as an absolute evil – but rather as a means of promotion, a way of first presentation, a promise of more to come, and, eventually, an activist strategy’ (198). Other loci of activist action are discussed in Chapter 8, ‘A Farewell to Fear’, including commentaries and forewords, which could be used, in the words of one editor, as a ‘smoke screen’ (189).

The book provides a wealth of information and valuable first-hand accounts from the world of Soviet publishing. What is sometimes missing, as I have noted throughout this review, is engagement with previous research. Samantha Sherry’s (2015) view of censorship as a heterogenous, dispersed set of practices in which negotiations play a crucial role, resonates well with Kamovnikova’s own observations (if not with her binary theoretical approach). Yet Sherry is cited only in passing, and her substantial contribution to the very topic of Kamovnikova’s book is not mentioned.

These critical remarks notwithstanding, *Made under Pressure* is an ambitious attempt at writing a microhistory of translation and translators at a time when, and a place where, their trade carried more significance and attracted more attention than in most other contexts. The book will certainly spark further research among TS scholars, and also deserves a broad readership across the humanities. Thanks to its accessibility, it may be appreciated by anyone with an interest in Russia, its recent past and the unpredictable workings of culture.

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