The translators who shook the world: journalists and translators in the Russian Revolution

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Abstract

Shortly after the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in February 1917, foreign newspapers and news agencies dispatched some of their best journalists, including a group of highly rated women reporters, to send their chronicles from a conflict which left an enduring memory in their lives. Most correspondents who travelled to Russia soon realised that their news coverage would depend on their recruitment of translators, interpreters, or other language mediators. Drawing on a selection of historical, journalistic and translation research sources, as well as on a number of memoirs, personal accounts and biographies of foreign correspondents, in this article we examine a number of unexplored topics related to the complementary and sometimes contradictory relationship between journalists and translators and interpreters during the Russian Revolution: (a) the demanding communication issues faced by foreign correspondents on their arrival in the country; (b) the meaningful contribution, frequently obscured in journalistic accounts, of translators or interpreters in the newsgathering process; (c) the ambivalent relationship between journalists and translators and how their divergent political ideologies might have interfered with their bond of trust; and (d) the role of correspondents within activist networks, especially in the Bolshevik party, when performing propaganda activities, which included diverse translation assignments.

Key words: Journalistic translation, history of translation, translation and conflict, translation and activism, Russian Revolution.

1. Introduction

The Russian Revolution of 1917 has been described as one of the most influential events that contributed to shape contemporary history throughout the 20th century. Only a few decades after the establishment of the Soviet Union, one-third of the countries of the world were ruled by regimes based upon its foundations (Figes 2017, p. 21). The outset of the revolutionary process dates back to a demonstration of thousands of female textile labourers on 23 February joining their voices with other women of varied social classes on the streets of Petrograd to demand equal rights on International Women's Day (Beevor 2022, p. 19). During the following weeks, more than 200,000 demonstrators of diverse ideologies engaged in strikes and mass rallies to protest against food shortages, lack of freedom and the devastating repercussions of World War I (Smith 2002, p. 12). After the slaughter of protesters by security forces on 26 February, the mutiny of the Petrograd garrisons turned the disorder into a full-blown revolution. By 3 March, the abdication of

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Tsar Nikolai II symbolised the collapse of the autocratic regime that had ruled over Russia for three centuries. The February Revolution brought about a Provisional Government, chosen by the members of the Duma, the lower house of the parliament, first led by Constitutional Democrat Prince Georgy Lvov, and later in July by Socialist Revolutionary Aleksandr Kérenski (Pipes 1991, p. 516), whose most urgent plans were to maintain Russia's commitment to its Western allies in the war and elect a constitutional assembly.

In the early stages of the revolutionary protests in Petrograd, a group of foreign correspondents, such as the Frenchman Ludovic Naudeau (*Le Temps*), Britons Guy Beringer (Reuter's), Robert Winton (*The Times*), Arthur Ransome (*Daily News* and *Observer*); the New Zealander Harold Williams (*Daily Chronicle*) and the Americans Arno Dosch Fleurot (*New York World*) or Walter C. Whiffen (Associated Press), were already sending their reports, "though generally without by-lines" (Rappaport 2016, p. 29). Given the unruly progress of the revolution and its consequences for the course of the world conflict, newspapers and news agencies send out more reporters, including Anglo-Irish Associated Press Robert E. C. Long, or a group of American journalists such as photographer Donald C. Thompson, *Saturday Evening Post* newsmen Isaac Marcosson and Ernest Poole, and John Reed, reporting for *The Masses.* Several pioneering women reporters, some of them with experience as war correspondents and solid reputation as political activists and suffragettes, were also drawn to the revolution. These included the Canadian Florence MacLeod Harper, working with photojournalist Donald C. Thompson for *Leslie's Weekly*; Rhetta Childe Dorr for the New York *Evening Mail*; Bessie Beatty for the *San Francisco Bulletin*; and Louise Bryant for the Bell Syndicate. While male journalists were expected to gather news on politicians, battles and casualties and dispatch them as soon as possible (Hollihan 2014, p. 25), women journalists were often at the time seen as a novelty, and their stories would just be quoted in an article signed by a male reporter, or printed weeks later, as is the case of Bessie Beatty's first-hand account of the fall of the Winter Palace. Furthermore, Rhetta Dorr, Bessie Beatty, Louise Bryant, and their colleagues were expected to report "from a woman's point of view" on a wider range of topics, from the daily trials of the civilian population to deeper insights of the revolutionary turmoil (McGlashan 1985, p. 55).

