

# Gulag translations and Cold War antinomies: Notes for a reflexive Translation Studies

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the phenomenon of Gulag translations, or translations done by incarcerated political prisoners in the Soviet Union, and the discourse surrounding it in order to think past the traditional binary of official/dissident that has dominated western scholarship on communist culture for decades. Understanding the discursive overlap of official and non-official or intelligentsia discourse regarding Gulag translations suggests shared values and shared views on translation as noble, self-sacrificing work. This is not to say that the intelligentsia were necessarily mimicking official rhetoric but, more probably, that both official and intelligentsia discourse fed from a common discursive repertoire developed in the nineteenth century. The article highlights the need to evaluate translations and translation thinking within the specific socio-cultural context that produced it and in which it circulates.

**Keywords:** translation history, Gulag translations, Soviet translation theory, reflexive translation studies, Cold War historiography

## Prevodi iz gulagov in antinomije hladne vojne: Zapisi za reflektivno prevodoslovje

### IZVLEČEK

Članek preučuje pojav prevodov iz gulagov, tj. prevodov, ki so jih naredili politični zaporniki v Sovjetski zvezi, in z njimi povezan diskurz z namenom, da bi presegle tradicionalno binarno razmišljanje o uradnem/disidentskem, ki je desetletja prevladovalo v zahodnem akademskem pisanju o komunistični kulturi. Vpogled v prekrivanja med uradnim in neuradnim diskurzom, tj. diskurzom inteligence o prevodih iz gulagov, razkriva obstoj skupnih vrednot in pogledov na prevajanje kot plemenito, požrtvovalno delo. To ne pomeni, da je inteligenca nujno oponašala uradno retoriko, temveč, bolj verjetno, da sta se tako uradni diskurz kot diskurz inteligence napajala iz skupnega repertoarja, ki se je razvil v devetnajstem stoletju. Članek poudarja nujnost vrednotenja prevodov in refleksije o prevodih v okviru specifičnega sociokulturnega konteksta, ki jih je ustvaril in v katerem so krožili.

**Cljučne besede:** zgodovina prevajanja, prevodi iz gulagov, sovjetska teorija prevajanja, reflektivno prevodoslovje, zgodovinoslovje hladne vojne

## 1. Introduction

What scholars of translation need to do, Mona Baker writes in “Reframing Conflict in Translation,” “is to locate individual translators and interpreters within the range of narratives they subscribe to and that inform their behavior in the real world—including their discursive behavior as translators and/or interpreters” (Baker 2010, 115). While uncovering and analyzing the narrative frames that structure, often covertly, our interpretation of people and events is essential to understanding how ideology shapes media representations, such narrative analysis presents a number of methodological and ethical challenges. First, while these frames shape how we “see” the world, they are not themselves visible, operating as they do at the level of perception itself. Narration is, as Walter Fishman describes it, “the shape of knowledge as we first apprehend it” (qtd. in Baker 2010, 115). Second, these frames may be multiple, overlapping, and may resist integration into a single meta-frame. Third, these narrative frames must be reconstructed from available, but always partial, textual and other evidence, requiring the interpretation of the scholar. And fourth, the scholar carrying out that interpretive analysis of these frames is herself operating from within frames. Therefore, a crucial component to such research must be critical reflection on the narrative frames structuring the scholar’s understanding of the object of study, which, in the spirit of a *histoire croisée* approach, should initiate a dialogue of mutual interrogation between the scholar and the subject of her research, or between the scholar as *framer* and the scholar as *framed*.

Such reflexivity is especially important when approaching Soviet-era cultural history as a US scholar, as stark Cold War binaries continue to frame popular and even scholarly interpretations. As art historian John J. Curley puts it in *Global Art and the Cold War*, “The Cold War is the central story of the second half of the twentieth century—essential for explaining what happened around the world and why” (2018, 8). As the opposition of two “master narratives,” the Cold War was waged over the meaning of ‘progress,’ and was as much a semantic battle over language and the interpretation of the world, as it was a political-military struggle” (Curley 2018, 9). Moreover, these master narratives were so ubiquitous and all encompassing, they were like the air people breathed. As the US poet Robert Frost put it, “It was sometimes like that as a boy with another boy I lived in antipathy with. It clouded my days” (Frost 2007, 231). In Anglophone popular culture today, the Soviet Union continues to be portrayed in terms of stark, mutually exclusive oppositions between, for example, capitalism and communism, democracy and totalitarianism, and West and East. Moreover, that global opposition was projected onto Soviet society itself, which the West typically saw as divided into two opposing camps, namely official and unofficial, or dissident.

This construal of Soviet society had a profound effect on what was translated into English—dissident literature, for the most part—leaving us today with an archive of translations that reflects and helps to reproduce those Cold War polarities.<sup>1</sup>

A second frame I brought to this project came from Translation Studies, which situates the origin of the field in the post-war West and presents its subsequent development as a more or less linear and unified process of progressive emancipation from the shackles of positivism (Tymoczko 2007), equivalence (Pym 2014) or abjection, troped as invisibility (Venuti 1995) (see Baer 2020). Within that developmental narrative, translation is increasingly associated with a leftist, oppositional political agenda, evident in Venuti's promotion of foreignization as *essentially* non-hegemonic, and in a focus on translation as activism in Tymoczko (2010). In fact, there is a tendency on the part of some scholars to present translation as “a good thing *en soi*” (Apter 2013, 8), that is, as *inherently* oppositional as, for example, when Sandra Bermann claims that translation “exposes the complex heteronomy that inheres in all of our constructed solidarities” (Bermann 2005, 3). Recent studies on the role of translation in asserting US dominance in the post-war world, however, challenge those readings (see Rubin 2012).<sup>2</sup>

In what follows below, I will trace the shift in my interpretation of translations produced from within the Soviet penal system, or the Gulag, away from an interpretive frame that constructed these translations as clear-cut acts of resistance to repressive political power by dissidents toward a more nuanced framing that acknowledges translation as a complex site within Soviet Russian culture at which the opposition of *official* and *dissident* was blurred and the nature of authorship itself reimagined, a site at which resistance and accommodation existed side by side and often overlapped in ways that frequently made them indistinguishable from each other. In tracing this

