

Publishing and Politics: Translating Contemporary Russian Fiction into English

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to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Russian
August 2023

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Abstract

Translation can be regarded as an intrinsically political act. Whether it is undertaken for reasons of activism, as a form of cultural diplomacy, from a love of literature, or as an instrument of colonisation, the asymmetric balance of power between dominant and dominated languages inevitably can move translated fiction beyond purely literary concerns. Taking the extra-literary motives behind translation as its point of departure, this PhD explores the ways in which Anglo-Russian politics and ensuing political bias influences the translation of contemporary Russian fiction into English. To discover these points of confluence, I compare the commission, translation, marketing, and reception of novels from two politically opposed groups of Russian writers: “liberals” Vladimir Sorokin, Ludmila Ulitskaya and Mikhail Shishkin, and “nationalists” Zakhar Prilepin, Mikhail Elizarov and Roman Senchin.

Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s research into the publishing industry in 1990s France, I site the field of contemporary Russian-English translated fiction within the global literary market. I apply an agent-based microhistorical methodology as advocated by Jeremy Munday in order to identify the macro-literary dynamics that govern this particular translation field. By creating translation histories around contemporary Russian novels that have been largely marketed via politicised paratexts in the UK and US, I ask why certain texts are translated rather than others, why some translations are more commercially successful, and to what extent political bias and economic constraints govern the translation process. My research is primarily informed by thirty-eight interviews with editors, literary agents, translators, and Russian authors. These reveal the under-researched gatekeeping processes both within Russia and the Anglophone literary market. Combined with close textual and paratextual analysis of translations from my six key authors, and an evaluation of their extra-literary activities, this study locates the points of confluence between the realms of Russian-English translated fiction and contemporary geopolitics.

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Transliteration

I use the Library of Congress system for transliterating Russian throughout, with the exception of some authors' names. In order to reduce confusion, I have used the spelling most commonly associated with authors by their publishers. I therefore refer to, for example, Ludmila Ulitskaya, Dmitri Glukhovsky, Sergei Lukyanenko, Alexei Navalny, and Joseph Brodsky and Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky.

Translations

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of author interviews, or from Russian media sources, are my own.

Interviews and Appendices

This research draws from thirty-eight interviews conducted between 2020-2023. Some of these have been anonymised according to the interviewee's wishes. Appendix A lists all of the interviews that took place, accompanied by brief biographical notes on each named interviewee.

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Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the European Research Council for funding my PhD as part of the research project: 'The Dark Side of Translation: 20th and 21st Century Translation from Russian as a Political Phenomenon in the UK, Ireland and the USA'.

I could not have attempted this research without the generosity and enthusiasm of all of my interviewees. I enjoyed every fascinating conversation as it led me another step along the way to understanding the world of Russophone fiction in translation. Neither would my PhD have been possible over an unexpectedly eventful four years without the unstinting support and care of my supervisors Professor Maguire and Doctor McAteer.

I would also like to thank Mikhail Vodopyanov for sparking my interest in contemporary Russian fiction, which inspired me to embark on this research, and Anna Maslenova for her friendship and support throughout this project. Finally, thanks go to my family and friends for their encouragement and patience, not least my husband David, and children Alex, Sam and Ishbel.

Introduction

In October 2011 Vladimir Grigoriev, Deputy Minister of Rospechat', Russia's Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media, made a significant announcement for the Russian literary scene. Standing beside author Mikhail Shishkin he revealed that Russia would be Guest of Honour at BookExpo America in 2012.¹ In response, American publisher Chad Post enthused that Russia's turn in the spotlight would coincide with the release of Shishkin's novel *Maidenhair* (*Venerin Volos*, 2005) in the US.² As BookExpo 2012 approached, Post's colleague Will Evans celebrated that Read Russia, a cultural organisation founded that year, was bringing scores of Russian authors to New York.³ Shishkin, who has lived in Switzerland since 1995 and is one of Russia's most visible novelists in the West, was to be one of Read Russia's main stars.⁴

A few months after the 2012 book fair, Shishkin fell abruptly from Grigoriev's favour. This was because on the 27th of February 2013, Shishkin wrote an open letter to Rospechat'.⁵ The letter outlined Shishkin's refusal to represent Russia at BookExpo America (BEA) the following June:

A country where power has been seized by a corrupt, criminal regime, where the state is a pyramid of thieves, where elections have become farce, where courts serve the authorities, not the law, where there are political prisoners, where state television has become a prostitute, where packs of impostors pass insane laws that are returning everyone to the Middle Ages — such a country cannot be my Russia. I want to and will represent another Russia,

¹ 'BEA 2012 to Honor Russia in Global Market Forum', *PublishersWeekly.Com*, 7 May 2011 <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bea/article/46391-bea-2012-to-honor-russia-in-global-market-forum.html>> [accessed 25 January 2023].

² Mikhail Shishkin, *Venerin volos* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2005); Mikhail Shishkin, *Maidenhair*, trans. by Marian Schwartz, (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2012).

³ These authors included Dmitry Bykov, Zakhar Prilepin, Mikhail Shishkin, and Olga Slavnikova. Editor Mark Krotov later noted that the event was not as successful as it should have been because most of the readings were only attended by Russians; Interview with Mark Krotov, December 2020; Will Evans, 'Read Russia at BEA 2012', 31 May 2012, <<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepersent/2012/05/31/read-russia-at-bea-2012/>> [accessed 25 January 2023]. For more on Read Russia, see 'Read Russia'. Available at <<https://readrussia.org>> [accessed 20 January 2023].

⁴ Shishkin is the only Russian author to win all three of Russia's most prestigious literary prizes, the Russian Booker, the Natsbest, and the Bol'shaia Kniga. For a discussion of Russian literary prizes, see Chapter One, p. 78.

⁵ The letter was soon published by the Western press. See Alison Flood, 'Mikhail Shishkin Refuses to Represent "criminal" Russian Regime', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2013. Available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/07/mikhail-shishkin-russia-us-book-expo>> [accessed 4 November 2019].

my Russia, a country free of impostors, a country with a state structure that defends the right of the individual, not the right to corruption, a country with a free media, free elections, and free people.⁶

Shishkin was quickly lauded in the West as a dissident and denounced by various political factions in Russia as a traitor. Grigoriev responded by stating that ‘this is what happens when a Russian author spends so long away from his homeland.’⁷ Writer Olga Slavnikova regarded Shishkin’s letter as an ‘anti-Russian statement.’⁸ A commentator at the liberal radio station *Ekho Moskvyy* welcomed Shishkin’s actions as a sign that he should win the Nobel Prize and named him a modern-day Solzhenitsyn.⁹ Post, who had no involvement with the letter, described Shishkin’s overtly anti-Putin stance as ‘catnip’ for the sales of *Maidenhair*, and the author was given column space in the British and American liberal press.¹⁰

The dénouement of this politically polarised reaction to Shishkin’s letter was performed by Institut Perevoda, Russia’s Institute of Translation (henceforth IP). IP is chaired by Grigoriev and has long been the principal source of funding for literary translations from Russian.¹¹ Shishkin claimed that IP stopped funding his translations; ‘After the open letter I wrote in 2013, they stopped awarding money to translate the books of someone they termed a “natspredatel” [national traitor]’.¹² It seems that Shishkin’s journey from being a relatively unknown writer

⁶ Flood, ‘Mikhail Shishkin Refuses to Represent “criminal” Russian Regime’. See also Chad Post, ‘Where State Television Has Become a Prostitute’, *Three Percent* <<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/2013/03/11/where-state-television-has-become-a-prostitute-mikhail-shishkin-the-russian-government/>> [accessed 24 July 2023].

⁷ ‘V Rospechaty udivleny otkazom Mikhaila Shishkina predstavliat’ Rossiyu na BookExpo v ssha’, *Gazeta.Ru*, 8 March 2013 <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2013/03/08/n_2788809.shtml?updated> [accessed 29 October 2021].

⁸ I will discuss these reactions in more detail in Chapter Four, p. 230. ‘Mikhail Shishkin otkazalsia ot uchastiia v knizhnoi iarmarke BookExpo America’, 2013 <https://ast.ru/news/mikhail_shishkin_otkazalsya_ot_uchastiya_v_knizhnoy_yarmarke_bookexpo_america/> [accessed 29 October 2021].

⁹ Marina Koroleva, ‘A ne predstavlen li nam v litse Mikhaila Shishkina budushchii nobelskii laureat po literature?’, *Facebook*, 8 March 2013 <<https://www.facebook.com/marina.koroleva.754/posts/617437514950069>> [accessed 28 October 2021]. *Ekho Moskvyy* was removed from the air in March 2022 but continues to broadcast online. See for example, ‘Ekho Moskvyy ob’iavilo o prodolzhenii raboty v sotssetiakh i YouTube’, *fontanka.ru*, 2022 <<https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/03/03/70484372/>> [accessed 29 January 2023].

¹⁰ Interview with Chad Post, 11 February 2021. For a discussion of Shishkin’s opinion pieces in the press, see Chapter Four, p. 243.

¹¹ I discuss IP in depth in Chapter Two, from p. 165 onwards. Also see, ‘About the Institute’ <<https://eng.institutperevoda.ru/>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

¹² Interview with Mikhail Shishkin, 13 September 2021.

in the West, to a regular contributor to the liberal Anglophone press, even a proposed candidate for the Nobel Prize, is a direct result of his political actions.¹³ His anti-Putin statements have simultaneously augmented his reputation and status in the West, while damaging them in some quarters within Russia.¹⁴

Alongside Shishkin, ultra-nationalist author, politician, and former OMON special forces soldier Zakhar Prilepin also attended the 2012 BEA. At the time, his cult novel *San'kia* (*Sankya*, 2006) was being translated into English.¹⁵ The novel was eventually published in the UK and US in 2014, accompanied by an introduction from anti-Putin politician Alexei Navalny.¹⁶ This foreword confirmed Prilepin's status as a member of the Russian government opposition. This dissident image was disrupted in 2014 by Prilepin's increasingly strident support for Putin. The first definite sign of Prilepin's political realignment came shortly after the 2012 BEA with the publication of his pro-Stalin, anti-Semitic magazine article 'Pis'mo tovarishchu Stalinu' ('Letter to Comrade Stalin').¹⁷ Subsequently, as the Ukrainian Maidan protests took place in the winter of 2013/2014, his support for the Russian government became increasingly vocal.¹⁸ In February 2017, Prilepin confirmed that he had been leading a battalion in what he called the 'People's Republic of Donetsk' in the Donbas region of Ukraine, and he began making regular appearances on the Russian evening news with a gun.¹⁹ The admission that he

¹³ Koroleva, 'A ne predstavlen li nam'.

¹⁴ The most recent proof of Shishkin's dissident role in the West is his book: Mikhail Shishkin, *My Russia: War or Peace?*, trans. by Gesche Ipsen (London: Riverrun, 2023).

¹⁵ At the time, his novel *Sin* had just been published by Glagoslav in the UK. *Sankya* was eventually published by Disquiet, an imprint of Dzanc Books in the US, and by Russian-literature specialist Glagoslav in the UK in 2014. Zakhar Prilepin, *San'kia* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2006); Zakhar Prilepin, *Sankya*, trans. by Jeff Parker, Mariya Gusev, and Alina Ryabovolova (London: Glagoslav, 2014); Zakhar Prilepin, *Grekh* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2007); Zakhar Prilepin, *Sin*, trans. by Nina Chordas and Simon Patterson (London: Glagoslav, 2012).

¹⁶ Prilepin, *Sankya*, p. 6. Prilepin's relationship with Navalny deteriorated after 2012. See Chapter Four, p. 236.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the content of the letter, see Chapter One, p. 100; Zakhar Prilepin, 'Zakhar Prilepin: Pis'mo tovarishchu Stalinu', *Zavtra*, 15 August 2012 <<http://zavtra.ru/blogs/pismo-tovarishchu-stalinu-2>> [accessed 2 May 2020]. The letter has not been translated into English but is available in French in Monique Slodzian's study; see Slodzian, *Les Enragés de La Jeune Littérature Russe* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 2014), p. 24.

¹⁸ For example, see: Zakhar Prilepin, 'Plach kliatogo moskalia', *Svobodnaia Pressa*, 3 February 2014 <<https://svpressa.ru/society/article/81592/>> [accessed 30 January 2023]; 'Rossiiskii pisatel' Zakhar Prilepin: Krym dostalsia Ukraine sovershenno sluchaino', *Insider*, 13 March 2014 <<http://www.theinsider.ua/art/rossiiskii-pisatel-zakhar-prilepin-krym-dostalsya-ukraine-sovershenno-sluchaino/>> [accessed 26 August 2022].

¹⁹ For example, 'Zakhar Prilepin Uekhal Voevat' Na lugo-Vostok Ukrainy', *Novosti 1TV*, 13 February 2017 <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2017-02-13/319761-pisatel_zahar_prilepin_uehal_voevat_na_yugo_vostok_ukrainy> [accessed 25 May 2020];

had been fighting in Ukraine led Prilepin's foreign literary agent Thomas Wiedling to announce that he would no longer represent the author, although he would honour existing contracts but donate all profits to Amnesty International.²⁰ In a 2019 interview where Prilepin appeared to boast about how many Ukrainians he had killed, the writer complained that as a result of his actions in Donbas his books were no longer commissioned for translation, and he was no longer invited to any international book fairs.²¹

This contrast between the reception of "liberal" Shishkin and "nationalist" Prilepin in the Anglophone West illustrates the question at the heart of my PhD. Shishkin's "liberal", anti-Putin, and therefore dissident stance rendered him an acceptable author in the UK and US, and he was henceforth afforded a platform in the mainstream Anglophone press. Meanwhile, Prilepin's journey in the opposite direction, from anti-government "nationalist" activist to pro-Putin "nationalist" soldier, has relegated him to obscurity abroad. Since this opposition between "nationalist" and "liberal" authors is central to my research, I begin by outlining these political movements in Russia, and clarify the definition of these terms as they are applied in this thesis. I will then detail my research question, before presenting the first portion of my literature review, which explores research on the circulation of World Literature, the sociology of translation, and studies pertaining to other national translation fields. This is followed by my methodology. I reprise my literature review in Chapter One with a consideration of the principal themes in contemporary Russian fiction, and an introduction to each of the six authors that form the focus of my research; Vladimir Sorokin, Ludmila Ulitskaya, Mikhail Shishkin, Zakhar Prilepin, Mikhail Elizarov, and Roman Senchin.

'Zakhar Prilepin sformiroval v Donbasse sobstvennyi batal'on', *Lenta.RU*, 13 February 2017 <<https://lenta.ru/news/2017/02/13/kombat/>> [accessed 29 January 2023]. Poet Vera Polozkova noted that she had a bottle of champagne ready for when he would be killed. See 'Poetessa Polozkova pozhelala Prilepinu smerti', *Dni.ru*, 15 February 2017 <<https://dni.ru/lifestyle/2017/2/15/361587.html>> [accessed 26 July 2021].

²⁰ Interview with Thomas Wiedling, 2 November 2020.

²¹ Find the interview here; Aleksei Pivovarov, 'Polnoe inter'viu Zakhara Prilepina, Redaktsia Iskhodniki', 15 August 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5HM4VKHc3U&feature=youtu.be&t=1329>> [accessed 11 March 2020].

1 Nationalism, Liberalism and Eurasianism in Russia

The contrasting translation journeys between authors who are perceived in the West as “liberal”, and therefore dissident, and those held to be “nationalist”, forms the basis of my research. As such, in the following section I will briefly explore Liberal and Nationalist politics in Russia, while also outlining the imperialist, Eurasianist movement that is increasingly influential. I will subsequently consider where the authors in this study sit along Russia’s political spectrum and define the ways in which I apply the labels “liberal” and “nationalist” within my research. I find that the extremes of contemporary Russian politics are rooted in a search for post-Soviet identity and agree with the analysis that Russia is searching for this new identity by looking to its pre-Soviet past.²² Throughout this thesis I use the term ‘Russia’ and ‘Russian’ to indicate the civic rather than ethnic connotation. In Russian, this is marked by two distinct terms — Rossiiskii (a citizen of the Russian Federation) and Russkii (an ethnic Russian).

Russia’s search to define its identity that can be traced back to the Slavophile/Westerniser debates that began in the eighteenth century. These debates were prompted by a search for identity that was itself precipitated by the adoption of European, and especially French culture among the Russian gentry at that time. This turn towards the West led to the emergence of a new educated class that saw itself as separate from the Royal Court, and one that went on to position itself between the State and the people.²³ As officers in the army pushing back Napoleon, some of these educated classes found themselves as officers in Paris in 1814. Amongst the barbarity and destruction of war these educated Russians came to realise that the French ideal they had been aiming for had failed at its source — the French Revolutions, and Napoleon, had destroyed the dream. What Russia had been trying to emulate had itself failed.²⁴ Distanced from

²² For a discussion of this topic, see: Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (London: Vintage, 2019), p.35. See also Tolz, ‘Conflicting “Homeland Myths”’. In *The Light that Failed*, Krastev and Holmes pose that the annexation was a bid to ‘re-legitimise’ a failing government; Krastev and Holmes, p. 112. For further reading on Putin’s use of memory politics, see Jade McGlynn, *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin’s Russia* (London; New York; Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

²³ Susanna Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 19.

²⁴ For Rabow-Edling the Decembrist movement, culminating in a mass protest from these educated classes during the coronation of Nicholas I in 1825, marks the final split between the Russian court and the intelligentsia; see her *Slavophile Thought*, p.20. Iver Neumann sees the

Russian culture, and without a reliable model to follow, this Westernised gentry were left without direction.

The identity crisis that ensued was expressed by Petr Chaadaev (1794-1856) in one of his letters, written in French and published in the journal *Teleskop* in 1836 (although copies were already circulating around private salons prior to publication).²⁵ Chaadaev wrote that Russia was a country of ‘cultural nomads’ who did not know who they really were. Dale Peterson stresses the importance of this debate, claiming that Chaadaev ‘initiated modern Russia’s search for a national identity’.²⁶ Chaadaev’s letter heralded the polarisation of Slavophile and Westerniser positions during the 1840s — by the end of that decade both sides were steadfast in their beliefs.²⁷ The Slavophiles were confirmed in their intention to look inwards to Russia to build the country’s future and sought inspiration in the pre-Petrine past. Accordingly, they placed their faith in Russian tradition and the Orthodox Church. Andrzej Walicki characterised Slavophile beliefs as ‘conservative utopianism’.²⁸ As I will discuss in more detail later, this same tendency is echoed by the current neo-medievalist trend in Russian culture as explored in Sorokin’s *Den’ Oprichnika (Day of the Oprichnik, 2006)*, as well as Putin’s reliance on the past to create a new Russia.²⁹

In contrast to the Slavophiles, Westernisers refuted the past and turned to Europe for inspiration.³⁰ They felt that Russia’s past should not influence its future: in order to progress, they needed to assess and react to Russia’s current situation. Alexander Herzen, one of the most high-profile Westernisers, stated that ‘we [Russians] have

Decembrist revolution as marking the birth of Russian political debate; see Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), p. 26.

²⁵ Dale Peterson, ‘Civilizing the Race: Chaadaev and the Paradox of Eurocentric Nationalism’, *The Russian Review*, 56.4 (1997), 550–63 (p. 550).

²⁶ For more on this see: Henry Hale, ‘How Nationalism and Machine Politics Mix in Russia’, in *The New Russian Nationalism* (Edinburgh, 2016), pp. 221–48 (p. 246); Vera Tolz, ‘Conflicting “Homeland Myths” and Nation-State Building in Postcommunist Russia’, *Slavic Review*, 57.2 (1998), 267–94 (p. 62). Importantly, Tolz notes this division began in the 1760s and characterises it as a conflict between conservatives and liberals; see Tolz, ‘Conflicting Homeland Myths’, p. 60.

²⁷ Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*, p. 28.

²⁸ The neo-medievalist trend in contemporary Russian literature, culture and politics can be linked to the Slavophiles’ idea of returning to the past to find a way forward. See, Andrzej Walicki, ‘Russian Social Thought: An Introduction to the Intellectual History of Nineteenth-Century Russia’, *The Russian Review*, 36.1 (1977), 1–45 (p. 36).

²⁹ Vladimir Sorokin, *Den’ Oprichnika* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2006); Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

³⁰ Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought*, p. 83.

to understand ourselves as we are' in order to progress.³¹ Neumann characterises Westernisers as 'those who looked to Europe for political and economic ideas'.³² For Neumann, Slavophiles are 'Romantic Nationalists': paradoxically, they were inspired by the German Herderian understanding of nationalism, which stressed the importance of 'the people'.³³

However, Russian politics cannot purely be characterised as either oriented to the West, or inwards towards Russia. The increasingly influential Eurasianist movement regards Russia as at the heart of the Eurasian world — an imperial concept that pictures the country as at the hub of a multiethnic alliance that incorporates China, and the former Soviet States. Precipitated by the turmoil of the early twentieth century, the Eurasianist movement was founded by Russian émigrés Nikolai Trubetskoi, Georges Florovski, Petr Savitski and Petr Suvchinski, who first expressed their ideas in 'Exodus to the East' published in Sofia in 1921. These early Eurasianists sought to unite Russia and the East into one entity under the Orthodox Church, and in this way free Russia and the Slavic lands from what they regarded as Western European colonialism. During Communism, the movement lost momentum, but it was revived by Lev Gumilev (1912-1992) when the Soviet Union collapsed. The movement has been embraced by notable figures, including Aleksandr Dugin, Zakhar Prilepin and, arguably, Vladimir Putin.

1.1 The Political Spectrum in Contemporary Russia

In the twenty-first century, Slavophile/Westerniser, and indeed Eurasianist arguments have become increasingly relevant as Russian society has polarised in response to the war in Ukraine.³⁴ Today, Russia's liberals hold a similar complex relationship with the West as the Westernisers, and are increasingly under threat. While their values can characterize a range of political beliefs, such as support for the free market, or a belief in personal freedom and democracy,

³¹ Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought*, p. 83. Masha Gessen compares Ulitskaya to Herzen. For this, see Chapter Four, p. 248.

³² Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*, p.18.

³³ Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*, p.18.

³⁴ See the Conclusion, p. 338 for a discussion of varied responses among Russian authors.

liberals are consistently derided; being a liberal is tantamount to being a Russophobe in contemporary Russia.³⁵

The threat against liberalism can be traced to the 1990s, when nascent liberal values promoted by the post-Soviet government were challenged during the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Western-inspired liberal economic reforms that were instigated at the time led to inflation, a dramatic fall in living standards, and economic chaos.³⁶ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argue that this post-Soviet attempt to emulate the West, and to aspire towards the supreme goal of Western Liberalism failed when Russians realised that they would not be ‘welcomed as fellow Europeans in the West.’³⁷ The failure of the liberal economic reforms, and ultimately of the Russian attempt to emulate the Western model under IMF guidance, badly tainted the liberal political cause. A rift formed between liberals who had sought close ties with the West, and conservatives who felt the experiment had been a betrayal.

As a result, the liberal values of freedom, including political correctness, tolerance, and protection for minorities, including members of the LGBTQ+ community, are today the subject of derision, and the antithesis of Putin’s conservative Russian State.³⁸ The association of these values with the West just as their association with the disastrous liberal politics of the 1990s, means that liberals are increasingly treated as internal enemies who advance the West’s

³⁵ See Eliot Borenstein *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* (Ithaca, NY ; London: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 133-34. See also, Mikhail Gutkin, ‘Vladimir Sorokin: ‘Ia pitaius’ Russkoi metafizikoi, no ne predstavliaiu sebia bez Evropy’’, *Golos Ameriki*, 11 May 2011 <<https://www.golosameriki.com/a/sorokin-interview-2011-05-11-121675299/234456.html>> [accessed 21 June 2023].

³⁶ Borenstein, *Plots*, p.134; Paul Robinson, *Russian Conservatism* (Ithaca, NY: Northern Illinois University Press, 2019), p. 183. In her 2007 study, Rosalind Marsh used the term ‘liberal’ to describe ‘democrats’. The term ‘democrat’ was associated with Yeltsin’s 1990 reforms and developed negative connotations in Russia. See Rosalind Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006* (Bern: P. Lang, 2007), p. 41.

³⁷ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *Light That Failed: A Reckoning*. (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p. 73. Shishkin also wrote to me about his complex relationship with the West. He holds the West partly responsible for the difficulties faced by Russia after the collapse of communism; Interview with Shishkin.

³⁸ Borenstein, *Plots*, p. 133. In July 2023, the Russian government passed a law that made sex change illegal. The law has grave implications for the transgender community. See ‘Deputaty Sdelali Uzhasnyi Zakon o Zaprete “Smeny Pola”’, *Meduza*, 14 July 2023 <<https://meduza.io/cards/vlasti-hotyat-sdelat-zhizn-transgendernyh-lyudey-v-rossii-adom>> [accessed 3 August 2023].

agenda.³⁹ Borenstein quotes Ilya Budraitskis who claims that ‘the very word “liberal” has become a synonym for the internal enemy’.⁴⁰ They are ‘anti-Russian’.⁴¹ In 2022 Putin declared that liberalism was dead, calling it absurd.⁴² The extent to which the liberal position is now problematic can be seen in the use of the term as an insult.⁴³ The fresh invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the subsequent haemorrhaging of liberals from Russia is testament to the threat to liberalism in an increasingly authoritarian State.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Russia’s growing nationalism, actively encouraged by the Russian government and its media as documented by Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz, is in part redolent of the Slavophile position, and increasingly inspired by Eurasianist imperialist philosophy.⁴⁵ Gumilev’s “neo-Eurasianism” of the 1980s and 90s saw the world in a much clearer way than the Eurasianists of the 1920s. For Gumilev, the globe was divided into the “Atlantic World” of Western Europe and the Americas, and the “Eurasian” one – with Russia at its heart. These two entities exist in opposition to one another. Gumilev supported this view of the world with an example from Russia’s history. Somewhat controversially, he argued that the 1380 Battle of Kulikovo, when Russian troops defeated the Mongol Golden Horde, represented cooperation between Russians and ‘people of the steppe’. He believed that these two factions had not in fact been enemies but had instead worked cooperatively to defeat the West: the latter, Gumilev

³⁹ Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*, p. 187. Concerns about protecting Russia against Western ‘depravity’ are expressed in Prilepin’s *Za Pravdu* manifesto and Russia’s stringent ‘anti-gay’ laws. For a description of these laws, and their impact, see ‘Vse, “gei-propaganda” (chto by eto ni znachilo) teper’ v Rossii pod pol’nym zapretom’, *Meduza*, 25 October 2022 <<https://meduza.io/cards/v-rossii-polnostyu-zapretyat-propagandu-gomoseksualnosti-i-pedofilii-a-detyam-nelzya-budet-dazhe-rasskazyvat-ob-lgbt-lyudyah-chto-esche-popadet-pod-zapret>> [accessed 9 January 2023].

⁴⁰ Borenstein, *Plots*, p. 134.

⁴¹ Borenstein, *Plots*, p. 133.

⁴² ‘Putin: Liberalizm doshel do absurda’, *TASS*, 27 October 2022

<<https://tass.ru/politika/16174585>> [accessed 30 January 2023].

⁴³ Rubtsov Aleksandr, ‘Kak liberalizm stal rugatel’stvom’, *Vedomosti*, 20 September 2019

<<https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2019/09/20/811652-liberalizm-rugatel'stvom>>

[accessed 30 January 2023]. Borenstein notes that the term ‘liberal’ has been corrupted to ‘liberast’, compounding ‘liberal’ with ‘pederast’ (paedophile). This is a highly pejorative term which in Russia refers to a gay man. See Borenstein, *Plots*, p. 135.

⁴⁴ For more on this see Borenstein, *Plots*, p. 134. See also my Conclusion, p. 333 onwards.

⁴⁵ Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz, ‘Truth with a Z: Disinformation, War in Ukraine, and Russia’s Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26 April 2023. Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2202581>>.

argued, was represented by a breakaway element of the Golden Horde which he claimed had allied with leaders from Western Europe.⁴⁶

Richard Sakwa argues that Gumilev's views have resulted in today's Eurasianists' 'overriding antipathy to the West'.⁴⁷ Sakwa also asserts that today Russia's character, or rather its new identity, is Eurasian. This has led, he argues, to Putin founding the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in January 2015.⁴⁸ It is also an element in Russia's imperialist quest to dominate former Soviet states such as Ukraine. Today, Eurasianism is embraced by organisations such as the Izborskii Klub, which was founded in 2012 by self-styled 'nationalist intellectuals' such as Aleksandr Dugin, writer and journalist Alexander Prokhanov, and Zakhar Prilepin.⁴⁹ In addition, Dugin's main work on the subject, *The Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997) is used as a reference book by the Russian armed forces, and he maintains close links with many of today's main political figures.⁵⁰

1.2 Literature and Politics

As I will explore further in Chapter One, the six writers who form the focus of this study sit along the Russian political spectrum that runs from "nationalist" to "liberal". The terms "nationalist" and "liberal" in this thesis denote the way in which these authors are perceived in both Russia and the West, rather than the way in which they might necessarily describe themselves. In the West, as I will explore in Chapter Four, Russian writers who are perceived as "liberal" are often described as "dissident" — indicating that as "liberals", they are opposed to Putin.⁵¹ Mikhail Shishkin arguably occupies the most openly "liberal", or "dissident" position of all of the authors here, evident in his unequivocal statements both at author events, in print, and in the Western media.⁵² While Vladimir Sorokin and Ludmila Ulitskaya have been regarded as "liberal", and

⁴⁶ Mark Bassin, 'Narrating Kulikovo: Lev Gumilev, Russian Nationalists, and the Troubled Emergence of Neo-Eurasianism', in *Between Europe and Asia, The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), pp. 165–86, (p. 172).

⁴⁷ Richard Sakwa, *Russia's Futures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p. 65.

⁴⁸ The EEU members are The Russian Federation, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

⁴⁹ Izborskii klub', 2024 <<https://izborsk-club.ru/>> [accessed 11 February 2024].

⁵⁰ Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2016), p.234.

⁵¹ See Chapter Four.

⁵² See Chapter Four, p. 243 for more on this.

hence represented as “dissident”, in the West, neither of the authors claimed to be politically active when they were first published in English. They occupy a less extreme “liberal” position than Shishkin. However, as I explore in the Conclusion, this is no longer the case — neither Sorokin nor Ulitskaya is able to avoid politics since Putin’s renewed invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁵³ Just as there is variation in “liberal” authors’ views, the “nationalist” authors here also differ. While Roman Senchin is increasingly mild in his “nationalist” stance, which veers towards the civic rather than imperial, Mikhail Elizarov takes a more right-wing, ethnocentric view of Russian nationalism. Zakhar Prilepin, meanwhile, occupies the most extreme nationalist, Eurasianist position of the three.⁵⁴

Although these authors sit along a political spectrum, they largely occupy positions that echo the Slavophile/Westerniser debate of the eighteenth century. In this sense, these authors are perpetuating a political and philosophical divide that Masha Gessen identifies as re-emerging after *glasnost*. For Gessen, the mid-1980s saw the intelligentsia divide into, ‘the Westernisers and the Slavophiles, the atheists and the religious, the liberals and the monarchists.’⁵⁵ The split between these two opposing ideological groups is captured by Shishkin’s description of the Russian literary scene:

On one side are the nationalists, who think Russia is a holy country, an island surrounded by an ocean of enemies (first among them, America) who want to destroy Russia. These ‘patriots’ have their own newspapers and literary magazines and their own literary critics. On the other side, we have the liberal Russian critics. They believe that we belong with the whole of civilization, that we must be together with the Western world.⁵⁶

⁵³ See the Conclusion, p. 338.

