Jeffrey Buntrock

ATA Conference; Chicago

German Language Division

Friday, November 7, 2014

**Translation and the Former East Germany**

This week marks the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In observance, this seminar investigates the nature and role of translation in the German Democratic Republic during the period 1949 – 1989.

**I. Introduction**

***Events Relevant to Marxist-Leninist Translation Theory in the GDR***

March 1917 – Tsar Nicholas II Abdicates; Russian Revolution Begins; Lenin in Zurich

April 1917 – Kaiser Wilhelm II wants to get rid of pesky relatives in Russia. Germany arranges for Lenin and other Russian exiles to travel by train from Switzerland to Russia. Germany supports the subversive Lenin, the Bolsheviks, and the revolution.

1922 – Stalin becomes head of Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1932 – Term “Socialist Realism” first used in Soviet press. Supporting terms were: proletarian, majestic, heroic, romantic, active, creative, development, happiness. **Socialist Realism is emerging as main cultural concept in the Soviet Union.**

1934 – Term “Socialist Realism” confirmed by First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers. Maxim Gorky said, “This new method is a creative program aiming to realize revolutionary humanism.”

1948/49 – The Marshall Plan and introduction of a new *Deutsche Mark* by the Western Allied Powers had angered the Soviet Union. Berlin Blockade by Soviets led to Berlin Airlift by United States, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. German Democratic Republic established in 1949.

1952 – East Germany begins building the “inner German border” from the Baltic Sea to the Czech border. Still free movement within four sectors of Berlin.

1961 – After 3.5 million ethnic Germans had left the GDR, Berlin Wall is erected to cut off West Berlin from East Germany. This *antifaschistischer Schutzwall* (“Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart”) is the true beginning of GDR’s isolation.

1986 – Disaster at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine SSR.

1989 – Fall of Berlin Wall on 9th of November.

**II. Cultural Politics in the German Democratic Republic**

**A. Post-War Impulses**

- East Germany has overcome the historical epoch of capitalism and is proudly on the path to communism.

- West Germany is backsliding to capitalism and is being rearmed and financed by fascist powers, e.g., Marshall Plan, DM currency reform, NATO membership.

- Re-education of East Germans must occur by means of law and public policy.

- Only two major leaders of Socialist Unity Party of Germany during this period:

1) Walter Ulbricht (1950-71) - Ordered construction of Berlin Wall, sought greater independence from Moscow, in exile in USSR during WWII.

2) Erich Honecker (1971-89) - Brought GDR into United Nations, loyal to USSR, imprisoned in Germany during WWII.

**B. Socialist Realism**

- Remnants of capitalist thinking must be eliminated.

- The positive hero in socialist realism is a fighter, builder, and leader.

- An international and unified literary movement is needed in the era of the socialist transformation of the world.

- Aesthetics of socialist realism encompass:

1) Entire multinational experience of art in socialist countries,

2) Revolutionary art in the bourgeois West,

3) Cultures of the Third World

- Concept of socialist realism is inseparably linked with that of artistic progress.

- Leading role for working class with new political, economic, cultural conditions.

**C. Book Publishing**

- Books must steer readers to ideologically desired behavior and thinking.

- Maxims: “The reading worker is a knowing worker.” “The new socialist being is an all-round educated personality.” “Socialist literature is world literature.”

- Emphasis was on high quality books, whether domestic or foreign.

- The new East German national literature was to incorporate works from the world’s cultural heritage.

- Foreign, i.e., translated literature, was an essential part of literary policy.

- Translation is therefore integrated into the literary and publishing scene.

- Both foreign books and indigenous literature must obey same ideology.

**III. Translation in the German Democratic Republic**

**A. Major Problems with Translation after Founding of GDR (Kurt Hager in 1952)**

- Not enough translators available (for language pairs as well as specialties)

- Available translators not sufficiently qualified

- Universities not involved in training of translators

- No concept for training and certification of qualified translators

- No mentorship program among translators

- Low pay and low status for translation work; variations in pay among publishers

**B. Solutions Borrowed from Translation Model of USSR**

- Translation required between national languages of USSR and Russian

- Translation required between non-Soviet languages and Soviet languages

- Translation becomes part of literature in East Germany

- Individual aspect of translation is rejected; collective element is embraced

- A translation must be partial and the translator must be a propagandist

- Commonalities between translators and authors:

1) Both are creators of literary texts;

2) Both accountable for every word, sentence, and entire book;

3) Both are responsible for the readers’ comprehension of the text.

**C. Walter Benjamin in Contrast to Marxist-Leninist Translation Theory**

- “In the consideration of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful…No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience.” (*The Task of the Translator*)

- “For to some degree, all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true above all of sacred writings. The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation.” (*The Task of the Translator*)

**D. Treatment of Translators in GDR**

- Nationwide copyright law installed in 1956 to protect authors and translators

- Publishers were required to cite translator’s full name on title page

- Translators were required to be members of Socialist Unity Party

- Translators enjoyed greatly enhanced security and status; regarded as artists

**IV. Criteria Influencing Translation and Publication in GDR**

1. **Economic Factors**

* 30% of “Means of Production” stolen by Soviet Union after WWII
* East German Mark not convertible in Western markets
* Shortages of paper and ink
* Scarce foreign exchange seldom used for royalties for translation rights
* Barter sometimes used in lieu of royalties for translation rights

1. **Ideological Factors**

* Glorification of bourgeois society rejected
* Vilification of morally depraved capitalist West embraced
* Compliance with socialist maxims and solidarity with USSR required
* All art in the GDR perceived as a weapon in class struggle
* In communist world, people find true selves, free from material constraints

**V. Conclusions**

- GDR promoted Marxist-Leninist views to overcome egotism and individualism

- Laws and regulations to create the “new socialist being”

- Laws and regulations to secure power for the ruling party

- Translation of foreign literature used as tool by ruling party to promote itself

- Socialist Unity Party gave financial and intellectual support to translators

- Marxist-Leninist translation theory never successfully developed

Recommended reading: Books and articles by Gabriele Thomson-Wohlgemuth