Maria KHOTIMSKY

WORLD LITERATURE, SOVIET STYLE:
A FORGOTTEN EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA*

“It is becoming more and more obvious to me that poetry is the common property of all mankind and that it is manifest everywhere and in all ages in hundreds and hundreds of people… I therefore like to keep informed about foreign productions, and I advise everybody to do the same. National literature means little now, the age of Weltliteratur has begun; and everyone should further its course.”

Goethe, Conversations with Eckermann, January 1827

“The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature.”

Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto

* The project was developed during the postdoctoral seminar Informing Eurasia: Informational Approaches to Eurasian Cultures, Politics and Societies at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies in 2011–2012, and I am grateful to the seminar participants for their suggestions on the earlier version of this article. I would also like to thank Ab Imperio peer review authors for their insightful comments and helpful references.


Introduction

“Literature is the heart of the world,” wrote Maxim Gorky, a prominent Soviet writer and cultural leader, in the introduction to the catalog of Vsemirnaia Literatura (World Literature) Publishing House, which he helped establish in 1918. As Gorky proclaimed further,

Bravely entering the path of spiritual unity with the peoples of Europe and Asia, the Russian people in all its masses ought to know the peculiarities of history, sociology, and psychology of those nations and tribes, with which it aspires to build new forms of social life.

A curious crossover between Goethe’s Weltliteratur and the Marxian commodity of universal literature, Gorky’s vision for the World Literature Publishing House was both Romantic and political, and, in its dual nature, was very much a product of its time. While the concept of a representative anthology of international literature capitalized on several modernist cultural trends, the strong political appeal of the publishing house served to establish a rather unique position of translation within the Soviet literary system.

Founded shortly after the October Revolution of 1917, the World Literature Publishing House became a notable cultural institution by the early 1920s. Its purpose was to systematically produce a library of translations from the masterpieces of world literature. At the same time, it provided a safe haven for a cohort of talented writers, scholars, and translators who were left without a means of earning a living after the Revolution. Though the publishing house was short-lived (1918–1924), it had a long-ranging influence on the development of the Soviet literary translation sphere; it also became a precursor for the internationalist trends of the 1930s discussed in the recent monographs by Michael David-Fox and Katerina Clark. The legacy of this publishing house pertains not only to cultural life in the Soviet Union in the 1920s but also to the growing field of world literature studies. Nevertheless, this rather ambitious project to create a representative library of world literature, as it was seen by Soviet cultural leaders in the early 1920s, remains a surprisingly overlooked episode in the history of this idea.

A phrase attributed to Goethe, “world literature” is a widely used concept that has remained at the center of comparative literature as an evolving field.\(^5\) Increasingly, it is invoked in the studies of globalization and post-colonialism (see Liu, Moretti, Prendergast).\(^6\) While the broad definition of world literature as “literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation, or in their original language”\(^7\) applies to many contexts, contemporary scholars focus on the historical and geographical dimensions of world literature, the economies of cultural exchange (D’haen, Lawall, Thomsen), and on broader patterns of literary development (such as Franco Moretti’s work on the genre of the novel).\(^8\)

As David Damrosch explains, world literature is “always seen from a local perspective.”\(^9\) This fundamental point is only latently acknowledged in several leading monographs on the subject. For example, Pascale Casanova’s now canonical book The World Republic of Letters locates the capital of the literary world in Paris, “the city endowed with the greatest literary prestige on earth.”\(^10\) On the contrary, John Pizer argues for Weltliteratur as an “authentically German intellectual development,” which gave name to a pedagogical trend in Western academia (such as courses on “world literature” or “great books.”)\(^11\) Neither of the critics challenges the notion of “world literature” as a time-specific, rather than universal, concept that is shaped by particular institutional, ideological, and historical contexts. In fact, Casanova proposes “a literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions, whose boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space.”\(^12\)

---

\(^12\) Casanova. The World Republic of Letters. P. xii.
While other publications offer more complex interpretations of competing literary canons as well as local perspectives on international literature (see the aforementioned works by D’haen, Prendergast, Damrosch), they often too treat the concept of “world literature” as an overarching category. For example, in his study, *Mapping World Literature*, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen traces the patterns of global book circulation and proposes the study of “constellations” (geographically and temporarily defined canons within the global literary market). At the same time, he concludes the analysis with a universalist notion: “Like the universe, world literature is infinite, but constellations appear and help connect things near and far.”¹³ Importantly, David Damrosch, whose influential monograph *What Is World Literature?* has become a reference point in many recent studies on the subject, notes both the multiplicity of canons within world literature and the influential role of the recipient culture: “A culture’s norms and needs profoundly shape the selection of works that enter into it as world literature, influencing the ways they are translated, marketed and read.”¹⁴

Taking Thomsen’s and Damrosch’s methodology of studying “global patterns of circulation” in “their local manifestation,”¹⁵ I would like to offer a reading of a specific and overlooked episode in the history of “world literature” as a cultural concept and editorial practice. While I find Damrosch’s approach to world literature as “not a set canon of texts, but a mode of reading, a detached engagement with a world beyond our own,”¹⁶ productive, I believe it is necessary to question the implicit ideological, institutional, and cultural practices that define the very concept of “world literature.” The case study of the Petersburg World Literature Publishing House offers a rare chance to see how the paradigm of “world literature” was defined and implemented, and which influences it generated within a specific sociohistorical setting.

Despite its unique position, the story of the World Literature Publishing House has so far escaped critical attention. To my knowledge, most of the recent publications devoted to theorizing world literature and the history of this discipline do not refer to it (with the rare exception of the Preface to The Routledge Companion to World Literature, which invokes the publishing house and Maxim Gorky’s attempts “to recuperate the idea of world literature for the ideology of the newly created Soviet state” as an early example of

---

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 27.
¹⁶ Ibid. P. 297.
creating an international literary canon). This absence is hardly surprising, considering the inaccessibility of the material. The publishing house is mentioned only briefly in the studies of Russian cultural history, or in monographs on Gorky, and it is often described as “Gorky’s enterprise.”

However, it is worth noting that Gorky’s vision of world literature has its precedents in Russian prerevolutionary culture, such as Dmitrii Merezhkovsky’s 1897 collection of essays Vechnye sputniki: Portrety iz vsemirnoi literatury, which offered a series of literary portraits of writers from different epochs and countries. Valerii Briusov’s work on various literary anthologies, including Biblioteka Novoi Poezii (Library of New Poetry) – a series of translations of modernist poetry with detailed introductions and bibliography – also foreshadows the editorial practices of the World Literature Publishing House. Even though Merezhkovsky

---

20 See, for example, Katerina Clark’s reference to Gorky in her monograph on Petersburg: “… He established the publishing house World Literature (Vsemirnaia literatura) as an autonomous department of Narkompros that gave several hundred otherwise destitute scholars and writers employment, often as translators. Under his patronage, the intelligentsia were sustained, and with relative autonomy.” Clark. Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution. P. 102.
Maria Khotimsky, *World Literature, Soviet Style*

did not participate in the World Literature project, and Briusov took on several translation assignments but was not actively involved in it, their literary and editorial work could have influenced Gorky’s outlook on world literature. Nor was Gorky alone in trying to secure an institutional and financial base for the World Literature Publishing House. In fact, its founding would not have been possible without support from various government officials, most important, Anatoly Lunacharsky. While Lunacharsky’s role in the history of the publishing house has been addressed in some Russian studies, with rare exceptions, most of them date back to the Soviet era, and thus do not invoke the concept of “world literature” or the ideology of translation.

By tracing the development of the publishing house and analyzing its key statements on world literature and the international literary canon, I hope to offer a more complete picture of this important episode in the history of early cultural internationalism. Due to the lack of available material, the main purposes of this article are to create a detailed outline of the development of the publishing house and its editorial program, to explore its vision of “world literature,” and to discuss the approaches to translation it helped establish. Reinscribing it into the broader field of comparative debates on world literature can be a subject of separate study; however, as I discuss the development of the World Literature Publishing House in the early 1920s, I will try to point out specific questions that resonate with contemporary Western debates in this field.