⁵⁴ Prilepin was accused of being a Slavophile by critic Mikhail Berg when he published his controversial ‘Letter to Comrade Stalin’. This is addressed in Chapter One, p. 100.

⁵⁵ Masha Gessen, *Dead Again: The Russian Intelligentsia after Communism* (London ; New York: Verso, 1997), p. 18. Gessen’s division along the lines of religion does not apply to my six authors, all of whom profess to be religious, regardless of their stance as “nationalist” or “liberal”.

⁵⁶ Alyssa Loh, ‘A Conversation with Mikhail Shishkin’, *The American Reader*, n.d. <<http://theamericanreader.com/a-conversation-with-mikhail-shishkin/>> [accessed 4 November 2019]. Marsh also refers to liberal and nationalist writers as two distinct sets. See Marsh, *Literature, History*, p. 508.

Prilepin depicts a similarly polarised society in his essay titled ‘Dve rasy’ (‘Two races’, October 2014).⁵⁷ Following Putin’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, Prilepin sees two different types of Russians — those that have hope for Russia’s future and support Putin’s actions, like himself, and those who do not. He bemoans the depression of a musician friend who laments that Russia will never be part of the ‘civilised’ world as a result of the annexation.⁵⁸ For Prilepin this illustrates the division in society, between those who support Putin and are newly proud to be Russian, and those who grieve their lost chance to be considered as part of Europe. He observes that, ‘What is good for them — is death for us. What makes them happy — brings us depression.’⁵⁹

It appears that the Slavophile/Westerniser divide thus survives in part as the “nationalist”/“liberal” split which Gessen, Shishkin and Prilepin describe. For Shishkin, the “nationalists” — whom he terms derogatorily as ‘patriots’ — regard the West as an enemy. Like their nineteenth-century Slavophile counterparts, and neo-Eurasianist colleagues, Prilepin and Elizarov look to the past, to Russian traditions and family values to create a post-Soviet national identity that verges on the imperialistic.⁶⁰ Prilepin directly references this past when he refers to himself as a ‘pochvennik’.⁶¹ The term is associated with the nineteenth-century *pochvennichestvo* movement which held that Russia’s problems could be rectified if the intelligentsia would return to the ‘soil’ — an epithet for native Russian culture.⁶² Meanwhile, Elizarov refers to the West as an active enemy of Russia, and parodies the Slavophile/Westerniser debate in his anti-Semitic novel *Pasternak*.⁶³ Senchin is not so extreme as his two “nationalist” peers. However, his embrace of the genre of Village Prose, which I describe in more detail in

⁵⁷ Zakhar Prilepin, ‘Dve Rasy’, *Den’ Literatury*, 9 October 2014 <<https://denliteraturi.ru/article/168>> [accessed 23 May 2023].

⁵⁸ This is echoed by Ulitskaya in ‘Evropa, proshchai!’; Ulitskaya, ‘Evropa, proshchai!’, *Novaia Gazeta*, 26 August 2014 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2014/08/26/60867-evropa-proschay-zaltsburgskie-vpechatleniya>> [accessed 21 January 2023].

⁵⁹ Prilepin, ‘Dve Rasy’.

⁶⁰ This is evident in the manifesto for Prilepin’s former political party, Za Pravdu. For more on this, see Chapter One, p. 102. For further analyses of both authors’ politics see Chapter One, p. 99 (Prilepin) and Chapter One, p. 109 (Elizarov).

⁶¹ ‘Soska Rossiiu ne spaset’: Kak v Kalingrade proshla tvorcheskaia vstrecha s Zakharom Prilepinym’, *Ru.Grad*, n.d. <<http://rugrad.eu/afisha/news/soska-rossiyu-ne-spasyet-kak-v-kaliningrade-proshla-tvorcheskaya-vstrecha-s-zakharom-prilepinym/>> [accessed 11 June 2023].

⁶² See Chapter Five for a discussion of this.

⁶³ For more on *Pasternak*, see Chapter One, p. 111.

Chapter One, along with his reluctance to engage with the West, place him firmly in the Slavophile camp.⁶⁴

Analogously, “liberal” authors reflect Westerniser values, and are often labelled in the West as “dissident”. They align themselves with Europe and the US, albeit not uncritically, and are willing to engage with the Western media in a way that most “nationalists” are not.⁶⁵ All three of the “liberal” authors in this study exhibit Westerniser beliefs. In a 2011 interview Sorokin was asked whether he was a ‘Russophile’ or a ‘Westerniser’; he replied that he could not imagine himself without Europe and praised European values.⁶⁶ Although Ulitskaya is regularly described as a ‘Westerniser’, she does not use the term herself.⁶⁷ This marries with her general avoidance of politics.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, Shishkin’s position towards Russia, and the West, is increasingly clear. He does not support Putin or the war, and embraces his life in Switzerland, all the while campaigning for democracy and freedom in Russia.⁶⁹ He does not, however, regard the West uncritically.⁷⁰

“Liberal” positions have become more entrenched since the intensification of Russia’s war against Ukraine from February 2022.⁷¹ Sorokin and Ulitskaya now live outside of Russia, as do other “liberal” figures such as literary critic Galina Yuzefovich, authors Maxim Osipov and Ksenia Buksha and actress Chulpan Khamatova.⁷² Shishkin left Russia in 1995 for personal reasons rather than

⁶⁴ See Chapter One, p. 73.

⁶⁵ See Chapter Four, p. 239 onwards for more on this topic. Despite his Western outlook, Shishkin is critical of the West for not helping Russia when the Soviet Union collapsed; Interview with Shishkin.

⁶⁶ Gutkin, ‘Vladimir Sorokin: ‘Ia pitaius’ Russkoi metafizikoi’.

⁶⁷ See Sergei Khudiev, ‘Tri glavnykh oshibki nashikh zapadnikov’, *Vsogliad.ru*, 26 June 2018 <<https://vz.ru/opinions/2018/6/26/929559.html>> [accessed 21 June 2023].

⁶⁸ For a discussion of Ulitskaya’s political views, see Chapter Four, p. 257.

⁶⁹ For more about this, see Chapter One, p. 93 and Chapter Four, p. 243.

⁷⁰ See Chapter One, p. 93.

⁷¹ The response of liberal and nationalist authors to the war in Ukraine post February 2022 is discussed in my Conclusion, p. 338.

⁷² For more on this, see: ‘Actress and Activist Chulpan Khamatova Has Left Russia’, *The Moscow Times*, 21 March 2022 <<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/21/actress-and-activist-chulpan-khamatova-has-left-russia-a77020>> [accessed 18 April 2023]; Anastasia Boutsko, ‘Who Are the Russians Leaving Their Country?’, *Dw.Com*, 4 May 2022 <<https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-the-russians-leaving-their-country/a-61364390>> [accessed 15 February 2023]; Ksenia Bushka, ‘The Russia That Was: Author Ksenia Buksha on Leaving Russia’, trans. by Anne O. Fisher, *Pushkin House*, 11 May 2022 <<https://www.pushkinhouse.org/blog/the-russia-that-was>> [accessed 18 April 2023]; Maxim Osipov, ‘Cold, Ashamed, Relieved: On Leaving Russia’, trans. by Boris Dralyuk, *The Atlantic*, 16 May 2022 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2022/05/russian-citizens-leaving-russia-ukraine-war/629859/>> [accessed 9 October 2022].

politics, though his views would make it challenging for him to return.⁷³ In contrast, “nationalists” Elizarov, Prilepin and Senchin remain in Russia, and the first two of these authors are fully committed to supporting the war.⁷⁴ Senchin, who occupies the less extreme end of the “nationalist” spectrum, has been named a person of suspicion because of his initial silence around the topic.⁷⁵

There is a link, I believe, between the Slavophile/Westerniser debate that raged in St Petersburg’s literary salons in the 1840s, the Eurasianist movement, and the increasingly entrenched polarisation of contemporary Russian society. As described by both Prilepin and Shishkin above, this debate is expressed by either an affiliation to Russia, perhaps as a leader of the Eastern world, and a belief that the West is the enemy, or a leaning towards the West. It might also encompass imperialistic ambitions and an understanding of the world as increasingly polarised. Meanwhile, as Shishkin explains, liberalism is frequently characterised as Russophobia by Russian nationalists.⁷⁶

The apotheosis of this increasingly stark divide can be seen in Putin’s ‘foreign agent’ laws, which target Russians with links to the West, and the mass exodus of “liberals”.⁷⁷ This increasing polarisation is visible not only in how Russian authors relate to the West, but in their representation in the UK and US. As I will argue throughout this thesis, an author’s political allegiance affects both their acceptability to a Western audience, and the marketing materials used to contextualise them in the Anglophone literary space. As I will show in the following chapters, “liberal” authors are regularly championed as dissidents in the West, while in contrast, the few “nationalist” authors who are commissioned for translation into English are likely to have their politics ignored.

⁷³ For further exploration of Shishkin’s political statements and views see Chapter One, p. 93 and Chapter Four, pp. 239-256.

⁷⁴ For more on this, see Conclusion, p. 338.

⁷⁵ For more details, see Chapter One, p. 102.

⁷⁶ Interview with Shishkin.

⁷⁷ For more details about Foreign Agents, see Chapter Two, p. 199.

2 Political Bias and Translation — Research Question

Translation can be regarded as an intrinsically political act.⁷⁸ Whether it is undertaken for reasons of activism, as a form of cultural diplomacy, from a love of literature, or as an instrument of colonisation, the asymmetric balance of power between dominant and dominated languages can move translated fiction beyond purely literary concerns.⁷⁹ The purpose of this study is to explore to what extent politics, in the form of individual and institutional political bias, underpins the gatekeeping networks that enable this transfer. This research will analyse the role of political bias in the commission, translation, marketing and reception of contemporary Russian novels in the West at a time when relations with Russia are increasingly strained.⁸⁰ By analysing the actions and motivations of translators, editors, and literary agents within the field of Russian-English translated fiction, and examining their response to Russian authors' politicised actions and statements, I will trace where, how and to what extent this political bias operates.

The terms politics, and political bias, as they are applied in this thesis, operate on multiple levels. In the primary instance, this research is concerned with the relationship between Russia and the UK and US. The balance of power between the Russian Federation and the West, and specific geopolitical events such as the war against Ukraine, and Putin's fraught relationship with NATO, all influence the flow of literature from one sphere to another.⁸¹ Furthermore, and as I will

⁷⁸ See for example: Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, 'Politics of Translation: How States Shape Cultural Transfers', in *Literary Translation and Cultural Mediators in 'Peripheral' Cultures: Customs Officers or Smugglers?*, ed. by Diana Roig-Sanz and Reine Meylaerts (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 183–208; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', in *The Translation Studies Reader*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 320–38; Maria Tymoczko, 'Translation and Political Engagement: Activism, Social Change and the Role of Translation in Geopolitical Shifts', *The Translator*, 6.1 (2000), 23–47; Lawrence Venuti, 'Translation as Cultural Politics', in *Critical Readings in Translation Studies*, ed. by Mona Baker (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010); Marina Warner, 'The Politics of Translation', *London Review of Books*, 11 October 2018 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n19/marina-warner/the-politics-of-translation>> [accessed 29 January 2023].

⁷⁹ Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, 'Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars', in *Post-Colonial Translation* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), pp. 1–18; *Translation, Resistance, Activism*, ed. by Maria Tymoczko (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

⁸⁰ When I began this research, Russian forces had already claimed Crimea and were fighting in Donbas. During the final year of my PhD, Russia invaded mainland Ukraine and widescale sanctions were imposed on Russia. Russian publishers were also boycotted by Western publishers.

⁸¹ See Conclusion, p. 333 onwards for a full discussion of the impact of Russia's war.

demonstrate, publishers hold a perception of Russia that is closely linked to the country's politics. There is a tradition, especially prevalent for fiction from the Soviet Union, of publishing and reading novels through a political lens. This includes the practice of preferencing novels written by "dissidents" as I demonstrate in Chapter Two.⁸² There is a sense that Russian novels might reveal something about the country's political situation, and that their authors have a political message for the Western reader. As Edwin Frank suggested in an interview with *The New York Times* in 2011, the idea of Russia as 'enemy' gives readers a reason to read a contemporary Russian book.⁸³ The political bias I refer to reflects this sentiment.

Political bias might be displayed by institutions such as funding bodies Institut Perevoda or English PEN and is detectable in their decisions over which Russian authors to support. Political bias also extends to the personal. Individuals may decide not to publish or translate a novel because of their own political beliefs, or from a desire to present an image that tallies with mainstream, acceptable norms in the UK and US. For this reason, publishing Prilepin since 2017 has become politically unacceptable, and publishing a novel that is pro-Putin even more so. Doing so would reflect badly on a publisher's or a translator's own personal political views, and possibly damage their career.

The juxtaposition above of Shishkin and Prilepin reveals the impact that an author's political stance can exert on the acceptability of novels both in Russia and abroad. To discover to what extent an author's acceptability in the West is influenced by their political stance, this study presents and analyses microhistories of six contemporary Russian novels written by authors who fall roughly into two ideologically opposed groups. Authors perceived as "liberal" in Russia, and who are therefore presented as "dissident" in the West are represented by Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* (*Den' oprichnika*, 2006); Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Big Green Tent* (*Zelenyi shater*, 2011); Mikhail Shishkin's

⁸² See Chapter Two, p. 124 onwards.

⁸³ Ellen Barry, 'The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin', *The New York Times*, 29 April 2011, section Books <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/30/books/the-russian-novelist-vladimir-sorokin.html>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

Maidenhair (*Venerin volos*, 2006).⁸⁴ The novels by authors who occupy varying degrees of the “nationalist” spectrum in Russia are: Mikhail Elizarov’s *The Librarian* (*Bibliotekar’*, 2007); Zakhar Prilepin’s *Sankya* (*San’kia*, 2006); Roman Senchin’s *Minus* (*Minus*, 2002).⁸⁵

I contend that based on an author’s political stance, an editor might choose not to commission a novel, a translator not to recommend a book, or an agent not to represent an author based on their own personal political bias. Editors might also make decisions about whom to avoid publishing, in order to protect their own reputation and guard their symbolic capital.⁸⁶ In some cases, translation decisions might be taken to render a controversial author more acceptable. Alternately, the reception of a Russian novel might be improved by focussing on a dissident angle of presentation, for example by designing politically biased paratexts such as titles, blurbs, cover design and introductions. These decisions are all underpinned, consciously or otherwise, by a combination of factors rooted in the prevalent discourse around Russia in the West.

As I will discuss in my methodology below, my research is largely based on thirty-eight interviews with translators, authors, editors and literary agents involved in the production of contemporary Russian fiction in English translation. I arranged, conducted, and transcribed the majority of these interviews between August 2020 and April 2022.⁸⁷ These conversations revealed that a complex series of decisions by a network of gatekeepers comprise the translation journeys of each of the novels addressed in the chapters below. Funding, linguistic expertise, access to information about Russian literature, and the question of sales all precede concerns with politics in these translation histories, but nevertheless, the influence of political bias remains significant. By describing the gatekeeping

⁸⁴ Mikhail Shishkin, *Venerin volos* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2005); Mikhail Shishkin, *Maidenhair*, trans. by Marian Schwartz (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2012); Vladimir Sorokin, *Den’ Oprichnika* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2006); Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Zelenyi shater* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2011); Ludmila Ulitskaya, *The Big Green Tent*, trans. by Polly Gannon (New York: Picador, 2015).

⁸⁵ Mikhail Elizarov, *Bibliotekar’* (Moscow: AST, 2007); Mikhail Elizarov, *The Librarian*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Pushkin Press, 2015); Zakhar Prilepin, *San’kia* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2006); Zakhar Prilepin, *Sankya*, trans. by Jeff Parker, Mariya Gusev, and Alina Ryabovolova (London: Glagoslav, 2014); Roman Senchin, *Minus* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2002); Roman Senchin, *Minus*, trans. by Arch Tait (Moscow: Glas, 2008).

⁸⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 142.

⁸⁷ For my interview methodology, see p. 60 below.

networks that bring contemporary Russian fiction to the UK and the US, this study will identify how political bias interacts with such networks and thus to what extent this bias influences the representation of author persona in a time of geopolitical insecurity.

My conclusion will consider the effects of Russia's war against Ukraine on the translation of contemporary Russian novels into English. The war has provoked discussions around cancelling Russian culture and has impacted US and UK publishers' readiness to accept funding for translated fiction from Russia. Such discussions confirm the interference of individual and institutional political bias in the translation of Russian literature into English. It also demonstrates that the Russian-English translated fiction field is largely sustained by the availability of external financial support. Although political bias does not consciously interfere with the textual-linguistic decisions taken by editors and translators on the micro level, it underpins macro-level decisions over what to publish, and how to market contemporary Russian fiction.⁸⁸ It is thus that politics influences the transfer of contemporary literature from Russia to the Anglophone West.

3 The Russian-to-English Translated Fiction Field, and World Literature

Since my research encompasses both Translation Studies and contemporary Russian fiction, I have divided my literature review into two sections. The first situates this thesis among studies on World Literature, as well as nation-specific publishing research. This encompasses Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the French publishing world, as well as studies of the French-Canadian, Dutch and Slovenian translated fiction fields. In this section, I explore the topics that are central to this thesis: Bourdieu's sociological framework, the evolution of the translation industry, gatekeepers, funding, and the role of the translator and the attendant ethics. In Chapter One, I will expand my literature review to situate my own work alongside existing academic studies on contemporary Russian literature, as well as research pertaining to my six key writers.

⁸⁸ I demonstrate this through my translation analyses in Chapter Five.

3.1 Bourdieu's Framework — Field, Capital, and Habitus

Before any further discussion of Pierre Bourdieu, it is necessary to define some of his key concepts as they are applied in this thesis. Bourdieu's own interrogation of the literary world, which I explore below, relies on his concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *capital*. All of these elements are to some extent interdependent. By analysing the actions and decisions of translators, publishers, literary agents and editors through Bourdieu's framework, I have been able to describe and assess the space within which Russian to English translated fiction exists.

Bourdieu divides society into different *fields*. Each field represents 'a kind of arena where people play a game which has certain rules, rules which are different from the game that is played in the adjacent space'.⁸⁹ Each field is governed by rules specific to it, which the actors who are active in these fields follow, and fully commit to. For the purposes of this study, the principal area of interest is therefore the field of Russian-English translated fiction, though I compare this with other national fields, and within the supra-national context of the field of World Literature, as I will discuss below.

Within each field, actors struggle for what Bourdieu terms *capital*. This competition for capital in turn forms the shape and structure of each field. Capital takes four different forms. It might be economic, demonstrated by material wealth or profit. Capital might also be cultural, and expressed in forms of knowledge, taste, and cultural preferences. Capital can also be social, and evident in membership of particular networks, such as those of translators, which I describe in Chapter Two.⁹⁰ Finally, capital might be symbolic — a form of capital that can be exchanged for other forms of capital in different fields.

The most important function of any field is that it allows one form of capital to be converted into another.⁹¹ This idea of transferring capital from one actor to another is referred to by Bourdieu as *consecration*, and is key to my description of the Russian-English literary translation field.⁹² By commissioning a novel for

⁸⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. by John B. Thompson and Gino Raymond (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 215.

⁹⁰ See Chapter Two, p. 137.

⁹¹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 14.

⁹² Pierre Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution in Publishing', trans. by Mieranda Vlot and Anthony Pym, *Translation Studies*, 1.2 (2008), 123–53 (p. 123).

translation, a publisher confers their symbolic capital to an author — consecrating them both in the target culture, and as we shall see, sometimes also in their source culture (though as Lawrence Venuti points out, this is not always the case).⁹³ In some cases, depending on the status of the foreign author and their position within the supra-national field of World Literature a publisher may in turn be consecrated. This is especially true if their author goes on to win prestigious prizes.⁹⁴

The final key element, which I will explore in relation to my own study, is that of *habitus*. Bourdieu defines *habitus* as a person's disposition, formed as a result of external and personal factors including upbringing and social class, that subsequently inform their actions.⁹⁵ For Bourdieu, a person's *habitus* influences how they interact with a particular field, which for the purposes of my research is the field of translated fiction, and more specifically, the subfield of translated fiction from Russian to English. In addition to *habitus*, as I explore further in Chapter Five, is the question of translatorial *hexis*, which David Charlston defines as the text-based embodiment of a translator's stance.⁹⁶ For Charlston, *hexis* is created by the 'social space' a translator inhabits and is the motivation behind some translator decisions.

Because they are shaped by the constant competition for capital, Bourdieu's fields are dynamic in nature. This is especially true for the literary field, which Bourdieu describes as 'a field of forces, but [...] also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces.'⁹⁷ For Bourdieu, and indeed as I show in this study, there is a conflict between conservative publishing forces which seek to maintain the status quo (in this case, the commercial publishers who represent World Literature to a large degree) and the disruption caused by

⁹³ See Marling's discussion of capital, later in this chapter, p. 44. For Venuti's comments, see Chapter Five, p. 286.

⁹⁴ An extreme example of this is the small London publisher Fitzcarraldo, whose authors have won four Nobel prize. See Sam Leith, 'How to Win Four Nobel Prizes in Literature', *The Spectator*, 18 October 2023 <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-to-win-five-nobel-prizes-in-literature/>> [accessed 28 February 2024].

⁹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, trans. by L. Wacquant (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 127.

⁹⁶ David Charlston, 'The Politics of Pinkard's Translation of Hegel's Phenomenology', *Radical Philosophy*, 186, 2014, 11–22, (p. 12).

⁹⁷ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 16.

independent publishers, who as I will demonstrate, and as argued by Richard Mansell, are becoming increasingly influential in the literary translation.⁹⁸

3.2 World Literature

The transfer of contemporary Russian novels into English takes place within the global literary translation industry and is examined in this thesis in relation to World Literature. My usage of the term, capitalised, refers to the academic discipline of studying World Literature as a phenomenon, as well as a commercial construct, in accordance with Emily Apter's description in her study *Against World Literature*.⁹⁹ David Damrosch regards "world literature" as any text that circulates outside its source culture, and which is, more importantly, read.¹⁰⁰ Damrosch builds on the idea of *Weltliteratur*, first voiced by Goethe in the nineteenth century, and expanded on by Karl Marx in his communist manifesto, that "world literature" should indicate an equitable and mutually beneficial sharing of literature between nations. Damrosch is aware that it is not necessarily easy to become part of "world literature". He argues that a novel must first be considered literature at home, and then must be read outside its source culture. In other words, a novel needs to be granted entry to the global literary market, to become an artefact of World Literature.

As I will show, this Marxist ideal of "world literature" as a free, transnational exchange of literature and ideas, becomes problematic when it confronts the economic realities of today's publishing industry. I suggest that World Literature is instead a field governed in part by economic concerns, and which is dominated by the Big Five publishing conglomerates.¹⁰¹ While a large amount of literature is indeed available to read in translation, throughout this thesis I will show that it must travel through the filter of literary gatekeepers, and a novel's visibility, or otherwise, is to a large extent dictated by the publishing firm they are commissioned and subsequently marketed by. The editors of liberal New York

⁹⁸ Richard Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful: The Rise of Independent Presses and Translated Fiction in the UK.', in *Translating Asymmetry - Rewriting Power* (Amsterdam ; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co, 2021), pp. 269–90. See Chapter Two, p. 130.

⁹⁹ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London; New York, NY: Verso, 2013), p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 4.

¹⁰¹ See my discussion of publishing constraints in Chapter Two, and also my Conclusion, p. 355.

literary magazine *n+1* tackle this issue in their 2013 article 'World Lite'.¹⁰² They agree with Damrosch when they emphasise that books need to be championed by the 'right' people to become World Literature: only gatekeepers in possession of sufficient cultural capital can consecrate a novel as World Literature. The question of who makes these decisions, and why, is one of the key questions addressed by this thesis.

The global circulation of literature is an interdisciplinary field which has been addressed in detail by a number of translation studies scholars, sociologists, and cultural historians. In their essay 'Politics of Translation: How States Shape Cultural Transfers', Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro describe the networks that support the circulation of World Literature.¹⁰³ They argue that the transfer of a literary text from one language to another does not take place within a neat, self-contained field, but instead involves a 'plurality of practices and contexts.'¹⁰⁴ It is informative, then, to understand the 'practices and contexts' that operate both nationally and globally. By creating an overview of the Russian-English translated fiction field, my thesis will contribute to an understanding of this world literary market. To do so, I will identify and analyse the practices of commissioning, funding, translation, and marketing in the specific Russian-English context so as to understand the motivations behind the publication of contemporary Russian fiction in the US and UK.

In his blueprint for a sociological approach to translation, 'Towards a Sociology of Translation', Heilbron outlines a view of World Literature that is governed by the tension between dominant and dominated languages.¹⁰⁵ Heilbron measures a language's dominance based on the number of translations made from it and contends that the effect of geopolitical changes can be seen in the example of Russia through the language's shift from dominant towards dominated. Heilbron argues that while a large number of translations were made from Russian into other Eastern European languages under the Communist regime, this number dropped dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet Union: the political impetus

¹⁰² Editors, 'World Lite', *N+1*, 25 July 2013 <<https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/>> [accessed 9 January 2024].

¹⁰³ Heilbron and Sapiro, 'Politics of Translation', p.183.

¹⁰⁴ Heilbron and Sapiro, 'Politics of Translation', p.183.

¹⁰⁵ Johan Heilbron, 'Towards a Sociology of Translation', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2.4 (1999), 429–44 (p. 435).

to translate out of Russian was reduced with the weakening of Russian power.¹⁰⁶ As I will show in my Conclusion, a similar diminution of Russian is taking place today.¹⁰⁷

This potential for change in status has consequences for a contemporary understanding of the Russian-English translated fiction field, which necessarily includes the context of strained geopolitics that have resulted from an increasingly authoritarian Russian State, and its war against Ukraine.¹⁰⁸ For example, in 2020 a decline of interest in Russian fiction was noted by literary agent Wiedling, who specialises in selling publishing rights to contemporary Russian novels.¹⁰⁹ He described an increased reluctance among the German public to read contemporary Russian fiction because of the decline in Putin's reputation in the West.¹¹⁰ Similarly, after Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine commenced in February 2022 a general conversation began across the Anglophone media about whether Russian books should be read at all.¹¹¹

Although contemporary Russian literature has undergone a somewhat dramatic reduction in popularity in the West, it is not alone in its peripheral position in the global literary market. Heilbron argues that since the English language is hyper-

¹⁰⁶ Heilbron, 'Towards a Sociology of Translation', p. 435.

¹⁰⁷ See the Conclusion, pp. 344.

¹⁰⁸ For more on this, see: Marlène Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?: Unravelling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021); Tony Wood, *Russia without Putin: Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War* (London: Verso, 2018).

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Wiedling.

¹¹⁰ Wiedling did not remark the same tendency among all countries, for example, Serbia receives a large amount of funding from IP; see Chapter Five, p. 285.

¹¹¹ It is not yet possible to know whether fewer Russian novels are being sold, but there has been plenty of commentary around boycotting Russian culture, although there have also been counterarguments to this. I discuss this in my Conclusion, pp. 333-51. In January 2023, Pen Translates awarded translation grants to three projects out of Russian – which is more than usual. See Lauren Brown, 'English PEN Announces PEN Translates Winners', *The Bookseller*, 31 January 2023 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/english-pen-announces-pen-translates-winners>> [accessed 2 February 2023]. For an example of the discourse around Russian literature post-2022, see the following: Elif Batuman, 'Rereading Russian Classics in the Shadow of the Ukraine War', *The New Yorker*, 30 January 2023 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/30/rereading-russian-classics-in-the-shadow-of-the-ukraine-war>> [accessed 15 February 2023]; Kevin Platt, 'The Profound Irony of Cancelling Everything Russian', *The New York Times*, 22 April 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/opinion/russian-artists-culture-boycotts.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; Pjotr Sauer, 'Putin Says West Treating Russian Culture like "Cancelled" JK Rowling', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/25/putin-says-west-treating-russian-culture-like-cancelled-jk-rowling>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; Will Self, 'Found in Translation', *The New European*, 3 June 2022 <<https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/found-in-translation/>> [accessed 9 June 2022].

central, most other languages occupy a peripheral, or semi-peripheral position in relation to it.¹¹² Like Heilbron, Pascale Casanova also regards the world literary system as comprised of individual national literatures, which she describes in Bourdieusian terms as fields, that range from the dominated to the dominant.¹¹³ She is aware that these fields are not equal, and describes the flow of literature between them, and hence within the ‘World Republic of Letters’, as a struggle for consecration. A national literature’s position along the dominant-dominated spectrum is dictated by its ‘linguistic-literary capital’ which for Casanova is grounded in its literary prestige.¹¹⁴ Casanova regards translation into other languages as a way to build this capital.

For Bourdieu, the position of a writer within the literary field can explain both their success and the constraints within which they are compelled to operate.¹¹⁵ Some of these constraints are described by Ondřej Vimr, who finds that dominated literatures are frequently smaller languages which, lacking cultural capital, have to make greater efforts to be noticed on the world literary stage.¹¹⁶ Accordingly, and in agreement with Casanova, Vimr regards translation as a form of cultural diplomacy, and a vehicle for recognition abroad.¹¹⁷

Vimr proposes that translating novels from dominated, ‘small’ literatures, whether they are required by the target culture or not, consecrates these texts within their nations of origin. In this way, Vimr challenges Toury’s claim that cultures import translations in order to fill perceived gaps in their national canon.¹¹⁸ This is a

¹¹² Heilbron, ‘Towards a Sociology of Translation’, p. 434. William Marling’s extensive study of gatekeepers in the publishing world confirms that together in 2010 the US and the UK published ten times more books than France. See William Marling, *Introduction: Gatekeeping and World Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 154.

¹¹³ Pascale Casanova, ‘Consecration and Accumulation of Literary Capital: Translation as Unequal Exchange’, in *The Translation Studies Reader*, trans. by Siobhan Brownlie (London: Taylor and Francis, 2021), pp. 407–23 (p. 408).

¹¹⁴ Casanova, ‘Consecration and Accumulation’, p. 411.

¹¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 166.

¹¹⁶ Ondřej Vimr, ‘Supply-Driven Translation: Compensating for Lack of Demand’, in *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*, ed. by Rajendra Chitnis and others (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020)

¹¹⁷ Vimr, pp. 48–68. These source-driven translations are tied to Mansell’s research on source-commissioned translations, where translations of entire books are sent to publishers in order to secure a commission. See Richard Mansell, ‘Where Do Borders Lie in Translated Literature? The Case of the Changing English-Language Market’, *Transcultural: A Journal of Translation and Cultural Studies*, 9.2 (2017), 47–63.

¹¹⁸ Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies – And Beyond* (Philadelphia, The Netherlands: John Benjamins, 2012), p. 21.

proposition that H  l  ne Buzelin supports in her study of the French-Canadian publishing scene, where she finds that there are very few thematic gaps in the dominant contemporary Anglophone book culture.¹¹⁹ My research takes Vimr’s proposition as inspiration. By creating translation histories around six novels, I identify the motivations of consecrating parties such as translators, publishers and funding bodies. I focus particularly on Russian funding body Institut Pervoda, whose decisions appear to be governed by the interests of Russia rather than the target culture. Their financial support for translations in large part dictates which Russian novels gain entrance into the world literary market.¹²⁰

3.2 Creating Context

As I will explore throughout this thesis, an analysis of the ways in which novels are contextualised in the target culture is key to understanding contemporary Russian fiction’s role in the West. Sapiro notes Bourdieu’s conviction that ‘texts circulate without their context’ and affirms that this lost context is replaced by a new one in the receiving culture.¹²¹ Bourdieu’s desire to understand a translation’s context, then, is an effort to ‘combat misunderstandings stemming from importation’.¹²² For the purposes of my study, the ‘misunderstandings’ Bourdieu alludes to centre around an inaccurate representation of the contemporary Russian literary market in the UK and US.¹²³ I contend that these misunderstandings manifest in the overly politicised context created around novels when they are marketed in the Anglosphere.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ H  l  ne Buzelin, ‘Independent Publisher in the Networks of Translation’, *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, R  daction*, 19.1 (2006), 135–73 (p. 167). In their interviews both Arch Tait and Natasha Perova’s described Perova’s surprise at the Frankfurt book fair that there appeared to be no gaps that needed to be filled. Tait recalled, ‘I remember she went to the Frankfurt Book Fair for the first time. She said everything she could think of was already there. Every conceivable book. Even children’s literature piling the shelves. Every niche that she could imagine had already been filled and was overflowing.’; Interview with Arch Tait, 28 September 2021.