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- 1 There are a number of very important works that have come out over the last ten years that seek to study Soviet society and culture outside those restrictive Cold War binaries. One of the most notable is Aleksei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (2005), which explores the rich space between supporters of official Soviet culture, or “activists,” and those opposing it, or “dissidents.” In his introduction, Yurchak acknowledges the continued influence of Cold War binaries on the scholarly understanding and representation of the Soviet Union: “oppression and resistance, repression and freedom, the state and the people, official economy and second economy, official culture and counterculture, totalitarian language and counterlanguage, public self and private self, truth and lie, reality and dissimulation, morality and corruption, and so on” (Yurchak 2005, 5).
  - 2 Of course, we know from the work of Cheyfitz (1991), Niranjana (1992) and Rafael (2005), among others, that translation is as effective a tool of imperialism as it is a tool of resistance.

re-framing, I hope to model the kind of reflexive practice that might allow us, however provisionally and partially, to expose the frames that shape our perception.

## 2. Gulag Translations as Resistance

For those unfamiliar with Russian translation history or with translation under totalitarian regimes, the phrase ‘Gulag translations’ might have a bizarre ring to it. Nevertheless, the production of translations of great literary works by members of Russia’s creative intelligentsia while incarcerated within the Soviet Gulag system occurred with enough frequency, I would argue, to be studied as a cultural phenomenon.

It is tempting, of course, to see translations of literary and scholarly works undertaken by members of the intelligentsia while serving their sentences in the Soviet prison system—often under conditions of great physical and mental duress—as a clear act of resistance directed at a regime that incarcerated a significant percentage of its creative intelligentsia. As Jan Plamper notes:

From its beginnings in 1918, writers and artists were among the many millions imprisoned in or departed to the Soviet system of force labour camps. [...] Many were executed or died under the harsh conditions. According to estimates by Vitaly Shentalinsky, 2000 writers died in the Gulag, among them Isaak Babel, Daniil Kharms, Nikolai Gumilev, Nikolai Kliuev, Osip Mandel’shtam, and Boris Pil’niak. Among the countless others who were confined in the Gulag at some point in their lives were the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, the writer Iuz Aleshkovskii, the writer Evgeniia Ginzburg, the poet Natal’ia Gorbanevskai, the historian Lev Gumilev, the avant-garde artist Gustav Klutskis, the Germanist Lev Kopelev, the historian Dmitrii Likhachev, the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, the actor Solomon Michoels, the writers Andrei Siniavskii, and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, the avant-garde theoretician Sergei Tret’iakov, and the poet Nikolai Zabolotskii. (2001, 2110)

It should come as no surprise that one of the consequences of Stalin’s repression of the intelligentsia would be Gulag translations. The fact that many writers outside the camps were forced to express themselves through translation of the works of foreign poets, novelists, and playwrights, makes it almost inevitable that they would do so when they found themselves within the camp system (Etkind 1997, 45–49). Moreover, by the early twentieth century there was already in place a rather impressive tradition of prison translations in Russia, beginning with the Decembrists Vilhelm Kiukhelbekher (1797–1846)

and Alexander Muraviev (1792-1863). The radical publicists Mikhail Mikhailov (1826-1865) and Petr Yakubovich (1860-1911) also produced literary translations during their incarceration. Mikhailov even managed to have his translations published under a pseudonym while still in prison.<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Lenin, in 1901, counseled his brother-in-law, Mark Elizarov, who had been imprisoned for his political activity, to engage in translation work as a way to establish a routine and to further his education in foreign languages (Fedorov 1953, 74–75). But while there was a sustained tradition of prison translations in tsarist Russia, the number of prison translations completed within the Soviet Gulag system is notable for their number and the publicity they received both in the official press and in more restricted intelligentsia circles. I will discuss five of the most well-known and representative Gulag translators, whose translations have been framed in dissident and emigré circles as acts of resistance.<sup>4</sup>

Tatyana Gnedich (1907-1956), who was related to the first Russian translator of Homer, Nikolai Gnedich, was a translator and teacher of English before her arrest in 1945 and incarceration for ten years “for betrayal of the Soviet motherland” (Etkind 2011). A survivor of the siege of Leningrad, Gnedich impressed the investigator with the fact that she had memorized the first 2,000 lines of Byron’s *Don Juan*. This feat of memory was “rewarded” with a typewriter, a Webster’s dictionary, and a complete edition of the English original of Byron’s poem. Gnedich spent the next two years in a single cell so that she could complete her translation. As Etkind notes, Gnedich “rarely went out, and she read nothing—she lived on the verses of Byron” (Etkind 2011). This story became a legend when, upon her release, her translation of *Don Juan*, which she had sent from prison to Mikhail Lozinsky, was published by the publishing house Khudozhestvennaia Literatura [Artistic Literature] in a print run of one hundred thousand to great critical acclaim (Etkind 2011).

Ivan Likhachev (1902-1972) was a member of the poet Mikhail Kuzmin’s inner circle. Widely recognized in intelligentsia circles as a brilliant translator of poetry, Likhachev had limited success in getting his translations published in official venues due not only to his friendship with Kuzmin, but also to his “foreign ties” related to his work

3 Prison translations are by no means restricted to Russia. Two notable examples include the English novelist Helen Maria Williams (1761-1827), who translated *Paul et Virginie*, by Bernardin St. Pierre while imprisoned in France during the reign of terror, and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), who translated the classic Sanskrit text the *Bhagavad Gita* into his native tongue of Gujarati, then into English during his years of imprisonment. In contemporary Iran, as well, prison translations have emerged as a cultural phenomenon.

