# Translators as Martyrs: the Power of Translation

Judith Woodsworth
Mount Saint Vincent University
Halifax, Canada

## I. Translators Then and Now

Translators fit into existing power structures to varying degrees. When their work is viewed as necessary, timely and appropriate, the target culture absorbs it easily and willingly. On the other hand, when values conveyed by translated texts come into conflict with those of the target society, translators are criticized, outlawed, and even martyred for their work.

We are familiar with some of the martyrs of translation, in the forefront of change at times of great cultural upheaval: John Huss, Czech translator and commentator of the Bible; William Tyndale, English translator of the Bible; and Étienne Dolet, French printer and humanist. All three were burned at the stake.

We are less aware, perhaps, of the persecution to which twentieth-century translators are subjected. In many parts of the world, they are still being silenced, tortured, and even put to death for the work they do. While they do not necessarily practice translation as a primary occupation—like many translators of the past they are writers, journalists, political activists—they use the translated word to achieve some of their goals.

Against the backdrop of the three illustrious cases from the past, this paper will examine a number of examples from recent history. The "crime" of these contemporary martyrs of translation is to have introduced new ideas that run counter to the ideologies imposed by those who hold the power. The gravity of the punishment derives not only from the power of the authorities inflicting it, but also from the power of the translated word itself.

## II. Martyrs of the Past

### John Huss

The Czech religious reformer John Huss (Jan Hus, c.1371-1415) studied theology at the University of Prague and was ordained a priest. Influenced by the ideas of John Wycliffe (c.1320-84), the Englishman who came to be known as the "first Protestant", Huss became the leader of the Czech reform movement. He criticized the wealth and corruption of the Church. He gained popular support and became dean and then rector of the University of Prague.

Huss translated the Bible into Czech and also published a commentary of the Scriptures in his native language. As Huss became involved in the politics of the Church, and in particular the politics of the Great Schism, which forced him to choose between rival claimants to the papacy, he gradually lost the support of those in power. He was forbidden to preach and was excommunicated. Abandoned by the archbishop of Prague, the king, and the university, he was driven from Prague in 1412. He travelled to the Council of Constance, which had been convened to heal the Great Schism and reform the church. He was arrested, condemned for heresy, and

burned at the stake. Huss's teachings and works did not go unappreciated; after his execution, they were fundamental to the development of Czech national self-expression, and his work as a translator helped shape a Czech literary language.

**William Tyndale**

William Tyndale (c.1494-1536) was the first Englishman to translate the Bible directly from the original languages. He attended Oxford and was ordained in 1519. Early on he was accused of heresy, and considered to be a rabble-rouser. Tyndale went on to Cambridge, not long after Erasmus had taught there and promoted the Greek language and new ideas of the Renaissance. In 1523, Tyndale went to London to ask for the support of the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, for his project to translate the Bible into English. Dr. Tunstall had recently been in Germany and was suspicious of what he considered to be a heretical enterprise. When Tyndale failed to get his support, he left for Germany, where he met Martin Luther. Inspired by Luther, Tyndale started translating the New Testament from the original Greek into English.

Tyndale lived like a fugitive in Germany, but continued his work despite intimidation from the authorities. At the time, the Catholic Church was still opposed to making sacred texts available in the language of the people, and royalty was on the side of the Church. Tyndale's activities were seen to be dangerous. Ports were watched, and copies of his English New Testament were burned as soon as they reached England. Its readers were persecuted, and there was a public burning of Tyndale's Bibles in the streets of London. The authorities were so ruthless that only one copy of Tyndale's first complete New Testament is known to have survived. Tyndale also learned Hebrew and published the first five books of the Old Testament in translation. Betrayed by a fellow Englishman, he was arrested by agents of the Emperor Charles V. On October 6, 1536, Tyndale, was strangled and burned at the stake at Vilvorde, near Brussels.

By contrast with the enormous Bibles produced on the Continent, Tyndale's Bibles were pocket sized. This had important implications: the Bible could be easily smuggled (the English Church was still opposed to reading the Bible in the vernacular) and carried around and read by ordinary people. Tyndale once said that his goal was to allow a boy driving a plough to get to know the Scriptures.

Only a few months after the execution of Tyndale, the tide turned in England. Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church in Rome in order to divorce the first of his six wives. This precipitated the Protestant Reformation, which in fact had been prepared in the background for some time. Henry ordered that a copy of the English Bible be placed in every church in his kingdom. Ironically, this Bible was in large part Tyndale's, but it did not bear his name, since Tyndale had been an outspoken Lutheran heretic and had vehemently opposed Henry VIII's divorce. Tyndale's translations, stripped of their prefaces and glosses, were published again and again under other names (Daniell 1989 and 1994; Delisle and Woodsworth 1995).