¹²⁰ See Chapter Two, p. 159.

¹²¹ Gis  le Sapiro, ‘Translation and the Field of Publishing: A Commentary on Pierre Bourdieu’s “A Conservative Revolution in Publishing”’, *Translation Studies*, 1.2 (2008), 154–66 (p. 163).

¹²² Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des id  es’, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 154:1 (2002), 3–8 (p. 4).

¹²³ A survey carried out by publisher Dalkey Archive about the translation business in 2011 regards the Anglophone publishing world as comprising the US, UK, Ireland and Australia. See ‘Research Into Barriers To Translation And Best Practices. A Study For The Global Translation Initiative’ (Dalkey Archive Press, 2011) <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Global_Translation_Initiative_Study.pdf>, p. 3.

¹²⁴ See Chapter Four for a discussion of the paratexts which create this new context.

This approach is in agreement with Gideon Toury's statement that 'translations are facts of target cultures.'¹²⁵ Sapiro considers such analysis as key to identifying the constraints of cultural, economic and political pressures on translation.¹²⁶ Thus, it is necessary to analyse a translated novel's 'political, economic and cultural dynamics' to understand its role within the receiving culture.¹²⁷ My research in this area is inspired by Sapiro, Bourdieu and Toury, and aligns itself with Kathryn Batchelor's work on paratexts, all of which I will explore below.¹²⁸

This reliance on politics as a promotional vehicle is the result, as I will show, of publisher commissioning practices which contribute towards a polarised conception of Russian literature. As former publisher at Moscow-based Glas, Natasha Perova stated in her interview that the novels translated into English are not necessarily a true representation of the Russian literary scene.¹²⁹ In Chapter Two I will suggest that such an inaccurate reflection of the contemporary Russian literary scene in the West is compounded by publisher preference for what Mark Lipovetsky categorises as the 'Russian Exotic'.¹³⁰ This, Lipovetsky argues, is a category of Russian novels that resemble nineteenth-century Russian classics, and which reference topics such as the Gulag or Stalin. As I will show, such novels are likely to sell in higher numbers than other contemporary Russian genres.¹³¹

In an attempt to analyse the creation of target-culture contexts, my research builds on Batchelor's research on paratexts. Batchelor describes the paratext as 'a consciously crafted threshold for a text which has the potential to influence the

¹²⁵ Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, p. 17.

¹²⁶ Gisèle Sapiro, 'How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)? in: *Journal of World Literature* Volume 1 Issue 1 (2016)', *Journal of World Literature*, 1.1 (2016), 81–96.

¹²⁷ Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, 'Outline for a Sociology of Translation: Current Issues and Future Prospects', in *Benjamins Translation Library*, ed. by Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 93–107, (p.93).

¹²⁸ Kathryn Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, Translation Theories Explored (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹²⁹ This, however, is not a new phenomenon. Russian literature has long been selected for reasons that serve the target culture, rather than in an effort to represent the literary scene. For examples of this, see: Peter Finn and Petra Couvée, *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle over a Forbidden Book* (London: Harvill Secker, 2014); Cathy McAteer, *Translating Great Russian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹³⁰ 'Is There a Place for Modern Russian Literature in the Global Context?: [A Znamia Roundtable]', *Russian Studies in Literature*, 49:2 (2013), 7–39, p. 24. See Chapter One, p. 127 for further discussion of the Russian Exotic.

¹³¹ See Chapter Two, p. 124 onwards.

way(s) in which the text is received.¹³² As I will explore in Chapter Four, the term paratext encompasses the peritextual elements of a book such as covers, titles and blurbs, as well as author or translator notes and postfaces; all of these elements indicate the role the publisher intends for the novel to play in the receiving market.¹³³ Reception can also, to some extent, be measured by other forms of paratext (strictly speaking, epitexts) that both respond to and help present novels in the form of reviews, social media posts, and author interviews.¹³⁴ The consecrating act of review-writing is also central to any novel's reputation in the target culture. By focussing on the paratexts that surround the six novels highlighted in my study, I explore the nature of the target-culture contexts that are created when these novels are published in English. I combine paratextual analysis with translation histories to create an understanding of the Anglophone framing, and what it reveals about publishers' attitudes and expectations for the novels they commission.

3.3 National Literary Fields within World Literature

As a point of comparison with my own research, I will now discuss Bourdieu's seminal study of the French publishing field, Buzelin's overview of the French-Canadian translation field, and Thomas Franssen and Giseline Kuipers analysis of the Dutch translation market.¹³⁵ I will also consider the issue of translation funding and its role in the circulation of literature. I refer to Olivia Hellewell's study of the Slovenian translated fiction field as a point of comparison with my own lines of enquiry.¹³⁶ Casanova states that there are both similarities and differences between national literary fields, but that despite these differences, these fields are increasingly isomorphic in their commissioning practices.¹³⁷ Similarly, Sapiro regards national literary fields as 'increasingly embedded' in the international market, a phenomenon that is caused by the increasing globalisation of literature,

¹³² Kathryn Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 142.

¹³³ Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, p. 142. See Chapter Four for a discussion of paratexts.

¹³⁴ See Chapter Four, pp. 216-18 for further definition and exploration of these terms.

¹³⁵ I will explore the following studies: Pierre Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution in Publishing', trans. by Ryan Fraser, *Translation Studies*, 1.2 (2008), 123–53; Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher'; Thomas Franssen and Giseline Kuipers, 'Coping with Uncertainty, Abundance and Strife: Decision-Making Processes of Dutch Acquisition Editors in the Global Market for Translations', *Poetics*, 41.1 (2013), 48–74.

¹³⁶ Olivia Hellewell, 'Creative Autonomy and Institutional Support in Contemporary Slovene Literature', in *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 109–26.

¹³⁷ Casanova, 'Consecration and Accumulation', p. 423.

and the subsequent tendency for national publishing markets to emulate one another.¹³⁸ By assessing the peculiarities of other national literary fields, it is possible to identify where the particular idiosyncrasies of the Russian-English translated fiction field reside.

In his analysis of the French publishing market in the 1990s, 'A Conservative Revolution in Publishing', Bourdieu describes a field where symbolic capital is a principal concern — both its pursuit, and a desire to retain it.¹³⁹ Symbolic capital is defined by Bourdieu as the possession of 'a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability.'¹⁴⁰ In short, this is an indicator of the 'esteem' in which a person or organisation is held — alongside the 'recognition, belief, credit, [and] confidence of others'.¹⁴¹ Bourdieu calculated the amount of symbolic capital possessed by sixty-one French publishers by measuring, among other criteria, their longevity, and the quality of their authors as demonstrated via prizes, as well as their financial position. By examining publishing firms' catalogues, he established that the most established presses sought first and foremost to 'maintain their assets' by translating the most prestigious authors available.¹⁴²

As my own research concurs, the high economic cost of purchasing the translation rights to well-known authors forces smaller independent publishers to become more innovative.¹⁴³ Bourdieu found that smaller firms tended to commission new, lesser-known (therefore less expensive) writers in an attempt to accrue symbolic capital. As one of Bourdieu's interviewees states, small publishers are not virtuous by choice. Instead, Bourdieu finds that they embody the true ideals of the literary world.¹⁴⁴ Casanova agrees. In her *World Republic of Letters*, she states that independent publishers are vital to the health of the literary sphere, importing new ideas and challenging the conservative, reputation-

¹³⁸ Sapiro, 'Translation and the Field of Publishing', p. 158.

¹³⁹ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution.'

¹⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), p. 285.

¹⁴¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000), p. 166.

¹⁴² Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution', p. 126.

¹⁴³ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution', p. 126. This description would not apply to the majority of contemporary Russian literature, where the reputation of a writer in Russia rarely affects the ability of independent publishers to acquire their work.

¹⁴⁴ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution', p. 126.

protecting approach of the older houses.¹⁴⁵ In Chapter Two I will argue that, as described by Bourdieu, it is the independent firms who publish the widest range of Russian fiction, and the commercial firms which conform to stereotypical ideas about Russian novels.¹⁴⁶ Inspired by Sapiro, I will also demonstrate that the pressure of finances in commissioning decisions governs which books are granted the status of World Literature.¹⁴⁷

Buzelin's study of the French-Canadian translation market differs from Bourdieu's in that she follows the translation of one unnamed Canadian novel from English into French, rather than surveying an entire national field.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, my own study focuses on six individual novels in order to elucidate publisher commissioning and marketing practices. I find that these can differ depending on the commercial or independent status of each of these firms. In the course of her translation history, Buzelin describes the difficulties faced by Québécois publisher Boréal, which operates in a dominated position to the French national field. Boréal is regularly financially outranked when bidding for commercially successful novels and might instead seek to co-publish with a French firm to cover the costs of what is frequently a loss-making venture. Bourdieu identifies a similar tactic in the 1990s, leading, I suggest, towards isomorphism, by asserting that novels that have been successful in other countries were likely to sell well in translation in France.¹⁴⁹

Buzelin records the idiosyncrasies of this dominated French-Canadian field. In Québec, language politics affect the early reception of Buzelin's case-study novel, and there is a tepid reception for its Anglophone writer who cannot speak French — a finding that my own interviews have confirmed in relation to Russian

¹⁴⁵ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution', p. 135; Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁴⁶ It appears that independent publishers are increasingly successful as a result of their diverse commissioning decisions across a range of languages. For more on this, see John Self, "'It's Exciting, It's Powerful": How Translated Fiction Captured a New Generation of Readers', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jul/29/its-exciting-its-powerful-how-translated-fiction-captured-a-new-generation-of-readers>> [accessed 30 July 2023].

¹⁴⁷ For discussion on the constraints present in the Translation Industry, see Chapter Two, and Conclusion p. 355. For data from independent publishers, see *Research Into Barriers To Translation And Best Practices. A Study For The Global Translation Initiative*.

¹⁴⁸ Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher'.

¹⁴⁹ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution', p. 147; Casanova, 'Consecration and Accumulation', p. 423. William Marling disagrees with this view and does not think that success in the source culture can indicate success abroad. See Marling, *Gatekeepers*, p. 60.

in the UK.¹⁵⁰ Despite these difficulties, and although the novel at the centre of the study did not initially sell in high quantities, sales had not been the primary concern for Boréal.¹⁵¹ Instead the editor was clear that publishing the novel was worth the effort and risk (mitigated by a grant) because it had ‘created substantial symbolic capital’ for the publishing house.¹⁵² The pursuit of symbolic over economic capital is a theme shared with many of the editors interviewed for my own study.¹⁵³

Another national picture is drawn by Franssen and Kuipers who survey the twenty-four publishers that comprise the Dutch national publishing field. For Franssen and Kuipers, the key issues in the translation-publishing industry are those of abundance, uncertainty and fierce competition for titles in an increasingly commercialised market.¹⁵⁴ They describe editors, who sit at the confluence of a network of agents, authors and translators, as the principal decision-makers. These editors, as those in my own research, are guided by a ‘decentralised’ transnational network of gatekeepers that helps them to decide what to read, when to read it, and what ultimately to commission.¹⁵⁵

In accordance with Bourdieu’s, Buzelin’s, and Sapiro’s findings, Franssen and Kuipers record a high degree of isomorphism across the international publishing industry in terms of which foreign literature titles are translated.¹⁵⁶ This, they state, is a solution to the uncertainty inherent in publishing translations. As a result of high economic stakes, editors are inclined to scrutinise other publishers’ catalogues, or liaise with them at book fairs in order to understand what has sold well. They then commission the same titles.¹⁵⁷ This tendency was also noted by Wiedling, who felt that editors tend to copy commissions made by publishing houses with established reputations. Wiedling spoke about his efforts to sell the rights to a biography of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky at the London

¹⁵⁰ Bourdieu, ‘A Conservative Revolution’, p. 152.

¹⁵¹ This is a description of the long tail sales approach, as described here: Chris Anderson, *The Longer Long Tail: How Endless Choice Is Creating Unlimited Demand* (London: Random House Business, 2009).

¹⁵² Buzelin, ‘Independent Publisher’, p. 156.

¹⁵³ See Will Evans’s vision for an independent publisher’s mission in Chapter Two, p. 133.

¹⁵⁴ Franssen and Kuipers, ‘Coping with Uncertainty’, p. 49.

¹⁵⁵ Franssen and Kuipers, ‘Coping with Uncertainty’, p. 70.

¹⁵⁶ Franssen and Kuipers, ‘Coping with Uncertainty’, p. 67.

¹⁵⁷ Franssen and Kuipers, ‘Coping with Uncertainty’, p. 68. See Gesche Ipsen’s anecdote about *The Spectre of Alexander Wolf*, Chapter Two, p. 153.

Book Fair in April 2022. While some publishers had been uncertain, once prestigious UK-based Polity had bought the rights, another fourteen publishers quickly followed.¹⁵⁸

Sapiro posits that economic constraints necessitate the imitative commissioning practices which are the root cause of the gradual homogenisation of World Literature. She recognises that in the UK and the US ‘commercial products [...] must obey the law of profitability’.¹⁵⁹ This economic concern is why Sapiro believes larger houses publish so few translations — publishers cannot guarantee translations will be profitable.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, these concerns are also one of the reasons that funding for translations is so essential, as I will discuss in Chapter Two.¹⁶¹

The national literary fields discussed above differ from the Russian-English translated fiction scene, in that they are all concerned with translations out of, rather than into, English. As Chad Post highlighted in his book *The Three Percent Problem: Rants and Responses on Publishing, Translation, and the Future of Reading* (2011), very few translations enter the English language: the percentage of translated novels published in the UK and the US is traditionally regarded as around three per cent.¹⁶² This low number means that the Russian-English commissioning process is both reductive and highly selective, and as I will

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Wiedling, 9 February 2023. The book was Serhii Rudenko, *Zelensky: A Biography*, trans. by Michael Naydan and Alla Perminova (Cambridge, UK ; Hoboken, NJ: Polity, 2022).

¹⁵⁹ Sapiro, ‘How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?’, p. 87. An example can be seen in the commissioning history of *Maidenhair*. See Chapter Three, p. 195.

¹⁶⁰ Sapiro, ‘How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?’, p. 92.

¹⁶¹ See Chapter Two, p. 159.

¹⁶² Recent articles, however, suggest that this number has risen to 5.63%. See Fiona O’Connor, ‘Gains in Translation for Fiction Readers and Publishers’, *The Irish Times*, 26 December 2022 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/2022/12/26/gains-in-translation-for-fiction-readers-and-publishers/>> [accessed 30 July 2023]. For the source of the three percent figure, see also: Alexandra Büchler and Giulia Trentacosti, *Publishing Translated Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland 1990 - 2012 Statistical Report*, Literature Across Frontiers, May 2015 <https://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Translation-Statistics-Study_Update_May2015.pdf>; Jasmine Donahaye, *Three Percent? Publishing Data and Statistic on Translated Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland*, Making Literature Travel (Mercator Institute for Media, Languages and Culture, December 2012) <https://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Three-Percent-Publishing-Data-and-Statistics-on-Translated-Literature-in-the-UK-and-Ireland_FINAL.pdf>; Chad Post, *The Three Percent Problem: Rants and Responses on Publishing, Translation, and the Future of Reading* (New York: Open Letter, 2011) <<http://site.ebrary.com/id/10901856>> [accessed 19 November 2021].

demonstrate in this thesis, relies on a relatively small network of gatekeepers who possess their own specific motivations.

At the time of writing my own research is unique among academic studies of Russian translations, in that it considers the implications and processes that operate in the translation of Russian into English, rather than vice versa.¹⁶³ Olivia Hellewell has researched the translation of Slovenian literature into English, and has, like myself, analysed the implications of state funding for the commissioning process.¹⁶⁴ She finds that translations out of Slovenian are predominantly driven by the source culture in an effort to both promote Slovenia's image abroad, and to increase the status of their literature domestically. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Two, while nineteenth-century Russian literature holds a relatively central position within World Literature, contemporary Russian fiction occupies a far more peripheral position, closer to the Slovene example.¹⁶⁵ As a result, contemporary Russian novels suffer some of the same issues described by Hellewell — a reluctance to fund, and lack of publisher interest.

As indicated by Hellewell's research, there is also a degree of specificity here. How Russian literature interacts with the Anglophone publishing market differs to its interaction with other national publishing fields. This is due to two factors: firstly, a general lack of linguistic expertise in the Anglophone publishing world, as I will outline in Chapter Two; secondly, political bias rooted in geopolitics. As I will demonstrate in the case studies referenced throughout this thesis, the context that a Russian novel loses when it is translated into English is often entirely recast by the publisher in order to market it to its British and American audience. Anglophone publishers impose their domestic cultural and political values, and thus create a specific role for translated Russian novels in the target market. Most often, as I will show in Chapter Four, such new context is imposed via politicised paratexts such as forewords, book titles, book cover blurbs and designs.

¹⁶³ For examples of such studies, see for example Brian Baer, *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011).

¹⁶⁴ Hellewell, 'Creative Autonomy', pp. 109–26.

¹⁶⁵ See Chapter Two, pp. 124–36.

3.4 The Role of Symbolic Capital

The similarities between the national translated fiction fields described above seem a direct result of the influence exerted by independent publishers, the reliance on gatekeeping networks to select novels, and the high economic cost of producing translations. In addition, all of these studies demonstrate the important role of symbolic capital in the circulation of World Literature. My own study is also rooted in an exploration of this exchange of prestige. While economic constraints are expressed through a tendency towards isomorphism among the larger publishers, smaller publishers trade more reliably in symbolic capital, since economic benefit is challenging to attain.

For Bourdieu, the more symbolic capital, or prestige a publisher has, the more of it they can confer on their authors.¹⁶⁶ As I will discuss in Chapter Three with the example of commercial publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux, one cost-effective method of gaining symbolic capital is by translating prestigious authors from abroad.¹⁶⁷ Other methods for both accruing and demonstrating symbolic capital are identified by Casanova as arising from personal recommendations, reviews, and the initial act of translation and publishing. Symbolic capital can also be conferred via prefaces and introductions written by prestigious individuals.¹⁶⁸ As I will discuss in Chapter Four, Şehnaz Tahir-Gürçağlar's study of paratexts demonstrates that the authors of such texts help to consecrate translators, authors and publishers.¹⁶⁹

As described earlier, Bourdieu refers to this conferral of symbolic capital as an act of consecration.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, William Marling notes that the process of consecration is multi-directional. Authors who are translated into other languages enjoy a 'refracted reputation': in addition to sometimes gaining a reputation abroad, they almost always gain symbolic capital at home (a point supported by

¹⁶⁶ Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 123.

¹⁶⁷ For an example of the usefulness of symbolic capital to an emerging publisher see Boris Kachka, *Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013). I explore this further in Chapter Three, p. 182.

¹⁶⁸ See Casanova, 'Consecration and Accumulation', p. 422. For a discussion of paratexts, see later in this thesis, Chapter Four.

¹⁶⁹ Şehnaz Tahir-Gürçağlar, 'Agency in Allographic Prefaces to Translated Words: An Initial Exploration of the Turkish Context.', *Authorial and Editorial Voices in Translation*, 2, 89–108 (p. 99).

¹⁷⁰ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution', p. 123.

Hellewell).¹⁷¹ This is not always necessarily a positive exchange in both the source and target cultures, however, as the opening anecdote about Shishkin and Prilepin proves. Lawrence Venuti is aware that for nationalist authors, publication abroad may be perceived as a form of treason.¹⁷²

The importance of symbolic capital is underlined by Rakefet Sela-Sheffy's study of Israeli translators whom she shows as being able to enrich their own culture, and profit reputationally, by importing prestigious authors from abroad.¹⁷³ Sela-Sheffy reviewed 250 articles from the Israeli press that related to her twenty-five selected translators in order to understand both how they were portrayed, and how they portrayed themselves in the media. She concluded that the most well-respected and prestigious translators described translation as more than a job, but instead a 'vocation' — this stance towards translation, she argues, increased their symbolic capital. I utilise Sela-Sheffy's argument to describe the role and creation of 'celebrity' translators in the realm of Russian-English translated fiction.¹⁷⁴ The idea of celebrity and the quest for symbolic capital informs my research about translator networks, and their potentially exclusive nature.

3.5 The Evolution of the Translated Literature Industry

The differences between the national studies described above are also temporal. It is therefore pertinent to recognise that fundamental changes have taken place since Bourdieu's 1990s research on the French publishing field. These changes are driven, I will suggest below, not least by the proliferation of social media, which continues to revolutionise the book industry.¹⁷⁵ These changes have resulted, as I shall demonstrate here, in independent publishers' increased ability to influence the translated fiction market. Reading Bourdieu's 'Conservative Revolution' it is impossible not to compare his descriptions of independent publishers in 1996 with the modern publishing world: in 2023 even the smallest

¹⁷¹ Marling, *Gatekeepers*, p. 75.

¹⁷² See Lawrence Venuti, 'Local Contingencies: Translation and National Identities', in *Local Contingencies: Translation and National Identities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 177–202 (p. 178).

¹⁷³ Rakefet Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae: Marketing Translatorial Images as Pursuit of Capital', *Meta: Journal Des Traducteurs*, 3 (2008), 609–22.

¹⁷⁴ See 'Celebrity Translators', Chapter Two, p. 145.

¹⁷⁵ As noted in a recent article, TikTok — or BookTok — is changing book selling both in the UK and in Russia. See Self, "It's Exciting, It's Powerful".

publisher can create an online presence and community.¹⁷⁶ Bourdieu also establishes that in the 1990s, small French publishers did not win literary prizes. This is no longer the case. For example, British independent Fitzcarraldo have won numerous awards including the International Booker Prize and have published three Nobel winners to date.¹⁷⁷ Buzelin directly addresses changes in the publishing industry when she describes the differences made by technology within a relatively short period. In 2013 one of her interviewees revealed that ten years previously he had not even owned a computer.¹⁷⁸

The increase in social media use over the past twenty years, and particularly the rise of virtual communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been revolutionary for the publishing business, to some extent subverting what Casanova refers to as an asymmetrical balance of power.¹⁷⁹ For example, Wiedling described attending the Frankfurt Book Fair online where he was able to meet publishers from smaller countries who could not usually afford to travel to the fair.¹⁸⁰ This evolution of the translation industry is the subject of Richard Mansell's 'Where Do Borders Lie in Translated Literature? The Case of the Changing English-Language Market'. Mansell contends that the traditional literary centres of London and New York are being bypassed by 'source-commissioned translations'.¹⁸¹ As in Hellewell's Slovenian example, these translations are produced by source-culture publishers and proffered to Anglophone editors as part of their sales pitch. Mansell suggests that this shift in literary borders removes some of the gatekeeping power from the editors that Franssen and Kuipers regard as integral to the flow of World Literature.¹⁸² Indeed,

¹⁷⁶ Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 135. For a discussion of marketing, and the importance of reader communities around independent presses, see Chapter Two, p. 130.

¹⁷⁷ See Richard Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful: The Rise of Independent Presses and Translated Fiction in the UK.', in *Translating Asymmetry - Rewriting Power* (Amsterdam ; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2021), pp. 269–90; Alex Marshall, 'How a Tiny British Publisher Became the Home of Nobel Laureates', *The New York Times*, 13 October 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/books/fitzcarraldo-nobel-prize-ernaux.html>> [accessed 2 February 2023].

¹⁷⁸ Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher', p. 146.

¹⁷⁹ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 82. The loss of access to social media since February 2022, and its impact on publishers in Russia is discussed in the Conclusion, p. 331.

¹⁸⁰ Wiedling told me, 'Via Zoom I did reach publishers who wouldn't even come to Frankfurt, who have never come to Frankfurt, smaller ones from Bulgaria, because they cannot afford it. But via Zoom you can now meet with them also, which is nice.'; Interview with Wiedling.

¹⁸¹ Mansell, 'Where Do Borders Lie in Translated Literature?', p. 57.

¹⁸² Franssen and Kuipers, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 49.

this shift in translation borders might ultimately remove the concern with publisher location from Bourdieu's criteria for evaluating symbolic capital.¹⁸³

The evolution of the translation industry which is currently underway is also embodied by the perceived rise in the importance of independent publishers. The central role ascribed to independents by Bourdieu, Buzelin, and Casanova is directly addressed by Mansell in his 2021 article 'Small Yet Powerful: The Rise of Independent Presses and Translated Fiction in the UK.'¹⁸⁴ Following Bourdieu's approach in 'Conservative Revolution', Mansell evaluates the symbolic capital accrued by independent British publishers against members of the Big Five.¹⁸⁵ He records the frequency with which translated fiction is longlisted for the Booker Prize, Man Booker International Prize, and Independent Foreign Fiction Prize between 2001-2019, and contrasts these figures with prizes awarded to non-translated fiction for the same time period.

By comparing the number of prizes both types of firm have been nominated for, Mansell concludes that independent publishers are becoming increasingly important in the publication of translated fiction: they accrue more symbolic capital than the Big Five for translations.¹⁸⁶ Although the larger houses remain influential, the number of prizes they win for their translations is in the decline. Indeed, so important is this shift, Mansell posits that translated fiction is beginning to form its own field, independent of non-translated fiction.¹⁸⁷ Mansell notes that this growth in symbolic capital is in part evident through the increased visibility of translators. This visibility is also utilised by independent publishers who might seize a political moment in the target culture to commission a politically relevant

¹⁸³ Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 130. Wiedling's discussion of the influence of publisher name rather than location suggests that this shift is already in progress; See Chapter Two, p.167.

¹⁸⁴ Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful'. This rise in importance of independent publishers has been voiced in my interviews. For more on this topic, see Chapter Two, p. 130 onwards.

¹⁸⁵ For a definition of independent publishers, see my Methodology, p. 66. The 'Big Five' comprise publishing conglomerates Macmillan, Penguin Random House, Hachette, Simon & Schuster, and HarperCollins; Jim Milliot, 'Over the Past 25 Years, the Big Publishers Got Bigger — and Fewer', *PublishersWeekly.Com*, 19 April 2022

<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/89038-over-the-past-25-years-the-big-publishers-got-bigger-and-fewer.html>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

¹⁸⁶ Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful', p. 284. The increased visibility of independents has also been noted by the media. For example, see Anthony Cummins, 'The Indie Publishing Mavericks Shaking up the UK Books World', *The Observer*, 16 July 2023

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jul/16/uk-indie-publishing-mavericks-shook-up-books-booker-nobel-fitzcarraldo-sort-of-books-daunt>> [accessed 24 July 2023].

¹⁸⁷ Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful', p. 281.

book.¹⁸⁸ I will explore Mansell's argument in Chapters Two and Three, where I describe the networks that make translated fiction happen, the role of 'celebrity' translators, and the visibility that accompanies greater gatekeeping privileges.

3.6 Gatekeeping Networks

The role of gatekeepers such as translators, editors, literary agents and funding bodies is integral to my research of publishing networks, which takes inspiration from the studies on individual nations' translation fields and World Literature assessed above. By identifying the principal gatekeepers in the field of Russian-English translated fiction and what influenced their decisions in each of my six case studies, I interrogate the impact of political bias and its role in the circulation of literature from Russia to the Anglophone West.

William Marling evaluates the increasingly professionalised role of gatekeepers in the circulation of World Literature from the 1960s to 2010.¹⁸⁹ Through a series of case studies focussing on the gatekeepers who supported authors Gabriel García Márquez, Charles Bukowski, Paul Auster and Haruki Murakami, Marling counters Bourdieu's assessment that success in a novel's source culture can predict success abroad. Marling suggests instead that 'success in World Literature is about gatekeeping.'¹⁹⁰ He pays close attention to the same gatekeeping networks that are later described by Mansell, and Franssen and Kuipers, when he seeks to identify who the principal literary gatekeepers are, and what their motivation is.

In addition, Marling challenges Casanova's model of World Literature as centred on Paris. He does not agree with her view that literature circulates free of economic and political concerns and regards Casanova's perspective as a

¹⁸⁸ Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful', p. 282. Mansell provides the example of Fitzcarraldo, and their decision to publish a Polish novel in response to Brexit. Fitzcarraldo also demonstrate the importance of accruing symbolic capital for success. Although they are a small independent publishing house, three of their authors have won the Nobel Prize for literature since the press was founded: Svetlana Alexievich, Annie Ernaux and Olga Tokarcuk. For more information, see Alex Marshall, 'How a Tiny British Publisher Became the Home of Nobel Laureates', *The New York Times*, 13 October 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/books/fitzcarraldo-nobel-prize-ernaux.html>> [accessed 2 February 2023].

¹⁸⁹ Marling, *Gatekeepers*.

¹⁹⁰ Marling, *Gatekeepers*, p. 2.

'romantic vision of European literature.'¹⁹¹ Instead, Marling views the network of gatekeepers as key to the commissioning of foreign titles. These gatekeepers, also noted by Mansell, are able to bypass the traditional centres of literature entirely, subverting centres of literary power as a matter of course.¹⁹²

Gatekeepers, however, bring their own considerations and biases to the literary process. Casanova notes that gatekeepers are required to "'discover" writers who are not native but who conform to their literary categories.' This, she argues, means that they, 'reduce foreign literary works to their own categories of perception which are set up as universal norms.'¹⁹³ This is echoed in my own argument that publishers recontextualise modern Russian novels in the target culture in line with market expectations, leading inevitably to a polarisation of the literary market. Gatekeepers have to select a novel they believe they can sell to the Anglophone market, or put their reputation, that is to say their symbolic and literary capital, at risk. As can be seen by my analysis of the Russian titles published by commercial firm Penguin Random House in Chapter Two, this frequently leads to the translation of novels that either are, or can be marketed as, "dissident".¹⁹⁴

The motivations of literary 'mediators' is also explored by Sapiro. Much in the same way as Franssen and Kuipers tackle the issues of abundance, uncertainty and competition, Sapiro considers the political, economic, and cultural factors which affect literature's journey around the globe. She notes that these factors can vary in importance depending on a text's source and target cultures. Sapiro is explicit about the possibility that political and ideological messages might be performed through translated fiction via such mediators, and provides examples of literature being used by governments to project a positive image abroad – in other words, translated fiction can be deployed as a form of soft power.¹⁹⁵ This question of political motivation is central to my own research, and as I will explore

¹⁹¹ Marling, *Gatekeepers*, p. 4. This resistance to Casanova's theory is also noted by Edward Said, See Said, 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals', in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 15–40, (p. 30).

¹⁹² Mansell, 'Where Do Borders Lie', pp. 58-9.

¹⁹³ Casanova, 'Consecration and Accumulation', p. 423.

¹⁹⁴ See Chapter Two, pp. 122-34.