4 One could also include Joseph Brodsky here, who engaged in the translation of English poetry while in internal exile in Siberia in the 1970s. For more on Brodsky’s translations, see Klots (2011).

as a translator. Some of his translations appeared in a 1937 anthology of English poetry, but without attribution. This was also the case with his finest translations—of the French poets Du Bellay, Deporte, and D’Obinier—that appeared in the 1938 anthology *Poets of the French Renaissance*. A teacher for many years at the Higher Military-Naval School Named for F. E. Dzerzhinskii, and later head of the department of foreign languages there, he was arrested in 1940 and sentenced to eight years in prison. He was released in 1945 and was sent to live in the city of Vol’sk in the Saratov Region, where he worked as a custodian in the local library. In August of 1948 he was sent to live in Frunze, and in November of that year he was arrested a second time, with virtually no basis. This time he was sentenced to ten years in prison. When he was released, he was again sent to Frunze, but he eventually made his way back to Leningrad, where beginning in 1959 he led a seminar for translators of English prose at the House of Writers.

Like Gnedich, his prison translations were not only feats of versification but also feats of memory. Likhachev knew all of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* by heart. His translations were perhaps more openly oppositional than Gnedich’s, although both Byron and Baudelaire had reputations in Russia for being individualists, and since the early nineteenth century, Byron was known in Russia as a freedom fighter. Likhachev’s translations of Baudelaire, especially of the poem “Epigraphe à un livre condamné” [Epigraph for a Condemned Book] can easily be read as a defense of individual difference in a society of repressive conformity; the fact that Likhachev was homosexual and travelled in “homosexual” circles before his incarceration undoubtedly helped lead to his imprisonment. In that context, the final line of the poem—“If you don’t like me, be damned”—as well as subtle references to contemporary Soviet reality lend his translation an especially defiant ring.<sup>5</sup> His daring may be explained by the fact that he entertained little hope that his translations would ever be published. However, several of his translations of Baudelaire did make it into the first collection of the poet’s works in Soviet Russia, *Flowers of Evil* [Tsveta zla, 1970], edited by Efim Etkind. This volume, released in a print run of 50,000, sold out in a matter of hours (Wanner 1996, 5).

Sergei Petrov (1911-1988) was also a translator of French poets, including du Bellay, Ronsard, and, again, Baudelaire. Petrov was a teacher of foreign languages in Leningrad before his arrest and subsequent exile to Siberia in 1935. He was re-arrested in 1938 and held in the Achinskii prison. He was sentenced to eight years of hard labor, but the sentence was revoked in 1939. He lived in Biriliusk, Achinsk, and Novgorod before making his way back to Leningrad. He began to translate while in exile, but his translations started to appear in print only after Stalin’s death. In 1958 his translation

5 For more on this, see Baer (2011).

of fragments from the epic poem “Hutten’s Final Days” [Huttens letzte Tage, 1871] by the Swiss author Conrad Meyer was published. Petrov’s resistance to the regime was expressed not only in his translations, into which he inserted prison slang, but also in the seminar on translators as scandal-makers [perevodchiki-skandalisty] that he led in the literary translation section of the Leningrad division of the Writers’ Union.

Iulii Daniel’ (1925-1988) was a poet and political dissident who was sentenced to five years of incarceration for four short stories that were published in the West under the pseudonym Nikolai Arzhak. The trial of Daniel’ and his friend Abraham Tertz (pseud. Andrei Siniavskii) was a major event in the Soviet-era dissident movement. Daniel’ practiced translation throughout his life, although the fate of his translations varied. He published a number under his own name before his arrest; after his arrest he could publish his translations only under the pseudonym “Iu. Petrov,” and the translations he published before his arrest were never republished in the Soviet period. The Russian bard Bulat Okudzhava and the poet David Samoilov published translations by Daniel’ under their names at a time when Daniel’ was having trouble finding work (Daniel’ 2000, 15). Like the famous prison memoirs of his contemporaries—Eugenia Ginzburg and Varlam Shalamov—Daniel’s letters from prison reveal the importance of literature for his personal and spiritual survival. While incarcerated, he translated the poems of his fellow inmate, the Latvian poet Knuts Skujenieks (1936-), imprisoned for anti-Soviet activity related to his involvement in the movement to free Latvia. Skujenieks poems expressed a deep longing for freedom and dignity.

Nikolai Zabolotskii (1903-1958) was a writer who began his career during the politically turbulent 1920s. His unusual style and literary experimentation—he was a founding member of the absurdist group OBERIU—drew increasing suspicion from official quarters. Sensing the growing danger of his situation, Zabolotskii modified his writing and turned to translation. Among his most famous translations was that of the medieval Slavic epic *The Lay of Igor’s Campaign* [Slovo o polku Igoreve]. Zabolotskii was arrested on the charge of creating “anti-Soviet propaganda” and imprisoned in 1938. The critic Nikolai Lesiuchevskii wrote a damning evaluation of Zabolotskii’s poetry, describing it as “an active counter-revolutionary struggle against the Soviet stratum, the Soviet people, and socialism” (Zabolotsky 1994, 211). During his five years of incarceration, Zabolotskii worked on his translation of the *Slovo*, which he completed in the Siberian city of Vostoklag where he had been consigned to live following his release from prison.

### 3. Re-framing Resistance: Soviet Discourse on Gulag Translations

There is much to support the interpretation of Gulag translations as proof of the oppositional nature of the Soviet-era intelligentsia. First, the intelligentsia's use of literature as an escape appears in contrast to the regime's call to engagement. Second, the frequent references to God and religion in intelligentsia discourse on prison translation stand in clear opposition to the official atheism of the regime. And third, the elitist nature of these Gulag translators appears in stark relief against the brutal and humiliating realities of everyday life. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the discourse surrounding these translations suggests some profound similarities between intelligentsia and official Soviet culture in relation to translation. Those similarities support post-Soviet re-framings of Soviet-era culture that look with suspicion at the simplistic Cold War opposition of dissident versus official Soviet culture. Serguei Oushakine, for example, in analyzing dissident samizdat texts of the Soviet era avoids "the long-standing Sovietology tradition of locating these texts exclusively within the context of dissidents' ideological struggle with the dominant political structure" (2001, 192). Instead, Oushakine reads them "through the discursive web of Soviet society within which they were conceived (or caught?)," arguing "for a Soviet origin to the forms and rhetoric of dissident's resistance" (2001, 192).