### Étienne Dolet

With the success of the Reformation in France, both the Church and political authorities adopted a much stricter attitude to the circulation of ideas, and hence to translation. The most famous victim of this change in attitude was Étienne Dolet (1508-46). Dolet started his career under the protection of the powers of his day. He travelled to Italy and stayed in Padua for many years, a university town in which he discovered new humanist ideas which were contrary to the doctrines of Christianity. At the University of Toulouse in France, he came into contact with the conservative wing of the Catholic Church and reacted against it. He established himself as a printer in Lyon and began to publish the works of certain writers considered to be suspect on moral or theological grounds—such as Marot, Lefèvre d'Étaples, Erasmus, who were translators of religious texts. Dolet was continually in trouble with the authorities. He was saved once by the intervention of King François I, but was eventually arrested, charged and executed.

The Counter-Reformation was spreading through France: the Church was aware of the dangers of humanism and had begun to take action against it systematically. Dolet was put on trial at the Sorbonne, the faculty of theology of the University of Paris, for his translation of *Axiochus*, a work attributed to Plato. He was condemned for having added a few words in one passage. These words were seen to cast doubt on the immortality of the soul and were judged to have been "dictated by heresy" (Cary 1963: 14). On August 3, 1546, Dolet was burned, along with his books, because his translation had allegedly been too free. At the time, the centres of power were in a position to intervene directly, swiftly and effectively. They could thwart a person by putting him to death; if they considered his work dangerous, they could curb its impact by burning it, too (Delisle and Woodsworth 1995).

These examples, although they are taken from a time that is quite distant from us, cannot be dismissed as impossible in our day and age. Depending on the country, culture and power structures, translators and, more generally, language professionals such as writers and publishers, can end up in similar situations.

## III. Translators Today

### The *Satanic Verses* file

Writer Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay, India in 1947, is internationally known for his controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*, published in 1989. Rushdie is an Indian Muslim; after some time living in Pakistan, he eventually went to live in England. In *The Satanic Verses*, he describes the birth of a religion resembling Islam, in a manner that was considered offensive and blasphemous by Muslims. This led to a *fatwa*, or edict of death, issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. Not only has Rushdie's assassination been called for, the book has been banned in most Muslim countries, and its translators have also been targeted.

Aziz Nesin, was a prolific Turkish writer, editor and translator, whose views often landed him in jail. He was the author of around 100 books, many of them novels of political and

social criticism. In 1993, Nesin announced plans to publish, either on his own or with the help of associates, a Turkish translation of *The Satanic Verses*, despite an 1989 ban on the import and distribution of the book in Turkey. Interestingly, neither Rushdie nor his publisher had given permission for Nesin to publish the book, so the publication of a translation would also have been in breach of copyright. Nesin received death threats and a pro-Iranian Turkish newspaper called for the *fatwa* against Rushdie to be extended to Nesin as well.

Excerpts from his translation of *The Satanic Verses* were published in Nesin's left-wing newspaper, *Aydinlik*, in May 1993. In July of that year, 37 people were killed and many others injured in Sivas, in eastern Turkey, when the hotel in which Nesin and others were staying was set on fire by Muslim extremists. Most of the victims were writers and singers attending a cultural festival. Among those killed was Asim Berzirci, a literary critic, writer and translator. Firemen are reported to have been seen assaulting Nesin as he was being rescued from the burning hotel, but Nesin did escape the fire with minor injuries.

The Turkish government launched a court case against Nesin and his newspaper for "insulting Islam" and "showing contempt for the moral character of the State". The Committee to Protect Journalists awarded Nesin its annual International Press Freedom Award in 1993. He died of a heart attack in 1995, at the age of 80.

A number of other cases have been compiled by the Foundation for Democracy in Iran (a 1996 data base), describing alleged victims of Iranian government "hit squads". Hitoshi Igarishi, a Japanese translator, was killed in Tokyo in 1991 for having translated Salman Rushdie's *Satanic verses*. He apparently had received death threats beforehand. The Italian translator Alberto Ettore Capriolo was wounded in a knife attack at his home in Milan in 1991, but survived. His assailants wanted to know "where Rushdie was hiding".

William Nygaard, a Norwegian publisher, was shot three times from behind outside his home in a suburb of Oslo in 1993, but survives. His publishing company, Aschehoug, had published the novel in 1989. This was one of the first foreign translations despite condemnation from Muslims. Nygaard had been outspoken in defence of Rushdie's right to self-expression and had received death threats before. The translator of the book, Kari Risvik, said that Nygaard was heroic compared to other publishers of *The Satanic Verses*, who had generally remained anonymous.