**The History of the World Literature Publishing House**

One might find it puzzling that in the years following the October Revolution, leaders of a country involved in a civil war and plagued by internal political instability and economic crisis found time and resources for promoting world literature. Yet, the World Literature project can be seen as part of an overall investment in culture that became “the sphere of

---

23 See, for example, Briusov’s translations and his introduction to the collection of poems by Edgar Allan Poe: Edgar Poe. Polnoe sobranie stikhov v iu poet / Transl. and introduction by Valerii Briusov. Moscow, Leningrad, 1924.

legitimation of the state.”25 One of the first government measures taken up shortly after the Bolsheviks seized power was to establish control over the publishing industry,26 including the institution of the State Publishing House (Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, or Gosizdat) by the Decree of December 29, 1917.27 It gained a monopoly over the publishing system by 1919.28

In a massive literacy campaign, the government invested in both political publications and literary editions. According to Steven Lovell, the Bolsheviks “attached great importance to the publishing of cheap editions of imaginative literature (especially the classics).”29 Investment in translation, in turn, was used to promote both domestic and international policies. Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissar of Enlightenment and one of the major figures of Soviet cultural politics, summarized this policy in his 1928 introduction to the journal Vestnik inostrannoi literature:

The Union of Soviet Republics is a unique country. […] However, it does not exist on a continent that is removed from the rest of the world, and neither does it desire to be fenced off from the rest of the world. Conversely, the Union is very interested in participating in the life of the entire world and shaping the life of the world in accordance with the governmental and societal principles that are at the basis of the Union.30

Creating an image of a progressive state concerned with mass education and questions of world culture became part of the ideological agenda of the Bolshevik government.

In fact, the sphere of literary translation served dual purposes. It established the internationalist appeal, but it also helped secure the support of Russian intellectuals, such as Gorky and many of the prerevolutionary writers and scholars. As Lunacharsky wrote in a later article of his attempts to reach

out to Gorky: “I still remember how timidly Ryazanov and I approached Gorky, so that we could build a bridge between him and the party by means of the World Literature Publishing House, because we all wanted to keep this brilliant writer.”

Many of the negotiations surrounding the future of the World Literature Publishing House were wielded through Gorky’s and Lunacharsky’s influential positions. In turn, it was Gorky’s authority among the Bolshevik leaders that determined the relatively independent status of the publishing house, and ensured participation of the leading prerevolutionary intellectuals.

In the summer of 1918, Gorky, Nikolai Tikhonov, Zinovii Grzhebin, and Ivan Ladyzhnikov signed a preliminary agreement regarding the World Literature Publishing House. Officially, its founding was registered in the Agreement of September 1918 under the auspices of the State Publishing House. Among hundreds of publishers (both state-owned and private) that existed after 1917, World Literature was distinguished by its relatively independent position, grandiose program, remarkable staff members, and thorough approach to translating and preparing manuscripts for print. The agreement of September 4, 1918, outlined the relations between the State Publishing House and World Literature and described the editorial plan of the publishing house. It also established the support of Narkompros (People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment), which was to provide the financial resources and necessary equipment for publishing and oversee the dissemination of printed books.

On September 11, 1918, Sovnarkom (Council of People’s Commissars) approved the agreement with Gorky and ordered an advance of 1 million

31 Anatolii Lunacharsky. Maksim Gor’kii // Prizyv. 1924. No. 5. P. 119.
32 Sheila Fitzpatrick makes a keen remark about the difference in Gorky’s and Lunacharsky’s intentions: “From the moment when Gorky entered into cooperation with the Soviet government, he occupied a liaison position between the Bolsheviks and the intelligentsia, as Lunacharsky did, and became a patron and protector of the intelligentsia and a channel for the expression of its grievances. But where Lunacharsky saw his first loyalty to the Bolsheviks and to the Soviet government, Gorky’s first loyalty went to the intelligentsia.” Sheila Fitzpatrick. Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917–1921. Cambridge, 1970. P. 130.
rubles. In October 1918 the publishing house was granted control over the printing press Kopeika, and Gorky was named the commissar of the printing press. An additional agreement signed on November 21, 1918, provided World Literature with the right to purchase paper, typeset, and publish its books, which was a significant measure in this period of severe shortages of resources. The internal structure of the publishing house and the production of translations were overseen by its founders. Its publishing activity, however, was affected by several economic and political circumstances. Below, I will discuss the structure of the publishing house; its development between 1918 and 1924, which included rising tensions with the State Publishing House; and its eventual closure.

In the early months of its existence, World Literature Publishing House enjoyed significant state support. Lenin, Lunacharsky, and V. V. Vorovskii (head of the State Publishing House in 1919 and 1920) backed this initiative to ensure Gorky’s loyalty. Gorky’s leading role in the governance of the publishing house is acknowledged in several founding documents. According to the agreement of September 4, 1918, Gorky was named the head of the newly instituted publishing house and was its intermediary in communications with government agencies. He was granted full freedom in organizing the publishing house, including the choice of books for publication, the decision about the number of copies to be published, control over the introductory articles and commentaries, and the freedom to choose employees, authors, and translators, and the amount and order of their compensation.

The conditions of the agreement in effect demonstrated a rather liberal government policy toward the cultural elite of the prerevolutionary period. As Tikhonov commented in his 1920 report to the State Publishing House, World Literature was supposed to serve as a link between the Soviet government and the literary intelligentsia. Besides, the existence of a publishing house with such a wide cultural agenda and a brilliant staff that included almost

all the prominent representatives of Russian literature could be used abroad as a prime example of Soviet cultural policy.  

The ideological importance of the publishing house was also invoked in Gorky’s correspondence with government leaders. In a letter to Lenin from January 9, 1919, Gorky emphasized the innovative nature of the publishing house:

Soon we will finish printing the catalog of books proposed for publication at the World Literature Publishing House. I think it would be good to translate these lists into all European languages and to send them to Germany, England, France, Scandinavian countries, and so forth, in order that the proletariat of the West, and all people such as Anatole France, H. G. Wells […] could see for themselves that the Russian proletariat is not simply barbarous, and that we understand internationalism much more broadly than they, cultured people, do. In the most dire conditions possible, we could manage something that they should have thought of long ago.

Gorky invoked the propagandist appeal of the World Literature Publishing House in order to support its financial and political interests. As his letter to Lenin suggests, the ambitious plan for the publishing house represented a “new” socialist vision of internationalism, hailed as superior to the Western equivalents. Such self-assessment foreshadows similar trends in the 1930s. For example, Katerina Clark observed that during the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, attention to foreign literati was coupled with claims that Soviet society “paid more attention to culture and also honored the great works of a rival state’s culture more than that state did.” Setting the precedent for the use of translations for ideological purposes, the editorial program of World Literature itself (though never fully realized) became a tool of political negotiation.

The catalog of the publishing house, released in 1919 in four languages with an introductory article by Gorky, outlined the editorial credo and offered an extensive list of works for translation and publication. The catalog included books by French, English, American, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish authors from the late eighteenth century (roughly the time of the French Revolution) to the early twentieth century. It represented a substantial list of classics as well

42 Clark. Moscow, the Fourth Rome. P. 11.
as works by lesser-known authors from these literatures. In addition, the
catalog listed the works of several authors from Canada, India, Mexico,
Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Peru, and Brazil, with the total amounting to
almost 1,200 authors, many of whom had not been previously translated
into Russian. Gorky repeatedly emphasized the innovative nature of the
project: “This is a grandiose task, and no one has tried to accomplish it yet,
no one in Europe. The government should vigorously support it, because
right now this is the largest cultural enterprise that it can accomplish.”