¹⁹⁵ Sapiro, 'How Do Literary Works Cross Borders', p. 82. For a discussion of Russian soft power, see Chapter Two, p. 169.

in Chapter Two, is most obviously present in the decisions made by external funding bodies such as Institut Pervoda.¹⁹⁶

Beyond translators and editors, the most influential gatekeeping function is, I suggest, performed by funding bodies. While the studies summarised above have suggested the possibility of potential negative implications of funding bodies acting as gatekeepers, none have addressed this issue directly. As confirmed in my own research, external funding for translations is frequently essential. Without subsidies, most firms will not publish a translation from a peripheral, or indeed semi-peripheral language since it comes with little or no guarantee of being profitable.¹⁹⁷ The subsequent reliance on external funding risks, as Pym observes in his *On Translator Ethics*, that the resulting text will serve ‘the interests of the subsidisers’ instead of those of the author.¹⁹⁸ In ‘Politics of Translation: How States Shape Cultural Transfers’, Heilbron and Sapiro also discuss the political influence exerted on translations where state subsidies are the main source of funding.¹⁹⁹ They contend that as a result, and as I will argue throughout my thesis, the cultural world cannot be divorced from political or economic demands. My study will address this issue directly both in Chapter Two, and throughout.

3.7 Translators and Ethics

I now turn my attention to the question of what motivates translators to pitch particular books to publishers, or accept commissions, as well as their textual-linguistic translation decisions. My research responds to Marling’s assertion that translators as the most important and influential gatekeepers, although as I will show, not all translators share equal gatekeeping privileges.²⁰⁰ Similarly, Vimr regards translators as unique in their position as experts on both the source and target languages and cultures, making them the most ideally placed of all gatekeepers.²⁰¹ However, as suggested by Sapiro, gatekeepers’ decisions are

¹⁹⁶ See Chapter Two, p. 169.

¹⁹⁷ See Chapter Two, p. 159 for more details about the economic challenges of publishing translations.

¹⁹⁸ Anthony Pym, *On Translator Ethics: Principles for Mediation between Cultures* (Amsterdam ; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2012), p. 167.

¹⁹⁹ Heilbron and Sapiro, ‘Politics of Translation’, p. 186.

²⁰⁰ Marling, *Gatekeepers*, p. 6. For discussion of inequity between translators, see Chapter Two, p. 145.

²⁰¹ Vimr, ‘Supply-Driven Translation’, p. 64.

not always neutral.²⁰² As I will demonstrate in my case studies, particularly in Chapter Five, translators' decisions are often partisan, or affected by personal bias. A partisan position might lead translators to adapt a source text to serve a specific purpose in the target culture, or translate in a way that betrays their own political stance. This can include decisions about what aspects of a text to emphasise, and which to overlook. Such an approach might be morally, politically, or career-driven but it can inform translators' decisions on every level.²⁰³ Indeed, Theo Hermans states that translators might 'signal their agenda' through decision-making processes such as textual-linguistic choices.²⁰⁴ Examples of this can be seen in all of the translation analyses that appear in Chapter Five: *Oprichnik*, *Maidenhair*, *Sankya* and *The Librarian* offer the strongest examples of a translator's partisan approach.

Zoran Milutinović offers an example of the potentially partisan actions of translators in his assessment of translator and translation scholar, Francis Jones's work during the 1992-95 Bosnian war.²⁰⁵ Milutinović explores the ethics of translation when representing an author's ethnonationalist political views, and assesses the extent of the translator's power, responsibility, and impartiality in such cases. Similarly, in her article 'Ideology and the Position of the Translator', Maria Tymoczko evaluates the 'in between' space that a translator occupies between cultures, and the difficulties they encounter when working from ideologically controversial source texts.²⁰⁶ Like Milutinović, she concludes that it is rare for a translator to be impartial, either in the translation decisions they make, or in their initial selection of texts. Jean-Marc Gouanvic agrees when he proposes that the ethical decisions taken throughout a translation are 'determined very much prior to the translation operation itself. It originates in the decision to

²⁰² Sapiro, 'How Do Literary Works Cross Borders', p. 82.

²⁰³ See Mansell's example of translator Antonia Lloyd Jones, and her attempts to promote Polish literature; Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful', p. 282. Also see: Maria Tymoczko, 'Ideology and the Position of the Translator: In What Sense Is a Translator "in Between"?' in *Critical Readings in Translation Studies*, ed. by Mona Baker (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 201–18.

²⁰⁴ Theo Hermans, 'Translator's Voice in Translated Narrative', in *Critical Readings in Translation Studies*, ed. by Mona Baker (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 193–212 (p. 196).

²⁰⁵ Zoran Milutinović, 'Translators as Ambassadors and Gatekeepers: The Case of South Slav Literature' in *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations* ed. by Rajendra Chitnis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 24-47.

²⁰⁶ Tymoczko, 'Ideology and the position of the translator', pp. 213 and 216.

translate.²⁰⁷ An example of this can be seen in Jeff Parker's decision to translate Prilepin's *Sankya*, as described in Chapter Three. Parker's initial motivation for selecting *Sankya* is echoed in his translation choices, as my analysis in Chapter Five reveals.²⁰⁸

Translators' agency is addressed by Daniel Simeoni as a function of their *habitus*.²⁰⁹ In his study, Simeoni seeks to determine why and how translators take decisions, which in turn raises questions about translator ethics. Anthony Pym builds on this, refuting Simeoni's assumptions about translators' subservience.²¹⁰ Instead, Pym questions whom translators really serve. Pym creates a code of ethics, which I will respond to in detail in Chapter Five.²¹¹ He asserts the translator's responsibility for the 'probable effects' of the target text, including its 'orientation' and also theorises that translators might at times serve the 'author-as-person' rather than 'text-as-object.'²¹² This might be the case where translators work in order to gain symbolic rather than economic capital, as I will explore in Chapter Two.²¹³

3.8 Conclusion

My research enters dialogue with the studies of national translated fiction fields detailed above, and in this way will contribute to an overall understanding of the supra-national field of World Literature. As I will detail in my methodology below, inspired by Bourdieu, I have created my own research material via thirty-eight interviews in order to build a picture not only of the Anglophone translated fiction field from the viewpoint of publishers, but to construct a comprehensive understanding of the networks within which these firms operate. Following Buzelin, I have created translation histories for six different contemporary Russian titles in translation. This has allowed me to compare and contrast

²⁰⁷ Jean-Marc Gouanvic, 'Ethos, Ethics and Translation: Toward a Community of Destinies', *The Translator*, 7.2 (2001), 203–12 (p. 209). Christiane Nord agrees, see Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained* (London: Routledge, 2018)

²⁰⁸ See Chapter Five, pp. 269-88.

²⁰⁹ Daniel Simeoni, 'The Pivotal Status of the Translator's Habitus', *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies*, 10.1 (1998), 1–39.

²¹⁰ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*.

²¹¹ See Chapter Five, p. 282.

²¹² Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 125 and p. 166. This is certainly the case for translator Max Lawton and Sorokin, as my case study will show. See Chapter Two, p. 145.

²¹³ See Chapter Two, p. 145 onwards.

translation journeys, and look for patterns in translator, publisher, and funding body behaviour.

I rely on Sela-Sheffy's work on translator personae to interpret my interviews to understand the role that 'celebrity' and symbolic capital can play in both promoting the work of the translators discussed in this thesis, but also the role that symbolic capital plays in promoting Russian fiction as a whole. Through an analysis of UK sales figures for Russian fiction in translation, I expand Mansell's research to test his claims that independent publishers are becoming increasingly influential in the translated fiction field. Finally, in order to interrogate the influence of political bias I expand Gouanvic's, Tymoczko's, Pym's and Simeoni's ideas about translators', publishers', and subsidising bodies' partisan motivations for selecting texts to commission, fund, and translate. I also incorporate Batchelor's interpretation of paratexts to analyse the target-culture contexts that are created around each translation in the UK and US English. In Chapter One I will return to my literature review with a focus on studies of contemporary Russian fiction and my individual authors. Before this, in the following pages, I will outline my methodology, before detailing the contents of the following five chapters.

4 Methodology

I have utilised a variety of methodological approaches to fulfil my research objectives. First, I created a macro view of the Russian-English contemporary translated fiction scene by identifying translations, including their publishers and translators, and analysing UK sales figures. I then focussed on six individual novels that had either been marketed via political paratexts in the UK and US or were written by authors with strong political views in Russia. I selected novels either written by authors perceived in the West as "liberal" (and therefore regarded in the West as "dissident") or "nationalist". By selecting authors with largely opposed political stances I was able to compare their translation journeys to one another, and in this way to assess how these authors' polarised politics affected their commission, translation and reception in the UK and US.

I constructed translation histories for each of these six novels to identify and analyse the network of gatekeepers that led to their publication in the West. To do so, as noted above, I conducted thirty-eight interviews with authors,

translators, editors and literary agents who were either directly linked to the novels in question, or who worked in the Russian-English translated fiction field.²¹⁴ I also undertook translation analysis on the novels concerned, evaluated reception in the US and UK, and scrutinised the paratextual marketing of these texts in the target culture. Between April 2020 and November 2022 I convened an online book group that discussed contemporary Russian fiction in translation. I further supplemented this data with an online survey which gathered reader responses to the six novels studied here. The following sections will elaborate on each of these aspects of my methodology.

4.1 Selecting the Six Novels

In order to investigate the specific ways in which an author's political beliefs can influence publishing decisions, I selected six contemporary Russian novels translated into English since 2000. These novels were written by authors who are considered "liberal" in Russia (and therefore "dissident" in the West), or by those who were understood to hold "nationalist" beliefs at home. In order to assess to what extent these opposing political positions affected a novel's translation journey, it was important to select authors who were to some degree politically active, and then compare the effect of different political stances upon Anglophone publisher decisions.

As I will discuss in Chapter Two, this selection process was made easier by the fact that all of the Russian authors published by the Big Five publishing firms are both held to be "liberal" in Russia and perceived in the West to be "dissident". Conversely, it was difficult to locate novels by "nationalist" authors in English translation, as I will discuss below. By considering authors with opposing political stances, and by comparing the journey to publication of "nationalists" and "liberals" it was possible to judge how far authors' politics influence publisher commissioning and marketing strategies. Accordingly, I compared one novel written by each of the "liberal" authors Shishkin, Sorokin and Ulitskaya, with one novel by each of "nationalists" Elizarov, Prilepin and Senchin.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ See Appendix A for a list of these, along with a brief background for each interviewee.

²¹⁵ As noted above, these novels are: Shishkin, *Maidenhair*; Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*; Ulitskaya, *Big Green Tent*. Nationalist novels are: Elizarov, *The Librarian*; Prilepin, *Sankya*; Senchin, *Minus*.

Since I wanted to research the reasons behind the commissioning of “typical” contemporary Russian novels, I chose not to include Russophone authors who write in Russian but are not ethnically Russian — for example, Alisa Ganieva, who lives in Moscow and is from Dagestan, or Narine Abgaryan, who moved to Moscow from Armenia as a child. This is because their novels are not marketed as artefacts of Russian literature in the West, although they are still promoted along political lines. For example, Ganieva’s *The Mountain and the Wall* (*Prazdnichnaia gora*, 2012) was marketed in the US and UK as the ‘first novel to be translated into English from Dagestan’.²¹⁶ Likewise, the marketing strategy behind Abgaryan’s *Three Apples Fell from the Sky* (*S neba upala tri iabloka*, 2014) relies on the fact that it is about Armenia — at no point does it mention that it is translated from Russian.²¹⁷ Since these novels are not marketed as Russian literature, I chose to exclude them from my study. Had I chosen to include them, however, they would both have represented the views of “liberal” authors. As I will demonstrate in my Conclusion, Ganieva has been particularly strident in her anti-Putin position.²¹⁸

The question over ethnicity might also be expanded to one of author location. While not all of the authors included in this study are currently living in Russia, they do all consider themselves to be Russian in the civic, if not also the ethnic sense. The situation has been complicated by the war, which has led to both Sorokin and Ulitskaya leaving Russia to live in Germany – however they should still be considered as Russian authors, largely because they consider themselves as such. Meanwhile, the remaining authors, Prilepin, Senchin and Elizarov continue to live in the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, in an attempt to clarify the limits of the field of Russian-English translated fiction, I chose to exclude Russophone writers who are not, and do not consider themselves to be Russian, or in any way affiliated with the Russian Federation. This is particularly pertinent due to the intensification of Russia’s war against Ukraine in 2022, and in the light of intensifying debates over decolonising the post-Soviet space in Western academia.²¹⁹ As a result, I did not consider authors such as Belarusian Svetlana

²¹⁶ Alisa Ganieva, *The Mountain and the Wall*, trans. by Carol Apollonio (Dallas, Texas: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2015); Alisa Ganieva, *Prazdnichnaia Gora* (Moscow: AST, 2012).

²¹⁷ Narine Abgaryan, *Three Apples Fell from the Sky*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2020); Narine Abgaryan, *S Neba Upala Tri Iabloka* (Moscow: AST, 2014).

²¹⁸ See Conclusion p. 340-1 for more on this.

²¹⁹ See Conclusion, p. 346, for a discussion of this.

Alexievich or Ukrainian Andrey Kurkov in my analysis, despite the fact that they write in Russian, and are among some of the UK's bestselling Russophone authors.²²⁰

In addition to their political stances, I selected these particular authors because they enjoy considerable symbolic capital in Russia, as evidenced in the number of prizes they have both received and been nominated for, and which I will detail in the sections relevant to each author in Chapter One. I aimed to understand whether these writers' prestigious reputations transferred to the new cultural context in the West. I also sought to assess whether these authors' political beliefs were instrumentalised in the marketing of their books or reflected in their critical reception. A cursory survey of the reception of novels from "liberal" writers, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Four, suggests that they are marketed to the target audience as "dissident". Sorokin's *Oprichnik*, which explores a neomedieval Russian future, was marketed in the UK and the US as an anti-Putin satire written by a 'Tolstoyan' Russian dissident.²²¹ Ulitskaya's *Big Green Tent* was pitched in the West as a dissident novel, despite predominantly being marketed at home as a family saga.²²² Finally, although Shishkin's *Maidenhair* is not an overtly political text, its author has come to be regarded as an important anti-Putin commentator in the UK and US. Shishkin's dissidence has been demonstrably responsible for relatively steady sales.²²³

In a further indication of the role of political bias in commissioning translations from Russian, it was challenging to select novels written by "nationalist" authors. This is because so few of these writers are translated into English — the novels selected below, however, are all written by authors with strong nationalist views, albeit along a spectrum from mild to extreme. Cult protest novel *Sankya*, written by high-profile ultranationalist Prilepin, is one of the few obvious examples. *The*

²²⁰ For example, according to Nielsen BookData, Kurkov's novel *Death and the Penguin* sold 10,646 copies in the UK when it was released in 2002. This is a considerable number of books in light of the sales figures for I discuss in Chapter Two (p. 179). Meanwhile, Alexievich won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2015. Andrey Kurkov, *Death and the Penguin*, trans. by George Bird (London: Vintage, 2002).

²²¹ See Chapter Four, p. 260 on the paratextual marketing of Sorokin. These reference was made by journalist Ellen Barry. See Barry, 'The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin', *The New York Times*, 29 April 2011 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/30/books/the-russian-novelist-vladimir-sorokin.html>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

²²² See Chapter Four for a discussion of the marketing around each novel.

²²³ I explore this in detail in Chapter Four, pp. 239-56.

Librarian was a close second. Its author Elizarov regularly courts controversy in Russia with ambiguous, sometimes xenophobic songs and public statements.²²⁴ His novel divided reception among Russian critics when it won the Natsbest Prize in 2008, with one reviewer describing it as ‘fascist trash.’²²⁵ Senchin’s *Minus* was written by the least extreme of the trio of “nationalists”, as proven by his antipathy towards Russia’s war against Ukraine in February 2022. Senchin does, however, believe in putting the interests of Russia before those of other countries, and was once close friends with Prilepin.²²⁶ In the telling absence of other “nationalist” writers translated into English, Senchin was the most nationalist author I was able to identify after Elizarov and Prilepin.²²⁷

4.2 Tracking Translations

In order to create an overview of the contemporary Russian-English translated fiction field, it was necessary to identify which titles have been published to date. There is not, however, a single reliable database that tracks all translations into English. UNESCO does host the Index Translationum, a searchable database of all books translated across Europe, but it is far from comprehensive for UK-published translations.²²⁸ This is because the database relies on receiving information from the British National Bibliography, which in turn receives its data from the British Library and from Nielsen Book data, who get their information from the publishers themselves.²²⁹ For a title to be recorded as a translation, publishers first have to identify a book as such, then provide the translator’s name, the original publication details, original language, and original title. Since publishers are charged a fee to record these extra fields of data, there is a low

²²⁴ See Chapter One, p. 109.

²²⁵ See Chapter One, p. 110 for more on this. On 26 January 2023, Prilepin announced that he was returning to Ukraine to fight. See ‘Prilepin podpisal kontrakt s Rosgvardiei i otpravilsia v zonu spetsoperatsii’, *RIA Novosti*, 26 January 2023 <<https://ria.ru/20230126/prilepin-1847652911.html>> [accessed 1 February 2023].

²²⁶ For more details, see Chapter One, p. 116.

²²⁷ One interviewee questioned whether this reluctance to publish novels by right-wing authors was because there was not enough of a market for them in the West; Interviewee #1, July 2021.

²²⁸ Available at ‘Index Translationum - World Bibliography of Translation’ <<https://www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsform.aspx>> [accessed 24 November 2021].

²²⁹ For more on this, see: Büchler and Trentacosti; ‘British National Bibliography’ <<https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/british-national-bibliography>> [accessed 22 May 2023]; ‘Explore the British Library’ <[https://nielsenbook.co.uk/](http://search.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/dIDisplay.do?vid=BLBNB&afterPDS=true&docId=> [accessed 22 May 2023]; ‘Nielsenbook UK’ < [accessed 22 May 2023].

level of compliance, and as a result the Translationum contains many omissions for translations into English.

In order to address this problem, I relied on three different sources to chart translations published in the UK and US since 2008 (prior to this date, for reasons I explain below, there is little readily available data). The most comprehensive of these sources is the Translation Database launched by Chad Post in 2008, and currently hosted by *Publishing Weekly*.²³⁰ This database lists translated titles published in the United States, and is populated with information taken from publishers' catalogues, or collected from reviews, and is supplemented with entries suggested by translators, authors and publishers themselves. I also relied on data from Russian-English translator Lisa Hayden's blog, *Lizok's Bookshelf*.²³¹ Hayden has collated a list of new translations from Russian annually since 2008 by scouring publisher's catalogues and supplementing this with information provided by her considerable number of contacts across the translator and publisher network.

For translations published in the UK, I added to the data I collected from the Translation Database and Hayden's annual list with titles recorded by the Nielsen database as provided to the RusTrans research project.²³² Finally, I cross-checked the information I had by collecting titles from the websites of the two main funding bodies in Russia: Transcript and IP.²³³ Inspired by the data recorded in the Translation Database hosted at Publishers' Weekly, I recorded the following fields: title, author, publisher, ISBN, publication year, genre, source language, country, author, and translator gender. I also recorded which books were funded by Institut Perevoda, and which by Transcript, since this data would inform my analysis of funding patterns.

²³⁰ Available at 'Translation Database', *PublishersWeekly.Com* <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/translation/home/index.html>> [accessed 1 December 2022].

²³¹ Lisa Hayden, 'Lizok's Bookshelf' <<https://lizoksbooks.blogspot.com/>> [accessed 21 February 2023].

²³² For more on Nielsen, see Chapter Two, pp. 124-5.

²³³ For more details see: 'About the Institute', <<https://eng.institutperevoda.ru/>> [accessed 30 November 2022]; 'Transcript' <<https://www.prokhorovfund.ru/projects/own/detail/120/>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

4.3 Microhistories

Inspired by Jeremy Munday's work on microhistories which focus on the lives and activities of individual translators, I have constructed translation histories around each of the six novels researched here.²³⁴ Munday advocates gathering the minutiae of translators' daily lives and translation practices, carrying out 'research into living subjects'.²³⁵ He suggests using these microhistories to construct a 'cultural history of translation and translators' by extrapolating findings from such microhistories out to the wider literary field.²³⁶ In this way, Munday regards microhistories as crucial to forming an understanding of wider discourses around translation. By focussing on the individual, microhistories allow the researcher to explore a translator's position within publishing networks, or as Munday describes it, the 'groups, institutions and power structures' that comprise the world literary market.²³⁷

Rather than focussing on individuals, the microhistories I present in this thesis focus on the production of six specific translations and follow the decisions taken by the translators, editors, literary agents and publishers who interact with them. By taking this approach, I was able to maximise my understanding of the processes and networks that surround the publication of each novel in English. Each microhistory is based on 'post-hoc accounts' gathered via interviews with multiple agents around each text.²³⁸ I also relied on additional paratextual information from reviews and interviews in the Anglophone press. All six microhistories provide a detailed journey to translation for each novel, and when analysed together, begin to create a more general impression of the Russian-English translated fiction field in the early twenty-first century.

By accumulating these novel-centred microhistories, it has been possible to construct a 'cultural' or 'social' history of the translation process, which Munday believes to be more instructive and insightful than Toury's more empirical

²³⁴ Jeremy Munday, 'Using Primary Sources to Produce a Microhistory of Translation and Translators: Theoretical and Methodological Concerns', *The Translator*, 20:1 (2014), 64–80.

²³⁵ Munday, 'Using Primary Sources', p. 67.

²³⁶ Munday, 'Using Primary Sources', p. 64.

²³⁷ Although, as noted below, Munday cautions that some of these testimonies might be 'overly mediated' they may still be of use if we retain our circumspection; Munday, 'Using Primary Sources', p. 77. I will return to this point below.

²³⁸ Munday, 'Using Primary Sources', p. 66.

research which is based chiefly on an analysis of target texts.²³⁹ These microhistories, along with other contextual information and textual analysis, have allowed me to create a snapshot of the Russian-English translation field as it relates specifically to contemporary Russian fiction, and which I will describe in detail in Chapter Two. In turn, this analysis has allowed me to pinpoint the influence of geopolitical concerns and personal political bias on the transfer of contemporary Russian fiction into the UK and the US up until April 2022.²⁴⁰ I have also been able to use this research, which largely took place prior to 2022, as a basis from which to assess the state of the Russian-English translated fiction scene since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. I turn to this topic in my Conclusion.

4.4 Interviews

My use of interviews was inspired by Buzelin's study of the English to French-Canadian publishing field.²⁴¹ Using Buzelin's model, I followed the main actors in the publishing process to build an overview of the translation field, and to create translation histories for each of the novels under examination here.²⁴² In an echo of the Russian-English translation gatekeeping network that I have identified and described in my research, I often relied on one interviewee to recommend me to the next.²⁴³ In this way I not only charted, but also actively followed the network of gatekeepers who recommend translators, publishers and authors to one another during the process of pitching and commissioning translations of Russian novels.

Since the majority of my research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to interview subjects in person. All but five of the thirty-eight interviews I conducted took place over Zoom, with two at the 2022 London Book Fair, and three via email. Although I had a list of prepared questions which related to the commissioning process, funding, or translation queries pertinent to a particular book, I followed Buzelin's example and allowed interviewees ample space to tell me what they wanted me to know.²⁴⁴ This created a series of rich

²³⁹ Munday, 'Using Primary Sources', p. 65.

²⁴⁰ I will discuss the Russian-English translation field post February 2022 in my Conclusion.

²⁴¹ Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher'.

²⁴² Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher', p. 140.

²⁴³ For an analysis of publishing networks, and the role of gatekeepers within them, see Chapter Two, pp. 136-56.

²⁴⁴ Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher', p. 140.

discussions about publishing and translation that will prove useful to future research.²⁴⁵

In compliance with university and European Research Council regulations, I submitted my proposed interview questions for approval by the University's ethics committee. I enabled participants to provide informed consent by furnishing them with full details about the RusTrans project, as well as information about how the interview would be used. I allowed interviewees full control of the final transcripts: each subject was invited to review and edit their transcript once it was complete. While many decided not to, some interviewees redacted passages that could have led to professional or political difficulties. Several edited their own words, or further embellished their statements in favour of style.²⁴⁶ I also redacted some interviewee statements where they risked being detrimental to the subject's professional life.

Other ethical issues surrounded confidentiality. Like Buzelin, I had to be discreet when interviewing subjects who might be easily identifiable to others within a small community.²⁴⁷ Accordingly, all interviewees were automatically anonymised, and had to consent to their names being linked to their transcripts. Where transcripts were anonymised, I took every effort to remove any elements that might make it clear who was speaking. At times, because specific novels or situations were described, this resulted in a loss of data, since it was not possible to completely anonymise the transcript. In other instances, it was sufficient to redact names and places. Overall, however, most participants agreed to be named.

This willingness to be involved in the project is in large part due to the interconnected nature of the Russian-English translated fiction community. Since nearly all interviewees were aware of the RusTrans project, which represented a purely academic endeavour detached from the commercial concerns of the translation market, nearly everyone appeared prepared to speak candidly. These

²⁴⁵ See Appendix A, p. 374 for a full list. I have not included these transcripts here because they total over 400,000 words. However, it is my hope to publish some of them in a monograph once my PhD is complete.

²⁴⁶ The fact that changes were made, reflect the importance of the translator's persona in their professional field. For more on this see Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae'.

²⁴⁷ Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher', p. 141.

close links meant that I often heard the same story described from different perspectives, which allowed me to cross-reference accounts and identify potential contradictions, negating some of Julie McDonough Dolmayer's concerns about interviewee reliability, which I will discuss below.²⁴⁸ Only occasionally was I aware that information was being withheld. These instances often appeared to be centred around a professional desire to guard publishing confidences rather than an unwillingness to talk.²⁴⁹

4.4a Interviews as a Reliable Source

In his work on microhistories, Munday references Toury's warning against relying wholly on interviews as a source of research data.²⁵⁰ Despite being aware that interviews are 'overtly mediated testimonies', Munday nevertheless regards them as crucial to analysing 'small cultural communities.'²⁵¹ Chiming with both Toury's and Munday's concerns, Dolmayer agrees that memory may be inaccurate or in some way 'edited' for interview conditions.²⁵² She debates the performative aspect of the interview and stresses the importance of acknowledging that the interviewee may be aware of the expectations placed upon them and alter their behaviour accordingly.²⁵³ To counter this, she suggests that a thorough analysis of all interviews, considering the interviewee's behaviour and emotional state, should form a vital role in the assessment of any interview-based research. Accordingly, I have noted in my analysis instances where an interviewee's demeanour, or their apparent enjoyment of storytelling, might overshadow the facts and lead to embellishment or hyperbole.

As anticipated by Munday and Dolmayer, other difficulties over memory presented themselves during my interviews. When questioning translators and editors about specific translation and editorial decisions made some time ago, they often had no recollection of their motivations. On some occasions, it was possible to supplement what translators told me with information from other interviewees who

²⁴⁸ Julie McDonough Dolmayer, 'A Place for Oral History within Translation Studies?', *Target*, 27.2 (2015), 192–214.

²⁴⁹ A similar tendency is noted by Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 137.

²⁵⁰ Munday, 'Using Primary Sources', p. 68.

²⁵¹ Munday, 'Using Primary Sources', p. 75

²⁵² McDonough Dolmayer, 'A Place for Oral History', p. 208.

²⁵³ This issue of interviewee cooperation is also raised by Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher', p. 139.

had worked on the same projects, but on many occasions this data was simply lost. In these instances I relied on textual analysis to enhance my understanding of the translation process, as I demonstrate in Chapter Five. Interviewers also have to take care. Munday notes the possibility for interviewer bias, which I attempted to counter in part by allowing interviewees to ‘tell me what they wanted me to know’ as noted above, and indeed, conducting interviews in this way often resulted in discovering information I had not anticipated.²⁵⁴

4.5 Paratexts, Reader Reception, and Translation Analysis

In order to best understand and interpret the source of target-culture contexts that are imposed on Russian novels in the Anglophone West, as well as the motivation behind micro-level translation decisions, I have relied on Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus and *hexis*, as described above.²⁵⁵ Munday suggests that reliable judgements about a translator’s motives or methods should be made by supplementing interview data with both paratextual and extratextual information.²⁵⁶ In addition to interviews, Munday describes this extratextual material as ‘archives, manuscripts and translator working papers.’ Indeed, although Toury believes that ‘extra-textual [sic] sources are partial and biased’ and are ‘likely to lean toward propaganda and persuasion’, I argue that one of the aims of my study is to uncover what exactly these prejudices and ‘propaganda’ might be. Both Munday and Toury use the term ‘extratextual’ in a slightly different way than I am applying the term in this study. Following Şehnaz Tahir-Gürçağlar, in Chapter Four I define extratexts as actions and statements that take place without relation to the text in question, but which might potentially influence both its paratextual and reader reception.²⁵⁷ In the theoretical framework I apply in this study, I therefore consider interviews, archives and manuscripts that are directly linked to the novels in question as a form of paratext.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ Munday, ‘Using Primary Sources’, p. 70.

²⁵⁵ See above, p. 30.

²⁵⁶ Munday, ‘Using Primary Sources’, p.70.

²⁵⁷ Şehnaz Tahir-Gürçağlar, ‘What Texts Don’t Tell: The Uses of Paratexts in Translation Research’, in *Crosscultural Transgressions: Research Models in Translation Studies 2: Historical and Ideological Issues* (Manchester: St. Jerome Pub, 2002), pp. 44–60.

²⁵⁸ Munday, ‘Using Primary Sources’, p. 66; Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, p.88. I divide paratexts into the distinct categories of epitexts, peritexts, and expand Munday’s definition of extratexts to enhance my paratextual analysis in Chapter Four.

Accordingly, I supplemented my interviews with extratextual evidence in order to construct as full an understanding as possible of each novel's translation history.²⁵⁹ This includes a consideration of authors' extra-literary lives such as Prilepin's fighting in Ukraine, Elizarov's anti-Semitic songs, Ulitskaya's and Sorokin's departures from Russia, and Shishkin's decision not to represent Russia abroad.²⁶⁰ I also relied on paratexts such as interviews available in the media, and information on author, publisher and literary agent websites to contribute to my translation microhistories.²⁶¹ I treated these sources with the same circumspection I directed towards interviews. For instance, most Anglophone reviews of "liberal" Russian novels appear in the (Western) liberal, or high-brow press, such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*.²⁶² "Nationalist" authors such as Prilepin are more regularly relegated to *Russia Beyond the Headlines* (henceforth *RBTH*), which is affiliated with the now sanctioned Russian television network RT (formerly Russia Today) and is considered by the US to be a propaganda outlet for the Russian government.²⁶³ To remain cognisant of the intrinsic bias these sources might hold, and in order to identify patterns in their author preferences, I have noted the perceived political affiliations of each of these publications throughout my work.

Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere concur with Bourdieu that a text is 'a fact of its receiving culture'.²⁶⁴ This is especially relevant when tracing any political intention within a translation, since Gouanvic suggests that a translation's ethics are incepted in the very decision to translate — a position also supported by

²⁵⁹ For a full discussion of these terms, see Chapter Four, p. 226.

²⁶⁰ See Chapter One for a full account of these.

²⁶¹ This was especially important because in most cases a considerable amount of time had passed between translation and interview. This was compounded by the fact that many of these documents, where they exist, are on emails and hence encounter issues of data protection or are stored electronically. As Munday notes, with the increasing use of computers and word processing programmes, drafts are less to be kept; Munday, 'Using Primary Sources', p. 71.

²⁶² Find these publications online: *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk>> [accessed 20 January 2023]; *Los Angeles Review of Books* <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/>>; *The New York Times* <<https://www.nytimes.com/>>; *The Times Literary Supplement* <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/>>.

²⁶³ See 'Russia Beyond' <<https://www.rbth.com>> [accessed 20 January 2023]. Access the US Government report on RT here; 'Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem', 2022 <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf>, p. 19.

²⁶⁴ *Translation, History and Culture*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (London: Cassell, 1995), p. 7.