The period between the American Civil War and the end of World War I would be a "Golden Age" for war correspondents, given the rise of the popular press, the increasing use of the telegraph, the tardy introduction of organised censorship, and the fact that, for the first time in history, it was physically and financially possible to send

reporters to a conflict within weeks, or even days. An elite corps of journalists, who themselves became the heroes of their own stories, was then born, ready to answer to the demands of a growing reading public for war news (Knightley 1976, p. 42). However, despite a few exceptions, most foreign correspondents who travelled to Russia in the first months of 1917 had an insufficient knowledge of the country, the driving forces behind the uprising, or the political leaders engaged in the revolution. Struggling reporters with serious communication problems soon faced the pressing need to recruit translators, interpreters, guides, and other language mediators, most of them bilingual or multilingual speakers and non-professional translators simultaneously engaged in other occupations, who yet still played, as Meylaerts (2008, p. 95) and Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva (2012, p. 131) point out in reference to other contexts, an important role in history in a time of scarce or nonexistent institutional or academic recognition of the profession as such.

Upon their return from reporting abroad, or later in their lives, many correspondents published memoirs depicting themselves as members of an elite group of journalists with a mythical noble calling, who performed the role of moral guardians, or witnesses to history's failings (Murrell 2015, pp. 27-29). While other fellow correspondents wrote first-hand accounts of their exploits during the revolutionary period in Russia, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919), a book by American journalist John Reed based on the articles he sent to *The Masses,* with a circulation of sixty thousand copies, eclipsed them all. Reed, a socialist activist and experienced reporter of the Mexican Revolution and the world war trenches, definitely left his hallmark on how one of the most significant historical events of the 20th century has been understood (Rodgers 2020, pp. 510 & 526).

Most of such autobiographical and biographical narratives, which have perpetuated the myth of the correspondent as a heroic figure, always at the centre of the news, have either concealed, mentioned briefly, or often obscured other team members in the newsgathering process, such as translators or interpreters (or fixers, as they are preferably called today), with whom journalists have traditionally established a hierarchical relationship in spite of their significant contribution to foreign reporting resulting from their command of languages, their contacts within the local networks of political or warring factions, or their capacity to provide security in hostile territories (Murrell 2015, pp. 27-29).

The role of fixers as translators working alongside foreign correspondents is not a passive one. The act of translation can be fraught with moments of disconnection and miscommunication, and fixers, in their capacity as language mediators, may make active decisions about what to say and how to say it, guided by their personal understanding of the newsgathering situation, and their opinion may differ from that of the journalist (Palmer 2019, p. 32). The process of translating and interpreting is often viewed with suspicion by many international reporters, who believe that language rendering should be "literal", so that the journalist remains impartial from the subjectivity of news mediators. This assumption contributes to foreign correspondents' occasional conflicting feelings towards their fixers and interpreters, an ambivalence portrayed in many autobiographical accounts of journalists in their interactions with translators (Palmer & Fontan 2007, p. 18; Murrell 2015, p. 67; Palmer 2019, p. 116).

Communication and journalism scholars have seldom looked upon the centrality of translation and of language mediators in the emergence of journalism as a profession and the dissemination of news, basically because translation has been regarded as a secondary activity, if not the source of negative interlinguistic deviations. Even though Journalistic Translation Research has gained recognition as a relevant field of investigation of its own within Translation Studies, historical research in this area is still scarce, mainly because the availability of newspapers from a certain period of time and the compilation of comparable corpus of historical translated news texts remain a challenge for academics (Valdeón 2012, pp. 850-865; Valdeón 2020, pp. 1644-1661).

This article is based on an analysis of a wide range of memoirs of foreign correspondents rooted, in some cases, in their own articles published during the Russian Revolution; research on the history of journalism in the Russian Revolution; historical studies on the revolutionary period; autobiographies and biographies of Tsar Nicholas II, foreign reporters, revolutionaries, or translators; and research studies on translation and journalism, translation spaces and translation and conflict. It discusses a number of until now uncharted issues within the field of Journalistic Translation Studies in the context of the Russian Revolution, such as (a) the challenging communication issues encountered by foreign correspondents on their arrival in the country; (b) the significant contribution, often obscured, if not invisible, in journalistic accounts of translators, interpreters or other language mediators in the newsgathering process; (c) the ambivalent relationship between journalists and translators and how their contrasting political ideologies might have interfered with their bond of trust and even terminated their collaboration; and (d) the role

of correspondents within activists networks, especially in the Bolshevik party, when performing propaganda activities which included diverse translation assignments.