Another important aspect of the World Literature Publishing House mis-
sion was its mass enlightenment appeal. The amassing of foreign cultural
capital was first and foremost supposed to benefit the “Russian democratic
reader.” As the first draft of the editorial program explained,

The goal of the World Literature Publishing House is to acquaint
the Russian democratic reader with the literature of the West, and es-
pecially with the works that represent the people of Western Europe,
their history, their life, their spirit. With this goal, the World Literature
Publishing House proposes to translate and publish in Russian selected
works of European literature, first, by English, French, and German
writers from the late eighteenth century until the present day.

Initially, the program focused on literatures of Western Europe – most no-
tably, France, Germany, and England – that had a long history of translation
into Russian, but it proposed a much more rigorous approach to text selection
and publication than had previously existed. The broad cultural program
determined the structure of the two book series proposed for publication.

The Main Series (Osnovnaia seriia) was to provide new translations of
outstanding works of European literature with extensive scholarly com-
mentaries. The target for this series was at first ambitiously set at nearly 200
volumes (about 320 pages each). The People’s Series (Narodnaia seriia)
would be addressed to the general reader and was to publish works of foreign
classics “more accessible for reading” in the form of brochures (in general,
20–30 pages each), with a goal of producing nearly 800 brochures.

As the preliminary program asserted,

12-25.
44 Maxim Gorky. Letter to Vorovsky from April 26, 1919 . Quoted in Shomrakova. M.
Gor’kii – organizator izdatel’stva “Vsemirnaia literatura.” P. 75.
We plan to publish books of two types: first, cheap brochures about two signatures each, which would include one or several simple stories, maximally accessible in their topic to the broad democratic populace. Second, we plan to publish separate volumes devoted entirely to the works of most significant European writers, selected in such a way that they would comprise a small, but systematically organized library of European literary classics.\textsuperscript{47}

By advancing the two book series, the publishing house created a hierarchy of readership, with the Main Series being addressed to an educated audience, and the People’s Series targeting the newly literate population. The editors at World Literature also established the tradition of the ideological framing of each work by means of introductory articles and textual commentaries. I will address more specific differences between the two series in greater detail in the third part of the article, but it is worth noting that both of these tendencies – the preference for systematic editions and the necessary inclusion of introductory articles and textual commentaries – became long-lasting trends in Soviet literary translation practices.

The publishing house also created a powerful precedent of translation as a “cultural niche” for politically ostracized members of the intelligentsia – the phenomenon explored in detail in recent studies by Brian Baer and Vsevolod Bagno.\textsuperscript{48} The staff of World Literature, amounting to almost 300 employees, included writers, poets, translators, and scholars of very different backgrounds who had at least one thing in common: they all were left without the means of existence after the October Revolution. Among the members of the Western Department, which oversaw the selection and translation of works from European and American literature, were Evgenii Zamiatin, Viktor Zhirmunsky, Mikhail Lozinsky, Kornei Chukovsky, and Boris Eikhenbaum. Many of the leading prerevolutionary poets served on the organizing committees of World Literature or prepared translations and commentaries. Nikolai Gumilev and Aleksandr Blok took an active part in preparing poetry editions of the Western Department. Other prominent poets, including Valerii Briusov, Zinaida Gippius, Vladislav Khodasevich,
Osip Mandel’shtam, and Marina Tsvetaeva were commissioned to produce translations or text commentaries. The opening of the Eastern Department attracted world-class specialists in Asian and Near Eastern Studies, including Boris Turaev (a scholar of Ancient Egypt and Namibia), Vasilii Alekseev (a specialist on Chinese literature and culture), and Sergei Eliseev (a specialist on Japanese literature, and, in his émigré years, the first director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute).

The work of the publishing house began almost immediately after its founding, and many authors were invited to participate on the World Literature committees, produce translations, or write introductory articles. The ledgers of the publishing house contain extensive lists of names on the payroll, even though the books were not published right away. It is worth noting that introductory articles and commentaries received the highest compensation, next to translations of poetry (which were measured by the verse line) and new translations of prose. According to a document of December 1, 1918, describing publishing house conditions, the honorarium for introductory articles or commentaries was set at 700–800 rubles (per printing signature, or approximately 24 pages); a compilation of anthologies was priced at 300–500 rubles per signature; prose translations, at 200–250 rubles per signature; whereas translations of poetry were priced at 1.3–2 rubles per line. Although the rates of pay changed due to inflation, their proportion remained the same. Hence, honoraria for translating poetry volumes generally measured much higher than translations of prose. This tendency continued throughout the Soviet period, making poetic translation a lucrative endeavor.

As economic conditions in Russia worsened, many employees of World Literature were eager to receive food and firewood rations as compensation for their work. Gorky described the hardships encountered by the publishing house in a letter to Lunacharsky dated December 13, 1920:

Over the time of its existence, World Literature has prepared 8,000 signatures, which amounts to 400 separate volumes. I see this as a rather large achievement for a year and a half of work, considering the very difficult conditions experienced by our employees and the inadequately

---

50 For example, the list of employee accounts from April 1918 includes Chukovsky, Puni, Eikhenbaum, Mayakovsky, Kliuev, Oliger, and other authors. TsGALI. F. 46. Op. 1. D. 2. L. 21. Original, handwritten.
low compensation they receive for their work. [...] Lacking the means to provide all our employees with food rations, the publishing house selected a group of its best employees (50 translators and 30 editors) who agreed to fulfill the monthly minimum (3 signatures for translators and 5 signatures for editors) in return for food rations. Thus, at present our minimal productivity amounts to 150 signatures of translated and edited texts a month.\textsuperscript{52}

Gorky’s influential position helped him to acquire additional food rations for World Literature employees and support them in many other ways. At the same time, poets, writers, scholars, and translators maintained an extraordinary pace preparing translations, although many of them expressed ambivalence about it. For example, Kornei Chukovsky wrote about “the joy of preparing new editions of O’Henry, Stevenson, and Carlyle” in a diary entry from October 28, 1918.\textsuperscript{53} A short time later, on December 4, 1918, he complained about wasting time on translations: “And I spend day after day on editing translations. It is a waste of time, which I will regret at some point.”\textsuperscript{54} Aleksandr Amfiteatrov, who was more outspoken in his anti-Soviet views, described the World Literature Publishing House as “a life saving straw of dubious quality,” but noted that in taking on large translation assignments, writers “were happy to commit themselves to hard labor, which was extremely intense, but at least, it was [ideologically] neutral, and hence, not shameful.”\textsuperscript{55} Amfiteatrov’s observation about translation as one of the few possibilities to continue literary work in the increasingly politicized cultural setting holds true for generations of writers who turned to translation when publishing original work became impossible.

As a result of this intensive work by translators and editors, by March 1919, the publishing house had typeset 700 printer’s signatures, but the publication was stalled. In the following years, the discrepancy between available material and the publication output only increased. Due to the fact that the World Literature Publishing House had not been included in the 1918–1919 paper supply plan, no books could be printed in the first six months since the opening. In March 1919, Gorky sent a telegram to Lenin addressing the issue: “The enterprise, in which we have invested so much energy, and which promises colossal results, must perish. I ask for your

\textsuperscript{52} Shomrakova. A. M. Gor’kii – organizator izdatel’stva “Vsemirnaia literatura.” P. 80.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. P. 98.
assistance." The telegram was sent to Lenin and to L. B. Krasin (commissar of trade and industry, who also oversaw Glavbum, the central paper committee located in Moscow), and several letter exchanges followed in an attempt to overcome excessive bureaucracy. After Lenin’s intervention, the publishing house received paper and began printing its first translations.