Analysis of intelligentsia and official discourse on the subject of Gulag translations also reveals some striking continuities. In both discourses, we see these translations described in heroic terms of self-sacrifice of the individual artist for the sake of the community. This continuity is perhaps most clearly evident in the shared use of several key words to describe the translator's task: labor *trud* (labor), *podvig* (heroic feat), and *skromnost'* (modesty).

The trope of translation as *labor* is common to both intelligentsia and official discourse. Efim Etkind describes these prison translations as labors of love (Etkind 1963, 179–180). This trope is also evident in the following diary entry written by Zabolotskii in the 1930s as it became increasingly difficult for him to publish his own writing: "You have to work and to struggle on your own. How many failures still lie ahead; how many disappointments and doubts! But if in such moments a person vacillates—he's a goner. Faith and perseverance. Work and honesty" (Zabolotsky 1994, 95). And at the trial of Joseph Brodsky on the charge of social parasitism, a literary scholar testified in Brodsky's defense, mimicking official Soviet rhetoric on the dignity of labor: "Verse translation is extremely difficult work, calling for devotion, knowledge, and poetic talent... Such *labour* calls for an unselfish love of poetry and of *work* itself" (qtd. in Etkind 1978, 252).

Translation as *podvig* is another recurring motif among Russian intellectuals, stressing the heroism of these translation projects carried out under conditions of repression and deprivation. For example, Etkind uses the term *podvig* to describe Gnedich's gulag translation of *Don Juan*, Georgii Margvelashvili uses the same term to describe Zabolotskii's translation of *The Lay of Igor's Campaign* (1990, 179), and Samuil Marshak describes the great feats of Russian literary translation as “bogatyrskie” [heroic], from the Russian word *bogatyř*, a hero of Russian folklore (1990, 213). And, of course, many of these works were predicated on “feats of memory” that allowed the translators to translate works for which they had no access to a print version.

Translation as feat in both intelligentsia and official discourse involves the overcoming of forbidding obstacles, making it a tribute not so much to the translator's genius or originality but to his or her forbearance and acceptance of suffering. Although never incarcerated, the great Soviet translator Mikhail Lozinskii, for example, pursued his monumental translation projects—Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Shakespeare's dramas—in spite of a debilitating physical illness. He completed his translation of *Purgatorio* in Leningrad under the hellish conditions of the 900-day siege. In her 1966 essay “A Word on Lozinskii” [Slovo o Lozinskom], Anna Akhmatova paints the following picture of the translator's endurance: “In his work, Lozinskii was tireless. Suffering from a serious illness that would have broken another, he continued to work and to help others. . . and the terrible, torturous illness proved powerless in the face of his superhuman will. It is terrible to think that it was at just that time that he undertook the great feat [*podvig*] of his life: the translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*” (2013, 98).

The editors of the 1967 reedition of Lozinskii's translation of Dante, like Akhmatova, describes the translation as a *podvig*: “Lozinskii worked on Dante's text for more than ten years, making his work a true feat [*podvig*]” (Alekseev and Golenishchev-Kutuzov 1967, 5).<sup>6</sup> The editors also make much of the fact that this translation was completed during the Siege of Leningrad, presenting the translation as an act of Russian (or Soviet) endurance, of resistance to the Nazi occupation, and as a metonym for the survival of Leningrad and of the country itself:

The *Inferno* in Lozinskii's translation appeared in 1939. The war began when the translator was at the very pinnacle of his work. Despite the blockade of Leningrad, in the difficult conditions of the besieged city, Mikhail Lozinskii continued his work. He managed to save the manuscript of his incomplete translations and all the background material.

6 It is an interesting historical coincidence under the circumstances that one of the editors bore the surname of the great Russian general Mikhail Kutuzov.

His *Purgatorio* was published in Moscow in 1944, and in 1945, the year of victory, his *Paradiso* came out. We should not fail to note the surprising circumstance that during the war when the country was in need of paper and there weren't enough typesetters, the strength and the means were nonetheless found in order to publish this timeless work by the great Italian poet. This is undeniable evidence of the great significance of Dante's poem for Soviet culture. In 1946 Lozinskii's translation was awarded the State prize of the first degree. We are convinced that that it will have a long life. (1967, 6)

Notice here how Lozinskii's act of heroic labor was matched by the regime, which found the means to publish this translation even in the most trying times. Such heroic discourse was also evident in a review in the newspaper *Socialist Karaganda* of a reading in 1945 by Zabolotskii, who was still living in exile; he read an excerpt from his translation of *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*: "It is a particular joy that the translation has appeared in 1945, the year of the Russian people's victory over its most stubborn foe, as a result of which the clear and resonant poetry of the translation, telling of a *heroic struggle* for the independence of the land of Russia, sounds particularly close and moving" (Zabolotsky 1994, 223). Zabolotskii's much-acclaimed translation of this Russian classic reconciled him with the regime, earning him the right to return to Moscow.

For both the imprisoned Zabolotskii and the Soviet literary establishment, here again, translation is presented as a metaphor for Russian history, for the Russian people's struggle against formidable odds, calling for the selfless qualities of hard work, suffering, and endurance.

The 1945 manuscript of Zabolotskii's translation carried the dedication "To the Russian People in the year of their triumph" (Gulina et al. 1996, 121).