2. Communication issues. Correspondents in search of translators and interpreters

Upon their arrival in Russia, foreign journalists were faced with diverse challenges and obstacles. During the first hours of the revolution, as Robert E. C. Long (1919, p. 37) noted, telegraph messages were under the control of the Okhrana, the Tsarist secret police, which regulated all dispatches sent by correspondents. Military censorship, however, broke down in January 1917, as editors of publications ceased to submit advance copies to its headquarters (Pipes 1991, p. 468). According to French journalist Marylie Markovitch (1918, p. 41), the right of everyone to know the truth had been restored in the early days of the Provisional Government, although Canadian Florence Macleod Harper (1918, p. 269) complained that some of the articles sent out from the country reporting on the real state of affairs never got past the Russian censorship, regardless of what government was in office, and that they were even held by the British censors or were never published by their own newspapers.

While for instance *The Guardian* correspondent Morgan Philip Price was fully immersed in the country's life, language and culture, most foreign reporters found themselves unable to articulate a single word in Russian. Bessie Beatty (1918, p. 21) recalls how she walked around stopping people to find out if they spoke English just to always get a shake of the head and a kind "Nyet, nyet, barishna!"; whereas Chicago journalist and attatché to the US embassy James L. Houghteling (1918, p. 7) remembers wandering like a "lost soul" at a train station asking himself why nobody spoke no other language but Russian. Harold Williams, Arthur Ramsone and other reporters decided to study the language shortly upon arrival (Rodgers 2020, p. 610; Ransome 1967, p. 161). In the case of John Reed, his fluency in Russian has been a puzzling matter for his biographers. Gelb (1973, p. 155) notes that although he had picked up some phrases on an earlier visit to the country, neither he nor his wife, Louise Bryant, spoke the language. Homberger (1990, p. 140) observes that his sympathetic critics believed that he compensated for his lack of Russian with his resourcefulness as a journalist, while his detractors thought it was a discredit to him, since he was only fed information coming from his Bolshevik friends. To help her with her lack of fluency in Russian, Bessie Beatty (1918, p. 327) tracked down Captain Henry S. Brown, a New York newspaperman attached to the American Red Cross Mission to Petrograd, and relied on his daily

summary of alleged news from all over the country, an amazing combination of truth and fiction. Louise Bryant (1918, pp. 248-249), for her part, maintained that a daily bulletin, gathered by the French government at the price of a few rubles a month, was then the most trustworthy supply of information available in the city because of its "unprejudiced news, without comment, and translations of leading editorials from all the Russian papers". Bryant (1918, p. 22) also believed that another way of overcoming the communication barrier was resorting to the foreign languages spoken by the educated local population, such as French, traditionally the lingua franca of the Russian bureaucracy and aristocracy (Rappaport 2016, p. 3). The *Journal de St-Pétersbourg,* much in demand during wartime, was then considered the semi-official organ of the Russian Foreign Office, with so many military attachés in the city. Isaac Marcosson (1917, p. 152), an American journalist reporting for the *Saturday Evening Post*, and Robert E. C. Long (1919, p. 73) recall their interviews in French with the "emotional and eloquent" Prince Georgy Lvov, first Minister-Chairman of the Provisional Government after the February Revolution, while Bryant (1918, p. 115) points out that the French spoken by Aleksandr Kérenski, Minister of Justice, Minister of War and second Minister-Chairman of the Provisional Government until the October Revolution, came down to a few words. Journalists were also aware that English was the language spoken by the imperial family. Tsar Nicholas II usually conversed in English with his wife Alexandra Feodorovna, the granddaughter of Queen Victoria. The Tsarina hardly ever expressed herself in Russian until the Japanese War of 1904-1905, when she decided to start using it to show her commitment to the country (Service 2017, p. 871), and Grand Duchess Elizabeth, the older sister of Alexandra, was pleased to talk in English in her interview with Dorr (1917, p. 148). After the Tsar abdicated, the Romanovs were secluded at their Tsarskoye Selo palace and, according to Robert E. C. Long (1919, p. 12), during his exercise hours, the monarch, whose jailer, Staff-Captain Kotzebue, was fluent in French and English, was only allowed to speak in Russian.