By July 1919, the first books were printed, including Guy de Maupassant’s *Sil’na kak smert’* (*Fort comme la Mort*), Anatole France’s *Ostrov pingvinov* (*L’Île des Pingouins*) in the Main Series, and Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *Pes'karskie rasskazy* (*Le Novelle della Pescara*) in the People’s Series. By the end of the year, the publishing house planned to release 50 books in the Main Series and 100 in the People’s Series, but it was only able to produce 31 titles. During 1920, World Literature released 28 titles, which comprised a little over 5 percent of the monographs that were ready for publication. Financial issues and paper deficit were a constant point of contention between World Literature and the State Publishing House. Thus, by March 1921, World Literature had spent 14 million rubles, while the book sales generated only 4.5 million. The discrepancy between translation and publication was even more drastic in 1921. During this year, World Literature was supposed to prepare 100 volumes for the Main Series and 50 brochures of the People’s Series, and publish 50 books in the Main Series and 20 in the People’s Series. However, due to economic hardships and paper deficit none of the books were printed.

In the first two years of its existence, the World Literature Publishing House functioned rather independently within the State Publishing House. By 1921, the relationship between the two entities became more tense. World Literature leadership faced increasing criticism, and many of its publications received tepid reviews in Bolshevik periodicals. For example, Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov acknowledged the need to use “specialists in lit-

---

57 It appears that Lenin and Krasin themselves expressed frustration over the proliferation of government agencies. In a note to Krasin, Lenin inquired: “Who is Pravbum? Can we procure copies of the statement and its cancellation?” Krasin’s response, quoted here in Russian, mocks the acronyms of the paper agencies: “Upornyi otkaz Pitera v otpuske bumagi, mesiatsami lezhashchei bez upotrebleniia, est nesomnennyi i zlostnyi sabotazh, ne znaiu lish, Pravbuma, Levbuma ili kakogo-to inogo buma” (The stubborn refusal of Piter (i.e. Petrograd) to apportion the [typography] paper that has been stored for months unused is undoubted and malicious sabotage, I am just not sure, whether by Pravbum, Levbum, or some other *bum*.) Khlebnikov. Iz istorii Gor’kovskikh izdatel’stv. P. 672.
59 Ibid. P. 215.
Maria Khotimsky, *World Literature, Soviet Style*

terature, despite their anti-Soviet or non-Soviet inclinations,” but added that it is necessary to “have commissars watch over them […] in order not to ruin the cultural values.”

Ideological tensions coupled with the economic insufficiency of the World Literature Publishing House and its dependence on the State Publishing House were among the issues of contention. By March 19, 1921, World Literature continued its work as an autonomous department of the State Publishing House.

Before 1922, World Literature published books on the orders of the State Commissariat of Enlightenment, and the books were designated for dissemination in libraries, clubs, and schools. After January 1, 1922, which marked the statewide attempt to transfer the publishing houses to the self-regulated economy, World Literature was responsible for its own sales and income. Resulting financial difficulties prompted some innovations in the hopes of raising profits, such as instituting new magazines *Sovremennyi Zapad* (Contemporary West) and *Vostok* (The Orient), as well as the book series titled *Novosti inostrannoi literature* (News of Foreign Literature), which published translations of contemporary European and American literature. *Sovremennyi Zapad* (published from 1922 to 1924) was a particularly interesting publication that captured the rare possibility of aesthetic dialogue with Western European culture.

The journal featured works of prose, poetry, literary and art criticism, as well as cultural and scientific news. Significantly, it included the first Russian articles devoted to James Joyce and Marcel Proust, as well as articles on German expressionism, Dadaism, and Futurism. Similarly to the publishing house itself, *Sovremennyi Zapad* presented a rare example of maintaining ideological neutrality in the context of growing political pressure. Despite their stimulating content, these publications did not do much to rescue the economic situation of the publishing house.

In 1922, after further reorganization, World Literature was annexed to the Department of Foreign Literature at the State Publishing House, which took over all administrative, editorial, and distribution functions. Moreover, ongoing attacks diminished its chances to continue autonomous work, even


61 Dinershtein. Izdatel’skoe delo v pervye gody Sovetskoi vlasti. P.118.

within the State Publishing House. In particular, Ilya Ionov, the head of the Leningrad branch of the State Publishing House, was opposed to World Literature. In a letter to Otto Schmidt, director of the Moscow branch, Ionov observed that World Literature, being subsidized by the state, should be “like any other department of Gosizdat.” Ionov depicted its work as costly and “reactionary in the political sense,” and complained about its predominately non-Bolshevik leadership: “World Literature in its current state as a publishing house is a profiteering counteragent, which wants to hold on to the enterprise by all means in the hopes (yes, they live by hopes!) of better times.” The ongoing centralization of the publishing system and the opposition to the independent status of the World Literature Publishing House led to its ultimate closure at the end of 1924, when Tikhonov’s position as the head of World Literature was terminated unexpectedly. The official closure of the publishing house dates to January 2, 1925.

Between 1918 and 1924, World Literature published 220 books and 11 journal issues of Sovremennyi Zapad and Vostok. These numbers are small compared to the initial editorial plan, but significant considering the economic hardships (of course, the editorial portfolio contained multiple monographs ready for publication, which were later printed by Gosizdat and its subdivisions). The legacy of the World Literature Publishing House, however, exceeded the number of books and journals produced within the six years of its existence. Apart from being a unique member of the early Soviet publishing industry, it became a cultural center around which Petersburg intellectuals could converge. Frequent committee meetings associated with the program planning and review of manuscripts brought together scholars, writers, and translators whose usual lives had been unsettled by the Revolution. Kornei Chukovsky’s diaries offer a compelling portrayal of editorial meetings and special events at the publishing house. These included translation workshops, literary readings, and lectures by distinguished scholars and writers. In addition, it organized a library of foreign literature amounting

64 Ibid.
65 For example, the journal Dom Iskusstv (The House of the Arts) published announcements for the following lectures presented by World Literature members in the first half of 1921: “Herbert Wells” by Evgenii Zamiatiin, “Walt Whitman” by Kornei Chukovsky, “Nietzsche” by Akim Volynskii, and “Chinese Theater” by Vasilii Alekseev. Dom Iskusstv. 1921. No. 2. P. 118.
to nearly 70,000 volumes, which was annexed as a foreign department of the Public Library in Leningrad in 1924.

With its scope of cultural activity and its protected institutional status, World Literature Publishing House became a precursor (albeit for a short time) of a phenomenon defined as “model sites” in a recent monograph by Michael David-Fox. According to David-Fox, the use of “model sites” – carefully structured, well-organized spaces showcased for foreign visitors – proliferated from the 1930s onward, and foreign writers received special attention. Even though the main audience of the World Literature Publishing House was domestic, its enlightenment appeal was often invoked for international propaganda purposes. The publishing house welcomed foreign literary celebrities, such as H. G. Wells in 1920, trying to impress them with the breadth of the project. Though Wells was skeptical about the outcome of the Bolshevik Revolution, he praised the work of the World Literature Publishing House. Writing about economic hardships he had witnessed in Petersburg and Moscow, Wells noted:

...[T]he bulk of the writers and artists have found employment upon a grandiose scheme for the publication of a sort of Russian encyclopaedia of the literature of the world. In this strange Russia of conflict, cold, famine and pitiful privations there is actually going on now a literary task that would be inconceivable in the rich England and the rich America of to-day.

Wells contrasted the market-driven publishing system in the West with the thorough editions of foreign literature that were promoted in the Soviet Union. This was precisely the response that founders of the publishing house sought to elicit in their foreign guests. However, the early Soviet understanding of world literature and internationalism were not devoid of paradoxes.

The Soviet Vision of World Literature

The vision of world literature as a cultural and intellectual asset was at the core of the publishing house’s mission statement. It was used as a premise for this large-scale cultural enterprise and offered a convenient resource of propaganda for its founders. At the same time, some of the problems dis-

cussed in its early publications addressed complicated cultural issues such as racism, cultural hierarchy, and relations between the East and the West, predating similar discussions in Western academia by decades.