By translating the *Slovo*, which was by then considered to be arguably *the* foundation text of modern Russian literature, Zabolotskii was able to reconcile himself with the regime, and the regime was able to reconcile itself with Zabolotskii. In the context of a Soviet prison, the beauty of the *Slovo* and the creativity required by the translation into Modern Russian led the poet to proclaim: "You read this tale and count your good fortune to be a Russian!" (Zabolotsky 1994, 222). But while the translation was seen in official culture as a great service to the Russian state and people—a *podvig*—the archaic features of the *Slovo* must have appealed to Zabolotskii's avant-garde sensibilities, which had been so harshly condemned in his original writing by the Soviet literary establishment. In other words, a "faithful" translation of this text in particular gave Zabolotskii the opportunity for creative use of language that would have been unthinkable in the translation of a contemporary work.

The association of translation with humility is another shared trait of official Soviet and intelligentsia discourse on translation. Consider the remarks of the poet and translator Arsenii Tarkovskii in an article entitled “The Opportunities of Translation,” where he criticizes the younger generation of literary translators: “currently entering the literary scene are young poets who are not devoid of talent, but neither are they devoid of an exaggerated passion for self-promotion. Translation demands *modesty*, the ability to retreat into the background, leaving the stage to the author of the original.” He concludes with a distinct note of derision: “Translations no longer resemble the original; today they more often resemble the original work of the translator” (Baer and Olshanskaya 2013, 120). Humility as the Russian answer to the Western cult of the individual is obvious, too, in the remarks of the Soviet writer and administrator Aleksandr Fadeev with regard to Pasternak’s work. When asked by a Western journalist about the popularity of Pasternak’s poetry in Russia, Fadeev responded:

Pasternak was never popular in the USSR with the common reader due to his *extreme individualism* and the formal complexity of his verse, which is difficult to understand. Only two of his works—“1905” and “Lieutenant Schmidt”—had a broad social impact and were written in a simpler way. Unfortunately, he did not continue along that path. Today Pasternak is translating the dramas of Shakespeare; he is famous in Russia *as a translator* of Shakespeare. (Baer and Olshanskaya 2013, 85; italics mine)

This idea was also promulgated by the critic Mikhail Alekseev, who described Pasternak’s literary career as “the tragedy of a poet aspiring to be a translator,” and advised “discipline and *complete subjugation* to the original author” (qtd. in Khotimsky 2011, 120). The critic Iogann Al’tman also addressed the problem of modesty in remarks made at the First All-Union Conference of Translators in 1936: “[Valerii] Briusov took a *modest stand*, unlike our translators, who think they have the right to work with the material in such a way that we can’t recognize it afterward” (qtd. in Zemskova 2013, 208).<sup>7</sup>

The notion of humility was also evident in the rhetoric surrounding the Soviet school of translation, which promoted a common approach to translation that mitigated the role of the individual translator, erasing his/her traces in the text, playing and replaying the submerging of the individual into the collective. Every successful translation was a tribute to the Soviet school, which functioned as a metonym for Soviet culture in general. Consider, for example, the closing paragraph of Konstantin Derzhavin’s introduction to the 1961 re-edition of Lozinskii’s *Divine Comedy*. After insisting that

7 These off-hand remarks were cut from the conference proceedings published later that year in the journal *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (Zemskova 2013, 208).

Lozinskii's translation would only have been possible "in the Soviet period," he states: "*The Divine Comedy* was the greatest achievement in the creative biography of the Russian translator-poet. It is in this work, in particular, that the fundamental merits of the Soviet translation school were expressed" (1961, 13). The critic gives a compliment to Lozinskii only to take it away, suggesting that his translation was an inevitable product of the Soviet school of translation.

As is perhaps evident from the citations above, the continuities between official and intelligentsia discourses can be explained through reference to a common discursive enemy: Western-style capitalism and the associated phenomena of individualism and materialism. In both discourses, the threat of individuality is countered through acts of self-sacrifice. As Sergei Petrov's widow commented, "He didn't translate according to the Soviet model: A great poet who cannot publish is forced to do translations to feed himself. A kitten couldn't feed itself on his income. He translated just as he wrote: for himself and for *God*. For the drawer. He knew twelve languages, and loved and translated many authors" (*Vek perevoda* 2014).<sup>8</sup> If we ignore the religious overtones, this rejection of the capitalist market is, of course, something the intelligentsia shared with the regime, and it is evident in Etkind's description of Tatyana Gnedich as *urodlivaia*, or a 'holy fool,' i.e., someone who didn't work for money or status. This disdain for capitalism aligns well with official Soviet discourse as exemplified in Derzhavin's comments regarding Dante: "'Stern Dante'—as Pushkin referred to the creator of the *Divine Comedy*—completed his great poetic work during the bitter years of his exile and wanderings, to which he was sentenced by the Black party that rose to power in 1301 in bourgeois-democratic Florence" (1961, 5). The reference to Russia's greatest poet, Pushkin, who also spent several years in internal exile, is certainly no coincidence, nor is the reference to bourgeois-democratic Florence. Derzhavin stresses the brutal capitalist atmosphere of contemporary Florence—"an anthill of commerce"—(1961, 1)—presenting Dante as an artist who looked beyond, and above, petty, worldly concerns, a view that was congenial to both intelligentsia and official Soviet circles, which shared an anti-materialist, anti-capitalist bent. Joseph Brodsky gave eloquent voice to the intelligentsia's disdain for the market in his introduction to a volume of translated poems by the Lithuanian poet and dissident Tomas Venclova, "The demand for innovation in art, as well as the artist's intuitive striving for novelty, demonstrates not so much the artist's imaginative wealth or the potential of the material as it does art's vulnerability to market realities and to the

8 "Переводами он занимался опять-таки не по советской схеме: «крупный поэт, которого не печатают, вынужден для прокормления заниматься переводами». На его гонорары не прокормился бы и котенок, а переводил он так же, как и свое писал: для себя и Бога. В стол. Он знал двенадцать языков, любил и переводил многих." Translation mine.

artist's desire to collaborate with them" (Brodsky 1989, viii). The title of his introduction was "Poetry as a Form of Resistance to Reality".