Since the language problem impeded foreign reporters from reading local newspapers, interviewing leaders of the revolution, talking to the local population, and finding reliable sources of information, Dorr (1924, p. 332) soon concluded that a priority for a correspondent was to find an efficient interpreter, not an easy task at the time. Some translators were hired by foreign delegations, such as Slavicist Samuel Harper, political adviser and guide interpreter to David R. Francis, the American ambassador in Russia, or Edith Kerby, attached to the British Embassy, where she read the daily press and compiled

reports for the Anglo-Russian Propaganda (Rappaport 2016, p. 10 & 190). Rhetta Dorr (1924, p. 332) finally recruited a Russian university student, partly educated in English, who read newspapers for the Associated Press in the mornings, and she defined her performance as "excellent" and "irreplaceable" in her understanding of the events of those turbulent weeks. Helen Smith, an American citizen who had travelled to Russia four times since the outbreak of the war, spoke the language and "had a genuine understanding and a very real appreciation of the people", translated newspaper articles for Bessie Beatty and was her guide on her expeditions to the countryside (Beatty 1918, pp. 134 & 140). Beatty also counted on the assistance of a local interpreter called Marya, a "Russian student who at eighteen had more knowledge stored away in her little black head than the Western woman of forty". Marya was really helpful to her as the information she gathered from the queues gave Beatty a better idea of the people's attitudes regarding issues such as the lack of bread, the high cost of living and their disappointment with the new governments (Beatty 1918, pp. 316-317).

Interpreters would often alternatively collaborate with different journalists. Peter Bukowski, a young Chicago man born into a Polish family with "an aptitude for languages", whom Beatty described as "my voice, my ears, and my bodyguard", travelled with her to the war front (Beatty 1918, p. 47), and Yacob Peters, a thirty-two-year-old Latvian who spoke English with a London accent, worked both with Bryant and Beatty. In March 1917, American photojournalist Donald C. Thompson made a formal request to the Military General Staff for a Russian decorated soldier, named Boris, to be assigned to him as an interpreter once he had recovered from his war wounds, as he had attended school in Brooklyn while his family was exiled in America after the riots of 1905. Boris was well educated, spoke fluent English and had already been employed by the American Embassy in 1915. Through his interpreter, Thompson received information about what was happening in the factory districts, the lack of food, the Cossack's insubordination, the waving of red flags by the revolutionaries and the numerous dead bodies on the snow on both Mikhailovsky Street and Nevsky Prospekt (Thompson 1918, pp. 31-61). In the heat of a demonstration, Thompson himself was arrested by a police officer in civilian clothes in the company of Boris, although they were liberated shortly afterwards by a furious mob of children, women, and soldiers. Boris also translated the banners, slogans and pamphlets calling for people to take arms and a speech of Kérenski on the steps of the Duma pleading the soldiers to obey their officers while he claimed that nobody would be executed without a trial (Thompson 1918, pp. 80-87 & 112).

Juvenale Tarasov worked as an interpreter for *The Saturday Evening Post* reporter Ernest Poole for several weeks in Petrograd, Moscow, and other smaller cities. Tarasov, of noble birth through his mother's family, was a farmer, a chemical engineer educated at St. Petersburg University, a violin maker, a banker's clerk, a business promoter, an anthropologist, a traveller, and a translator who rendered into Russian, among other books, *Up from Slavery*, an autobiography by Afro-American leader Booker T. Washington (Saul 2017/1918, p. xiii). Tarasov met Poole when the journalist was reporting on the 1905 revolution and assisted him as a guide on his trips to Ukraine and the Caucasus. Poole kept in touch with Tarasov on his second trip to Russia to cover the revolution. They started to work together again on the third night of the July insurrection, during the bloody clashes between Kérenski's troops and the Bolshevik Red Guards. Tarasov was very pessimistic about the future of Russia for he believed that Petrograd was chaotic, and that the Hermitage might be destroyed due to its proximity to the Winter Palace, the headquarters of the Provisional Government, and because he witnessed how most of the middle and upper classes were fleeing the city. The bond of trust between journalist and translator became so close that Tarasov would be featured in some of the books written by Poole, especially in *The Village: Russia's Crisis* (1918) and in *The Dark People: Russian Impressions* (1919) (Saul 2017/1918, pp. xiii & xviii).