**Some other examples**

**China**

The following cases illustrate two kinds of issues in China today: the struggle of ethnic minorities to affirm their identity and the central government's opposition, in Tibet for example; and the efforts of certain Chinese dissidents to speak up against the regime, with consequences such as the Tienanmen Square uprising in 1989 and the imprisonment of some well-known opponents of the government.

Jampel Changchub and Ngawang Phulchung are Tibetan monks from the Drepung Monastery near Lhasa. In 1989, they were sentenced to 19 years imprisonment, the longest sentences against prisoners of conscience imposed in recent years by the authorities in Tibet. Ngawang Phulchung, aged 35, was accused of "forming a counter-revolutionary organization" which produced "reactionary literature" and "venomously slandered China's socialist system". Jampel Changchub, aged about 30, alleged to be a principal member of this group, was accused of "collecting information and passing it to an enemy".

In 1987, Jampel Changchub and Ngawang Phulchung had taken part in a peaceful demonstration in favour of Tibetan independence from China. As a result, they were detained for four months, along with 19 other fellow monks. That demonstration marked the beginning of a wave of protests by Tibetans advocating independence from China. The group to which Jampel Changchub and Ngawang Phulchung belonged was formed in January 1989. Among the "reactionary literature" that the Group was accused of printing was a Tibetan translation of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Other documents included reports on dissident activity in Tibet and a document entitled *The Meaning of the Precious Democratic Constitution of Tibet*, which analyzed the concept of "democracy" on the basis of the 1963 draft constitution for Tibet promulgated by the Dalai Lama in exile. Jampel Changchub and Ngawang Phulchung are serving their sentence in Drapchi prison in Lhasa. Little information is available about their conditions of detention because of strict official controls on information. They have been adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International.

Tong Yi served as the assistant and interpreter to prominent dissident Wei Jingsheng. She was taken into custody after alerting the foreign press that Wei had been arrested by public security officials on April 1, 1994. She was initially accused of forging an official stamp from her university on a document submitted to Columbia University in New York, where she had applied to enter a post-graduate program. However, she told her relatives that "more than 99%" of the questions directed at her during more than 30 interrogation sessions in Beijing concerned Wei Jingsheng. "We cannot separate your case from his", Tong Yi was reportedly told by officials in Beijing when they accused her of being an "accessory" of Wei. She served a sentence of two and a half years of "re-education through labour", without charge or trial. She has since been released.

**Iran**

Ahmad Miralai, an author and translator, was reportedly detained by security forces in October 1995 and taken to a hotel for questioning. A few hours later, his body was found in Isfahan. Miralai had been scheduled to introduce author V.S. Naipaul at a lecture earlier that day. The government initially claimed he had died of a stroke and later said it was a heart attack, but his family and friends believe his death is linked to his arrest. Miralai was one of 134 writers who signed a petition in October 1994 calling for greater freedom of expression. He had reportedly been called for interrogation by security forces in Tehran and Isfahan on at least 20 occasions in the few months before his death.

Born in Isfahan, Iran, in 1942, Miralai was the first translator of works of Octavio Paz, V.S. Naipaul, Milan Kundera and Jorge Luis Borges into Persian. He also translated Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and Lawrence Durrell. Miralai studied literature at Isfahan University and later at Leeds University in England. He then became involved with a literary magazine and began translating. His work took him all over the world. Between 1976 and 1980, for example, he was in charge of the Iranian Cultural Centre in Karachi and New Delhi. In the early 1990s, he helped set up a publishing house and a bookshop in Isfahan. He also lectured on a casual basis at universities in Iran and Pakistan. He had wanted to translate Shakespeare's collected works into Farsi, but was unable to carry out his plans before his untimely death.

Woman writer and translator Mariam Firouz was imprisoned in April 1983. She was tried in 1986 before the Islamic Revolutionary Court, which sentenced her to death, but this sentence was later commuted. She was apparently threatened with execution in early 1989. She is being held in prison in Tehran, often in solitary confinement, and with a number of health problems. Born in 1915, Mariam Firouz had held senior positions, as a secretary or president, in the Democratic Organization of Iranian Women, and was married to the Secretary General of the Tudeh Party (Iranian Communist Party). She has written her memoirs, entitled *Familiar Faces*, and translated short stories and French texts about the Vietnam war. She was the editor of Iran's only women's magazine.

**Guatemala**

Alaide Foppa was a feminist, university lecturer, art critic, poet, broadcaster, and translator. She disappeared in Guatemala City on 19 December 1980 at the age of 64. The Guatemalan government claimed that guerillas had captured her for ransom money. According to eyewitnesses, however, she was forced by an army commando unit from her mother's car. Her husband had almost been the victim of similar abduction attempt in 1978, and her journalist son was forced to leave Guatemala in 1980 after his name appeared on right-wing death squad lists.