The theme of self-sacrifice is also a theme in Etkind's recounting of Gnechich's translation of *Don Juan*, which he entitles "Involuntary Cross" [Nevol'nyi krest] (2011), a notion tied closely to the religious virtues of *smirenje* (acceptance of suffering), *samoukorenii* (self-reproach), and *terpenie skorbei* (endurance of sorrow), qualities that, despite their Christian origin, were much vaunted in official Soviet rhetoric. This discursive overlap is evident in an incident recounted by Etkind, when the prosecutor read the first pages of Gnedich's translation of *Don Juan*, written in tiny letters on paper with the heading "Evidence of the Accused." The prosecutor supposedly exclaimed, "For this you should be awarded the Stalin Prize!" (Etkind 2011).

The official reception of these Gulag translations clearly complicates their being framed as simple acts of resistance. Rather, this discourse reveals the relationship between the Soviet regime and its creative intelligentsia to be an extremely complex one. As Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko note, "the intelligentsia should not be idealized, as they so often are in Western historiography, nor should they be seen as an extrasystematic category. Intellectuals were implicated in the workings of the state, which not only 'repressed' them but also rewarded them with one of the most privileged existences available in Soviet Russia" (2007, xiv). Clark's works on the cultural life of Petersburg and Moscow reveal how thoroughly the cultural interests of the intelligentsia were intertwined with those of the regime. And, as Plamper notes, despite the regime's practice of incarcerating its writers, "many writers willingly or otherwise supported the camps' existence" (2001, 2110). Any study of translation in Soviet Russia must therefore take this into account. To the extent that translation was used both to punish and reward writers, it reflects quite well the intelligentsia's complex relationship with the regime and its official cultural policies.

#### 4. Re-framing Resistance: Gulag Translations in the Soviet Literary Polysystem

Another post-Soviet insight into the workings of Soviet culture concerns the crucial role played by culture—and literature, in particular—in the making of Soviet subjects. As Clark and Dobrenko point out: "All states have to manufacture subjects, but what is peculiar about the Soviet example is the need to create new subjects out of old. As it were, they needed to put new software into the old machine. Writing was, in effect, seen as a means of producing that software. Hence literature became in the thirties the flagship of Soviet culture" (2007, xiii). This had a profound effect on the Soviet literary polysystem and the place of translation within it.

With the adoption of the aesthetic policy of Socialist Realism, literary production in official Soviet culture was organized around the imitation of correct models, not originality. Within this literary polysystem, Harriet Murav contends, “texts are not vehicles of authorial or national expression, and originality and authenticity are irrelevant” (2005, 2403). What is important is the preservation—the iterability—of texts. In Stalinist culture, one could say, “the key question for authorial agency and authenticity [...] shifts from originality to selective assimilation” (Felch 2011, 159). As Evgeny Dobrenko explains in *The Making of the State Reader*, such control over artistic production led to an extreme traditionalism (1997, 22). Censorship practices, too, promoted a more text-centered model of literary production insofar as it led to the publication of works—translations included—without attribution or under pseudonyms, making it difficult to read the texts as reflections of an author’s intentions—what Daniele Monticelli has referred to as part of a more general phenomenon of “de-authorization” in the Soviet Union, which he conceptualizes “in terms of a radical redistribution of the prerogatives of authorship” (2016, 417).<sup>9</sup>

The conservatism or traditionalism of Stalinist culture—the focus on preservation of great artistic works and of “eternal” values—was something shared among members of the Soviet intelligentsia from across the political spectrum. As Gudkov, Levada, and their coauthors wrote in 1988: “It is difficult not to admire that in the hardest times, in the atmosphere of humiliation and pinches, the people of high culture decently served the ideals of truth, continued the traditions of our intelligentsia, creating rational, good, *eternal* things” (qtd. in Shlapentokh 1990, 57; italics mine). This traditionalism, which reflects a view of literature as the transmission of “eternal things” in language, was defended by Brodsky in his introduction to Venclova’s *Winter Dialogue*: “The poet has one more duty that explains his devotion to form: his debt to his predecessors, to those who created the poetic language he has inherited. This debt is expressed in the feeling every more or less conscious writer has, that he should write in such a way as to be understood by his ancestors—those from whom he learned poetic speech” (1997, xi). This same idea was expressed by Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel Prize lecture: “And today how am I, accompanied by the shades of the fallen, my head bowed to let pass forward to this platform others worthy long before me, today how am I to guess and express what they would have wished me to say?” (qtd. in Parthée 2004, 155). Or, as the poet Marina Tsvetaeva put it, “What is art, if not the finding of lost things, the immortalization of things lost?” (qtd. in Burnett 1985, 164). And so, while the Soviet

9 The fact that the Soviet government did not sign on to international copyright agreements until 1973 suggests a certain ambivalence toward author-centered models, which are buoyed by copyright protections.

regime and the intelligentsia may have sought to disseminate very different Truths, they shared a common belief in the ability of language and literature to preserve “eternal things,” to translate values and beliefs across boundaries.

One effect of the increasing conservatism and text-centered nature of the Soviet literary polysystem was the elevation of translation as a form of (non-original) writing, something witnessed both within official and dissident circles.<sup>10</sup> Translation assumed an increasingly central position within the Soviet literary polysystem on both a metaphorical and a practical level. As Katerina Clark has shown, translation in the Soviet Union became a symbol of Soviet cosmopolitanism, a discursive site where the intelligentsia’s “longing for world culture,” as famously described by the poet Osip Mandelstam, overlapped with the regime’s promotion of world literature, “both for domestic consumption and as emblem of the antifascist movement” (Clark 2011, 4).

As a practice, translation became an acceptable form of authorship for writers under suspicion—and as a metaphor for authorship in a society where the ones who could “generate new authoritative texts” were “essentially only Stalin or someone privileged to be delegated by him to perform that function” (Clark and Dobrenko 2007, xiv). Indeed, as Elena Zemskova explains, for many Russians in the Stalinist period, “‘escape into translation’ became the only possible answer to the question of *how to be a writer*” (Zemskova 2013, 186). The heightened status of translation in Soviet society was reflected in the fact that translators were granted full “literary citizenship” in the 1930s when they were accepted into the Writers Union with all the rights and privileges of writers (Zemskova 2013, 204).