Alexander Gumberg's particular role in the revolution is related to his performance as an interpreter at the United States Embassy in Petrograd, and for correspondents Louise Bryant, Bessie Beatty, John Reed, and Albert Rhys Williams. Born into a Jewish family from Odessa in 1887, Gumberg had emigrated at the age of fifteen to New York, where he managed to provide financial aid to his family back home. A naturalised American citizen, he arrived in Russia in late spring 1917 as a business representative for several American companies. His skills as a translator and his contacts within the Bolshevik party led to him being hired by Colonel Raymond Robins, an influential individual in charge of the American Red Cross in Russia, through whose friendship he gained access to the financial circles of Wall Street and of the Republican Party. In September and October 1917, Robins also resorted to other translators, among them Sarah Kropotkin, daughter of the anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin, and informally employed members of the American colony with inside information on local political affairs, such as Associated Press representative Charles Smith, and the aforementioned Louise Bryant, Bessie Beatty, John Reed and Albert Rhys Williams, whom Robin met at the Hotel d'Europe, where they were joined by Gumberg, who would

put aside his financial activities and become their guide and translator (Libbey 2014, pp. 11-15). Being a former business manager of *Novy Mir*, a magazine published by exiled Russian social democrats in New York, Gumberg was a shrewd resourceful man, with a sardonic humour which spared no one, especially when he referred to his journalist friends: "Every time I see American reporters, they want to know what took place somewhere where they weren't" (Gardner 1982, p. 133).

3. Trusting language mediators. Journalists and translators as propagandists

Translation sites are considered to be polyglot spaces through which languages compose ever-changing palimpsests where the wounds of history can be decoded. Translation, thus, is a powerful framework for describing the linguistic landscape of a region, a country, or a city, shaped by a succession of political regimes, wars and revolutions (Simon 2017, pp. 1-6). St. Petersburg, in this sense, emerged as a translation site where the iconoclastic violence derived from the revolution of February destroyed the symbols of imperial power and privileges, where public places were renamed and taken over by new dwellers who claimed their place in history, and where languages, forbidden under Tsarist legislation, were to be spoken again. Since the outbreak of the world war, there had been increasing hostility towards citizens of German ancestry. The government had deported thousands of them, banned the use of their language and closed down their newspapers (Gatrell 2014, p. 179). Mobs ransacked the German Embassy in Marinskaya Square, citizens changed their names to make them more Russian and the Tsar, whose wife was half-German, and also under suspicion of being a spy, decreed the change of the Germanic toponym of the capital St. Petersburg to the Slavonic Petrograd (Figes 2017, p. 337). On her arrival at her hotel, Louise Bryant (1918, pp. 36-37) saw a large sign above her bed forbidding anyone to speak German under a penalty of fifteen hundred rubles. France, on the contrary, was Russia's nearest Western ally against Germany and a prominent member of the European club of democratic nations which the newly born republic wanted to join. During Russia's incipient revolution, there was a "fit of francophilia". Books on the French Revolution were the most sought-after in the city's bookshops, and the "Marseillaise", the revolutionary hymn of France, was sung by troops and demonstrators and played by bands at rallies and parades. Kérenski, Prime Minister of the Provisional Government, began to model himself on Napoleon and had a bust of the French Emperor on his desk (Figes 2017, pp. 464 & 530). Formerly banned languages

regained their visibility in the urban landscape of the imperial capital during the revolutionary period, as journalist Robert E. C. Long (1919, p. 77) witnessed, the walls of Petrograd were suddenly covered with posters in Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, Lettish, Tartar and Estonian, the languages of citizens held in vassalage to the Russian Empire, now free, through the new revolutionary legislation, to publish their own newspapers and books and develop their own cultural institutions (Wade 2004, p. 164).

In the wide range of tasks carried out by translators, interpreters, and fixers in conflict zones by the side of foreign journalists, trust is undoubtedly considered to be of paramount importance. Correspondents need to discard that the political ideology of their language mediators may interfere with the autonomy of their newsgathering and find out if a bond of trust can be built between them (Murrell 2015, pp. 107-113; Palmer 2019, p. 116). In this regard, Bessie Beatty (1918, p. 28) acknowledges that an interpreter taught her that revolution was a term "as variable as truth, and newly mined by every man who speaks it", and Rhetta Dorr (1924, p. 333) is puzzled when she realises that some foreign journalists relied on the Russian wife of a veteran invalid English correspondent who only translated articles from reactionary local newspapers. Ernest Poole, for his part, dismissed three interpreters, two Bolsheviks and a Constitutional Democrat, on the grounds of their sectarian political opinions (Pitcher 2011, p. 202), and eventually recruited Tarasov because he was not a partisan of any ideology, even though the translator believed the country was "sliding into hell" (Saul 2017/1918, p. xviii).