She had been living in exile in Mexico City since 1954. Until her disappearance, she taught literature at the University of Mexico and was an art critic for the newspapers. Foppa was a distinguished translator of Italian, French and English literature. A leading member of Amnesty International and women's rights activist, she helped to found *FEM*, Mexico's first feminist magazine. She was also an active supporter of indigenous women of Guatemala. Shortly before her disappearance, she published a collection of poems entitled *Las Palabras y El Tiempo* (Words and Time). Her body was found in 1981.

**Turkey**

Ayse Nur Zarakolu and her publishing house, Belge, have published over 200 books in the past 15 years. Zarakolu was sentenced to a two-year prison term in December 1994 for publishing a Turkish translation of *The Armenian Taboo* by French author Yves Ternon. On

September 28, 1995, she was sentenced to five months in prison in connection with a book about the "Kurdish Question".

Prosecutors in Istanbul have brought charges against Mr. Ertugrul Kurkcu, translator, and Ms. Ayse Nur Zarakolu as publisher, for translating and publishing a November 1995 report by the Human Rights Watch Arms Project, *Weapons Transfers and Violations of the Laws of War in Turkey*. Mr. Kurkcu and Ms. Zarakolu have been charged under Article 159/1 of the Turkish *Penal Code* for "defamation and belittling of the state's security and military forces."

Kurkcu was a member of left-wing student groups in the 1960s, a time of student demonstrations and police and para-military violence. After long years in prison, Kurkcu was released under a general amnesty. He has been actively involved in publishing left-wing cultural works since then. He has recently visited Australia to promote the "Freedom and Solidarity Party", an alliance of socialists, environmentalists, feminists, pacifists, and other marginalized groups.

Human Rights Watch was permitted to send a Danish newspaperman to the trial as an official observer. Human Rights Watch also invited people to protest against the charges against Ertugrul Kurkcu and Ayse Zarakolu, by attending the hearing or sending expressions of protest to the prime minister of Turkey. In March 1997, Kurkcu was given a 10-month suspended sentence, which indicates the effectiveness of such intervention by human rights groups.

**IV. Translation and Power: the Power of Translation**

Some of the examples set out above pertain to people who are not just translators, but also writers, publishers, or other language professionals. This is no coincidence, because what makes a writer appear offensive, threatening or dangerous to his or her government or culture is the expression of something "foreign", and this foreignness is often conveyed through the translation of texts from another country or culture. Translation, by its very nature, negotiates *exchange* and *change*. Translators import values from one culture to another, and these foreign values, which derive from a different cultural system, are never the same as those of the target culture. In some cases, the imported material—literary forms, or philosophical, political, scientific ideas—can be complementary and hence beneficial to the receiving culture. The new ideas can nourish the society of the translator and help to advance it. In other cases, however, there is contradiction: openness is revealed to a closed society; feminist ideas clash with the values of a male-dominated culture; the tenets of one religion conflict with the doctrines of another, and so on.

If translators threaten the power structure, they will be opposed, persecuted or prosecuted, even imprisoned or killed. These are very extreme cases, but they are not isolated or rare. They occur in countries that can be characterized as repressive: that is, the prevailing ideologies, which may be political, religious, or a combination of the two, are supported by laws, along with military or police structures that allow those in power to control the flow of information and prevent opposition to their set of values.

But translators and their work can be repressed in more subtle ways, even in so-called "democratic" societies, through choices that publishers or editors make, for example, as to what ultimately gets into print. Even if the translated work is accepted for publication, editors or revisors may alter the translation, making certain stylistic choices that will, in their opinion, make the translation "fit better" into what is considered good writing. There may be attempts to domesticate the translation, that is, to render it less foreign to domestic readers—a practice against which Lawrence Venuti, for one, has protested in his critique of "fluent translation" and the "invisibility of the translators" (Venuti, 1995).

These reactions against translators, their choices, their work, however extreme, illustrate not only how vulnerable translators are to authorities in power, but just how powerful translation itself is perceived to be, and how much responsibility, therefore, translators have in performing their functions in society.

To conclude, I wish to acknowledge the background research done by my former student and colleague Raynald Adams, who has published articles on the subject (1995, for example). Adams compiles information from various sources, both print and electronic: the international writers association PEN, which has a "Writers in Prison Committee"; International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX); Amnesty International (AI); the Committee to Protect Journalists; Human Rights Watch (HRW); to cite only the main ones. The objective of these organizations is to make the public worldwide aware of the extent and gravity of human rights violations, and, secondly, to encourage people to communicate their opposition to the authorities. Adams himself is an active member of Amnesty International and continues to gather such information as a means of promoting the human rights of translators and other language professionals. In some cases, the circulation of information and resulting lobbying efforts have improved the situation or contributed to the release of prisoners.[1]

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