The very title of the World Literature Publishing House embodied the humanistic dream of its founders. The idea of “vsemirnaia” (whole-world, or universal) literature alluded to Gorky’s vision of literature as a path to universal humanism:

There is no universal Literature because – as yet – there never was any universal language common to all mankind; but all Literature, both prose and poetry, is saturated with sentiments, thoughts, ideas, which belong to the whole human race, and express the one sacred longing of Man for the joys of spiritual freedom…

In his reflections, Gorky echoes Goethe’s aspirations for a universal literature: “For there are everywhere in the world such men, to whom the truth and the progress of humanity are of interest and concern.” The title also invokes the subtitle of Merezhkovsky’s Vechnye sputniki – “portrety iz vsemirnoi literatury.”

Gorky’s own definition of “world literature” combines the Enlightenment’s view of literature as a part of intellectual and spiritual growth with a revolutionary appeal to literature as a way to bridge political and social divides. As if echoing the idea of literature’s universal reach, the logo of the publishing house, created by artist Iurii Annenkov, pictures a Pegasus hovering in a starry sky (fig. 1).

Gorky’s early definitions of “world literature” were decidedly literature-centric and Eurocentric, with the majority of examples stemming from European and Russian fiction and poetry. The introductory paragraph of the catalog was imbued with high-style rhetoric that positioned literature as the crowning achievement of the human intellect: “Literature is the heart of the world, winged with all its joys and all its sorrow, the hopes and dream of people,

---

72 This logo appeared in most editions by Vsemirnaia Literatura. See Gorky. Katalog izdatel’stva “Vsemirnaia Literatura.” P. 1.
their desperation and their rage, human affection for the beauty of nature, and fear before its mysteries.” The elevated tone of this passage is, in a way, a testament to Gorky’s own contradictory position as an intellectual caught in the advent of a new political order. In fact, the stylistics of this passage alludes to his early writing. For example, the opening paragraph-long sentence that defines literature as “the heart of the world” is reminiscent of the “burning heart” in his 1895 short story “Starukha Izergil” (The Old Woman Izergil), which critics have linked with Christian ideas. Gorky’s vision of “vsemirnaia literatura,” too, has strong religious undertones, such as in the image of literature as “the path of the cross to the whole-world feast of mutual understanding, respect, brotherhood and free labor in our glory.”

However, Gorky’s teleological view of world literature as a path to universal humanity was grounded in the idea of a revolutionary enterprise that could “snatch the human being from the chains of humiliating reality, to help him feel not as a slave, but as a master of facts, a free creator of life.” The very possibility of a true “whole-world” literature, Gorky insisted, was inextricably linked with the spirit of the Revolution, and the creation of “Internatsional dukha” (International of the Spirit):

The domain of the literary creation is in the International of the spirit, and now, when the idea of the brotherhood of nations, the idea of a social International, is evidently becoming a reality, a necessity, all efforts must be made in order that the assimilation of the saving idea of the fraternity of all mankind should develop as quickly as possible and penetrate into the depths of the mind and will of the masses.

Gorky’s ideas of “whole-world literature” and “International of the Spirit” represent an early instance of using cultural internationalism for political and ideological purposes – a significant feature of the Soviet cultural policy, analyzed in detail by Clark and David-Fox. These ideas also resonate with Western European discussions on internationalism and world literature such as the works of Valery Larbaud (French writer, translator, and literary critic), who described the modernist cultural exchange as the “Intellectual International.” While in Larbaud’s works, the “Intellectual

73 Ibid. P. 5.
76 Ibid. P. 7.
77 Ibid. P. 21.
International” largely presupposes shared cultural movements in Western European countries. Gorky proposes a much more ambitious plan, both in terms of geography and in social appeal of literary works.

Like Larbaud, Gorky was guided by a belief in the universal accessibility of aesthetic values, but he differed from the French scholar in proposing a much clearer political agenda that sought to bring the “International of the Spirit” to reality. For example, in a letter to Wells, Gorky defined the mission of Soviet cultural policy as “the propaganda of all-encompassing unity.” And in defining the remarkable scope and importance of the World Literature Publishing House, Gorky praised the state that funded it:

The honor of realizing such a scheme belongs entirely to the creative powers of the Russian Revolution, that same Revolution that is considered by its enemies “an Outbreak of Barbarians.” By creating such an immense and responsible cultural work in the very first year of their active life, under inexpressibly difficult circumstances, the Russian people are justified in saying that they are erecting a monument worthy of them.

The “monumental” dimensions of the World Literature publishing plan were indeed noteworthy. The project initiated by World Literature was the first centralized and organized attempt at transmitting cultural capital conceived in such proportions in the history of Russian culture (and, according to the editorial program, in the history of European culture as well). Furthermore, this project created a precedent for translation as a cultural asset, which grew and evolved to suit the political needs of the time. As Susanna Witt notes, “Literary translation in the Soviet Union may well be the largest more or less coherent project of translation the world has seen to date – largest in terms of geographical range, number of languages (and directions) involved and time span; coherent in the sense of ideological framework (given its fluctuations over time) and centralized planning.” While the choices of translated works shifted over time, reflecting censorship demands and the political agenda of a specific moment (ranging from the greater emphasis on the literature of the republics during the late 1930s–1950s, to the renewed

---

interest in international literature during the Cold War), it was the large-scale appeal established by World Literature Publishing House that defined many of the Soviet translation projects.

What were the boundaries of the idea of “world literature” in the Soviet Union of the early 1920s? As the aforementioned catalog of the publishing house suggests, its initial focus centered on European and American literature, with an ostensible focus on fiction and poetry. But it was not exclusively Eurocentric. In fact, the addition of the Eastern Department, which oversaw the publications of books and articles devoted to Asian, African, and Near-Eastern literatures, expanded both the geography and the genre scope of the publishing plan. The desire to expand the literary canon beyond European and American tradition was not unique to Gorky, and it traces back to the modernist interest in non-European literary and folklore traditions. Thus, in 1916 the anthology of Armenian poetry edited by Valerii Briusov foreshadows the editorial principles of the World Literature Publishing House, both in its subject matter and in the collaborative nature of an anthology (Valerii Briusov, Aleksandr Blok, Ivan Bunin, and Konstantin Bal’mont were among the contributors). However, the breadth of the World Literature editorial plan and its use of translation as a tool of political propaganda established some influential tendencies for the future of this field.

The initial plan for the Main Series included updated editions of European classics, grouped by countries of origin. Importantly, the catalog of the publishing house featured literature not only of many European countries, with the majority being from France, Germany, and England, but also of the Americas, including Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela. Both celebrated world classics (such as Goethe, Dickens, Goldoni, Maupassant), and authors whose works were never previously translated into Russian (France, Romain Rolland, and Rabindranath Tagore), were included in the catalog.

Editions of the People’s Series also incorporated a broad range of literary works, from the classics of European literature (Schiller, Voltaire, Wilde) to the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors (Wells, Jack London, D’Annunzio). This series usually published poetry, short stories, novels, and drama with a clearly defined plot, fabula, and accessible language. It often favored historical novels and adventure stories, for the main goal of the series was to reach out to the masses “to make reading attractive for unedu-

84 Shomrakova. A. M. Gor’kii – organizator izdatel’stva “Vsemirnaia literatura.” P. 86.
In the initial plan, Gorky advised to “publish the brochures in the chronological order, so that the mass reader could see clearly the entire process of Europe’s spiritual growth from the epoch of the Great Revolution until our days.” The emphasis, however, was on contemporary literature, and many of the stories and novels first published in this series soon became very popular with Soviet readers, as Evgenii Dobrenko notes in his study of the postrevolutionary workers’ libraries. This trend was supported by the State Publishing House. According to the protocol of a meeting on August 28, 1923, it was advised to “bring the attention of the World Literature staff to the immediate need to master the market of contemporary authors (London, Wells, and Upton Sinclair).” This exemplifies yet another trend in the literary translation sphere: generations of readers preferred editions of foreign literary works to the Soviet literary production.