After the Revolution of February 1917, Russia was ruled by a "dual power" system with a Provisional Government sharing its authority with a Soviet of Workers' Deputies, who saw themselves as the source of popular sovereignty and were in favour of a separate peace settlement with Germany. The more radical members of the Soviet, particularly the Bolshevik leaders Lenin and Trotsky, conspired to depose the government on allegations that they were traitors to the revolution. From August to October, while apparently organising a congress of soviets and falling back on special troops trained by Trotsky, the Bolshevik forces finally managed to turn the street rallies into a much wider insurrection which enabled them to take over the state's governmental and military authority and to eventually give all the powers to the soviets, leaving Russia on the verge of what would turn out to be a three year civil war (Pipes 1991, p. 651).

The connection between translation, journalism and ideological conflict can also be traced in the relevant role played by a large number of displaced individuals for political and religious reasons in the expansion of translated news narratives (Valdeón

2022, p. 17). The most notorious Bolshevik leaders were political exiles who had returned to Russia after the February Revolution. Lenin returned from Switzerland via Germany, and devoted the core of his exile years to publishing a succession of newspapers, such as *Iskra*, *Vpered*, *Proletarii* and eventually *Pravda* (Read 2005, p. 64), while Trotsky not only wrote for many of these journals, some of which were smuggled into Russia, but had some professional experience as a foreign correspondent in the two wars of 1912 between the Ottoman Empire and the Balkan states (Weissman 1980, pp. xiii-xiv). It was Lenin to whom the words "useful idiots" (Rodgers 2020, p. 606) were often attributed to when referring to foreign journalists, and Trotsky, aware of their influence abroad, always found time to receive them (Service 2010, p. 5480). Interviews with Lenin and Trotsky were highly esteemed by foreign reporters, especially during the weeks prior to the October Revolution. Both leaders were internationalists, world revolutionaries who believed that the proletarian revolt should spread from Russia to Western Europe, and that journalism and translation, in its widest sense, were essential tools in their revolutionary project. Williams (1919, p. 92) recalls Lenin instructing the *Pravda* office to translate propaganda into English, while John Reed (1924, p. 143) recounts Trotsky's frustration when he could not find translators at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to render into several languages the Decree of Peace, which proposed the withdrawal of Russia from the world war. Both Louise Bryant (1918, p. 115) and Arthur Ransome (1919, p. 143) remark on Lenin and Trotsky's fluency in various languages, as opposed to the leaders of the Provisional Government. When the Bolshevik party was already granting Lenin the status of a kind of demigod (Heresch 1990, pp. 134-5), American correspondent Williams pictured him as a versatile interpreter who helped him with the Russian words missing along his jumbled speech to the comrades of the Red Army, and bestowing on him his particular language learning method: "First; learn all the nouns, learn all the verbs, learn all the adverbs and adjectives, learn all the rest of the words; learn all the grammar and the rules of syntax, then keep practising everywhere and upon everybody" (Williams 1919, pp. 73 & 79-80).

In her research of the role of translation shaping the space of dissent within contemporary revolutionary movements, Baker (2016, pp. 11-12) argues the need to reassess the parameters of translation in protest movements, a rethinking which involves reconceptualizing the patterns of interaction between non-translators (journalists in our case) and translators as full participants within activist networks. When referring to *The Guardian*'s reporter Morgan Philips Price's political leanings, Slavik scholar Bernard

Pares (1931, p. 428) claimed that he had taken "the virus of Bolshevism in the regulation way, suddenly and fanatically". In his preface to *Ten Days that Shook the World,* John Reed proclaimed that his sympathies "were not neutral" (Rodgers 2020, p. 525), and Williams assured that he had been drawn to the revolution "like a magnet" (Benton Whisenhunt 2016, p. xx).

The commitment to the Bolshevik party of these journalists eventually got them involved in a variety of political tasks including translation. Reed and Williams, for instance, were hired by the Bureau of International Revolutionary Propaganda, which published newspapers in three languages –German, *Die Fackel*; Hungarian, *Nemzetzkoi Socialista*; and Romanian, *Inainte*— to be distributed along the enemy fronts and prison camps and into the neighbouring countries of Eastern Europe (Duke 1987, p. 34). Even if they were not openly Bolsheviks, within a few years many of the correspondents, and other writers who sympathised with Lenin and Trotsky's politics and their anti-war stance, would be called "fellow-travellers", and would recount in their own personal narratives the complexities and traumas of the revolution and the following civil war to a worldwide readership (Service 2011, pp. 68-69).