Pym.²⁶⁵ Ian Mason highlights the importance of analysing the effect of translation decisions on readers.²⁶⁶ He posits that this might offer some insight into the translator's role in 'spreading or resisting the spread of narratives and discourses' in the target culture.²⁶⁷

In order to research reader response, I ran a small book group and conducted a reader survey. I ran my book group on the text-only gaming platform Discord between 2020-2022. We read and discussed a total of twenty-six contemporary Russian novels in translation, including nearly all of the books under consideration in this study. The only exception was Senchin's *Minus*, which we omitted because it was out of print.²⁶⁸ Over the two and a half years, a total of seventy people took part, and an average of six participants attended each meeting, with eleven attendees in the busiest discussions. Although participants were self-selecting (most joined the group having responded to advertising on social media) they still provide anecdotal insight into reader reception. Members included translators, Russianists and general readers, many of whom gave me permission to use their responses throughout my research.

I also composed a questionnaire, which I posted on SmartSurvey.²⁶⁹ The survey asked about paratexts, publisher awareness, translation quality and political themes in the novels we read. At the time of writing, the survey has received twenty-two responses, and I have referenced some of these throughout the thesis. While the numbers attending the book group and responding to the reader survey were relatively small, and therefore cannot be taken as indicative of the reaction of the UK or US readership as a whole, they still provide some evidence of reception among a group of well-placed attendees, as I will describe later in this thesis.

Finally, to uncover both editorial and translatorial aim, and to identify any political bias, I carried out translation analysis between the Russian and English editions of the novels in question. Drawing on Andrew Chesterman's suggested use of

²⁶⁵ Gouanvic, 'Ethos, Ethics and Translation', p. 209; Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 166.

²⁶⁶ Ian Mason, 'Discourse, Ideology and Translation', in *Critical Readings in Translation Studies* (Routledge, 2010), pp. 83–96 (p. 95).

²⁶⁷ Mason, 'Discourse, Ideology', p. 95

²⁶⁸ The novel is not published as an eBook and is only available via second-hand bookshops.

²⁶⁹ My survey is accessible at <<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/3VS03/>>.

skopos theory, I compared source and target texts.²⁷⁰ As I will discuss in depth in Chapter Five, I sought to identify a partisan approach on behalf of the translator or editor by locating areas of conflict between source and target texts. For this purpose, I selected passages that contained politically or morally problematic vocabulary and analysed their translation into English.²⁷¹ Where possible, I took questions about these specific passages to their translators and editors, although as noted above, this was not always a successful exercise. Where interviewees were able to recall their motivation, I was able to contextualise translation decisions to reveal the translator's, editor's, or indeed author's intention for the English translation in the target culture.

4.6 Commercial and Independent Publishers — A Definition

Throughout my thesis I frequently refer to 'independent' and 'commercial' publishers. By commercial, I mean firms that are members of the Big Five publishing conglomerates, with Penguin Random House the most active in the realm of literary translations from Russian into English.²⁷² The remaining companies are Hachette, Simon & Schuster, Pan Macmillan and Harper Collins.²⁷³ These commercial firms operate a large number of smaller imprints and tend to have substantial budgets and large numbers of staff.²⁷⁴ For example, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, who published Ulitskaya and Sorokin in the US, are an imprint of Macmillan, and operate five imprints of their own.

In contrast to commercial companies, independent publishers are not owned by publishing conglomerates. In the United States, independents are often also not-for-profit publishers, which makes them eligible for government grants.²⁷⁵ In contrast to commercial firms, independent publishers tend to operate on very small budgets and with limited staff — presses such as Fitzcarraldo fall into this

²⁷⁰ Andrew Chesterman, 'Questions in the Sociology of Translation' in João Ferreira and Teresa Seruya, *Translation Studies at the Interface of Disciplines* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006), pp. 9-27 (p.9).

²⁷¹ Quixia Jiang isolated political language in her study of translation ideology. See Quixia Jiang, 'Ideological Impacts on Literary Translation – A Descriptive Study of Translated Literature in 1910–1931 and 1979–1999 in China', *Asia Pacific Translation and Intercultural Studies*, 2.3 (2015), 174-186.

²⁷² See Chapter Two, p. 128 for a discussion of this.

²⁷³ Milliot, 'Over the Past 25 Years'.

²⁷⁴ An excellent illustration of the structure of commercial publishers and their imprints in the US is to be found here: 'The Big Five US Trade Book Publishers', *The Big Five US Trade Book Publishers*, 3 May 2023 <<http://almossawi.com/big-five-publishers>> [accessed 4 August 2023].

²⁷⁵ For an example of this, see Chapter Two, p. 133.

category, as do Deep Vellum and their Dalkey Archive imprint, Open Letter, Glagoslav, NYRB Classics, Oneworld, Pushkin Press and the now defunct Glas. A 2023 article in *The Guardian* defined an independent publishing house as ‘the kind of place where the people — or person — selecting which books to publish may also be responsible for lugging copies to the warehouse [...] parcelling orders, calculating royalties, handling social media and so on.’²⁷⁶

In his study of the publishing industry, John Thompson underlines the key differences between commercial independent publishers. He finds, as I will also demonstrate, that small, independent publishers are often more editor-driven in their commissioning decisions, less reliant on literary agents, and are generally less concerned with commercial success.²⁷⁷ The contrast between the commissioning practices of commercial and independent publishers in the realm of Russian-English translated fiction, as well as their varying levels of influence, is one of the key lines of inquiry in the research that follows.

5 Chapter Summaries

In the chapters that follow I will construct translation microhistories of my six key novels in an effort to define the Russian-English translated fiction field, and to assess the impact that geopolitics, and political bias have upon it. **Chapter One** builds on my literature review to provide an overview of contemporary Russian fiction and identifies the key trends relevant to the novels under scrutiny here. I also use this chapter to introduce each of my six authors and their key texts, as well as their political backgrounds and beliefs.

Chapter Two outlines the structure of the Russian-English translated fiction field, and describes the roles played by independent and commercial publishers within it. By identifying which publishing houses translate which titles, I ask what Western readers expect from Russian literature, and to what extent the output of commercial houses influences this expectation. The chapter also explores the gatekeeping networks that control the circulation of contemporary fiction from

²⁷⁶ Anthony Cummins, ‘The Indie Publishing Mavericks Shaking up the UK Books World’, *The Observer*, 16 July 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jul/16/uk-indie-publishing-mavericks-shook-up-books-booker-nobel-fitzcarraldo-sort-of-books-daunt>> [accessed 31 July 2023].

²⁷⁷ John Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 152-62.

Russia to the UK and the US. It investigates the relationship between editors and translators, as well as the amount of power possessed by the latter to influence publishing decisions. Finally, I will consider the economic challenges that govern the publishing market, as well as structural constraints (such as comparative titles), and analyse the role and gatekeeping powers of Russian organisations, specifically IP and their US/UK representation, Read Russia.

Chapter Three examines the fact that “dissident” Russian authors enjoy the support of more extensive gatekeeping networks than “nationalist” authors, and the effect this has on determining which publishers commission them. By focussing on the translation microhistories behind Ulitskaya’s *Big Green Tent*, and Senchin’s *Minus*, I explore the extent to which political bias interacts with the commissioning process. Since both novels were written by authors who enjoy a prestigious reputation in Russia, these translation microhistories reveal the difficulty of finding success abroad for Russian authors and enable a comparison between the relative success of “liberal” writer Ulitskaya in the West with the almost non-existent target reception of “nationalist” Senchin.²⁷⁸ The translation story behind *The Big Green Tent* in particular demonstrates the lack of power that translators have over their work.

Chapter Four examines the role of both paratexts and extra-literary activities in these six novels’ marketing and reception. I focus on Shishkin and the influence of his political statements on his epitextual reception, and contrast this with an analysis of the marketing and reception of Elizarov’s *The Librarian*, which in contrast to Shishkin’s case, omits any mention of Elizarov’s controversial politics. Whether this was caused by lack of research, or the publishers’ reluctance to engage with his politics, it raises important questions over translator and publisher ethics that are subsequently explored through the prism of the other four novels.

Translator and publisher ethics remain under scrutiny in **Chapter Five**. Here I focus on Prilepin’s *Sankya* and Sorokin’s *Day of the Oprichnik*. I examine the micro-textual level of translation and ask to what extent politics is involved in text-based decisions. Both translations suffered allegations of ideological tampering.

²⁷⁸ As I will outline in Chapter One, both authors have won, and been nominated for, numerous literary prizes in Russia.

Sankya's translators were accused of obscuring the novel's anti-Semitism to render Prilepin more palatable to the Western reader, while Sorokin's translator was accused of simplifying *Oprichnik* to make the novel more marketable. In fact, I argue this was the case for neither, and that translatorial *hexis* is to blame rather than a conscious editorial or translatorial agenda, or indeed, translator error. The more complex question of translator ethics, in short what a translator's responsibilities are, is raised by these two case studies and is also applied to Marian Schwartz's translation of Shishkin's *Maidenhair*, and Andrew Bromfield's translation of Elizarov's *The Librarian*.

In reflection of Russia's intensified war against Ukraine from February 2022 onwards, I begin my **Conclusion** by presenting Russian authors' responses to the conflict and discussing its impact on Russian literature both in the Russian Federation, and in the Anglophone West. I then conclude my study with a summary of my research, and a description of constraints that are shared by both Anglophone translated fiction field as a whole and the specific Russian-English context. I then present my conclusion, that the Russian-English translated fiction field is indeed influenced by political bias at all stages of the translation process, a fact that has been confirmed by the Anglophone publishing market's reaction to Russia's illegal war against Ukraine.

Chapter One

Contemporary Russian Literature

In the chapter that follows, I present a summary of the research already published in the West about contemporary Russian fiction, followed by an outline of the principal genres and trends in the contemporary Russian literary scene which I will refer to throughout my thesis. These include trauma, magic historicism, *stiob*, ironic imperialism, Village Prose, New Sincerity, and New Realism. I will then introduce each of the six authors that form the focus of this study, divided into their respective “liberal” and “nationalist” tendencies: Sorokin, Ulitskaya, and Shishkin; and Prilepin, Elizarov and Senchin. I provide an overview of these writers’ politics, their literary output, and their translations into English thus far, as well as assessing Anglophone academic research, where it exists. In this way I offer a justification for their inclusion here, and for my selection of each of their respective novels.

1 Russian Literature Studies in the West

There is a limited amount of Western research on contemporary Russian fiction as a whole. In the following section, I outline the principal studies in this area from the early 1990s to the most recent publications, including research about Read Russia and interview-based studies with translators and authors. I will follow this with an analysis of some of the studies based around principal themes in contemporary Russian fiction, as listed above.

In his 1993 article ‘Russian Writers Confront the Past: History, Memory, and Literature, 1953-1991’, David Gillespie discusses the importance of literature in Russian culture, and the influence that it can have on domestic politics and the Russian national psyche.¹ Mark Lipovetsky also discusses the power and influence of fiction in ‘Post-Soviet Literature between Realism and Postmodernism’ (2011).² He describes the period between 1982-1991, when a lifting of literary censorship led to a boom in literary magazines known as *thick*

¹ David Gillespie, ‘Russian Writers Confront the Past: History, Memory, and Literature, 1953-1991’, *World Literature Today*, 67.1 (1993) 74–79.

² Mark Lipovetsky, ‘Post-Soviet Literature between Realism and Postmodernism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 175–94.

journals.³ In an echo of Shishkin's comments about the 'literary civil war', Lipovetsky describes the conflict between these journals, which formed two groups; nationalist publications *Nash sovremennik*, *Molodaia gvardiia*, *Moskva*, *Literaturnaia Rossiia* and *Zavtra*, which positioned themselves as anti-Semitic defenders of the Soviet past, and which opposed the 'Western liberals' represented by journals such as *Novyi mir*, *Znamia*, *Oktiabr'* and *Iunost'* who openly criticised the status quo and were against nationalism.⁴ This opposition was echoed in the divisions between writers' unions, which fell apart with the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁵ The writers' unions were replaced by publishing houses and award committees, which subsequently became the principal regulators of literary taste.

More recently, Lipovetsky's and Evgeny Dobrenko's 2015 edited volume *Russian Literature Since 1991*, surveys the resultant post-Soviet Russian literary scene, and focuses on a number of writers who remain important in Russia today.⁶ By discussing authors such as Polina Barskova, Dmitrii Bykov, Vladimir Sharov and Aleksandr Prokhanov, as well as five of the six authors studied here (the exception is Senchin), the collection presents the emerging literary genres of the post-Soviet years. Of particular relevance to this chapter are the explorations of the literary treatment of Soviet tropes, the historical novel, dystopias, magical historicism, postmodernism and trauma.

Lipovetsky's 2017 collection of essays, *Postmodern Crises: from Lolita to Pussy Riot* continues this analysis of the post-Soviet literary scene.⁷ The essays span 1996-2016 and contextualise the imperial themes, and the role of politics, in Russia's literary output.⁸ Further insight into early-post-Soviet fiction is provided by the late Sally Laird's 1999 series of interviews with ten Russian writers who were then just emerging in the West. The collection features interviews with Ludmila Petrushevskaya, Andrei Bitov, Vladimir Sorokin, and Victor Pelevin.

³ Lipovetsky, 'Post-Soviet Literature', p.174.

⁴ Lipovetsky, 'Post-Soviet Literature', pp. 175-6.

⁵ Lipovetsky, 'Post-Soviet Literature', p.176.

⁶ *Russian Literature since 1991*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁷ Mark Lipovetsky, *Postmodern Crises: From Lolita to Pussy Riot* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2017).

⁸ Particularly 'The Progressor between the Imperial and the Colonial', pp.56-86 and 'The Formal Is Political', pp. 145-67.

Through these candid conversations Laird reviews the Russian literary scene after a tumultuous decade.⁹ The most recent volume to address contemporary Russian fiction, *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia* (2020) edited by Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin, takes an alternative approach to the principal concerns of recent fiction by examining major Russian works through the prism of fantasy and science-fiction writing. The collection of articles includes studies of prose from Eugene Vodolazkin, Sorokin and Eduard Limonov.¹⁰ Finally, Natalia Kamovnikova's research (2019) on Soviet translators offers a counterpoint to my own work.¹¹ She investigates the censorship exerted over Soviet translators through a series of interviews, and thereby constructs a survey of the profession and its role in the USSR.

Besides research around specific themes in Russian literature, which I will discuss in more detail below, the above are the only studies pertaining directly to the concerns of contemporary Russian fiction to date. One other article sits alongside my own research into the state-sponsorship of translations from Russian, however. Angelos Theocharis' 'Russian Literature Will Fix Everything' (2021) is the only research to attempt an evaluation of the Russian-English translated fiction scene and its relationship with politics.¹² Theocharis describes Read Russia's efforts to promote Russian literature abroad, focussing primarily on their presence at the London Book Fair in 2018 and 2019. He concludes that Read Russia is not effective at promoting Russian fiction to new Anglophone readers: it is more successful in this aim for Russian speakers living abroad than for the target Anglophone culture.¹³ As I will explain in Chapter Two, this aligns with my own findings.¹⁴

⁹ Sally Laird, *Voices of Russian Literature: Interviews with Ten Contemporary Writers* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).

¹⁰ *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, ed. by Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020).

¹¹ Natalia Kamovnikova, *Made under Pressure: Literary Translation in the Soviet Union, 1960-1991* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019).

¹² Angelos Theocharis, "Russian Literature Will Fix Everything": The Read Russia Project and Cultural Statecraft', in *Russia's Cultural Statecraft* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 97–119.

¹³ This echoes Mark Krotov's impression of events organised by Read Russia. See Chapter Four, p. 241.

¹⁴ See Chapter Two, p. 169.

1.1 Themes in Contemporary Russian Literature

A number of studies centre around the key themes that unite contemporary Russian authors and are therefore crucial to an understanding of the contemporary Russian fiction I present here. This section introduces the terms and genres that I refer to throughout my thesis and demonstrates how they are utilised by my six authors. These genres include trauma, magic historicism, *stiob*, ironic imperialism, Village Prose, New Sincerity, and New Realism. Many of these trends are triggered by political events, such as the collapse of Communism, the resurgence in nationalism, and a need to confront the past, and thus are essential to an accurate appraisal of my six authors' novels. Themes of trauma and the identity crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union are common.¹⁵ Lipovetsky and Lisa Wakamiya for example, consider the effect of trauma on literature. They examine Alexander Etkind's suggestion that trauma expresses itself through 'magic historicism' — an exploration of versions of the past where everything is still possible.¹⁶ Trauma also emerges, they argue, through the depiction of violence 'as a form of social communication', only now it is not violence enacted by the state upon its citizens, but by ordinary people upon ordinary people.¹⁷ They offer Sorokin's *Oprichnik* as an example of this violence, while I would add Elizarov's *The Librarian* as an equally shocking manifestation of violence as part of the everyday.¹⁸

Russians' loss of identity post-1991 is characterised by Lipovetsky and Wakamiya as a widespread 'feeling of profound symbolic lack'. This, they argue, created a society that felt it was permanently in 'transition'.¹⁹ One of the outcomes of this has been the emergence of a new Russian identity, centred around nationalism and neo-imperialism. Boris Noordenbos finds evidence of these

¹⁵ Helena Goscilo, 'Narrating Trauma', in *Russian Literature since 1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 167–87. See also Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 8. For Yurchak, the trauma of the Soviet union affected everyone in Russia.

¹⁶ *Late and Post Soviet Literature: A Reader*, ed. by Mark Lipovetsky and Lisa Wakamiya (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014), p.149. I suggest that Vodolazkin's novel *Laurus* is an excellent example of this genre; Eugene Vodolazkin, *Lavr* (Moscow: AST, 2012); Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2016).

¹⁷ Lipovetsky and Wakamiya, p. 274. Lipovetsky and Wakamiya discuss the idea that his *Day of the Oprichnik* leads the reader to 'question the pervasiveness of violence in everyday life' (p. 273).

¹⁸ See below for more details about these novels.

¹⁹ Lipovetsky and Wakamiya, p.148

trends in contemporary Russian fiction. He discusses this at length in his essay 'Ironic Imperialism', and more recently in his 2016 study *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for Russian Identity*.²⁰ In the latter of these studies, Noordenbos proposes that the neo-imperialist movement is not always seen as a negative one. It is instead 'in some way... acceptable in (highbrow) art and literature or in fashionable counterculture movements' and in fact, 'neo-imperialism is an "antidote" to the Pelevins and Sorokins with their New Sincere literature'.²¹ It is certainly the case that authors such as Elizarov and Prilepin in particular embrace these themes, as I will demonstrate in their author profiles below. For Noordenbos meanwhile, the neo-imperialist trend no longer belongs to counterculture but is increasingly relevant to the growing 'patriotic and anti-liberal tone of Russian society and politics'.²²

Both Senchin and Prilepin are inspired by Village Prose, which is linked to Russian nationalism by Kathleen Parthé in her *Russia's Dangerous Texts*.²³ In her earlier work on the genre, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past*, Parthé describes Village Prose as a literature set in rural Russia in which the 'peasants acquired symbolic resonance'.²⁴ It was typically published between the 1950s-1970s, but it is referenced today in novels written by "nationalist" authors. This might be due to the fact that, as author Alexander Yakovlev pointed out in the 1970s, Village Prose is a genre that could easily 'cross the line from non-Soviet to anti-Soviet, and from patriotic to chauvinistic'.²⁵ This is because it celebrates the old, pre-revolutionary values of Russia, and the earth-bound wisdom of the peasants and farmers, the real (read ethnic) Russians who knew the Motherland

²⁰ Boris Noordenbos, 'Ironic Imperialism: How Russian Patriots Are Reclaiming Postmodernism', *Studies in East European Thought*, 63.2 (2011), 147–58 (p.155); Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016). According to Noordenbos, neo-Imperialist themes are inspired by philosopher Aleksandr Dugin who sees Russia as being at the heart of a 'Eurasian Empire', which exists in opposition to what he calls the 'Atlantic World'. Alexander Etkind links Dugin closely to Putin, and notes that although the president has never publicly acknowledged Dugin's influence on him, it is evident in the Russian government's actions. Etkind states that, 'Dugin called for the war [against Ukraine] and Putin started it.'; Alexander Etkind, *Russia Against Modernity* (London: Polity, 2023), p. 79.

²¹ Noordenbos, 'Ironic Imperialism', p.156.

²² Noordenbos, 'Ironic Imperialism', p.155. Proof of this can be seen in the increasing nationalism in Russia as expressed during the country's war against Ukraine.

²³ Kathleen Parthé, *Russia's Dangerous Texts* (Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

²⁴ Kathleen Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 3.

²⁵ Parthé, *Russia's Dangerous Texts*, p. 80.

before they were co-opted and collectivised.

A notable contemporary example of Village Prose appears in Prilepin's *Sankya*.²⁶ Protagonist Sasha's journey to his home in a rural village is imbued with nostalgia and echoes the values of old Russia. The village is the only place where Sasha feels truly safe. Likewise, Senchin utilises the topos of Village Prose in *Minus*, as I will discuss later in this chapter.²⁷ He depicts his parent's rural life in Siberia as idyllic in comparison to his struggling existence in town. Closer to old Russian traditions in the village, the older generation are far better able to survive in the countryside than he is in the urban environment of Minusinsk.

Other approaches to neo-imperialist and nationalist themes rely on the deployment of *stiob*. Alexei Yurchak explains that *stiob* can be seen as an 'ironic aesthetic' whose satirical nature might be so close to that of its object of satire that it can be difficult to tell at times whether its practitioners are intending to criticise or praise their subject.²⁸ *Stiob* relies on overidentification with the object of satire, to the point where it can be difficult to tell whether it is genuine satire, or genuine appreciation.²⁹ In order to carry out *stiob* the writer or artist needs to thoroughly understand what he is satirising and, Yurchak argues, hold a genuine affection for it.³⁰ *Stiob* is deployed to grand effect in Sorokin's *Oprichnik*. As I demonstrate in Chapter Five, the entire tone of the novel is one of irony, resulting in an attack on the Russian government that is acerbic, but entirely lacking self-awareness on the part of its main character, Komiaga.³¹

Ellen Rutten regards the trend of New Sincerity as a reaction against the use of *stiob*, and to the postmodernism of authors such as Sorokin and Victor Pelevin in

²⁶ Ulitskaya praised Prilepin's *Sankya*, noting specifically this passage, in a film made by Read Russia to promote Russian fiction. Although she admired Prilepin's work, however, she noted that his politics scared her; *Russia's Open Book: Writing in the Age Of Putin*, dir. by Read Russia, 2013 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRPDM7OTMrl>> [accessed 30 October 2020].

²⁷ For a brief discussion of other examples of Village Prose in Senchin's work, see below, p. 117.

²⁸ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 240, and p. 249.

²⁹ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 250.

³⁰ For an example of *stiob* in other contemporary cultural contexts, in this case RT, see Stephen Hutchings, 'Revolution from the Margins: Commemorating 1917 and RT's Scandalising of the Established Order', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23.3 (2020), 315–34.

³¹ See Chapter Five, p. 307.

the 1990s.³² Rutten posits that whenever there is flux in society, sincerity becomes important.³³ Her book *Sincerity After Communism* describes the trend as it first emerged in Russia in the 1950s in response to the death of Stalin and his subsequent denunciation. New Sincerity began as a reaction against a 'hypocritical past'.³⁴ This is a theme that Ulitskaya takes up in much of her work, as discussed later in this chapter.³⁵ Rutten regards Sorokin's *Oprichnik* as fitting directly into this genre.³⁶ Although *Oprichnik* can also be regarded, as I will argue in Chapter Five, as a form of *stiob*, this is merely the vehicle via which a sincere message — a critique of Russian society — is delivered.³⁷

Rutten does question, however, whether authors are always sincere when they write in the spirit of New Sincerity. As she points out, New Sincerity authors often sell more books.³⁸ She explains that some critics questioned Sorokin's turn from postmodernism towards sincerity, believing that he performed this change for monetary gain. Linked to this theme of sincerity, Rutten also considers Sorokin's self-presentation as a modern Tolstoy.³⁹ As I will discuss in Chapter Five, this is how Sorokin is generally received in the West, and given that Anglophone publishers perpetually claim to be searching for their own 'next Tolstoy', this is an excellent marketing ploy.⁴⁰ Rutten, however, is ultimately convinced of the sincerity of Sorokin's work. It is perhaps the case, she writes, that he was always sincere: it is simply that since the 1990s he has chosen to promote this fact.⁴¹

From the early 2000s, the New Realist movement also countered postmodernist tendencies. In 2001, author Sergei Shargunov wrote a manifesto on New Realism

³² Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism: A Cultural History* (Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

³³ Rutten, *Sincerity*, p. 152.

³⁴ Rutten, *Sincerity*, p. 16.

³⁵ See below, p. 87.

³⁶ Rutten, *Sincerity*, p.18.

³⁷ See Chapter Five, p. 307.

³⁸ Rutten, *Sincerity*, p. 19.

³⁹ Rutten, *Sincerity*, p. 134.

⁴⁰ For an example of the publishing industry's search for the 'new Tolstoy', see Howard Amos, 'Tomorrow's Tolstoy: Publisher Yelena Shubina on the Wait for a Great Novel about Contemporary Russia', *The Calvert Journal*, 24 October 2018 <<https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/10742/tomorrows-tolstoy-publisher-yelena-shubina-great-novel-contemporary-russia>> [accessed 4 October 2019].

⁴¹ Rutten, *Sincerity*, p. 135.

titled *Otritsaniye traura* (*Denial of mourning*).⁴² Here he suggests that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing commercialisation of literature caused the art form to lose much of its ethical significance in Russia. He states that postmodernism is killing literature and pillories Sorokin and Pelevin as the worst examples of the genre. Shargunov offers New Realism as the antidote.

Moving online, New Realism is also referenced by Jeff Parker, one of *Sankya's* translators.⁴³ In a 2009 article for *Bomb Magazine* about his new anthology of Russian fiction, *Rasskazy*, Parker discusses the New Realist genre and frames it as a counterpoint to Sorokin's post-modernist work.⁴⁴ Parker justifies the inclusion of predominantly New Realist writers in *Rasskazy* by describing their work as a 'news dispatch [...] this is what Russians see when they look out of their windows every day.' In their article 'The Traditionalist Discourse Of Contemporary Russian Literature' scholars Natalia Kovtun and Natalia Klimovich find that the energy of young writers such as Prilepin and Senchin is integral to the success of the New Realism movement. The article also acknowledges the debt that New Realism owes to texts of the past. Kovtun and Klimovich compare Senchin's work with Village Prose writer Valentin Rasputin (1937-2015) in *Zona Zatopleniia* (*Flood Zone*), and Prilepin's with Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) in *Obitel'* (*The Monastery*).⁴⁵

As I have demonstrated, many of these themes and topoi detailed above are employed by the authors in this study. In the following section I introduce each of these six authors, whom I divide into groups with "liberal" and "nationalist" tendencies, based on my definition in the introduction: "liberals" Sorokin, Ulitskaya, and Shishkin, followed by "nationalists" Elizarov, Prilepin and Senchin.⁴⁶ I provide details of each writer's biography, literary output and politics, and summarize academic criticism of their work in order to contextualise each

⁴² Sergei Shargunov, 'Otritsanie traura', *Novyi Mir*, 12, 2001
<https://magazines.gorky.media/novyi_mi/2001/12/otriczanie-traura.html> [accessed 11 January 2022].

⁴³ See Chapter Three, p. 207, and Chapter Five, p. 282, for appraisals of his role in bringing *Sankya* into English.

⁴⁴ Kevin Kinsella, 'On the New Russian Realism', *Bomb Magazine*, 26 October 2009
<<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/on-the-new-russian-realism/>> [accessed 13 January 2022].

⁴⁵ Natalia V. Kovtun and Natalia Klimovich, 'The Traditionalist Discourse Of Contemporary Russian Literature: From Neo-Traditionalism To "New Realism"', *Umjetnost Riječi*, 2018, 315–37 (pp. 319-20).

⁴⁶ See Introduction, p. 21.

author's position, literary and extra-literary, in the sphere of Russian-English translated fiction.

2 “Liberal” Authors

Academic studies that focus on authors who are considered “liberal” both in Russia and the West, including my subjects Sorokin, and Ulitskaya, outnumber those that concern those considered “nationalists”, Prilepin, Elizarov and Senchin. Sorokin enjoys the largest amount of attention, followed closely by Ulitskaya. There are no book-length studies in English on Shishkin to date, but Sorokin's work and politics are considered by Dirk Uffelmann in his recent *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses: A Companion* (2020), while Ludmila Ulitskaya's liberal views and their expression through her work are explored in Elizabeth Skomp and Benjamin Sutcliffe's *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance* (2015).⁴⁷

2.1 Vladimir Sorokin

Born in Bykovo in 1955, Vladimir Sorokin is one of Russia's most famous modern writers. He has published sixteen novels including my focus in this study, *Den' Oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, published in Russia 2006), as well as short story collections, and four opera librettos.⁴⁸ He was the finalist for the Russian Booker Prize in 1992 and 2002 and won second place for the Bol'shaia Kniga Prize in 2011. He won the Nos Prize in 2018 and was nominated for the International Man Booker Prize in 2013 for *Oprichnik*.⁴⁹ Sorokin's work is characterised by his subversion of literary stereotypes, as he pays homage to

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Skomp and Benjamin Sutcliffe, *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015); Dirk Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses: A Companion* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2020).

⁴⁸ For a full bibliography, see 'Bibliografiia avtora', *Ofitsial'nyi Sait Vladimira Sorokina* <<https://srkn.ru/bibliography>> [accessed 14 February 2023].

⁴⁹ The main literary prizes in Russia are: **Natsbest** (National Bestseller), which was founded in 2001. In 2022 no novel was awarded a prize, though a shortlist was produced. At the time of writing in May 2023, its website is 'under repair'; 'Natsional'nyi Bestseller', *Natsional'nyi Bestseller* <<https://natsbest.com>> [accessed 29 May 2023]. The **Nos** prize is organised by the Prokhorov Fund and was founded in 2009; 'Literaturnaia Premiia NOS' <<https://www.prokhorovfund.ru/projects/own/detail/108/>> [accessed 29 May 2023]. The **Bol'shaia Kniga** (Big Book) was founded in 2005, and is the largest monetary prize in Russia. Members of the public vote for their winner; 'Bol'shaia Kniga' <<http://bigbook.ru/>> [accessed 29 May 2023]. The **Andrei Belyi** Award was founded in 1978, 'Premiia Andreiia Belogo' <<http://belyiprize.ru/>> [accessed 29 May 2023]. The **Russian Booker** ran between 1999-2019. The **lasnaia Poliana** was founded in 2003, and is voted for by readers; 'Literaturnaia premiia lasnaia Poliana', 2023 <<https://yppremia.ru/>> [accessed 29 May 2023].

well-known, golden-age Russian authors. For example, *Metel'* (*The Blizzard* published in Russia 2010) follows a doctor who battles through a stereotypical literary trope of a Russian blizzard to treat the inhabitants of a distant village for an infection that transforms them into zombies.⁵⁰ It is redolent of Pushkin's story of the same title, and the choice of a doctor as protagonist evokes Chekhov.⁵¹ *Oprichnik* shares its circadian structure with Solzhenitsyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, 1962), which describes the life of a convict during twenty-four hours in the Soviet gulag.⁵²

Sorokin is also known for his so-called 'binary bombs' – texts that appear to be written in one genre, usually one that is vaguely bucolic, but then suddenly pivot to an entirely different, more challenging theme. *Roman* (*A Novel*, 1994) follows this pattern.⁵³ The majority of the book is reminiscent of Ivan Turgenev, and accordingly, reads like a classic nineteenth-century Russian text. It follows the love affair of Roman and Tatiana up to their wedding night when they hold a large feast. Then, Roman opens a wedding gift, an axe, and decides to slaughter everyone in the village with it, before killing both his bride and himself. Another vivid example of a 'binary bomb' can be seen in a reading Sorokin performed alongside his translator Max Lawton in New York in October 2022. The story that he reads, 'Proshchanie' ('A Farewell', 1980) appears pastoral, but takes a sudden, phallic turn.⁵⁴ The mirth expressed on the faces of translator and author as the pivot in the story approaches encapsulates the intended, shocking effect of the binary bomb, as does the audience's reaction.⁵⁵

Sorokin's other major novels and short stories provoke the reader either with explicit, detailed violence, or by satirising contemporary society and challenging

⁵⁰ Vladimir Sorokin, *Metel'* (Moscow: AST, 2010); Vladimir Sorokin, *The Blizzard*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

⁵¹ Aleksandr Pushkin, 'Metel'', in *Povesti Belkina*, 1830.