Although the general reading public was interested primarily in the Western writers, the understanding of world literature by scholars and translators of the World Literature Publishing House extended beyond the traditional canon of European literature – a remarkable fact that parallels analogous developments in the Western literary world in the second part of the twentieth century. The Eastern Department, instituted shortly after the opening of the publishing house, began its work by publishing two volumes titled *Literatura Vostoka* (Literature of the Orient). It relied on the experience and the achievements of the Russian imperial tradition of Oriental studies; prominent scholars such as Boris Turaev, Vasilii Alekseev, Sergei Eliseev were among the scholars invited to participate in the work of the Eastern Department and to contribute to *Literatura Vostoka*. Volume 1 of this publication included articles on Indian literature, Arabic literature, and articles titled “Literature of the Turkish People” and “Folk Literature of the Paleoasian Peoples.” Volume 2 featured articles on Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian, Manchurian, Egyptian, and Abyssinian literature. The choices of literary traditions and the thoroughness of the articles reflected the expertise of these scholars and drew on the prerevolutionary academic tradition.

86 Ibid.
As the introduction to Volume 1 of *Literatura Vostoka* proclaimed,

Russian readers have long viewed world literature as the literature of the West. Now with the help of Russian specialists on Eastern studies, the World Literature Publishing House is making the first attempt to make masterpieces of Eastern literature an integral part of world literature, and to connect them with the heritage of the Western literatures.⁹⁰

Scholars of the Eastern Department praised the effort of the World Literature Publishing House that will enable Russian people to possess “a series of masterpieces of Eastern literature that no other people do.”⁹¹ Importantly, articles in *Literatura Vostoka* addressed the unique sensibility of Eastern literary traditions and sought to explain it in a language accessible to the general public. For example, Eliseev discussed the difficulties encountered by European readers of Japanese literature. According to him, these difficulties lay in

understanding foreign and unknown forms, where… we encounter a different proportion of parts and whole. We should not approach Japanese literature with our own patterns and disregard anything that fits these patterns. On the contrary, we should try to understand these forms that are new to us.⁹²

Reaching beyond the broad appeal for unity between the East and the West under the aegis of the Bolshevik Revolution, articles by Eliseev and his colleagues addressed complex questions of aesthetic and cultural differences.

Editions of *Literatura Vostoka* also devoted special attention to questions of spirituality and religious tradition. Turaev, one of the leading Egyptologists and specialists on Near Eastern literatures of his time, described the importance of translating and publishing religious texts of different national traditions: “Praise, prayer, incantation – all are idiosyncratic but understood by humanity, and should be represented in the modern literary world.”⁹³ Turaev’s statement presents another example of a “niche” for topics absent in official culture. In subsequent years, translations from ancient or geographically distant literary traditions (including Chinese, Japanese, and Indian literature as well as the literature of Byzantine Ancient Greece and Rome) permitted discussions of religious and spiritual questions, while such themes were forbidden in the context of Soviet literature.

⁹⁰ Ibid.
Scholars and writers who participated in the work of World Literature strove to represent a variety of cultural sources, even though their conceptual framework often relied on notions of cultural dominance. For example, in an article devoted to the oral epic traditions of Siberian ethnic groups, Bogoraz praised them as a part of diverse world literature, which he described in sensual terms as a “multicolored bouquet”:

The black and the yellow danger that we often hear of in the sphere of world literature is not a danger at all, but rather a growth of riches, an exploration of new sources flowing in from the east and the south, from the most rich, colorful, and hot lands, so rich in sunshine and color. World literature should shun monochromy. The more complex its colorful bouquet, the sweeter and stronger its aroma.  

This description of different literary traditions may seem graphic from the modern standpoint, but it reflects both a search for terminology and an attempt to form a broader literary canon.

Guided by a desire to create an inclusive canon of “world literature,” the leaders of the publishing house paid close attention to the most recent publications in Europe and in the United States that could represent multinational trends. For example, in 1922 World Literature translated and published René Maran’s *Batouala: A True Black Novel*, a book that won the Prix Goncourt in 1921 and became internationally known for its exploration of racism and colonialism. In his review of the translation, Chukovsky admired the vividness and intensity of the book, and praised its ability “to break down the wall of misunderstanding that separated people and artists of different races.”

While the notion of literature “of all times and all peoples” did not lift the very distinction of “big” or “small,” “civilized” or “primitive” nations, the tendency toward universality and inclusion defined the editorial policy of the World Literature Publishing House. As the analysis suggests, the editorial credo of the World Literature Publishing House was shaped by specific political and cultural circumstances, and it combined an idealistic call for an inclusive literary canon with the need to accommodate the ideological agenda of the socialist state. The approaches to text translation and commentaries were, in many ways, also determined by the dual nature of the publishing house.

Approaches to Translation and Commentary

The editorial program of World Literature included not only an extensive list of books but also a demanding call for high-quality translations. Several committees oversaw the selection of texts and closely supervised the quality of translations as well as the textual commentaries and introductions. According to the editorial guidelines, “All manuscripts, including originals and translations, are subject to control and editing by the Editorial Committee of the publishing house.”

As Chukovsky, the editor and translator of English and American literature, recalled, the editorial committee painstakingly reviewed the quality of translations:

Whether we were dealing with English ballads, Beranger’s songs… none of us members of the World Literature staff would permit compromises, and erased anything that could misrepresent the original work, as we all believed in the high mission of the translator’s art.

Scholars and writers who collaborated on the World Literature projects sought to produce informative, fully annotated editions.

The works of various literary traditions were seen as equally meriting the “treasure chest” of world literature. The tendency to compare universal values and emotions that speak to “all people” at “all times,” justified the relevance of world literature for the modern epoch (although sometimes, it bordered on the absurd). As Gorky proclaimed in the introduction to the publishing house catalog, literature “tells us that Hen-Toy the Chinaman suffers as acutely from unrequited love for women as Don Juan the Spaniard, that the Abyssinian’s songs of the joys and sorrows of love are the same as those sung by the Frenchman.”

Inasmuch as this approach disregarded the unequal value of different concepts and ideas in the cultures it sought to compare, it was adopted as one of the key models for translation commentary. Universal values, historical significance, and cultural importance were often highlighted in the introductions to works published by World Literature.

As the editorial program asserted, the introductory articles played an important educational and ideological role in familiarizing Russian readers...
with foreign literary traditions. Critics and translators were encouraged to present a historical overview of the work within its native literary tradition and draw parallels with Russian literature. According to the editorial recommendations,

Each introductory article should, apart from all other material, include information about the translated author’s influence on the foreign literature, and vice versa.

The Editorial Board of World Literature Publishing House requests that in compiling articles and introductions one should show, where possible, the connections of the author of a particular work to Russian literature, and point out the influences of given authors or works on Russian literature.\textsuperscript{102}

Although the main goal of the introductory articles was to establish cultural and historic contexts of a given work and to justify its relevance for the Soviet reader, the content varied between the Main Series and the People’s Series.

Editions of the Main Series were geared toward more sophisticated readers. They included detailed biographical overviews and insightful analyses of stylistic features of the translated works, commentary on the works’ international reception, and references to previous editions in Russian. Examples include Zhirmunsky’s article on Byron, Chukovsky’s article on Walt Whitman, and Blok’s article on Heinrich Heine.\textsuperscript{103} Questions of aesthetics and details of literary history held greater importance in these articles than political comments.