Palmer and Fontan (2007, p. 15) point out that journalists are sometimes under the threat of fixers bringing their own political agendas into their interactions, thus transforming the journalist into their propagandist. Louise Bryant (1923, p. 61) depicted her interpreter Yacob Peters as a fluent speaker of English who in 1917 translated a biography of Kérenski for her and brought her closer to the principles of revolution, although later on she was appalled to learn about his sinister activities, as one of the founders of the Soviet secret police. Peters even called on reporter Bessie Beatty to assist him with his own translation into English of the so-called Decree of Peace, published by *Izvestiya,* which the Bolsheviks were eager to send on the wireless in as many languages as possible. Peters struggled with the Russian version as he had to translate it in his mind first into Latvian, then into English, while Beatty wrote down the words. Finally, they gave up, he conceded that his Russian was not good enough and deeply regretted the lack of translators and stenographers at the new government of the People's Commissaries (Beatty 1918, p. 222).

Colonel Raymond Robins dismissed his interpreter Sarah Kropotkin, who openly opposed the Bolsheviks, and replaced her with Alexander Gumberg, whose influence among the American colony in Petrograd grew with the radicalisation of the Revolution (Libbey 2014, p. 13). His brother Sergei, later known as Zorin, had worked in the United

States, where he met Trotsky and other exiles, and was a fervent Bolshevik who would become instrumental in his access to the innermost circles of the party (Gardner 1982, p. 133). On the night of October 24-25, through Gumberg's intercession, the Bolsheviks authorised journalists Louise Bryant, Bessie Beatty, John Reed, and Albert Rhys Williams to step on a truck which would take them from the Smolny Institute, the headquarters of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, to the Winter Palace, where Kérenski's cabinet was under siege. The vehicle dropped copies of the proclamation "To the Citizens of Russia!" released by Lenin, which Gumberg translated to his companions and through which they learnt of the overthrow of the Provisional Government (Duke 1987, p. 32).

Gumberg's scepticism towards the revolution was seen with reservations by John Reed, who in *Ten Days that Shook the World* immortalised his opinion of the translator through the pseudonym "Trusishka" ("coward" in Russian) (Libbey 2014, pp. 21-24). Gumberg's own contempt for the journalist was influential in Lenin's decision to withdraw Reed's appointment as Russia's consul general to New York, given the reporter's dubious connections with *Russische Tageblatt,* a newspaper contrary to a separate peace of Russia and Germany financed by American capitalist commercial interests (Duda 2017, p. 165). Although he was a versatile translator, Gumberg's insufficient command of English would not allow him to start a career as a journalist back in the United States, but through his close ties with the Soviet Union and its leaders he became a sort of envoy, a liaison to play a key role in the unofficial relations established between Soviet Russia and the United States from 1917 to 1933 (Libbey 2014, p. 11 & 88).

4. Concluding remarks

The period between the American Civil War and the end of the First World War would be recalled as a golden age of foreign journalism, a time when correspondents became a select group of first-rate reporters to be promptly dispatched to the multiple wars and conflicts arising throughout the world. During the Russian Revolution, many foreign reporters, some of them with previous experience at other war fronts and revolutions, including a remarkable group of pioneering women journalists, travelled to Petrograd. Several of these correspondents would eventually publish mythmaking memoirs and autobiographical accounts of their activities in that revolutionary period

which Louise Bryant (1918, p. 8) defined as "the dawn of a new world", and Albert Rhys Williams (1921, p. 4) as a most "striking phenomenon in all history". However, journalists were consistently plagued with the tyrannical censorship of the Tsar's secret police, the Provisional Government and the Bolshevik propaganda machinery, as well as with the political bias of their own editors back home. Their deficient command of Russian, or knowledge of the country, turned out to be a major obstacle in their newsgathering mission during the revolution. Only a few of the correspondents reporting from Petrograd after February 1917 spoke Russian or tried to study it on the ground. English, the language of the Tsar's inner-circle, or French, the lingua franca of the aristocracy and the upper middle-classes, were key to allow reporters to carry out their first interviews with high officials of the Provisional Government, but foreign correspondents soon felt the pressing need to search for fluent interpreters or translators to help them understand the convoluted historical events developing in the country.