⁵² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 'Odin Den' Ivana Denisovicha', *Novyi Mir*, 11 (1962), 8–74.

⁵³ Vladimir Sorokin, *Roman* (Moscow: Tri Kita and Obscuri Viri, 1994). The Untranslated, 'Interview with Max Lawton', *The Untranslated*, 1 March 2022

<<https://theuntranslated.wordpress.com/2022/03/01/interview-with-max-lawton-on-reading-russian-literature-translating-sorokin-books-in-need-of-translation-and-retranslation-learning-languages-and-ambitious-projects/>> [accessed 4 February 2023].

⁵⁴ The short story appears in *Pervyi subbotnik*, a collection of short stories due to be published in Lawton's English translation in the near future. Vladimir Sorokin, *Pervyi subbotnik* (Moscow: Russlit, 1992).

⁵⁵ 'Vladimir Sorokin - The 92nd Street Y, New York', 92Y, 20 October 2022

<<https://www.92ny.org/archives/vladimir-sorokin>> [accessed 7 June 2023]. The story is told at twenty-two minutes into the recording.

social mores. In the short story 'Nastia' ('Nastya', 2001) a girl celebrates her sixteenth birthday by surrendering to her destiny, which is to be slowly cooked and eaten by her parents.⁵⁶ *Goluboe Salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999) describes a post-World War Two society where the Soviet Union and Germany are allies, and Britain has been destroyed.⁵⁷ A secret government programme creates clones of famous nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russophone authors Fedor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Andrei Platonov, Vladimir Nabokov, Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova. In 2002, a protest led by pro-Kremlin youth group *Idushchie vmeste* (Forward together) placed thousands of copies of *Goluboe salo* in a large *papier-mâché* toilet outside the Bolshoi Theatre in central Moscow in protest at the novel's depiction of sex between clones of Nikita Khrushchev and Joseph Stalin.⁵⁸

The earlier novel *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1994) describes a Soviet society where citizens are required to eat excrement on a daily basis, and *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1985) is told as a series of conversations from a Soviet-era queue.⁵⁹ Perhaps Sorokin's most controversial work is *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (*Their Four Hearts*, 1991).⁶⁰ In this short but disturbing and gruesome novel, four characters who represent archetypal Soviet values set out on a nonsensical mission, revelling in extreme violence and paedophilia.⁶¹ The novel is intended as an

⁵⁶ 'Nastia' first appeared in Sorokin's short story collection *Pir*; Vladimir Sorokin, *Pir* (Moscow: Corpus, 2001). An English translation was published online in late 2022: Vladimir Sorokin, 'Nastya', trans. by Max Lawton, *The Baffler*, 12 December 2022 <<https://thebaffler.com/stories/nastya-sorokin>> [accessed 21 February 2023].

⁵⁷ Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboe Salo* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999). This is due to be published by NYRB Classics in Lawton's translation in February 2024; Vladimir Sorokin, *Blue Lard*, trans. by Max Lawton, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2024).

⁵⁸ 'Idushchie vmeste proveli u Bol'shogo Teatra aktsiiu protesta protiv tvorchestva pisatelja Vladimira Sorokina', *RIA Novosti*, 27 June 2002 <<https://ria.ru/20020627/182306.html>> [accessed 4 February 2023].

⁵⁹ *Ochered'* was translated by Sally Laird and published in English in 1988; Vladimir Sorokin, *The Queue*, trans. by Sally Laird (New York: Readers International, 1988). The novel wasn't published in Russia until 2007; Vladimir Sorokin, *Ochered'* (Moscow: I. P. Bogat, 2007). Meanwhile, *The Norm* is due to be published in English as part of Lawton's, Evans's and Frank's 'Five Year Plan'. See 'A Five-Year Plan for Vladimir Sorokin', *Columbia University Department of Slavic Languages*, 2021 <<https://slavic.columbia.edu/news/five-year-plan-vladimir-sorokin>> [accessed 1 August 2023]; Vladimir Sorokin, *Norma* (Moscow: Obscura Viri, 1994).

⁶⁰ Vladimir Sorokin, *Their Four Hearts*, trans. by Max Lawton (Dallas, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2022); Vladimir Sorokin, *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (Moscow: Konets Veka, 1994).

⁶¹ The disturbing nature of *Their Four Hearts* has been reflected to some extent in its reviews, which have not been copious, perhaps as a result of the novel's content. See for example: Ben Hooyman, 'Russia's Finest Metaphysician: On Vladimir Sorokin "Their Four Hearts" and "Telluria"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 21 July 2022 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/russias-finest-metaphysician-on-vladimir-sorokin-their-four->

allegory for the absurdity of the Soviet Union, and in this way confronts the theme of trauma as discussed above. In the 1990s, printworkers refused to print Sorokin's *Serdtsa chetyrekh* because of the offensive scenes it described.⁶²

2.1a *Day of the Oprichnik* and 'Sincere' Literature

Oprichnik (2006) has achieved the most academic attention of Sorokin's novels — it is regularly described as predicting the conservative turn in Russian politics, and the country's return to the values and mindset of its medieval past.⁶³ The Oprichniki the novel describes are inspired by the personal guards, or Oprichnina, that protected Ivan Groznyi (otherwise known as Ivan the Terrible) in sixteenth-century Russia. The novel's hero Komiaga, an Oprichnik to 'His Majesty' (a thinly disguised reference to Putin), inhabits a country that has returned to its medieval past and cut itself off from Europe with an enormous wall.⁶⁴ In a similar format to Solzhenitsyn's *One Day*, the novel follows Komiaga for twenty-four hours, in which time he oversees murders, commits rape, and takes elaborate drugs. In an apparent parody of Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan Groznyi*, which was commissioned by Stalin and released in 1944, the novel culminates in the Oprichniks forming a giant orgiastic caterpillar to confirm their brotherhood.⁶⁵ As I will describe in Chapter Four, *Oprichnik* has primarily been received as a political commentary on the Russian government, and a criticism of Putin.⁶⁶ As such, an analysis of the novel's journey to translation, and the paratexts that have been

hearts-and-telluria/> [accessed 24 July 2022]; Jennifer Wilson, 'The Shock Jock of Russian Letters: On Vladimir Sorokin', *Harper's Magazine*, 11 May 2022 <<https://harpers.org/archive/2022/06/vladimir-sorokin-the-shock-jock-of-russian-letters/>> [accessed 3 February 2023].

⁶² For example, see Alexandra Alter, 'He Envisioned a Nightmarish, Dystopian Russia. Now He Fears Living in One.', *The New York Times*, 16 April 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/16/books/vladimir-sorokin-russia-ukraine.html>> [accessed 4 February 2023].

⁶³ This is addressed here: Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*, p. 282; Victoria Nelson, 'His Majesty: On Vladimir Sorokin's "Day of the Oprichnik"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 16 February 2019 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/his-majesty-on-vladimir-sorokins-day-of-the-oprichnik/>> [accessed 4 November 2019].

⁶⁴ Chapter Four, p. 260 for a discussion of *Oprichnik's* paratexts, and Chapter Three, p. 202 for its commissioning history. *Oprichnik's* prescience has been noted both in the West and in Russia. For example, see: Nelson, 'His Majesty: On Vladimir Sorokin's "Day of the Oprichnik"'; 'A Sorokin Preduprezhdal!', *Novye Izvestiia*, 1 May 2021 <<https://newizv.ru/news/politics/01-05-2021/a-sorokin-preduprezhdal-nikolay-patrushev-reabilitiroval-oprichninu>> [accessed 1 September 2022].

⁶⁵ *Ivan Groznyi*, dir. by Sergei Eisenstein (Mosfilm, 1944).

⁶⁶ See Chapter Four, p. 260.

used to market it, provide an opportunity to investigate how politics is instrumentalised in the marketing of Russian fiction in the Anglophone West.

Rutten suggests in her aforementioned study that this tendency towards sincerity began with his trilogy which comprises the books *Put' Bro* (*Bro*, 2004), *Led* (*Ice*, 2002) and *23,000* (2005).⁶⁷ Known collectively as the *Ice Trilogy* in English, these novels describe the violent awakening of an Aryan brotherhood who begin a quest to awaken their brothers and sisters across the world and re-establish themselves as Gods.⁶⁸ For them, humans are mere 'meat machines' who are to be treated like animals. Through the medium of fifty short stories, *Telluriia* (*Telluria*, 2013) describes a near future where Islam has conquered Europe, and where everyone is addicted to a drug made of a metal called Tellurium, which is only possible to imbibe by hammering a nail of it into the skull.⁶⁹

Still writing in his 'sincere' period, Sorokin's *Manaraga* (*Manaraga*, 2017) explores the commodification of Russian novels, extending the carnalising tendency of his earlier works to eat literature itself: people order books to be cooked and eaten rather than read.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, three other novels are set in the same universe as *Den' Oprichnika*. *Metel'* takes place in what appears to be the same neo-medieval Russia. *Sakharnyi Kreml'* (*Sugar Kremlin*, 2008) features an appearance from *Oprichnik's* Komiaga, and is narrated via a collection of stories told from varying points of view — in this way it is similar in structure to *Telluriia*.⁷¹ Sorokin's most recent novel *Doktor Garin* (*Doctor Garin*, 2021), returns to the doctor of *Metel'*, ten years after he was captured by the Chinese at the end of the novel.⁷² He is still practising medicine, but this time in a dystopia that is plagued by a war sparked, like *Telluriia*, by an Islamic revolution. I will return to the question of sincerity and *stio*b in my analysis of *Oprichnik's* translation in Chapter Five.⁷³ The question of Sorokin's sincerity in his political statements is

⁶⁷ Rutten, *Sincerity*, p. 19. Vladimir Sorokin, *Led* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2002); Vladimir Sorokin, *Put' Bro* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2004); Vladimir Sorokin, *23'000* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2005).

⁶⁸ Vladimir Sorokin, *Ice Trilogy*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: New York Review Books, 2011).

⁶⁹ Vladimir Sorokin, *Manaraga* (Moscow: Corpus, 2017); Vladimir Sorokin, *Telluriia* (Moscow: AST, 2013).

⁷⁰ At the time of writing in early 2023, all of Sorokin's novels had been commissioned for translation by Max Lawton's except *Manaraga*.

⁷¹ Vladimir Sorokin, *Sakharnyi kreml'* (Moscow: AST : Astrel', 2008).

⁷² Vladimir Sorokin, *Doktor Garin* (Moscow: AST : Corpus, 2021).

⁷³ See Chapter Five, p. 307.

one I will consider throughout this thesis, especially as it seems closely linked with publishers' decisions to frame Sorokin as a dissident author.

2.1b Academic Research on Sorokin

Dirk Uffelmann's *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses* is the most complete study of the writer's work to date, and includes a chapter dedicated to *Oprichnik*.⁷⁴ Uffelmann also contributed to *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages*, the first collection of essays in English to centre around the author.⁷⁵ In the same edited volume, Marina Aptekman analyses Sorokin's use of language in *Oprichnik* and *Sakharnyi Kreml'*.⁷⁶ Aptekman also writes directly about *Oprichnik* when she compares the novel to Petr Krasnov's *Za chertopolokhom (Behind the thistle, 1927)*.⁷⁷ Among various similarities, Krasnov's novel, which he set in the then-future of the 1990s, features a leader resembling Ivan Groznyi who seals Russia off from the West. Meanwhile, David Gillespie focuses on the role of history in Sorokin's work and identifies the political tendencies that he regards as evident in *Oprichnik*.⁷⁸ Tatiana Filimonova queries geopolitical concerns in Sorokin's prose in her article, 'Chinese Russia: Imperial Consciousness in Vladimir Sorokin's Writing', which focuses on Sorokin's preoccupation with Russia's relationship with China, as evidenced in *Metel'*, *Den' Oprichnika*, *Sakharnyi Kreml'* and *Telluriia*.⁷⁹

Sorokin is frequently cited in studies on post-Soviet literature. He is the primary subject of two essays in *Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia*.⁸⁰ Per-Arne Bodin discusses Sorokin's use of Church Slavonic in *Den' Oprichnika*, which is relevant to my translation analysis in Chapter Five, while Lipovetsky evaluates *Telluriia* as

⁷⁴ Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, p. 132.

⁷⁵ *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages*, ed. by Tine Roesen and others, Slavica Bergensia, 11 (Bergen: Dept. of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen, 2013).

⁷⁶ Marina Aptekman, 'The Old New Russian: The Dual Nature of Style and Language in Day of the Oprichnik and Sugar Kremlin', in *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages* (Slavica Bergensia, 2013), pp. 282–97 <<https://boap.uib.no/books/sb/catalog/view/9/8/174>> [accessed 16 September 2022].

⁷⁷ Marina Aptekman, 'Forward To The Past, Or Two Radical Views On The Russian Nationalist Future: Pyotr Krasnov's Behind The Thistle And Vladimir Sorokin's Day Of An Oprichnik', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 53.2 (2009), 241–60.

⁷⁸ David Gillespie, 'Vladimir Sorokin and the Return of History', in *Facets of Russian Irrationalism between Art and Life: Mystery inside Enigma* (Netherlands: Brill Rodopi, 2016), pp. 519–3.

⁷⁹ Tatiana Filimonova, 'Chinese Russia: Imperial Consciousness in Vladimir Sorokin's Writing', *Region*, 3.2 (2014), 219–44.

⁸⁰ *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia*.

an example of ‘post-utopian science fiction.’⁸¹ Lipovetsky includes his essays on Sorokin in *Postmodern Crises* where he explores Sorokin’s carnalisation of metaphors.⁸² In another essay, Lipovetsky compares Sorokin’s *Goluboe Salo* to Victor Pelevin’s *Generation P (Generation ‘P’, 1999)*.⁸³ In *Russian Literature Since 1991*, Alexander Etkind includes Sorokin in his examples of magical historicism, again comparing him with Pelevin. Sorokin is also discussed by Dobrenko and Lipovetsky in their chapter ‘Recycling the Soviet’.⁸⁴ More recently, in Russian, Dobrenko and Lipovetsky gathered a large number of essays by Russian academics and critics about his oeuvre, its evolution, and themes, in 2018.⁸⁵ In 2019, a film about Sorokin, *Sorokin Trip*, explored his biography alongside his literature and art.⁸⁶ My own thesis contributes to an understanding of Sorokin, but in contrast to the research described above, it does so from the perspective of the receiving, Anglophone culture as it seeks to understand publishers’ intended role for him within it.

2.1c Sorokin’s Political Views

As I will prove in Chapter Four, despite the fact that Sorokin has been feted in the West as a ‘bad boy novelist’ and dissident, he does not describe himself this way.⁸⁷ Until 2014, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Sorokin’s dissident statements were few.⁸⁸ In an appearance in 2011 he described himself as writing

⁸¹ See this analysis in Chapter Five, pp. 292-303. Per-Arne Bodin, ‘Church Slavonic in Russian Dystopias and Utopias’, in *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), pp. 203–18 (p. 209); Mark Lipovetsky, ‘The New “Norma”: Vladimir Sorokin’s Telluria and Post-Utopian Science Fiction’, in *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), 301–14.

⁸² Mark Lipovetsky, ‘Fleshing/Flashing the Discourse: Sorokin’s Master Trope’, in *Postmodern Crises: From Lolita to Pussy Riot* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2017), pp. 109–29.

⁸³ Mark Lipovetsky, ‘Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 79.1 (2001), 31–50. Viktor Pelevin, *Generation ‘P’* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999). The novel was translated by Andrew Bromfield as *Babylon*; Viktor Pelevin, *Babylon*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

⁸⁴ Alexander Etkind, ‘Magical Historicism’, in *Russian Literature since 1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 104–19; *Russian Literature since 1991*, ed. by Dobrenko and Lipovetsky.

⁸⁵ *Eto prosto bukvy na bumage*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018).

⁸⁶ *Sorokin Trip*, dir. by Ilya Belov, 2019.

⁸⁷ See Chapter Four, p. 250. He was labelled a ‘bad boy novelist’ by literary critic Stephen Kotkin. See Kotkin, ‘Book Review - Day of the Oprichnik - By Vladimir Sorokin’, *The New York Times*, 11 March 2011 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/books/review/book-review-day-of-the-oprichnik-by-vladimir-sorokin.html>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

⁸⁸ Sorokin wrote articles against the annexation of Crimea in 2014. For details see Chapter Four, p. 262.

literature first and foremost.⁸⁹ Sorokin did not participate in the protests against Putin in 2011-12, and reportedly dislikes the crowds such demonstrations involve because they will not help him to become a better writer.⁹⁰ When Liza Rozovsky interviewed Sorokin in 2018, he was living part-time in Berlin and was happy that the Russian state was leaving him in peace.⁹¹ He registered his seeming Islamophobic concerns, however, about immigration (in this case into Germany), a theme which is arguably appears in his novels *Telluriiia* and *Doktor Garin*, as noted below:

I can say that our world is changing, in part because of the Muslim migrants. No one will dispute that. That worries me, of course [...] I have nothing against the refugees one sees in the streets. The problem is that at any moment one of them can become a terrorist.⁹²

However, since 2014, and even more so since 2022, it became impossible for Sorokin not to present an overtly political stance.⁹³ This reached its logical conclusion when he left Russia for an indefinite amount of time as soon as the full-scale war against Ukraine began. Although Sorokin was not an actively dissident writer before the war he was portrayed as such by the Western media, as I will demonstrate more fully in Chapter Four.⁹⁴ By framing Sorokin as an ‘anti-Putin’ writer in US and UK culture, publishers created a space in the literary marketplace for an author whose prose is challenging to read. By understanding Sorokin as a dissident writer, critics and readers are presented a way in which to receive his texts. Without this supposedly dissident angle — one which I will demonstrate is favoured by Western publishers — he might not have been so

⁸⁹ See also Chapter Five, p. 260 for further details; *In Conversation: Vladimir Sorokin and Keith Gessen*, dir. by PEN America, 3 May 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00nqeQEt_Js> [accessed 10 November 2022].

⁹⁰ Natalia Kochetkova, ‘Literatory pili, p’iut i budut pit’» Vladimir Sorokin o vode, vodke i futbole’, *Lenta.Ru*, 30 August 2019 <<https://lenta.ru/articles/2019/08/30/srkn/>> [accessed 5 November 2019]. As of February 2022, Sorokin took up a more permanent residence in Berlin, see Conclusion, p. 334.

⁹¹ Liza Rozovsky, ‘This Controversial Russian Novelist, Accused of Promoting Cannibalism and Pornography, Is a Literary Star’, *Haaretz*, 21 September 2018 <<https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium.MAGAZINE-accused-of-spreading-cannibalism-and-pornography-this-russian-novelist-is-a-literary-star-1.6492149>> [accessed 5 November 2019].

⁹² Rozovsky, ‘This Controversial Russian Novelist’.

⁹³ See Conclusion, p. 338 for a discussion of his comments about the war against Ukraine.

⁹⁴ See Chapter Four, p. 260.

well recognised or received in the West, and the further translation of his novels, especially in the case of *Their Four Hearts*, might have been impossible.

2.1d Translations into English

Despite Max Lawton's claims to the contrary, a relatively large number of Sorokin's novels have been published in English, and translations have been slow but relatively steady up until 2023.⁹⁵ *The Queue* was translated by Sally Laird and published in 1988, and an excerpt of *Their Four Hearts*, translated by Gambrell, appeared in *Glas* in 2002.⁹⁶ Between 2011-14 *Ice Trilogy*, *Oprichnik* and *The Blizzard* were all translated into English by Gambrell.⁹⁷ In 2020 a renewed interest in Sorokin's work began, led by his newest translator Lawton, and aided by Lawton's alliance with both Will Evans at Dalkey Archive and Deep Vellum, and Edwin Frank at NYRB Classics. As part of an unironically named 'five-year plan', Sorokin, Lawton, Evans and Frank are launching what they term a *Sorokinaissance* in order to publish all of his work in English over the next few years.⁹⁸

It is, nevertheless, true, for reasons I will explore in Chapter Two, that Sorokin's work has sold much less well than that of other Russian authors of historical fantasy or science fiction, such as Boris Akunin, Dmitry Glukhovsky or Sergey Lukyanenko.⁹⁹ Despite low sales, Sorokin's symbolic capital, and potential marketability, as well as the possibility that he might win literary prizes, is expressed by the fact that he is published by FSG in the US and Penguin Random

⁹⁵ Interview with Lawton, 23 October 2020. Lawton's emphasis on what he considers the low number of Sorokin's translations might, I suggest, be part of his plan for promotion both of Sorokin's fiction, and hence himself. See 'Celebrity translators', Chapter Two, p. 145.

⁹⁶ Sorokin, *The Queue*, trans. by Sally Laird. See also *Glas 2: Soviet Grotesque*, ed. by Natasha Perova, *Glas New Russian Writing*, 2 (Moscow: Glas, 2000).

⁹⁷ Vladimir Sorokin, *The Blizzard*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); Vladimir Sorokin, *Ice Trilogy*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: New York Review Books, 2011). Vladimir Sorokin, *The Queue*, trans. by Sally Laird (New York: Readers International, 1988).

⁹⁸ For covering of this, see: 'A Five-Year Plan for Vladimir Sorokin', *Columbia University*, 27 September 2021 <<https://slavic.columbia.edu/news/five-year-plan-vladimir-sorokin>> [accessed 18 February 2023]; Ecem Lawton, "'The Sorokinaissance Is upon Us in English Courtesy of One Man: @maxdaniellawton" @willefans @NewYorker #VladimirSorokin', @EcemLawton, 2021 <<https://twitter.com/EcemLawton/status/1442584184267034629>> [accessed 7 March 2022]. To date *Their Four Hearts* and *Telluria* have been released; Vladimir Sorokin, *Telluria*, trans. by Max Lawton, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2022); Sorokin, *Their Four Hearts*, trans. by Lawton. For more on the Sorokinaissance and Lawton see Chapter Two, p. 138.

⁹⁹ For an analysis of sales figures, see Chapter Two, p. 124.

House in the UK.¹⁰⁰ That such well-regarded independent publishers as Dalkey Archive and NYRB Classics are translating his work today might indicate their desire to accrue symbolic capital from an author already published in English, as well as a genuine interest in Russian fiction.¹⁰¹ While these smaller publishers might benefit from Sorokin's association with PRH and FSG, as I will show in Chapter Two, Sorokin's novel's have not sold in large quantities in the UK.¹⁰² This begs the question, which I attempt to answer in this thesis, of why he was initially commissioned for translation into English over other contemporary Russian writers, and why he continues to be published despite a poor sales track record. I will argue that his politicised texts, and the possibility of marketing him as "dissident", or as one critic refers to him, 'Tolstoyan', make him both a potential prize-winner (before February 2022) and an ideal author to promote in a market that is skewed towards politicised Russian novels.¹⁰³

2.2 Ludmila Ulitskaya

After Sorokin, Ludmila Ulitskaya (b. 1943) has received the most academic attention. Elizabeth Skomp and Benjamin Sutcliffe's *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance* regards Ulitskaya's work through the prism of sincerity, and identifies tolerance as the principal theme that permeates her oeuvre.¹⁰⁴ Helena Goscilo's foreword to the same study celebrates Ulitskaya's popularity in Russia, recording that sales of her novels there amount to 'several million volumes.'¹⁰⁵ Ulitskaya's prestige is confirmed by her array of prizes, both from Russia and abroad. These include the French Medici Prize (1996), the Penne Prize (Italy, 2006), the Simone de Beauvoir Prize (France, 2011), the Pak Kyong-ni Prize (South Korea, 2012), and the Austrian State Prize for European Literature (2014). She was nominated for the Man Booker International Prize in 2009 for all of her

¹⁰⁰ Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (London: Penguin Classics, 2018).

¹⁰¹ Will Evans holds a master's degree in Russian, and has previously worked as a translator on; Oleg Kashin, *Fardwor, Russia!: A Fantastical Tale of Life under Putin*, trans. by Will Evans (New York: Restless Books, 2016).

¹⁰² See Chapter Two, p. 132.

¹⁰³ For the reviewer in question, see Ellen Barry, 'The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin', *The New York Times*, 29 April 2011 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/30/books/the-russian-novelist-vladimir-sorokin.html>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

¹⁰⁴ Skomp and Sutcliffe, *The Art of Tolerance*. See above, p. 73 for a discussion of sincerity in Russian literature. This tolerance should be seen as diametrically opposed to Borenstein's description of the anti-Liberal movement in Russian, who regard tolerance as one of the least desirable qualities. See Borenstein, *Plots*, p. 167.

¹⁰⁵ Skomp and Sutcliffe, *The Art of Tolerance*, p. xii.

work to date.¹⁰⁶ In Russia she has won the Bol'shaia Kniga (2007), the Natsbest (2004), and was nominated for the Russian Booker (2002). As a result of her critical recognition, Ulitskaya is regularly named as a potential winner of the Nobel Prize.¹⁰⁷

2.2a Ulitskaya's Political Views and Literary Output

Interviews and articles abound in the Russian press in which Ulitskaya openly states that all power is bad, and that she has no faith in the Russian government, or indeed any government.¹⁰⁸ Ulitskaya took part in the protests against Putin in 2011-12, as well as those against the invasion of Ukraine in 2014.¹⁰⁹ She has been physically attacked as a result of her activism which was recognised by the Moscow Helsinki Group for Human Rights (MHG) in 2021 when she was named laureate for 'the protection of human rights through culture and art.'¹¹⁰ When the war against Ukraine intensified in February 2022, she was living in her apartment in Berlin, and has stated that she does not plan to return to Russia while the war continues.¹¹¹ She has subsequently been vocal against Russia's actions in Ukraine.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ 'Ludmila Ulitskaya' <<https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/authors/lyudmila-ulitskaya>> [accessed 21 January 2023].

¹⁰⁷ For example, see Alison Flood, 'Nobel Odds: Annie Ernaux Is the Favourite to Win This Year's Prize for Literature', 4 October 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/oct/04/nobel-odds-annie-ernaux-is-the-favourite-to-win-this-years-prize-for-literature>> [accessed 5 February 2022].

¹⁰⁸ See her interview here; *Ulitskaia o russskoi klassike, dlinnykh romanakh, putine i ideal'nom gosudarstve*, knizhnyi chel, 1 August 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7HPVGcVgtc>> [accessed 15 August 2023].

¹⁰⁹ See: Masha Gessen, 'Lyudmila Ulitskaya Against the State', *The New Yorker*, 29 September 2014 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/06/weight-words>> [accessed 23 October 2019]; Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber, 'Thousands March Against War in Ukraine in Moscow Protest - The Moscow Times', *The Moscow Times*, 21 September 2014 <<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/21/thousands-march-against-war-in-ukraine-in-moscow-protest-a39621>> [accessed 29 May 2023].

¹¹⁰ Ulitskaya was attacked at a Human Rights event in Moscow in April 2016 by nationalists who sprayed her with disinfectant. For more information see 'Russian Author Ludmila Ulitskaya Attacked at Awards Ceremony - PEN America', 29 April 2016 <<https://pen.org/press-release/russian-author-ludmila-ulitskaya-attacked-at-awards-ceremony/>> [accessed 27 July 2023]. See also 'MHG Announces the Names of the Winners of the Moscow Helsinki Group Prize for 2021', 21 May 2021 <<https://mhg.ru/news/mhg-obyavlyaet-imena-laureatov-premii-moskovskoy-helsinkskoy-gruppy-za-2021-god>> [accessed 23 January 2023].

¹¹¹ See Sabine Kiseselbach, 'Russian Author Ulitskaya Warns of "terrible" Consequences of War', *DW.com*, 1 April 2022 <<https://www.dw.com/en/russian-author-ulitskaya-warns-of-terrible-consequences-of-war/a-61326678>> [accessed 9 October 2022].

¹¹² In 2024, Ulitskaya's novels were banned in Russia in early 2024. She was tricked into admitting that she was donating proceeds from her books to support the Ukrainian war effort; Kirill Zykov, 'Ludmila Ulitskaya Is the Latest Russian Writer Under Fire', *The Moscow Times*, 2

Ulitskaya takes her role as a member of the liberal intelligentsia very seriously, and her novel *Zelenyi shater (Big Green Tent)* can be seen as both a celebration and a criticism of the liberal intelligentsia of the 1960s.¹¹³ As liberal émigré journalist Masha Gessen points out, in the past Russia's intelligentsia took it upon themselves to advocate for people who became victims of the Soviet authorities, and in her political activities, Ulitskaya is acting within that same tradition.¹¹⁴ It is clear to Ulitskaya, however, that not everyone is doing the same.¹¹⁵ Despite her overt humanitarian concerns, Ulitskaya does not regard herself as political. In our interview she stated that, 'in no uncertain terms I am an anti-political person. Authors should keep to their own affairs and write books.'¹¹⁶

In her essay 'Mein Land Krank' ('My Country is Ill') published in the German press in 2014, Ulitskaya describes herself as politically inactive, and explains that she simply says what she thinks when she is asked.¹¹⁷ For this she has been relegated by the Russian State to the 'fifth column' — she is regarded as an internal enemy.¹¹⁸ Her warnings about Russian culture and politics in this 2014 essay seem prescient in 2023. She predicted that Russia would ultimately have to abandon any hope of becoming part of Europe because of the 'Third World War' she worried that Russia is bound to provoke. She felt that this had already begun with conflicts in Chechnya, Georgia and Ukraine. Ulitskaya reiterated her concerns in an article in *Granta* literary magazine in 2019.¹¹⁹

February 2024 <<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/02/02/ludmila-ulitskaya-is-the-latest-russian-writer-under-fire-a83957>> [accessed 28 February 2024].

¹¹³ For a discussion of this, see: Marijeta Bozovic, 'Outside the Tent: Ludmila Ulitskaya's Latest Novel and the End of an Era', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 30 August 2016

<<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/outside-tent-ludmila-ulitskayas-latest-novel-end-era/>>

[accessed 23 October 2019]; Anastasia Rudenko, "'There Isn't and Won't Be Any Freedom of Speech in Russian Journalism'", 10 August 2016 <<https://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/society/there-isnt-and-wont-be-any-freedom-speech-russian-journalism>> [accessed 9 October 2022]. When Khodorovsky was in prison, Ulitskaya and Akunin wrote frequently to him and subsequently published the letters; Mikhail Khodorkovsky, *Stat'i, diaglogi, interv'iu* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2010).

¹¹⁴ Gessen, 'Lyudmila Ulitskaya Against the State'.

¹¹⁵ See discussions here: Skomp and Sutcliffe, *The Art of Tolerance*, p. xviii; Gessen, 'Lyudmila Ulitskaya Against the State'.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Ludmila Ulitskaya via email, 12 November 2021.

¹¹⁷ Ljudmila Ulitzkaja, 'Essay: Mein Land Krank', *Spiegel Online*, 18 August 2014

<<https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-128743771.html>> [accessed 1 November 2019].