The publications of the People’s Series, on the contrary, emphasized the ideological aspects of literature. In defining the pertinence of foreign works to the Soviet reader, these articles sought to explain sociopolitical conflicts of a specific epoch and country. Thus, in his introduction to Wilde’s stories, Chukovsky contrasted Wilde, as an Irishman, with a more strict English culture: “Oscar Wilde was an Irishman. The Irish are a very gifted, dreamy, and poetic people. They are similar to the French. And they are not like the English at all […]. Every Irishman, as every child, is part poet, and part actor.”\textsuperscript{104} Such

descriptions were not uncommon, as the introductory articles in the People’s Series appealed to uneducated readers and often relied on oversimplified analogies. Along with defining some cultural traits, the introductory articles also highlighted the political conflicts of the respective epoch in its connection to the Russian Revolution. In the same article, Chukovsky praised Wilde’s ability to “battle bourgeois prejudices” in order to support “brave, freedom-loving people.”

Nevertheless, writers at the World Literature Publishing House were able to convey their own point of view in the introductory articles and commentaries. For example, in introducing Wells to the Russian reader, Zamiatin wrote: “The old world, with its militarism and inequality, its cruel class and racial struggle, is ill and doomed to perish if it does not experience a profound transformation. Wells strongly believes in this, and everything that he writes is colored with the red hues of this conviction.” While catering to the call for ideological framing of translations, Zamiatin also adds cautionary remarks about limiting a work of literature to political context:

The reader has probably already sensed the word that we have not uttered yet: Wells is a socialist. But this should not be understood in the sense of belonging to a political party. Giving an artist a party label is as impossible as teaching a bird to sing by sheet music, and if that were possible it would produce not a nightingale, but a starling – nothing more.

Zamiatin’s subversive comment about the impossibility of applying narrow political definitions to creative literature represents an important feature of translation in the Soviet epoch. Even though the repertoire of translated works was restricted due to censorship, translations usually came under less scrutiny than original writing, and often became a “vehicle for expressing alternative, if not openly oppositional, views.”

Scholars and writers at World Literature often took the requirement of politically minded introductions with a grain of salt. For example, in his diaries, Chukovsky recalled the editorial meeting where he and his colleagues brainstormed ideological justifications for translating world classics:

Tikhonov gave a report on expanding our publishing agenda. He would like to include Shakespeare, Swift, Latin and Greek classics in

---

105 Ibid. P. 9.
the proposed publication list. But in order to pass each book through the editorial committee at the State Publishing House, we needed to supply each author with an ideologically appropriate recommendation: Boccaccio – struggle against the clergy; Vasari – moving art closer to the masses; Petronius – satire on the NEP. But we could not quite figure out how to recommend *The Divine Comedy*.109

This note suggests that employees of World Literature acknowledged the superficial nature of the ideological framework for the publications. At the same time, they recognized their own role as transmitters of cultural heritage. For example, Sergei Ol’denburg in an obituary for Boris Turaev published in the second volume of *Literatura Vostoka* wrote: “With a frightening and eerie feeling we realize that in our days there are no new forces to replace the ones who are gone, and we sense an ominous decrease in the ranks of weary fighters for world culture.”110 It was the rich academic background of scholars such as Ol’denburg, Turaev, Zhirmunsky, Eikhenbaum, and many others who took part in the World Literature publications that set the high standards for the translation editions.

Among the measures introduced to ensure a consistent quality of translations were the creation of translation guidelines, training of translators, and institution of translation editors. The early publications by World Literature generally did not present theoretical accounts of the translation process, but occasionally included notes on translation and style in the introductory articles. However, the publishing house did issue a theoretical brochure, *Printsipy khudozhestvennogo perevoda* (Principles of Artistic Translation).111 This book included Batiushkov’s articles “Zadachi khudozhestvennykh perevodov” (The Tasks of Artistic Translations) and “Iazyk i stil’” (Language and Style), as well as articles on poetry translation by Gumilev and prose translations by Chukovsky.

Batiushkov’s contribution to the volume addressed larger issues of translation equivalence. Citing the Greek Septuagint Bible as an ideal example of impartial translation, Batiushkov observed that “there is only one principle of the true artistic translation – the commitment to adequacy.”112 Batiushkov offered a thoughtful overview of the typology of translation, depending on its role within a literary system, thus predating the polysystems theory of

---

translation advanced by Itamar Evan-Zokhar in the 1970s, which considers the position of translated literature in relation to the recipient literary system.\textsuperscript{113} In Batiushkov’s view, the goals of translation were “the exact transmission of sense, maximally close reproduction of style, and retention of stylistic traits of the original without breaking grammatical rules of the language into which you are translating.”\textsuperscript{114} Comparing the task of the translator to that of an actor or a music performer, Batiushkov observed that a translator, in fact, has less freedom in reproducing the text because “he must reproduce what already exists.”\textsuperscript{115}

Batiushkov’s observations are significant, as they emphasize “scientific,” rather than artistic, dimensions of the translation activity. These approaches provided a formative influence on the subsequent development of literary translation theory in the Soviet Union. The premises of translatability (each work can be transposed to another language), norm (each translation should conform to specific stylistic and ideological standards), and equivalence (the style of translation should be maximally close to the analogous style in the original language) had long-ranging implications for the translation field. This view of translation was incorporated into the principles of the “functional stylistic,” one of the key translation methods advocated by scholars of literary translation such as Andrei Fedorov, Efim Etkind, and Givi Gachechiladze.\textsuperscript{116}

World Literature also established translation workshops – another tradition that enjoyed a long-lasting legacy. As Chukovsky recalled,

The publishing house was in need of a large pool of qualified masters of translation, and since there was a shortage of employees of this sort, we had to undertake energetic efforts in order to create them in a record manner, and, at the same time, to improve the qualifications of the translators who have not received appropriate training.\textsuperscript{117}

To remedy the shortage of qualified skilled translators, the World Literature Publishing House oversaw the creation of a literary translation studio

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{114} Batiushkov. Zadachi khudozhestvennykh perevodov. P. 12.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid. P. 15.
\textsuperscript{117} Korney Chukovsky and Andrei Fedorov. Iskusstvo perevoda. Leningrad, 1930. P. 3.
\end{flushleft}
led by Lozinsky and Gumilev. Dom Iskusstv (the House of the Arts) hosted the first workshops for collective poetic translation, along with a series of other educational events. The translation studio organized lectures and seminars on poetics, literary criticism, history of European literature, and translation craft. Among the lectors were Batiushkov, Blok, Akim Volynsky, Gorky, Gumilev, Zamiatin, Mikhail Kuz’min, Viktor Shklovsky, Lozinsky, Eikhenbaum, and other prominent writers and scholars.

The literary studio also conducted practice sessions and aimed to develop guidelines for translators. In these workshops, young poets, writers, and aspiring translators collaborated under the guidance of one of the professional translators. Thus, translation was seen as an objective, collective enterprise that should be maximally free of the personal interference and creative expression of the translator. Several Soviet writers and translators, including Vsevolod Ivanov, Konstantin Fedin, and Veniamin Kaverin, were disciples at the studio.

The tradition of formal and semiformal translation seminars continued throughout the Soviet period. Shortly after the closure of the World Literature Publishing House, many of its members joined the Translator’s Section of the Leningrad branch of the All-Russian Union of Writers. The practice of literary translation studios established by Gumilev, Chukovsky, and Lozinsky also had an enduring history. Official and semiofficial literary translation workshops, such as the English poetry seminar led by Tatiana Gnedich, the French poetry seminar conducted by El’ga Linetskaia in Leningrad in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as Moscow translation seminars by Vil’gel’m Levik, Elizbar Ananiashvili, Arkadii Shteinberg, and Vladimir Mikushevich were frequented by many translators. These workshops not only provided a literary schooling for beginning authors but also offered formative encounters with inspiring mentors and great works of literature.

