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500th Anniversary of Russian Translation

Early Beginnings

Russia was established as a state in the year 862, when the citizens of Novgorod asked a Varangian (Scandinavian) chief by the name of Rurik "to come and rule in Novgorod, for large and wealthy is our land, but there is no law and order in it". This event was later commemorated by a monument "Millennium of Russia" that now can be seen in the center of the Novgorod Detinets (Kremlin). There is no doubt that some translation was involved during the negotiations and later, but there is no evidence whatsoever to that effect.

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In 988 Russia adopted Christianity, and churches were built all over the country. The oldest surviving among them is the St. Sophia Cathedral in Veliky Novgorod built in 1050. Religious books were translated into Russian from Greek and Latin texts, for by this time Bulgarian Saints Cyril and Methodius had introduced a new alphabet that was widely used in old Russia. One of the first surviving manuscripts was written in St. Sophia of Novgorod in 1057 and is called *Ostromirivo Evangelie* (Ostromir's Gospel). It is now kept in the National Library in St. Petersburg. One

should bear in mind that it was written in the Old Church Slavonic language, which was in use from the White Sea to the Black Sea and from the Baltic to the Caspian Sea. The Russian language proper (as distinct from the Little (Ukrainian) and White Russian (Belorussian)) emerged at the end of the 15th century when those nations took more or less definite shape.

So in 1499 again in Novgorod, under the Archbishop Gennady, the full Bible was translated into the Russian language for the first time. We consider that the first major written translation work into Russian.

During the same century many foreigners came to Russia for many reasons, mostly by invitation of the Moscow Prince Ivan the Third, who needed the skills of architects and other professionals to build and decorate churches that were being built at the time in the new Russian capital. Among them were Aristotel Fioravanti who built the Assumption Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin and Theophanos the Greek who painted fresco murals in the Novgorod Church of the Transfiguration of our Savior. Doctors and other professionals also came to Russia at the time in their quest for greener pastures. One of the interpreters and translators is depicted in Lazhechnikov's book *Basurman* (The Infidel).

A large number of foreigners was brought to Russia during the reign of Peter the Great and, as a result, French, German and English later became widely used by Russian nobility. Peter the Great attached much importance to translation of technical books and texts mostly of naval, military and scientific nature and he commissioned several translations in those areas. At the same time he treated interpreters and translators as low-level workers ranked them together with cooks and ammunition providers, and spoke derogatorily about them. One of the first known translators

in Russia was Vassily Adodurov (who also came from Novgorod) who for some time tutored Mikhail Lomonosov, the first world-famous Russian poet and scientist. During the 18th century, the first translations of fiction appeared from Greek and Latin. They were made by Antiokh Kantemir, Sumarokov, Karamzin, and Ivan Krylov (whose versified translations of La Fontaine/Aesop's fables are known to every Russian schoolchild). They were followed by Viazemsky, Zhoukovsky, and Gnedich (who translated Homer's *Iliad* and other famous works of world literature).

Russian literature in the 19th century

The greatest period in Russian translation came in the 19th century when both fiction and poetry were extensively translated into Russian from nearly all European languages. Among the most prominent translations I would cite Lermontov's translation of Goethe's poem about a lonely pine standing high up on a cliff. Those who speak German claim that in Russian it is better. The same could be said about Thomas Moore's poem *The Evening Bells*, which was translated by Ivan Kozlov and which is now widely considered as a Russian folk song in this country. The works of many Russian authors of the 19th century contain entire pages in French (take for example Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*). Many Russian writers of this period are also well known abroad, the most famous of them being "Tolstoyevsky" (Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky). In my copy of *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Reference Encyclopedia* their names under the photos are swapped.

Translation in today's Russia

Russians learn about *Tom Sawyer* and *White Fang* (by Jack London), *The Three Musketeers* and *Ivanhoe* from early childhood; later on nearly everybody reads *Sherlock Holmes* stories and novels by Agatha Christie. We read *Don Quixote* and *Three Comrades* by Remark in Russian; we also read Dickens and Shakespeare and many other famous authors owing to translators, whose names we no longer remember.

I would like pay homage to several of these forgotten translators here. First of all are those who translated Shakespeare and Burns, Byron and Dickens into Russian. They are Samuel Marshak, Boris Pasternak, Shepkina-Koupernik, and Nora Gal. The first two are also known as outstanding authors; for example, Marshak's poems are known to every Russian child. Pasternak is a Nobel Prize winner in literature. Jim Karambelas who in the 1970s was an interpreter at the UN Secretariat in NYC told me that Boris Zakhoder's rendering of *Winnie the Pooh* into Russian is better than the original text. Many a book is now translated into Russian from all languages of the world, but they are mostly of entertaining nature: detective stories, and books dealing with the exotic and supernatural. Some authors of world fame have not yet been published in Russian (e.g. R.M. Pirsig), although Russian translations of some of these authors appear on the Internet.

One of the most difficult books I've read in English is *Lolita*, by Russian-born author Nabokov, but I do not like its Russian version, which is a re-write, rather than translation, by the author. Nabokov also translated Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* into English in four volumes, but it can only be of interest to specialists. His rendition of *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian doesn't do justice to the original, but, for the sake of fairness, it

should be mentioned that Carroll's satire can hardly be translated at all. I do not like Joseph Brodsky's poems either in Russian or in English. And very little modern poetry is being translated into Russian nowadays. Translators try their hand again and again at Shakespeare (a new version of *Romeo and Juliet* appeared recently) and other classics; others translate into English Russian poets such as Griboyedov (who is a contemporary of Pushkin's). I would like to hear from readers of the *Translation Journal* what modern Russian authors they have read recently, and what they think of Russian literature apart from Tolstoy, Chekhov and Solzhenitsyn.

Translators and interpreters in this country are still very much underestimated. Translation was introduced as an occupation in the *Labor Code* only some 15-20 years ago. Those who work as translators can hardly win their bread, let alone butter. Most employers first ask your age, bust, waist and hip measurements, and only after that will they ask what language you "know." The publishing industry has still much of the same attitude as it did during the cold war, and it is very difficult to persuade anyone to try and publish even the most famous books. Take for example Robert M. Pirsig with his *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. He offered it to 121 publishers; only 8 gave some response, and now it is a world bestseller. In Russia it was translated twice some 10 and 5 years ago, but you can only read it on the Internet. The same thing is true in interpretation. Nearly everyone who can say whassyouname is trying to make a buck at translation or interpretation, and this is why pay rates are very low. A retired translator receives a pension equivalent to \$15-20 a month when the food basket alone costs about twice as much. One cannot move to the major cities because of sky-high rental costs there and acute competition by amateurs. There are no

translation agencies in this country outside the major cities and those are unwilling to deal with outsiders.

As soon as a translator has a chance to get out of the profession, he does so with no regrets whatsoever. So my outlook for the future is rather gloomy. Good luck to those who are still willing to try!