¹¹⁸ Her German article appeared in Russian later that year: Ludmila Ulitskaya, 'Evropa, proshchai!', *Novaia Gazeta*, 26 August 2014

<<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2014/08/26/60867-evropa-proschay-zaltsburgskie-vpechatleniya>> [accessed 21 January 2023].

¹¹⁹ Ludmila Ulitskaya, 'Ludmila Ulitskaya. On Europe', trans. by Polly Gannon, *Granta*, 21 November 2019 <<https://granta.com/ludmila-ulitskaya-on-europe/>> [accessed 21 January 2023]. Such predictions are echoed by author Ludmila Petrushevskaya. See Conclusion, p. 328.

Ulitskaya's political stance, although not overt in her work, is detectable in the small details her prose comprises. In her introduction to *The Art of Tolerance*, Goscilo argues that this is the reason for Ulitskaya's success in Russia.¹²⁰ Russian nationalist critic Lev Danilkin harshly criticised Ulitskaya for what he considers to be this 'small' view of the world.¹²¹ In a somewhat combative interview for magazine *Afisha* (2011) about *The Big Green Tent*, Danilkin accused Ulitskaya of ignoring the major historical milestones (such as the space race that was taking place in the Soviet Union when the story is set) in favour of personal stories. In response, Ulitskaya justified her approach as follows, 'My novel is absolutely not about the relationship between "the people" and "the state" but about the relationship between the individual and the state.'¹²²

For Skomp and Sutcliffe, Ulitskaya's popularity in Russia lies in exactly this propensity to tell stories from a very personal, humanised perspective rather than a national one.¹²³ Goscilo offers an example of this with one of Ulitskaya's stories, 'Vtorogo marta togo zhe goda' ('March 1953', 1994) in which the heroine starts her period on the day of Stalin's death. The heroine's day is thus imbued with personal significance, rather than being primarily concerned with the national tragedy of Stalin's demise.¹²⁴ Focussing on an intimate personal event over one of national significance is an act of bravery on Ulitskaya's behalf, and one that Goscilo refers to as 'Tolstoyan'.¹²⁵

It is paradoxical then, that considering what Gessen refers to as Ulitskaya's 'profoundly un-Soviet' approach, which was the essence of Danilkin's complaint, that her novel *Big Green Tent* is nevertheless marketed in the UK and US as primarily about Soviet Russia.¹²⁶ The discord between Russian and Anglophone interpretations of Ulitskaya's fiction is also addressed by Brian Baer in his analysis of the fictional translator in her novel *Daniel' Shtein, perevodchik* (*Daniel*

¹²⁰ Skomp and Sutcliffe, *The Art of Tolerance*, p. xiii.

¹²¹ Lev Danilkin, 'Obshchestvo podrostkov menia pygaet', *Afisha*, 16 February 2011 <<https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/vozduh/archive/8621/>> [accessed 29 May 2023].

¹²² Danilkin, 'Obshchestvo podrostkov'.

¹²³ Skomp and Sutcliffe, *The Art of Tolerance*; Gessen, 'The Weight of Words'.

¹²⁴ Skomp and Sutcliffe, *The Art of Tolerance*, p. xiii.

¹²⁵ Skomp and Sutcliffe, *The Art of Tolerance*, p. xiii.

¹²⁶ Gessen, 'Weight of Words'.

Stein, Interpreter, 2006).¹²⁷ Baer demonstrates the influence of paratexts in positioning *Daniel Stein* in the target culture. He concludes that the novel is presented to the Anglophone reader as a postmodernist novel from the level of its title onwards, and that this contrasts with reception in Russia which regards *Daniel' Shtein* as primarily post-Soviet.¹²⁸ I will discuss this apparent tension between these two interpretations of Ulitskaya's novels in Chapter Four.¹²⁹

Meanwhile, Goscilo argues that Ulitskaya's attention to tiny details is also expressed in the frequent use of names in the titles of her novels and short stories. *Sonechka* (*Sonechka*, 1992) tells the eponymous story of a woman whose life is driven by her love of books.¹³⁰ *Daniel' Shtein*, blends autobiography and fiction in the true story of Oswald Rufeisen, his journey from Judaism to Christianity and his bid to be accepted in Israel.¹³¹ Similarly, *Lestnitsa Iakova* (*Jacob's Ladder*, 2015) also mixes personal correspondence and fiction, after a young woman discovers the letters of her grandparents, a young Jewish couple who fled Kyiv for Moscow where they then suffered anti-Semitism and repeated imprisonments as a result.¹³² Ulitskaya's most recent publication, *Chuma* (*Just the Plague*, 2020) is again concerned with the fate of the regular citizen.¹³³ Written as a screenplay in the 1980s but not published before 2020, it is set in 1930s Russia, and follows the efforts of the Secret Police to contain an outbreak of the plague. As I will explore in Chapter Four, it appears to have been published in order to capitalise on its topical nature in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³⁴ This trend of commissioning texts in response to a political moment is one I will explore throughout this thesis.

¹²⁷ Brian Baer, 'Interpreting Daniel Stein', in *Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014), pp. 157–75; Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Daniel' Shtein, perevodchik* (Moscow: AST, 2006); Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Daniel Stein, Interpreter: A Novel in Documents*, trans. by Arch Tait (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2011).

¹²⁸ Baer, 'Interpreting Daniel Stein', p. 162.

¹²⁹ See Chapter Four, p. 257.

¹³⁰ Ludmila Ulitskaya, 'Sonechka', *Novyi Mir*, 7 (1992), 61–89; Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Sonechka and Other Stories*, trans. by Arch Tait, 17 (Moscow; Birmingham: Glas, 1998).

¹³¹ Ulitskaya, *Daniel' Shtein, perevodchik*; Ulitskaya, *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*.

¹³² Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Lestnitsa Iakova* (Moscow: AST, Redaktsiia Eleny Shubinoi, 2015); Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Jacob's Ladder*, trans. by Polly Gannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

¹³³ Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Chuma* (Moscow: Elena Shubina, 2020); Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Just the Plague*, trans. by Polly Gannon (London: Granta, 2021).

¹³⁴ See Chapter Four, p. 237.

2.2b *The Big Green Tent*

The Big Green Tent (henceforth *BGT*), which is one of the focuses of this study, is concerned with the lives of the *shestidesiatniki*, the dissident children of the 1960s. *BGT* is as an ode to the intelligentsia Ulitskaya feels is dying out in Russia. This is symbolised by the death of the dissident Russian poet Joseph Brodsky at the end of the novel, and Brodsky's displeasure that his daughter does not speak Russian.¹³⁵ The novel, constructed as a series of short stories that slowly reveal themselves to be intricately connected, is also highly intertextual.¹³⁶ The importance of literature is voiced by *BGT*'s inspirational Russian literature teacher Victor Yulevich who states that, 'literature is the only thing that allows us to survive, the only thing that helps us to reconcile ourselves to the time we live in.'¹³⁷

In line with Ulitskaya's approach to her fiction, *BGT* sets personal stories against a grand historical backdrop. The novel begins with Stalin's death in 1953 and ends with Brodsky's in 1996. Within these years, the narrative follows three men — Ilya, Sanya and Mikha — and their interconnections through literature, beginning with their childhood in Moscow where they are schooled in fiction by their devoted teacher Yulevich. None of the complex web of characters survives the Soviet experience unscathed. Ilya and his wife Olga are permanently pursued by the KGB because of their involvement in producing illegally printed copies of banned and foreign books, known as *samizdat*. Both die prematurely. Mikha is denounced for reading *samizdat*, loses his job and takes the dangerous decision to support the cause of the Crimean Tatars.¹³⁸ He joins Ilya to write a *samizdat* newspaper and later kills himself rather than confess anything to the KGB. Talented musician Sanya is forced to emigrate to the US.¹³⁹ As with so much of

¹³⁵ Ulitskaya, *Big Green Tent*, p. 565.

¹³⁶ One book group member described the novel as a 'gateway drug to Russian literature.' Ulitskaya states that she intended the novel to be a collection of short stories: 'When I wrote the *Big Green Tent*, I tried to make it easier on myself, assembling the novel out of stories, to create a kind of compound view.'; Oleg Kashin, "Intelligentsiia Zakonchilas" kak istoricheskoe iavlennie", *Afisha*, 12 November 2015 <<https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/vozduh/books/intelligenciya-zakonchilas-kak-istoricheskoe-yavlenie-intervyu-lyudmily-ulickoy/>> [accessed 8 February 2023].

¹³⁷ Ulitskaya, *Big Green Tent*, p. 72.

¹³⁸ Ulitskaya, *Big Green Tent*, p. 451.

¹³⁹ Ulitskaya, *Big Green Tent*, p. 57.

Ulitskaya's work, themes of emigration, fate, religion, love and literature permeate the novel.

2.2c Translations into English

There is a trajectory in Ulitskaya's publishing history in English from smaller, independent firms to large commercial presses which is exemplary of a general trend in translation: unknown writers move from lesser-known publishers to more established firms as their reputation in the target culture increases.¹⁴⁰ Ulitskaya's first text in English, *Sonechka*, was translated by Arch Tait, and published by Russia-based Glas in 1998.¹⁴¹ Subsequently, *Funeral Party* (*Veselye pokhorony*, 1997) and *Medea and her Children* (*Medeia i ee deti*, 1996) were published by Schocken Books in 2002 and 2004 respectively.¹⁴² *Daniel Stein* was published in English by Duckworth Overlook in 2011.¹⁴³ Following the critical success of this novel, *Zelenyi Shater* was signed to Farrar, Straus & Giroux, followed by *Lestnitsa lakova*, as I will discuss in Chapter Three. Her most recent publication, *Just the Plague*, was published by Granta.¹⁴⁴

2.3 Mikhail Shishkin

Of the three "liberal" writers in this thesis, Mikhail Shishkin (b.1961) is perhaps the most dedicated to political matters. As such, Shishkin himself writes the majority of articles that are published in relation to him in English. Born in Moscow, Shishkin's mother was a Russian literature teacher, and his father a submariner who was decorated in World War Two.¹⁴⁵ Shishkin studied German and English at the Moscow State Pedagogical University, later working as a journalist, then as a teacher of German and English. He followed his second wife to Switzerland in 1995, where he worked as a translator and interpreter. Shishkin

¹⁴⁰ This echoes Bourdieu's description of the French publishing market; Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution'.

¹⁴¹ See Chapter Three, pp. 193-99 for a discussion of Glas. Ulitskaya, *Sonechka and Other Stories*, trans. by Arch Tait.

¹⁴² Ludmila Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, trans. by Arch Tait, (New York: Schocken Books, 2002); *Medea and Her Children*, trans. by Arch Tait (Schocken Books, 2004); *Medeia i ee deti* (Moscow: Astrel', 1996); *Veselye pokhorony* (Moscow, Minsk: Astrel', 1997).

¹⁴³ Ulitskaya, *Daniel Stein*.

¹⁴⁴ Ulitskaya, *Just the Plague*.

¹⁴⁵ Loving details of his mother are captured in 'The Half-Belt Overcoat', the first story in Calligraphy Lesson; Mikhail Shishkin, 'The Half-Belt Overcoat', in *Calligraphy Lesson, The Collected Stories*, trans. by Leo Shtutin (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2015).

wrote his first short story in 1993. 'Urok kalligrafii' ('Calligraphy Lesson', 1993) published in literary journal *Znamia*, was followed by his first novel, *Vziatie Izmaila* (*The Taking of Izmail*, 2000) which won him the Russian Booker Prize in 2000.¹⁴⁶ This was followed by further prizes for *Venerin volos* (*Maidenhair*, 2005 – winner of the Natsbest, 2006), and *Pis'movnik* (*The Light and the Dark*, 2010) which won the Bol'shaia Kniga prize in 2011.¹⁴⁷ He remains the only Russian writer to have won all three of these prizes.

Shishkin is a committed member of the liberal intelligentsia. In our interview he explained that before Russia invaded Ukraine, he always imagined himself as having 'one foot in Russia, and the other in Switzerland, Germany, England and America.'¹⁴⁸ This changed with his refusal to represent Russia at the 2013 BookExpo in New York, and even more so when Russia occupied Crimea and subsequently intensified their war against Ukraine.¹⁴⁹ As a result of his political statements, since 2013 Shishkin has been regarded in Russia as a political émigré. However, he explains that he left his country for love and not politics during a time when he believed that things were going to change for the better in Russia.¹⁵⁰ Shishkin is not, then, by his own definition, an émigré. Instead he believes that his Russia has emigrated away from him and returned to its totalitarian past.¹⁵¹

Shishkin the novelist and Shishkin the activist manifest in different ways — the first through Shishkin's novels and short stories, and the latter through essays and interviews. However, these two identities merge with and influence one another.¹⁵² Shishkin's novels lend him gravitas and provide him with a platform to comment about the state of Russia in the international media. Likewise, these statements, and most importantly, his dissident position, help to raise the profile

¹⁴⁶ Mikhail Shishkin, 'Urok Kalligrafii', *Znamia*, 1993; Mikhail Shishkin, *Vziatie Izmaila* (Moscow: AST, 2000).

¹⁴⁷ Mikhail Shishkin, *Pis'movnik* (Moscow: AST, 2010); Mikhail Shishkin, *The Light and the Dark*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Quercus, 2013); Mikhail Shishkin, *Venerin volos* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2005); Mikhail Shishkin, *Maidenhair*, trans. by Marian Schwartz (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2012).

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Shishkin, 13 September 2021.

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter Four, pp. 240-51 for a detailed discussion of this.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Shishkin.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Shishkin. As Shishkin describes it, '...my country emigrated from the twenty-first century to the middle ages'.

¹⁵² This point is made by Ingunn Lunde, "'A Revolution for Russia's Words": Rhetoric and Style in Mixail Šiškin's Political Essays', *Zeitschrift Für Slawistik*, 61.2 (2016), 249–61.

of his novels and boost his sales in the West. This is not, Shishkin states, his aim. Instead he firmly believes that it is his duty as a writer to make people think.¹⁵³ His novels, he explains, are not for entertainment, but to ask questions that perhaps cannot be answered. Most importantly, he states, ‘I cannot and do not want to be silent about what is happening today, both in the world and in Russia. Even if it is impossible to conquer a dictator, you at least have to do what you can so as not to be complicit.’¹⁵⁴

Shishkin’s literary oeuvre reflects both his political and language-bound concerns. His story ‘Lodka, natsarapannaia na stene’ (‘In a Boat Scratched on a Wall’, 2008) describes the effect on his writing process of living in Switzerland and leaving behind his mother tongue.¹⁵⁵ He writes, ‘Being at once creator and creature of the nation’s reality, the Russian language is the form of existence, the body, of the totalitarian consciousness.’¹⁵⁶ His aim is to separate Russian literary prose from the oppressive language used by the Russian State over the past century.¹⁵⁷ By reclaiming his mother tongue, Shishkin hopes to restore dignity to the Russian people. His attempts to recreate the Russian literary language is visible in his inventive prose, as in *Pis’movnik* — a love story between two characters who never meet, but who write letters to each other from different ends of the twentieth century. However, this same inventiveness, coupled with his typically complex plots, can lead to challenges for the translator and, as I will illustrate in Chapter Three, can make Anglophone publishers reluctant to commission his novels.¹⁵⁸ For example, *Vziatie Izmaila*, which was initially to be translated by Jamey Gambrell but was never completed, is a complex narrative which relies on the historical event of the Siege of Izmail (1790) to create a metaphor for life.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵³ Interview with Shishkin.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Shishkin.

¹⁵⁵ Mikhail Shishkin, ‘In a Boat Scratched on a Wall, in *Calligraphy Lesson, The Collected Stories*, trans. by Marian Schwartz (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2015), pp. 156–69.

¹⁵⁶ Shishkin, ‘In a Boat’, pp. 157–8.

¹⁵⁷ Not everyone agrees this might be possible. As I will discuss in my Conclusion, Ukrainian author Oksana Zabuzhko regards Russian literature as a vehicle for Russian imperialism. See Conclusion, p. 334.

¹⁵⁸ See Chapter Three, p. 204.

¹⁵⁹ Email conversation with Shishkin, 17 May, 2023.

2.3a *Maidenhair*

Shishkin's *Maidenhair*, however, is perhaps the most complex of his novels.¹⁶⁰ The novel spans time as well as space, and characters from different historical eras regularly cross paths. On its surface the book recounts the experience of its main character, who works as a Russophone interpreter at an immigration centre on the Swiss border. The interpreter has to translate refugees' horrific tales in support of their claim for asylum. He relays these to his boss, who nearly always denies the refugees the right to claim asylum in Switzerland. Parallel to this story, the interpreter writes to his son about a magical land ruled by 'Nebuchadnezzasaurus'. The novel is also interspersed with chapters that present the diary of early twentieth-century singer Izabella Iur'eva. Shishkin 'borrowed' various sections of Soviet author Vera Panova's memoirs for this passages, but failed to attribute them to her, drawing accusations of plagiarism in Russia. This is addressed by José Vergara in his article 'Return That Which Does Not Belong to You'.¹⁶¹

As Vergara demonstrates in his article about plagiarism, *Maidenhair* reads like an ephemeral stream of consciousness that is so intertextual that only Shishkin himself is its ideal reader.¹⁶² According to one review, the beauty of the novel is in the small details, sometimes a fleeting sentence or image, that make up its impressive whole.¹⁶³ Shishkin, however, regards it as 'a classic novel about simple things. About overcoming death through love and words.'¹⁶⁴ In our interview he added that it is essentially about love and how it can overcome anything.¹⁶⁵ While the novel itself is not explicitly political, Shishkin has taken a determinedly political stance against Putin's government. It is this political position, his American publisher Chad Post argues, that helped to raise awareness of the author in the West.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ See Chapter Five, p. 325 for a consideration of the challenges of translating *Maidenhair*.

¹⁶¹ For a thorough discussion of this 'plagiarism' and other examples of borrowings see José Vergara, "'Return That Which Does Not Belong to You': Mikhail Shishkin's Borrowings in *Maidenhair*", *The Russian Review*, 78.2 (2019), 300–321. See also below Chapter Four p. 312 for a discussion of Shishkin's use of an Agatha Christie title.

¹⁶² Vergara, "'Return That Which Does Not Belong to You'. Marian Schwartz made the same observation; Interview with Marian Schwartz, 18 January 2021.

¹⁶³ James Meek, 'Cloud-Brains', *London Review of Books*, 22 November 2012, pp. 31–32.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Shishkin.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Shishkin.

¹⁶⁶ See above, p. 13.

2.3b Academic Research on Shishkin

Despite this dissident status, Shishkin has received little academic attention in the West. He only gains passing attention in Lipovetsky's collection of essays, for example.¹⁶⁷ Ingunn Lunde analyses Shishkin's use of language as an expression of his ideology in his non-fiction and considers how these same ideas are reflected in his novels.¹⁶⁸ Meanwhile, as mentioned above, Vergara analyses *Maidenhair's* intertextuality, and discusses the validity of the accusations of plagiarism over his use of Vera Panova's diaries.¹⁶⁹ Vergara also devotes a chapter of his book, *All Future Plunges to the Past: James Joyce in Russian Literature*, to *Maidenhair* and its position within the 'Russian Joycean tradition'.¹⁷⁰ None of these articles looks closely at the translation of *Maidenhair*, or the reasons behind its commission into English. This I will do in detail in both Chapter Three, and Chapter Four, where I analyse the influence of politics on *Maidenhair's* reception in the US and UK.¹⁷¹

2.3c Translations into English

The majority of Shishkin's Russian prose has been translated into English. Again, as with Ulitskaya, Shishkin's novels have been commissioned by increasingly commercial publishing houses. Marian Schwartz's translation of *Maidenhair* was published by US independent Open Letter (2012). It was followed by *Calligraphy Lesson* (2015) published by Deep Vellum — in part because Will Evans, who at that time had recently founded the press, had worked with Shishkin and Schwartz on *Maidenhair* (such professional connections inform my analysis of gatekeeper networks in Chapter Three).¹⁷² Quercus, part of Big Five conglomerate Hachette, commissioned *The Light and the Dark* in 2011, following Shishkin's presentation at the London Book Fair that year.¹⁷³ Shishkin's then-UK-agent, Seamus Murphy, also appeared alongside him at the London Book Fair to promote the novel.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁷ Lipovetsky, *Postmodern Crises*, pp. 92, 103 and 105.

¹⁶⁸ Lunde. For further discussion, see Chapter Four, p. 250.

¹⁶⁹ Vergara, "Return That Which Does Not Belong to You".

¹⁷⁰ José Vergara, 'Mikhail Shishkin: Border Crossings', in *All Future Plunges to the Past: James Joyce in Russian Literature* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 140–71.

¹⁷¹ See Chapter Four, pp. 240–251.

¹⁷² Interview with Will Evans, 15 February 2021.

¹⁷³ Email exchange with Shishkin, 18 May 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Email exchange with Shishkin. For more on this, see Teri Tan, 'Publishing in Russia 2012: The Rights Side of Business', *PublishersWeekly.Com*, 30 March 2012

Shishkin's most recent book, *Frieden Oder Krieg (My Russia, War or Peace*, 2019) was published in 2023 in the UK and translated from German by Gesche Ipsen for Riverrun, an imprint of Quercus.¹⁷⁵ This publishing trajectory demonstrates the influence of Shishkin's political stance on his marketability in the UK and US, despite the complexity of his prose. The same increase in status is not enjoyed, however, by the "nationalist" authors, to whom I now turn my attention.

3 "Nationalist" Authors

To date there have been no academic studies of the work of "nationalist" authors Elizarov or Senchin, the latter of whom only figures peripherally in the academic research dedicated contemporary Russian fiction surveyed above. There is, however, some research dedicated to Prilepin — in fact, Anglophone texts dedicated to his work in the form of articles and book chapters, outnumber research on Shishkin. His first novel *Patalogii (Pathologies*, 2003) is examined by Elena Clark in her *Trauma and Truth: Teaching Russian Literature on the Chechen Wars*.¹⁷⁶ Julie Fedor writes about Prilepin in relation to Russian identity and the Chechen war, and Tomi Huttunen and Jussi Lassila consider his paradoxical political identities in their article 'Zakhar Prilepin, the National Bolshevik Movement and Catachrestic Politics'.¹⁷⁷

All three authors on the "nationalist" side of Russia's political spectrum are included in a French study, *Les Enragés de la Jeune Littérature Russe*, written by Prilepin's French translator Monique Slodzian.¹⁷⁸ Slodzian maps the political milieu of Senchin, Elizarov and Prilepin alongside Russian authors German

<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/51285-publishing-in-russia-2012-the-rights-side-of-business.html>> [accessed 6 June 2023].

¹⁷⁵ Mikhail Shishkin, *My Russia: War or Peace?*, trans. by Gesche Ipsen (London: Riverrun, 2023).; Fritz Pleitgen and Mikhail Shishkin, *Frieden Oder Krieg: Russland Und Der Westen, Eine Annäherung* (Munich: Ludwig, 2019).

¹⁷⁶ Elena Pedigo Clark, *Trauma and Truth: Teaching Russian Literature on the Chechen Wars* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2022); Zakhar Prilepin, *Patalogii* (Moscow: Andreevskii flag, 2005); Zakhar Prilepin, 'Pathologies', trans. by Arch Tait, *Index on Censorship*, 5.1 (2006), 94–99.

¹⁷⁷ Julie Fedor, 'Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars', *The RUSI Journal*, 163.6 (2018), 18–27; Jussi Lassila and Tomi Huttunen, 'Zakhar Prilepin, the National Bolshevik Movement and Catachrestic Politics', *Transcultural Studies*, 12 (2016), 136–58.

¹⁷⁸ Monique Slodzian, *Les Enragés de La Jeune Littérature Russe* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 2014).

Sadulaev, Andrei Rubanov, and Sergei Shargunov, who penned the manifesto on New Realism referenced earlier in this chapter.¹⁷⁹ Slozidian includes a translation into French of Prilepin's anti-Semitic 'Pis'mo tovarishchu Stalinu' ('Letter to comrade Stalin').¹⁸⁰ As with the "liberal" cohort of authors, the following section will detail these "nationalist" writers' political stances, describe their literary output, and summarise their key novels in order to provide context for my research. For Elizarov, I include a description his musical oeuvre and link it to the political messaging present in his literature and extra-literary statements.

3.1 Zakhar Prilepin

In his 2012 article 'Politicheskaja Motorika Zakhara Prilepina' ('The Political Drive of Zakhar Prilepin'), Lipovetsky describes Prilepin as one of the most widely praised writers in contemporary Russia.¹⁸¹ The Prilepin of 2012 that Lipovetsky describes has undergone notable changes over the past decade, however. Born in 1975 in Nizhny Novgorod, Prilepin studied for a degree in philology, interspersed with time serving with the OMON (military police) in both Chechnya (1996) and Dagestan (1999). He has worked as a night watchman, editor of newspaper *Svobodnaia Pressa*, journalist, singer, and actor. Prilepin's evolution has also been political, from small-time anti-establishment National Bolshevik activist to pro-Putin politician. In May 2023, just as he returned from three months' fighting with the Russian army in Ukraine, he was badly wounded by a car bomb, widely reported to be an anti-tank device, near his home in Nizhny Novgorod.¹⁸²

3.1a Political Views

Although Prilepin is a prolific author, it is not solely his fiction that has created his controversial reputation in Russia (and increasingly also abroad) but his extratextual

¹⁷⁹ See earlier in this chapter, p. 76.

¹⁸⁰ For a discussion of this letter and its implications, see below. The fact that the letter was published in France is not so surprising. According to Wiedling, the publisher Éditions de la Différence continues to publish Prilepin directly because of his politics. Wiedling told me that they are a 'right wing communist publisher.' Wiedling affirmed however, that most other publishers dropped Prilepin when he admitted to fighting in Donbas; Interview with Wiedling.

¹⁸¹ Mark Lipovetsky, 'Politicheskaja motorika Zakhara Prilepina', *Znamia*, 10 (2012) <<https://magazines.gorky.media/znamia/2012/10/politicheskaya-motorika-zahara-prilepina.html>> [accessed 30 October 2019].

¹⁸² For more details, see Sofiia Goncharova, 'Pokusheniia na Zakhara Prilepina', *kp.ru*, 6 May 2023 <<https://www.kp.ru/daily/27500/4759316/>> [accessed 29 May 2023].

actions.¹⁸³ He was a Natsbol, a committed member of Eduard Limonov's and Aleksandr Dugin's National Bolshevik Party (henceforth NBP), which was founded in 1993, and banned in Russia in 2007 as an extremist organisation.¹⁸⁴ The NBP, described in detail in Fabrizio Fenghi's *It'll be Fun and Terrifying* (2020), attempted to unite both far-right and far-left ideologies.¹⁸⁵ The organisation was pro-Stalin, and their flag was reminiscent of the Nazis', with a black hammer and sickle in a white circle against a red background.¹⁸⁶ The deliberate Nazi symbolism was a provocation to society at large, and the NBP 'performed' an ironic, *stjob*-like attitude towards fascism: one of their preferred chants was 'Stalin, Beria, Gulag!'.¹⁸⁷ Although the party was critical of Putin, many former members chose to support the president when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014.¹⁸⁸ They were not, Charles Clover argues, a 'serious political party' but one with arbitrary rules.¹⁸⁹ Clover suggests that Dugin didn't even care what they were called, 'a scream in the wilderness — that was his goal.'¹⁹⁰

In 2012, Prilepin caused controversy by publishing his 'Pis'mo tovarishchu Stalinu' in the ultranationalist newspaper *Zavtra*.¹⁹¹ It was this letter that gave his translators pause for thought just as they were about to sign the contract for *Sankya*.¹⁹² In his letter, Prilepin argues that Jews and liberals should be grateful that Stalin protected their lives by sacrificing Russians during the Great Patriotic War. He writes in the first-person plural, about how everything 'we' have achieved is thanks to Stalin and is anti-Semitic when he refers to the number of dead during the Holocaust as 'mere details.' Prilepin signs off the letter as 'Liberal Society', framing the love/hate relationship with Stalin as one belonging to the liberal, perhaps even Jewish

¹⁸³ To date Prilepin has written twenty-one books, including novels and biographies, compiled twelve anthologies, and published countless articles, poems and short stories. I use the term 'extratextual' here to describe actions, statements and written matter that are not linked to a specific novel, but which nevertheless influence its reception, See Chapter Four, p. 226 for a detailed definition.

¹⁸⁴ Fabrizio Fenghi, *It Will Be Fun and Terrifying: Nationalism and Protest in Post-Soviet Russia* (Wisconsin, WI; University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), p. 7.

¹⁸⁵ Fenghi, *It Will Be Fun and Terrifying*.

¹⁸⁶ Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?*, p. 35. For an example of the Natsbol aesthetic, see Chapter Five, p. 286.

¹⁸⁷ Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*, p. 225.

¹⁸⁸ Fedor, 'Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars', p. 19. It is these NBP members Prilepin describes as having a fresh hope for Russia's future after Putin's annexation of Crimea. See above, Introduction, p. 21; Prilepin, 'Dve Rasy'.

¹⁸⁹ Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*, p. 226.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹⁹¹ Prilepin, 'Pis'mo tovarishchu Stalinu'.

¹⁹² For more on this, see Chapter Three, p. 207.

population. The letter provoked extended debate.¹⁹³ Writer and journalist Victor Shenderovich branded Prilepin an anti-Semite, while critic Mikhail Berg accused Prilepin of being a Slavophile.¹⁹⁴ He added that as far as the charge of anti-Semitism was concerned, Prilepin was not unusual among Russian novelists — Shenderovich felt that most nineteenth-century Russian writers were anti-Semites too.¹⁹⁵ For Berg, Prilepin's seemingly retrograde attitude was a clear example of Russian history repeating itself.¹⁹⁶ That same year, Prilepin was involved in the foundation of the Izborskii klub (Izborsky Club), an organisation dedicated to furthering the cause of Eurasianism.¹⁹⁷ The club aims to influence the Russian government to create 'patriotic' policies, wrest control from what the club terms 'liberal society' in the sphere of media, and challenge the influence of Russia's so-called "fifth column".

Prior to 2022, Prilepin's involvement in military activities directly affected his acceptability in liberal literary circles.¹⁹⁸ In 2017, he confirmed that he had been leading a battalion in Donbas, which rendered him *persona non grata* in much of the Western literary world.¹⁹⁹ Not long after his time in Donbas (2015-2018), Prilepin openly confirmed a shift in his political allegiance. He was forced out of Limonov's party Drugaia Rossiia (Other Russia) as a result of joining Putin's Obshcherossiiskii narodnyi front (All-Russia people's front) movement in 2018.²⁰⁰ Prilepin does not accept, though, that he has carried out a political turnaround. Instead, he insists that the government finally changed its politics to come into line with his — although I would suggest that this adaptation to a new political reality might in itself have been

¹⁹³ Prilepin was soon to defend himself but did not back down. See his response here; Zakhar Prilepin, 'Stesniat'sia svoikh ottsov', *Svobodnaia Pressa*, 9 August 2012 <<https://svpressa.ru/society/article/57713/>> [accessed 4 May 2020].

¹⁹⁴ For more on Slavophiles and Westernisers, see Introduction, pp. 18-26.

¹⁹⁵ Viktor Shenderovich, 'Debiutant', *Ezhednevnyi Zhurnal*, 6 August 2012 <<http://www.ej.ru:8080/?a=note&id=12131>> [accessed 29 May 2023].

¹⁹⁶ Mikhail Berg, 'Rossia na kolieniakh', *Ezhednevnyi Zhurnal*, 9 August 2012 <<http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=12141>> [Accessed 4 May 2020]. Berg quotes Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili in his article, in what feels like a further example of the debates carried out in the thick journals of the 19th century.

¹⁹⁷ 'Izborskii klub', 2024 <<https://izborsk-club.ru/>> [accessed 11 February 2024].