---

All in all, approaches to translation advanced by the World Literature Publishing House mirrored its dual nature as a state-sponsored literacy project and as an institution that employed many members of the group of prerevolutionary scholars and writers. This duality encompasses many of the features of the literary translation field that I have pointed out throughout the article. In the concluding part, I will briefly address some of the World Literature legacies that allowed critics to define it as “a cradle of the Soviet school of literary translation,” but also inspired generations of translators who saw their work as a way of perpetuating literary culture.

**Soviet Translation Theories and the Legacy of the World Literature Publishing House**

Between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s, literary translation changed course, moving from the rather open approach to various cultural traditions that was characteristic of the World Literature Publishing House to a focus on promoting literatures of the Soviet republics. Gorky’s article “Literary Creativity of the People of the USSR” published in *Pravda* on September 29, 1928, heralded the rise of this new trend:

The art of words – literature – fosters mutual understanding between people; workers and peasants of the Union of Socialist Soviets must know their neighbors of different languages well, as their mutual goal of creating new forms of state life calls for that.123

One may note the similarity of rhetoric between this article and Gorky’s introduction to the World Literature Publishing House catalog that praised literature as a way of building “mutual understanding, respect, brotherhood.”124 Translation continued to play a crucial role in the development of the nationalities policy, which generated an avalanche of translations to and from various languages of the Soviet republics. In this context, the use of translation as a cultural “achievement,” first championed by Gorky, became a cliché in official publications:

---

Never before has translation achieved such a grandiose sweep in our country as in the 1950s. According to the magazine *The UNESCO Courier*, the USSR holds first place in the world for its number of published translations. But the point is not only the number of translations, which in the period of 1951–1956 constituted 78.8 percent of all literary publications.\footnote{Vladimir Rossel’s. Za eti gody // Masterstvo Perevoda 1959. Moscow, 1959. P. 208.}

The statistics spoke to a sad fact: the number of translations of Soviet literary works, as well as translations of the classics of Western literature recognized by the Soviet literary canon, was overwhelming in comparison to the publication of original books.


Following the closure of World Literature, some of its manuscripts were published by different branches of the State Publishing House, as well as by Academia Publishing House. Perhaps the most direct heir to the World Literature project was Biblioteka Vsemirnoi Literatury (Library of World Literature), a book series that was launched to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution. Comprising literary works from ancient epics to twentieth-century literature (both foreign and Russian), it fulfilled the idea of a thorough and accessible library of world literature proposed by Gorky in 1919. Even the emblem of the new series (a Pegasus flying over the globe)
was reminiscent of the World Literature logo. Two hundred volumes of the series printed during the 1960s and the 1970s (with 303,000 copies of each volume) embodied Gorky’s idea of a comprehensive and accessible representation of “world literature” proudly displayed in the private libraries of many Russians. (While the volumes in this collection spanned ancient epics and remote traditions, the selection of authors and titles was determined by censorship restrictions, particularly in regard to twentieth-century Russian and international literature.)

The World Literature Publishing House also established several important trends in approaches to translation, including the practice of scholarly editions with extensive critical commentary, institution of translation editors, and the development of stylistic norms and guidelines for translators. The tradition of norm-oriented translation became one of the hallmarks of the Soviet translation school, even though it had to accommodate the rhetoric of Socialist Realism aesthetics. It also contributed to the emergence of translation studies as a separate field, with a growing number of publications on the subject, such as Masterstvo perevoda (The Craft of Translation, an annual almanac published between 1959 and 1976) and Tetradi perevodchika (Translator’s Notebooks, published between 1963 and 1982).

The appeal to a mass reader – another idea that allowed Gorky and his colleagues to establish the World Literature Publishing House – was frequently appropriated in the ideologically based discussions of translation. As Vladimir Rossel’s, one of the translation critics of the 1950s, explained: “The wider the circle of future readers that the translator envisions during his work, the higher and more valuable his art, and the better it corresponds to the goals of the entire Soviet literature.”129 The emphasis on large-scale translation projects had some negative consequences as well. In particular, the widespread use of podstrochniki (interlinear prose versions of the original texts that received literary reworking by professional translators or writers) often resulted in a low quality of translations and literary mystifications.130 While the editors at the World Literature Publishing House advocated for a close knowledge of the linguistic and cultural background of the original work, new practices of translating via the interlinear prose texts established a target-language-oriented tradition. In this context, the style of translations

130 For more on the debates around the use of podstrochniki see Susanna Witt’s articles: Susanna Witt. Between the Lines: Totalitarianism and Translation in the USSR; Eadem. Arts of Accommodation: The First All-Union Conference of Translators, Moscow, 1936, and the Ideologization of Norms.
catered to a presumed literary norm, rather than specific features of the original text.

The translation field, overall, incorporated a set of “ideological filters,” to use Ilya Kukulin’s apt definition, which influenced not only the choice of works available for translation but also the critical framing of translated editions and the stylistic approaches. At the same time, as Baer and Bagno have pointed out, literary translation continued to offer a political “safe haven” for a number of poets and writers who not only produced excellent translation examples but also cultivated the tradition of translation as a way of preserving and transmitting culture. These broader trends took different shapes over decades, and their history is drawing increasing scholarly attention.

* * *

To summarize, the World Literature Publishing House not only marks the founding moment of the Soviet tradition of literary translation and the vision of world literature but also encapsulates their paradoxical nature within Soviet culture. To recall Damrosch’s definition, the analysis of “world literature” should always take into account its “local perspective,” including its presumed boundaries and its framing by means of translation. As Edwin Gentzler explains,

Translation does not simply offer a window onto some unified, exotic Other; it participates in its very construction. The process of staging translation is a process of gathering and creating new information that can be turned to powerful political ends, including resistance, self-determination, and rebellion.

According to Gentzler, not only can translation appear as a powerful tool of establishing the dominant ideology, but it can also become a site of resistance. As I have tried to show in this article, the early Soviet attempt to

133 See A. Azov. Poverzhennye bukvalisty: Iz istorii khudozhestvennogo perevoda v SSSR v 1920–1960-e gody. Moscow, 2013 (Forthcoming). I would like to thank the peer review author for this reference.
represent world literature possessed an ambivalent nature, serving as a tool for political propaganda and simultaneously creating possibilities for dissent. On the one hand, Gorky’s notion of universal accessibility of world literature was appropriated as a way of gaining cultural capital at different stages of Soviet history. On the other hand, many of the practices established by the World Literature Publishing House created an ongoing counterbalance to the dominant ideology. Serving as a refuge for many leading prerevolutionary intellectuals, it defined the space of translation as a “cultural niche” and a channel of covert communication with readers.

In the final analysis, while the history of the World Literature Publishing House is grounded in the Russian cultural context, it offers a useful example of how institutional and ideological frameworks can define seemingly universal categories. Analyzing such historically specific examples may help in gaining greater insights into the complexity of political, historical, and aesthetic issues that converge in the notion of “world literature.”

**SUMMARY**

The article explores the history of the World Literature Publishing House (1918–1924), which was founded in Petrograd under Maxim Gorky’s initiative, and employed many leading writers, scholars, and intellectuals of the time. I analyze the development of the publishing house, its editorial principles, and its approaches to creating the canon of world literature. Special attention is devoted to its role in establishing some key tendencies for the field of literary translation in the Soviet Union. The history of this publishing house offers an example of how specific ideological and institutional frameworks can influence such broad concepts as “world literature.”

**Резюме**

Статья посвящена истории издательства “Всемирная литература” (1918–1924), основанного в Петрограде по инициативе Максима Горького. Автор реконструирует историю организации издательства и анализирует принципы его деятельности, включая формирование канона мировой литературы и подходы к переводу и комментированию текстов. Особое внимание уделяется тенденциям, повлиявшим на дальнейшее развитие художественного перевода в советскую эпоху. История издательства позволяет проследить, как идеологические и институциональные структуры воздействуют на формирование концепции “всемирной литературы”.

154
Copyright of Ab Imperio is the property of Editors of Ab Imperio and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.