On an aesthetic level, translation reflected—indeed exemplified—the increasing conservatism of the Soviet literary polysystem. As Maria Khotimsky contends, one of the defining aspects “of the Soviet school approach to translation was its excessive reliance on poetic tradition,” on the imitation of the great stylists of the past (2011, 93). Therefore, as a fundamentally text-centered, aesthetically conservative model of literary production, translation became emblematic of Soviet authorship—a Soviet alternative to the Western Romantic model of the author-genius. To the extent that translation requires the translator’s submission to certain linguistic and other constraints that are foreign to the author of original writing, it served in Soviet Russia as a privileged site for the performance of a perhaps uniquely Russian accommodation between the individual and society. Translations, then, can be seen as something akin to Dina Spechler’s notion

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10 The creation of a text-centered literary polysystem was reflected not only in the elevation of translation as a form of (non-original) writing but also in the promotion of folk bards, who came to represent a merging of the individual artistic voice with that of the folk. For more on translation and authorship in Soviet society, see Chapter 5 in Baer (2015).

of “permitted dissent,” which inextricably links resistance and submission, subjectivity and subjection, within a model of *authorship* based on imitation and iteration.<sup>11</sup>

To the extent that translation was elevated in status as an exemplary form of writing/authorship within the Soviet literary polysystem as a whole, then the literary culture of the Soviet prison system appears not as something isolated and radically different, but rather as a reflection—albeit in very stark terms—of that polysystem. This was due in large part to the conditions of literary production in the Soviet prison system. The books available to prisoners were mostly restricted to classic works, as opposed to contemporary literature, ensuring an aesthetic and thematic conservatism. This conservatism was reflected and reproduced in a culture of re-reading and citation, as well as feats of memory. Evgeniia Ginzburg (1975) notes that the experience of reading was enhanced in prison, where it constituted virtually her only pastime and allowed her to “escape” the humiliating confines. She notes that, “Reading is more intense in prison” (205), and points out “its ennobling influence” (206). Moreover, original writing was even more tightly controlled in the Gulag than outside it, making translation an especially privileged mode of artistic expression.

The conservative nature of the literary polysystem of the Gulag has been documented in the many prison memoirs that were published in the post-Stalinist period, most notably, those of Evgeniia Ginzburg and Varlam Shalamov. As Katerina Clark notes, “Evgeniia Ginzburg [...] and her fellow convicts took Pushkin in their hearts to the frozen wastes of Siberia virtually as Christians took the holy writ to the catacombs. The great works of European literature (by Tolstoi and Blok, Stendhal and Balzac) helped her keep faith in prison and ward off thoughts of suicide” (Clark 2001, 543). When the prisoners were given access to books, Ginzburg exclaims: “Tomorrow at this time I would have visitors: Tolstoy and Blok, Stendhal and Balzac. How stupid I had been to have thoughts of death” (Ginzburg 1975, 204). And later: “Such were our black days of sleep and our nights of blinding light and surreptitious reading. Such was our life of physical and mental suffering, of transfigured hours in the society of books, of alternate hope and despair” (208).

Indeed, throughout her lengthy memoir, first published in the Soviet Union in 1966 during the Khrushchev Thaw, Ginzburg frames her horrifying experience of arrest and incarceration in terms of canonical works of world literature. Repeatedly, Ginzburg invokes classic texts and authors to dignify the humiliating and degrading life of the

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11 Dina Spechler’s concept of “permitted dissent” was an early contribution to the re-thinking of Soviet culture beyond the dichotomy of official/dissident, focusing on the journal *Novy Mir* as a site where the creative intelligentsia could express its frustrations and desires, within certain limits.

Gulag, and, perhaps, to maintain links to her former life, as in the following passages: “I spent the two and a half months until my arrest in tormented conflict between reason and the kind of foreboding which Lermontov called ‘prophetic anguish’” (30); “You’ve certainly chosen a noble part! Good enough for a film or a novel by Dumas père!” (94); “a tall, plumpish young woman whose round face made me think of Maupassant’s *Boule de suif* [Butterball]” (105); “I can still see her huge eyes filled with the deepest despair. They made me think of Andreyev’s story about the resurrection of Lazarus” (106–7); “at last came the long-awaited bath, a joy in itself and an interlude of sanity in this Danteque Inferno” (145); “he had a sharp little nose and a toothbrush mustache, like the comic policeman in Gorky’s play *Enemies*” (167); “I doubt whether Sherlock Holmes himself could have observed that tiny corner of the world more closely” (194); “Our prison experience illustrated the fact that any human being in the position of Robinson Crusoe will, as it were, retrace the development of the species” (211); “Suppose, like Boris Godunov, he really does ‘dream of slaughtered infants all night long?’” (227); “Remembering his round, soft features and the kindness plainly seen in every wrinkle, we decided to call him Dr. Pickwick, feeling that his fellow student must surely have done likewise” (248); “After the whole scene was over, many of us said it reminded us of an incident in Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*” (304); “The Menshevik Lucia Oganjanian, who had been there more than once in her time, told us nightly tales, as in the Arabian Nights, of the magical delights of the large, clean, spacious disinfection center in Sverdlovsk” (312); “there was no equality in this new circle of Dante’s Inferno” (333); “Like Gorky’s character Luka, Vasek never missed a chance to comfort his fellow creatures” (350); “As always happened at the beginning of such a ride, one or two of us began to make literary comparisons: in this case Alaska and Jack London’s *White Fang* (395). And instead of just saying “Good night” to her bunkmate Julia, Ginzburg would recite the following lines from Nekrasov: “Kind sleep that makes the prisoner a king...” (234).<sup>12</sup>

These literary references also became the basis for the Aesopian language that allowed Ginzburg and her fellow intelligentsia inmates to communicate without fear of censure. As Ginzburg explains:

In one of Knut Hamsun’s novels there is a character called Captain Glan with a dog answering to the name of Aesop. Although the whole spirit of our prison life was permeated by ‘Aesopian language,’ Julia, clearly

12 Historical references are also common in Ginzburg’s memoir: “And, when the cell was more asphyxiating than usual: ‘Giordano Bruno was worse off... his cell was made of lead!’” (249); “This was Stalin’s eighteenth Brumaire” (74); as well as several mentions of the French revolutionary Charlotte Corday who murdered the Jacobin leader Jean-Paul Marat and was then guillotined (170, 175, 191).

overestimating our warder's education, was frightened of using this expression aloud. Thus it was that we came to use the term 'Glan's dog' for the methods of allegory, fable, and double-talk in which we became adept for the purpose of conversing on forbidden topics and, especially, corresponding with the outside world. (209)

The limited access to books not only increased their value but also inspired feats of memory. Lev Gumilev, the son of the poets Anna Akhmatova and Nikolai Gumilev, while serving his ten-year sentence in the Soviet prison system, participated in poetry gatherings organized by the inmates, where he recited poetry from memory. As a fellow inmate, A. F Savenko, described the gatherings: "At one point [...] in the depths of the barracks we began to hold literary-poetic evenings involving the recitation of poetry. Lev Nikolaevich had no equal in terms of the volume of his poetic knowledge. He recited by heart poems by N. Gumilev, A. K. Tolstoi, Fet, Baratynskii, Blok, some unknown contemporary imagists and symbolists, as well as Byron and Dante. For two evenings in a row he recited the *Divine Comedy* (Gumilev 2004, 14). This cult of memory is also evident in Ginzburg's memoir, where she recounts how she and a neighboring inmate—whom she would never meet face to face—made use of a system of taps to communicate through the walls. She was able to do so because she was able to remember the entire code. She repeatedly makes the point that the prison experience greatly improved her memory. And so, the literary polysystem of the Gulag, characterized by a culture of citation and a cult of memory, appears to reflect—rather than resist—the increasingly dominant model of literary production within the Soviet polysystem at large in the 1930s and 40s.

## 5. Conclusion

The emergence of a traditionalist literary culture in the Gulag occurred not only for the obvious reason that original writing was more dangerous to pursue under those conditions, but also because the preservation of the canonical works of world literature served as a metaphor of survival. If we consider Walter Benjamin's notion of translation as granting an afterlife to texts, then Gulag translations appear to have served as a kind of ritual reenactment of survival against unthinkable odds.<sup>13</sup> If, as

13 Consider the religious allusions in the following Yakubovich said of Baudelaire, "In these difficult years Baudelaire was for me a friend and consoler, and I, on my part, gave him much of the best of my heart's blood" (qtd. in Wanner 1996, 23), while Kiukhelbeker declared Homer and Shakespeare to be his "*pain quotidien*" (Levin 1988, 65). Bella Brodski elaborates on Benjamin's notion of translation as the afterlife of texts in her monograph *Can these Bones Live? Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory* (2007).

Joseph Brodsky claims, “linguistic barriers can be as high as those erected by the state” (1987, 47–48), then prison translations offered inmates an allegorical means of overcoming their confinement that must have brought them some kind of psychic relief. It also allowed these individuals, cut off from their families and Soviet society at large, to establish affective genealogies—hence the importance of reciting or citing canonical works, works that have already stood the test of time. (In this respect it is interesting to note that among the works recited by Lev Gumilev were poems by his father.)

To the extent that translation in the Gulag ritually reenacted the sacrifice of the individual writer to the collective, however, it also served as a privileged site for the construction of Soviet subjects. It was a site where Soviet efforts to re-construct authorship—an effort that cannot be separated from the more general effort to create a new Soviet subject—exploited a traditional Russian ambivalence over the Romantic (Western) model of the author-genius and gave birth to the heroic discourse of translation as self-sacrifice, which had great purchase—albeit for different reasons—both in official Soviet and intelligentsia discourse. The metaphor of translation as sacrifice suggests a model of artistic production that stands in distinct opposition to a Romantic, author-centered model, which posits “originality as the guarantor of subjective identity” (Gutbrodt 2003, 19), underscoring Douglas Robinson’s assertion that, “the precise admixture of pride and humility expected of a speaker or writer will vary from culture to culture” (2011, 107).

The fact that the perception of Gulag translations as acts of heroic self-sacrifice for a greater cause was held by Soviet citizens from across the political spectrum pushes us to look beyond the dichotomies that have structured our views of Soviet culture, on the one hand, and of the role of translation in authoritarian contexts, on the other, lending support to Tymoczko’s contention that, “The polarized nature of resistance, where attention is focused on opposing the force of a defined and more powerful opponent, is an unnecessarily limited view of translational activism” (2010, viii). The place of Gulag translations in Soviet culture suggests that translation may function simultaneously as an act of resistance and accommodation, fundamentally challenging not only the frames through which Westerners have traditionally viewed Soviet society but also our Western Romantic framing of authorship and the relationship of authorship to translation.

Finally, this analysis of the discourse surrounding Gulag translations may also present an alternative to Oushakine’s construal of the totalizing reach of Soviet discourse. The distinct overlaps and differences between official Soviet discourse and the discourse of the translators themselves suggests that both groups may have been feeding from a common source: the culture of the nineteenth century intelligentsia. Whereas the

Soviets saw themselves as the historical endpoint, the perfect embodiment of that tradition, obviating the need for opposition, the intelligentsia saw itself as carrying on the eternal task of speaking truth to power, as played out in the great works of world literature they continually referenced, cited, and translated. Both readings of that tradition called for heroism and self-sacrifice. As Derek Offord (1999, 10) notes, the Russian intelligentsia's "willingness to suffer for convictions—the word 'convictions,' denoting ideas very strongly held, is to be preferred to the weaker 'beliefs.'" Tracing the ways these discourses overlap and diverge, mirror and mimic each another, cannot, however, be carried out within a framework structured by incommensurable binaries.

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