In spite of not having still received the credit they deserve, in our view, the autobiographies and the personal accounts written by the correspondents stationed at the time in Russia prove to be an invaluable first-hand source of information about the essential function of language mediators in newsgathering and their close association with journalists. Translators, many of them women, were mostly recruited via word of mouth, sheer luck, or some acquaintance in a previous visit to Russia. These linguistic and cultural mediators were mainly non-professional translators, at a time of scarce institutional or academic recognition of the job, with diverse social and professional backgrounds such as university students and graduates, bilingual or polyglot members of the community of expatriates living in Russia, political exiles returning to join the revolution, and individuals with some prior experience as literary translators. These "fixers", as their contemporary counterparts would later be called, translated local newspapers, political speeches, banners, slogans, pamphlets, and interviews, and in their role as language and cultural mediators were pivotal in protecting correspondents through the violent clashes between demonstrators and military forces, guiding them on their visits to working-class districts, or organising their expeditions to the war fronts.

Foreign correspondents would also write their chronicles with a political agenda, or that of their newspapers or agencies, in mind. Trust would be cardinal in building a successful relationship between correspondents and their translators and interpreters, whose political leanings sometimes brought their reliability into question, especially when they turned out to be propagandists for a political party, which would lead

correspondents to dismiss them in the hope of hiring somebody else who would not betray their own newsgathering approach. While most leading western newspapers welcomed the end of the corrupt and brutal Tsarist regime, as well as the establishment of a liberal constitutional government which would guarantee Russia's involvement in the world war, the escalating political influence of the Bolshevik party after July 1917 brought about a different kind of relationship with the foreign press and, as a consequence, with their language and cultural mediators. The October Russian Revolution gathered a network of activist journalists, translators and interpreters committed to the cause of the Bolshevik party. Reed, Bryant, Beatty, Williams, and many other foreign correspondents, later to be called "fellow travellers", joined the Bureau of International Revolutionary Propaganda, where their duties involved some kind of translation activity as gatekeepers of the revolutionary narratives to be promoted worldwide. Their personal relationship with Alexander Gumberg, a most significant translator, eventually turned out to be controversial, especially when he expressed his scepticism regarding the Bolsheviks. On seeing off reporter Albert Rhys Williams, Gumberg told him that the problem with journalists was that it was not enough for them to record history, they insisted on making it, to which Williams plainly responded: "Not everyone can be so modest as you, Alex, or have your talent for making history, but always in the background" (Libbey 2014, p. 54).

Some journalistic accounts also convey idealised descriptions of Bolshevik leaders Lenin and Trotsky, both experienced political journalists in their own right, as polyglots, fluent in a number of foreign languages, eager to promote the publication of multilingual newspapers, or the translation of political pamphlets and new government decrees. Lenin was well aware of the advantages of a reliable relationship with foreign correspondents, as he had spent some of his exile years in London, where understanding English was first an obstacle because he could not grasp the "Cockney" spoken by his working-class comrades. In time, he learned to speak the language and, assisted with some dictionaries, he and his wife managed to render into Russian *The History of Trade Unionism*, by Fabian Socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Lenin, however, relied on French-Russian Inessa Armand, a feminist activist and Bolshevik fluent in four languages, to be his interpreter in French and in English, and whose performance as a translator definitely deserves more attention (Sebestyen 2017, pp. 127 & 202-203).

Trotsky's banishment from the Soviet Union after 1929 led to a period in his life when translation royalties became his main source of income and publishing in foreign

languages the only way to spread his political ideas throughout the world. Particularly engaging, in this respect, and relevant for further research, is his demanding relationship with his American translator, Max Eastman, regarding his English version of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. Eastman had backed the Bolsheviks in the United States as early as October 1917 through his newspaper articles and by raising money to send John Reed to Russia, whose reports would later become the international bestseller *Ten Days that Shook the World* (Eastman 1955, p. 10). In his short introduction to the 1922 edition, Lenin wrote it was a book that he wanted to see published "in millions of copies and translated into all languages". Stalin, however, did not approve of Reed's account of the revolution and would order the bowdlerisation of the Russian translation so as to underscore Trotsky's significance and promote his own figure as the new leader of the revolution and Lenin's political heir (Rappaport 2016, p. 331).

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