¹⁹⁸ When I announced at a translation conference in Glasgow (2019) that I was going to discuss Prilepin, I was met with eye-rolling from the Russian members of the audience, with one participant (a writer) admitting to me that ever since Prilepin's involvement with Ukraine she couldn't bring herself to even touch his books.

¹⁹⁹ 'Zakhar Prilepin sformiroval v Donbasse sobstvennyi batal'on'; 'Nemetskii agent otkazalsia ot sotrudnichestva s Prilepinym posle ego ot'ezda v DNR', *Interfax.ru*, 18 February 2017 <<https://www.interfax.ru/culture/550418>> [accessed 30 July 2021]. As discussed in the introduction, Wiedling, Prilepin's agent, stopped representing the author after these revelations.

²⁰⁰ Other Russia was founded when the NBP was banned in 2007. 'Eduard Limonov iskliuchil Zakhara Prilepina iz partii "Drugiaia Rossiia" za chlenstvo v ONF', *Radio Svoboda*, 29 December 2018 <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/29682822.html>> [accessed 29 May 2023].

an act of self-interest.²⁰¹ This shift in allegiance was further confirmed in 2020 when Prilepin joined a working group to re-write the Russian constitution.²⁰² Later that year he founded the political party Za Pravdu (For Truth) which in 2021 ran on a manifesto that championed the right to carry arms and the importance of traditional family values.²⁰³ The manifesto also suggested that comparing Soviet Russia to Nazi Germany should be punished by a custodial sentence (a theme present in his 2014 novel *Obitel'*).²⁰⁴ Liberal news outlet *Meduza*, banned in Russia from 2022, suggested that the party was being funded by the Kremlin in order to split opposition to Putin in the 2021 elections.²⁰⁵

Support from and involvement with the Kremlin continued. In 2021 Prilepin received a grant from the Russian government to promote 'patriotic' literature in Russia.²⁰⁶ This he did from Zakhar Prilepin Village as a part of Ethnomir, a holiday park near Moscow that is modelled on a traditional Russian settlement.²⁰⁷ Prilepin's concern with patriotism extended to the foundation of GRAD (Group for the Investigation of Anti-Russian Activities in the Cultural Sphere) in 2022.²⁰⁸ On 4 August that same year, GRAD compiled a list of 142 writers, actors, producers, and journalists who had either spoken out against the so-called Special Military Operation in Ukraine (SVO) or who signalled their opposition by remaining silent. Prilepin's erstwhile acquaintance Roman Senchin was placed on the list because he had not openly supported the war: next to his name it simply says 'molchit' ('is silent').²⁰⁹ Those named were urged to declare their support for the war openly, while another member

²⁰¹ Bogdan Kul'chitskii, 'Zakhar Prilepin: "Rossii neobkhodimo eshche desiat" let putinskoi tishiny, no nas zhdet boltanka"', *66.Ru*, 11 February 2019 <<https://66.ru/news/society/219376/>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

²⁰² 'Prilepin uveroval v podderzhky popravok v Konstitutsiiu bol'shinstvom rossiiian', *Lenta.RU*, 18 February 2020 <<https://lenta.ru/news/2020/02/18/podderzhka/>> [accessed 29 May 2023].

²⁰³ 'Predvybornaia Programma Politicheskoi Partii "Za Pravdu"', 2020 <https://zapravdu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Programma_ZA_PRAVDU-1.pdf> [accessed 8 June 2021].

²⁰⁴ For details, see below, p. 105.

²⁰⁵ Andrey Pertsev, trans. by Hilah Kohen, 'Rise of Spoiler Parties', *Meduza*, 15 January 2020 <<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/01/15/rise-of-the-spoiler-parties>> [accessed 16 January 2020]. In January 2021 Za Pravdu merged with pro-Kremlin political party A Just Russia (Spravedlivaia Rossia).

²⁰⁶ 'Zakhar Prilepin poluchil grant prezidenta Rossii na razvitie patrioticheskoi literatury', 14 October 2019 <<https://openmedia.io/infometer/zaxar-prilepin-poluchil-grant-prezidenta-rossii-na-razvitie-patrioticheskoi-literatury/>> [accessed 12 October 2020].

²⁰⁷ 'Zagorodnyi otdykh v Podmoskov'ye, Park-Muzei - ETNOMIR' <<https://ethnomir.ru/>> [accessed 12 October 2020].

²⁰⁸ GRAD stands for Gruppya po rassledovaniuu antirossiiskoi deiatel'nosti v sfere kul'tury. See also Senchin later in this chapter, p. 116.

²⁰⁹ Viktoriia Kataeva, 'V Gosdume predstavili spisok 142 znamenitostei, ne podderzhavshikh SVO', *NEWS.ru*, 5 August 2022 <<https://news.ru/culture/v-gosdume-predstavili-spisok-142-znamenitostej-ne-podderzhavshih-svo/>> [accessed 13 February 2023].

of GRAD, Dmitrii Kuznetsov, suggested that they be ‘re-educated’ with a trip to Donbas.²¹⁰ Before joining the full-scale war in Ukraine as a soldier in January 2023, Prilepin came under official sanctions from the UK.²¹¹ At the time of writing, he remains one of Russia’s most influential and prolific pro-war bloggers, with over 300,000 followers on social media app Telegram.²¹² On August 1st 2023, having recovered from the attempt on his life in May that year, Prilepin announced that he was returning to Ukraine to lead a newly formed battalion.²¹³

Besides his political activities and literary notoriety, Prilepin is also an influential cultural figure in Russia. He hosts a regular YouTube channel programme, *Uroki Russkogo* (*Russian Lessons*), where he regularly addresses Russophobia while expounding on Russian history and political hot topics of the day. The episodes include titles such as ‘Nebrat’ia ili vse-taki rodina?’ (‘Are they countrymen or non-brothers?’, 9 December 2022) where he discusses whether Ukraine is integral to Russia, as per Chaadaev’s question and ‘Naval’nyi ili bunt sytykh detei’ (‘Navalny or the revolt of well-fed children’, 2020) where he talks about the ‘sham’ of Navalny’s poisoning in August 2020.²¹⁴ Prilepin also hosts a chat show called *Chai s Zakharom* (*Tea with Zakhar*). Not all of these episodes are currently available to view, but he has hosted interviews with Sergei Lukyanenko, Mikhail Elizarov, Eduard Limonov, and Aleksandr Zakharchenko, leader of the so-called People’s Republic of Donetsk

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ ‘As a prominent writer and Russian media commentator, Yevgeniy Nikolaevich Prilepin is a vocal supporter of Russian intervention in Ukraine. In numerous articles, broadcasts and interviews he has promoted actions and policies which undermine or threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty or independence of Ukraine.’; ‘Consolidated List Of Financial Sanctions Targets in the UK’

<<https://ofsistorage.blob.core.windows.net/publishlive/2022format/ConList.html>> [accessed 13 February 2023]. See also ‘Velikobritaniia obnarodovala chetvertyi paket sanktsii protiv Rossii’, *Kommersant*, 15 March 2022 <<https://www.kommersant.uk/articles/velikobritaniya-zapretila-eksport-predmetov-roskoshi-v-rossiyu>> [accessed 13 February 2023].

²¹² Jade McGlynn regards Prilepin as one of the most influential nationalist figures active on Telegram. She records Prilepin as having 211,076 followers. At the time of writing in August 2023, that figure has risen to over 300,000. Jade McGlynn, *Russia’s War* (Medford: Polity Press, 2023), p. 89.

²¹³ See Aleksei Krasovskii, ‘Zakhar Prilepin stanet politrukcom novogo polka osobogo naznacheniiia Rosgvardii na baze batal’ona “Oplot”’, *Daily Storm*, 1 August 2023 <<https://dailystorm.ru/news/pisatel-zahar-prilepin-stanet-politrukcom-novogo-polka-osobogo-naznacheniya-rosgvardii-na-baze-batalona-oplot>> [accessed 1 August 2023].

²¹⁴ *Nebrat’ia ili vse-taki rodina?*, Uroki Russkogo, 9 December 2022, UROK №198. <https://www.ntv.ru/peredacha/Uroki_russkogo/m65587/o711738/video/?fb> [accessed 13 February 2023]; *Naval’nyi ili bunt sytykh detei.*, Uroki Russkogo, 28 October 2020, UROK NO.117 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=9sXnI9XoYq0&fbclid=IwAR30yjbD6C2G44KQPK0Q85_tJGZxVL7ZnL8z6zCUV0gqmV9wdw0L1balDtA&app=desktop> [accessed 30 October 2020].

who was assassinated in 2018.²¹⁵ Prilepin has appeared in the film *Vosmerka* (*Break Loose*, 2014) which was adapted from his novel of the same name.²¹⁶ He has also starred in the short film *Dezhurstvo* (*Phone Duty*, 2018) which portrays Russian soldiers in Ukraine, and was a controversial winner of the Tribeca Film Festival in 2018.²¹⁷

3.1b Prilepin's Literary Output and Critical Reception

Similar to Shishkin, as discussed above, Prilepin's literary output both betrays and promotes his political interests, while his high literary standing in Russia is signalled by his prizes, both from Russia and abroad.²¹⁸ His first novel *Patalogii* details his formative military experiences fighting in Chechnya. Clark frames this novel as an example of PTSD and argues that its fragmentary structure reflects the trauma of battle.²¹⁹ In addition to his first big success, *Sank'ia*, which I will examine in detail in Chapter Five, Prilepin's bibliography comprises many semi-autobiographical titles. *Grekh* (*Sin*, 2007) describes the childhood experiences of a youth called Sanya.²²⁰ This Bildungsroman, told through a collection of short stories, is overshadowed by the spectre of violence, poverty, and army conscription. Likewise, *Sank'ia* is based very closely on Prilepin's experiences in the NBP.

²¹⁵ An increasing number of websites have become unavailable to view from the UK since February 2022. The interview with Zakharchenko is available here however: *V Gostiakh u Zakhara Prilepina, Zakharchenko*, Chai s Zakharom, 7 December 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGP6_Wz-d3c> [accessed 13 February 2023].

²¹⁶ *Vosmerka*, dir. by Aleksey Uchitel (Rock Films, 2014).

²¹⁷ Find the film here; *Phone Duty*, dir. by Lenar Kamalov, 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXdeH7dC4ws>> [accessed 9 July 2020]. There was outcry that a film that appeared to promote Russia's argument was allowed to win the film festival. See 'Sign the Petition' <<https://www.change.org/p/tribeca-film-festival-deprive-anti-ukrainian-movie-of-the-award>> [accessed 13 July 2021].

²¹⁸ Prilepin has been nominated for, and awarded, many prizes both in Russia and abroad. For his main body of prose, the most important of these are; *Pathologies*, Finalist National Bestseller 2005; *Sankya*, Winner Iasnaia Poliana 2007, Finalist Russian Booker 2006; *Sin*, Winner National Bestseller 2008, Winner Super National Bestseller 2011; *Black Monkey*, Winner Bronze Snail 2012, Finalist Big Book Award 2012; *The Monastery*, Winner Big Book Award 2014, Long List Russian Booker 2014. For the full list, along with a full biography, see his website at <<https://zaharprilepin.ru/ru/bio.html>>.

²¹⁹ Elena Pedigo Clark, 'Zakhar Prilepin: The Warrior Bard of Russian Patriotism', in *Trauma and Truth, Teaching Russian Literature on the Chechen Wars* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2022), pp. 193–242.

²²⁰ Zakhar Prilepin, *Grekh* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2007); Zakhar Prilepin, *Sin*, trans. by Nina Chordas and Simon Patterson (London: Glagoslav, 2012).

Prilepin's political world view is also evident in *Obitel'* (*The Monastery*, 2014) which won the Bol'shaia Kniga Prize in 2014.²²¹ The novel follows the prisoner Artem as he serves his term in the Solovki prison camp in the Soviet Union's nascent Gulag system, and is politicised by the paratexts provided by its author.²²² As such, *Obitel'* is an excellent example of Prilepin's use of fiction to promote his political opinions, signalled in part by his statement in the novel's introduction that, 'Truth is what you remember'.²²³ The same introduction draws a direct link between Prilepin and the Gulag via his grandfather's experiences of imprisonment in Solovki. Prilepin later proves the historicity of his novel by including a conversation with the camp commander Fyodor Eichmann's daughter as a postscript.²²⁴ Despite his obvious awareness of the horrors of the Gulag, Prilepin appears ambivalent. He states that although he doesn't support everything the Soviet government did, he won't hear anyone speak against it:

"I have very little love for the Soviet government," I answered, slowly choosing the words. "But those who especially hate it are the kind of people whom I abhor, as a rule, even more."²²⁵

Subsequent books relate directly to Prilepin's involvement in the war in Ukraine. In 2017 he wrote a study of Russian authors who fought in past wars, *Vzvod. Ofitsery i opolchentsy Russkoi literatury Platoon (Officers and Militia of Russian Literature*, 2017).²²⁶ The book was published at the same time as he revealed he was fighting in Donbas. "Liberal" critic Galina Yuzefovich described the collection of essays as a potentially dangerous form of propaganda, which normalised conflict with the West and glorified war.²²⁷ Julie Fedor notes Prilepin's claim that had they been alive, Pushkin and Tolstoy would be fighting in Ukraine — an insight into Prilepin's self-perception as an author-soldier, which he also relied on

²²¹ Zakhar Prilepin, *Obitel'* (Moscow: AST, 2014); Zakhar Prilepin, *The Monastery*, trans. by Nicholas Kotar (London: Glagoslav, 2020).

²²² The book was serialised for television in 2021. See 'Serial Obitel', Sezon 1' (Rossia 1, 2021) <<https://smotrim.ru/brand/63424>> [accessed 13 February 2023].

²²³ Prilepin, *The Monastery*, p. 24.

²²⁴ Prilepin, *The Monastery*, pp. 611-18.

²²⁵ Prilepin, *The Monastery*, p. 616. As noted above, this opinion is reflected in the manifesto Prilepin created for his political party Za Pravdu.

²²⁶ Zakhar Prilepin, *Vzvod. ofitsery i opolchentsy Russkoi literatury* (Moscow: AST, 2017).

²²⁷ "Chto ne tak s knigoi Zakhara Prilepina «Vzvod. Ofitsery i opolchentsy russkoi literatury»", *Meduza*, 20 February 2017 <<https://meduza.io/feature/2017/02/20/chto-ne-tak-s-knigoy-zahara-prilepina-vzvod-ofitsery-i-opolchentsy-russkoy-literatury>> [accessed 13 February 2023].

when promoting himself abroad.²²⁸ In an echo of both Yuzefovich's concerns, and Prilepin's pride in his new status, an article in Russian-government funded online magazine *RBTH (Russia Beyond the Headlines)* celebrated the publication of *Vzvod*, and linked it directly to Prilepin fighting in Donbas.²²⁹ A television adaptation followed, filming Prilepin in action in Ukraine, further justifying and propagandising his actions, and by extension, those of the Russian government.²³⁰

Other novels followed along the theme of war, most notably *Nekotorye ne popadut v ad (Some Won't Go to Hell, 2019)* where Prilepin describes his time spent living and fighting in Donbas from 2015-2018, first as a *politruk* (political instructor) and then as leader of his own battalion.²³¹ The collection of stories has been criticised for its embellishment.²³² In 2020, his *Opolchenskii romans (Militia Romance, 2020)* described the war in Ukraine through another collection of short stories.²³³ His most recent publication at the time of writing is a compendium of all of his reportage from Ukraine up until 2022.²³⁴ According to one scholar, this series of books was planned by Putin's aide, Vladimir Surkov, and therefore should be regarded as Kremlin propaganda.²³⁵

Julie Fedor's 2018 article 'Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars' describes Prilepin's role in Russia as one of a political freelancer who advances the

²²⁸ Fedor, 'Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars', p. 25.

²²⁹ See Phoebe Taplin's comments about Prilepin in Chapter Four, p. 255. Alexandra Guzeva, 'What Makes a Popular Russian Writer Go to Fight in Donbass?', 23 February 2017 <https://www.rbth.com/arts/literature/2017/02/23/writer-zakhar-prilepin-donbass_708066> [accessed 16 February 2021].

²³⁰ «*Voina i Mir Zakhara Prilepina*». *Fil'm Vladimir Chernyishova*, dir. by Vladimir Chernyishova, 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0J2BnanrgQ>> [accessed 13 February 2023].

²³¹ Prilepin boasts about how many people he killed with his battalion here; *Polnoe inter'viu Zakhara Prilepina, Redaktsia Iskhodniki*, dir. by Aleksei Pivovarov, 15 August 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5HM4VKHc3U&feature=youtu.be&t=1329>> [accessed 11 March 2020].

²³² Zakhar Prilepin, *Nekotorye ne popadut v ad* (Moscow: AST, 2019); Galina Yuzefovich, '«Nekotorye ne popadut v ad: Roman-fantasmagoriia». Zakhar Prilepin napisal o sebe i o voine v Donbasse (o Sebe — Namnogo Bol'she)', *Meduza*, 9 April 2019 <<https://meduza.io/feature/2019/04/09/nekotorye-ne-popadut-v-ad-roman-fantasmagoriya-zakhar-prilepin-napisal-o-sebe-i-o-voyne-v-donbasse-o-sebe-namnogo-bolshe>> [accessed 13 February 2023].

²³³ Zakhar Prilepin, *Opolchenskii Romans* (Moscow: AST, 2020).

²³⁴ Zakhar Prilepin, *Vse, chto dolzhno razreshit'sia. khronika pochti beskonechnoi voiny 2013-2021* (Moscow: AST, 2021).

²³⁵ Hosaka Sanshiro, 'Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War', *Nationalities Papers*, 47.5 (2019), 750–73, cf. Marlène Laruelle, 'Back from Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Reinvent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiya Russia', *The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 47.5 (2019), 719–33 (p. 726).

interests of the Kremlin — a view with which I would concur.²³⁶ Meanwhile, Tomi Huttunen and Jussi Lassila highlight the influence of both Prilepin and the National Bolshevik movement on Russian politics up until the mid-2010s.²³⁷ Huttunen and Lassila dissect Prilepin's seemingly paradoxical political identities that hover between conservative and radical, patriot and opposition figure, right-wing and left-wing. They surmise that this is integral to the 'catachrestic' politics that both he and the NBP represent.²³⁸ They also regard Prilepin's status of author as vital to the advancement of his views, noting the longstanding significance of writers in Russia.²³⁹ In this way, I suggest, the role that politics plays in Prilepin's literary career in Russia is similar to the role it plays for Shishkin in the West.

Marlène Laruelle's article 'Back from Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Reinvent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiia Russia' was written in the relative lull between the initial 2014 invasion, and the launch of a full-scale war in February 2022.²⁴⁰ In it, she considers literature as a form of expression, as well as a way of retaining past glories once the fighting is over. In contrast to Russian fighters-turned-authors, 'Donbas heroes' Aleksandr Borodai and Igor Strelkov, Laruelle indicates that Prilepin has taken a different path, in that he is instead a writer who has turned to war. Laruelle's argument chimes with Yuzefovich's worries that Prilepin's literature is a form of propaganda: Laruelle describes his literary output, especially his study of nineteenth-century Russian authors at war, as 'a literature that invites writers and readers to go into combat.'²⁴¹

3.1c *Sankya*

Sankya, which I will examine more closely in Chapter Five, follows its twenty-two-year-old antihero Sasha Tishin on his adventures with a political group called the

²³⁶ Fedor, 'Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars', p. 25.

²³⁷ Lassila and Huttunen, 'Zakhar Prilepin'.

²³⁸ Lassila and Huttunen, 'Zakhar Prilepin', p. 149.

²³⁹ Lassila and Huttunen, 'Zakhar Prilepin', p. 155.

²⁴⁰ Laruelle refers to 'Novorossiia' as the Ukrainian territories of both Donetsk and Lugansk; Marlène Laruelle, 'Back From Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Reinvent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiia Russia', *The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 47.5 (2019), 719–33 (p. 719). 'Oplot', the battalion reformed by Prilepin on 1 August 2023 was comprised of soldiers who first fought together in Donbas. See Krasovskii, 'Zakhar Prilepin stanet politrukom'.

²⁴¹ Laruelle, 'Back from Utopia', p. 730

Founding Fathers (henceforth FF), which closely resembles the NBP.²⁴² Sasha is ultimately willing to sacrifice his life for the FF. He takes part in violent protests, travels to Riga to kill a judge, and is badly beaten by the police. The novel ends with a series of random violent acts, culminating in Sasha and his comrades raiding an OMON headquarters, burning down a police station, and seizing the town hall. *Sankya* is laced with political discussions on the theme of Russia as the Motherland, the shape of Russia's future, the loss of Russia's identity and Sasha's alienation from it. These polemics are accompanied by acts of violence, anti-Semitism, racism, and misogyny.²⁴³

Sank'ia was well received in Russia: the novel was a finalist for the Russian Booker Prize in 2006, and winner of the prestigious Iasnaia Poliana award in 2007.²⁴⁴ Even if they disagreed with its politics, critics hailed *Sank'ia* as a work of literary genius, and as an expression of the disaffection of Prilepin's generation, with many also understanding it as a defence of the NBP.²⁴⁵ Not all reactions were positive. One inflammatory review came from millionaire banker Petr Aven, who described *Sank'ia* as a declaration of class warfare.²⁴⁶ Prilepin's response, and the subsequent posturing of literary critics on both sides, turned the review into a literary, philosophical argument reminiscent of the political disputes that took place in

²⁴² The Founding Fathers are referred to in Russian as *Soiuz Sozdaiushchikh* which translates more literally as *Union of Creators* – or SS in Russian. Lassila and Huttunen note the common theme of the absence of fathers in the National Bolshevik Party, which calls this translation of Founding Fathers into question; Lassila and Huttunen, 'Zakhar Prilepin, p. 140. See Chapter Five, p. 293 for an analysis of the translation.

²⁴³ Large parts of *Sankya* appear to come directly from Prilepin's personal experience. Tellingly, this is borne out by Emmanuel Carrère's accounts of his interviews with Prilepin, where exact lines from the English translation of *Sankya* seem to reappear in Prilepin's accounts of his own life (which were themselves translated from the French). Emmanuel Carrère, *Limonov*, trans. by John Lambert (New York: Picador, 2014), pp. 264-74.

²⁴⁴ For examples of positive reviews see; Roman Senchin, 'Prilepin prodolzhit na bumage izvechnyi klassovoi boi', n.d. <<http://sankya.ru/otzivi/roman-senchin-prilepin-prodolzhit-klassovij-boj.html>> [accessed 4 May 2020]. Ad Marginem has also published Eduard Limonov, and Vladimir Sorokin — specifically his novel *Blue Lard*, in which clones of Khrushchev and Stalin have sex, and which landed them in trouble with the authorities. For more on this, see Daniel Kalder, 'Notes from the Underground: Indie Publishing in Putin's Russia', *Publishing Perspectives*, 16 March 2010 <<https://publishingperspectives.com/2010/03/notes-from-the-underground-indie-publishing-in-putin%E2%80%99s-russia/>> [accessed 1 May 2020].

²⁴⁵ This is expressed by Sergei Kniasev, 'San'kia – Zhit' bystro, umeret' molodym', n.d. <<http://sankya.ru/otzivi/umeret-molodym.html>> [accessed 1 May 2020].

²⁴⁶ Petr Aven, 'Petr Aven o romane Zakhara Prilepina', *Russki Pioneer*, 28 March 2012 <<http://ruspioner.ru/cool/m/single/3007>> [accessed 4 May 2020].

nineteenth-century journals.²⁴⁷

3.1d Translations into English

To date, three of Prilepin's novels have been translated into English, and each was produced by a different translator: *Sin*, *Sankya*, and *The Monastery*.²⁴⁸ All of these were published by Dutch/British publisher Glagoslav, while they shared the publication of *Sankya* with US-based Disquiet, an imprint of Dzanc Books.²⁴⁹ Prilepin's current political stance makes it highly unlikely that any more of his work will be translated into English in the foreseeable future.²⁵⁰ As I will discuss in Chapter Three, *Sankya* appears to have been commissioned because it was believed to tell an 'anti-Putin' story, confirming my hypothesis that contemporary Russian novels are regularly regarded as political artefacts.²⁵¹ The political themes of *Sankya*, coupled with Prilepin's notoriety both in Russia, and more recently in the West following the attempt on his life, make him an ideal author through which to study the influence of politics on translation commissions. In addition, his change in political stance from anti-Putin activist to largely committed supporter of the Russian government and the war in Ukraine makes it possible to examine the effect of political beliefs on his marketing and reception in the West.

3.2 Mikhail Elizarov

Mikhail Elizarov has received much less academic attention in the West than Prilepin. Although the author and singer was born in the West Ukrainian town of Ivano-Frankivsk (1974), and studied philology at Kharkiv University, he nevertheless considers himself a Russian writer.²⁵² His novels *Pasternak* (2003), *Bibliotekar'* (*The Librarian*, 2008) and *Zemlia* (*Earth*, 2019) have all won

²⁴⁷ Prilepin's response can be found here; Zakhar Prilepin, 'Deistvitel'no ne ponimaiu', *Kommersant'*, 2 November 2008 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2301652>> [accessed 29 May 2023]. This, again, harks back to the Slavophile/Westerniser debate, as described in the Introduction.

²⁴⁸ Zakhar Prilepin, *Sin*, trans. by Nina Chordas and Simon Patterson (London: Glagoslav, 2012); Zakhar Prilepin, *Sankya*, trans. by Jeff Parker, Mariya Gusev, and Alina Ryabovolova (London: Glagoslav, 2014); Zakhar Prilepin, *The Monastery*, trans. by Nicholas Kotar (London: Glagoslav, 2020).

²⁴⁹ For the commissioning history behind *Sankya*, and more details about Dzanc Books, see Chapter Three, p. 208.

²⁵⁰ See the Introduction, p. 14 for more on this.

²⁵¹ See Chapter Three, p. 207.

²⁵² For example, see Anatolii Starodubets, 'Mikhail Elizarov: Ia "tovarishch" a ne "gospodin"', *Svobodnaia Pressa*, 2 December 2008 <<https://svpressa.ru/culture/article/2121/>> [accessed 29 October 2019].

prestigious prizes in Russia.²⁵³ *Bibliotekar'* won the Russian Booker in 2008, and *Zemlia* won the Natsbest in 2020, as well as the Bol'shaia Kniga the same year. His short story collections have also been successful. *Mul'tiki* (*Cartoons*, 2010) was a finalist for the Natsbest in 2011, *My vyshli pokurit' na 17 let* (*We Stepped Out to Smoke for 17 Years*, 2012) won the readers' award for the NOS prize in 2014.²⁵⁴ Other short story collections include *Nogti* (*Fingernails*, 2001), and *Krasnaia plenka* (*Red Film*, 2005).²⁵⁵ Elizarov has been translated into seven languages, though *Bibliotekar'* is the only novel translated into English (by Andrew Bromfield) and was published as *The Librarian* by the UK's independent Pushkin Press in 2015.²⁵⁶ I will analyse the translation in detail in Chapter Five.²⁵⁷

Although he does not use social media, and rarely gives interviews, Elizarov's political comments are consistent. The author is a defender of Stalin and Stalinism and an advocate for Communist Russia.²⁵⁸ He believes in the need to rebuild the Russian Empire to its former Soviet glory.²⁵⁹ He is also, perhaps unsurprisingly, anti-Western. In 2014 Elizarov described the West as having benefited from the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and he proposed that it was using Ukraine as a training ground for a further battle with Russia.²⁶⁰ Elizarov has also questioned why his 'great Soviet homeland' has become a third-world country and has talked derogatively about the Ukrainian language.²⁶¹ In a 2019 interview, he declared Ukrainian as 'unnecessary' and 'comic', and claimed that all 'normal' people in Kyiv speak Russian.²⁶² Because these same sentiments are

²⁵³ Mikhail Elizarov, *Bibliotekar'* (Moscow: AST, 2007); Mikhail Elizarov, *Pasternak* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2003); Elizarov, *Zemlia*.

²⁵⁴ Mikhail Elizarov, *Mul'tiki* (Moscow: AST, 2010); Mikhail Elizarov, *My vyshli pokurit' Na 17 Let* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2012).

²⁵⁵ Mikhail Elizarov, *Krasnaia plenka* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2003).; Mikhail Elizarov, *Nogti* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2001).

²⁵⁶ Mikhail Elizarov, *The Librarian*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Pushkin Press, 2015).

²⁵⁷ See Chapter Five, p. 322.

²⁵⁸ He prefers to be called 'Comrade Elizarov'. See, Starodubets, 'Mikhail Elizarov: Ia "tovarishch"'.

²⁵⁹ Anatolii Strel'iani, 'Imperets ot slobozhanshchiny', *Radio Svoboda*, 19 January 2009 <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/480032.html>> [accessed 29 October 2019].

²⁶⁰ Ekaterina Dement'eva, 'Mikhail Elizarov: Evropa stavit na Ukraine opasnyi eksperiment', *MK.RU*, 28 August 2014 <https://spb.mk.ru/articles/2014/08/28/pisatel-mikhail-elizarov-evropa-stavit-na-ukraine-opasnyy-eksperiment.html?fbclid=IwAR3hJUEnsHuVjtJmKXYqZyCFb1ITjgIL_XNLKidm1RM73ewndRLuNWQrE8> [accessed 26 October 2019].

²⁶¹ See Elena Georgievskai, 'Russkie impertsy i natsional'nye iazyki', *Niglist*, 4 October 2019 <<https://www.nihilist.li/2019/10/04/russkie-imperty-i-natsionalnye-yazyki/>> [accessed 29 October 2019].

²⁶² Georgievskai, 'Russkie impertsy'.

expressed in *Bibliotekar'*, this statement has, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Five, implications for the novel's translation into English.²⁶³

3.2a Elizarov's Literary Output and Reception

It is perhaps not surprising then, that Elizarov's novel *Bibliotekar'* caused controversy when it won the Russian Booker in 2008. It was slated by some critics as 'fascist trash', and he was accused of romanticising the Soviet era.²⁶⁴ In fact, without any knowledge of his political views, it is unclear whether his books are meant to be read in earnest or as a form of neo-imperialist *stio*b.²⁶⁵ For example, translator and book blogger Lisa Hayden merely finds *Bibliotekar'* 'a cautionary tale'.²⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Lipovetsky registers that Elizarov is more vocal about Soviet nostalgia in his interviews than in his novels and short stories.²⁶⁷ As I will show, by examining Elizarov's political statements and fiction, as well as his popular quasi-folk songs, it is possible to formulate an understanding of his nationalist position. I argue that in light of Russia's current war against Ukraine, it is wise to apply this context to any interpretation of his novels.

As I will discuss more fully in Chapter Four, Elizarov's politics have barely featured in the limited PR material about him in the Anglophone West. *The Librarian* was published in the UK without political comment despite the controversy it caused in Russia.²⁶⁸ Clues to Elizarov's politics, however, abound in both his fiction and his popular songs, which I will summarise later in this section. Elizarov's first novel, *Pasternak*, centres on a fight against Jewish author Boris Pasternak, who turns into a devil and assumes control of Russia's intelligentsia, infecting their minds with liberal ideas. *Zemlia*, the first in a

²⁶³ See Chapter Five, p. 322.

²⁶⁴ For details of this, see *Russian Literature since 1991*, p. 37; Nikolai Kornatskii, 'Bibliotekar': o vrede chteniia', *Vedomosti*, 30 June 2023 <<https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/columns/2023/06/29/983029-bibliotekar-o-vrede-chteniya>> [accessed 1 August 2023].

²⁶⁵ Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*.

²⁶⁶ Lisa Hayden, 'Mikhail Elizarov's Booker-Winning Librarian', *Lizok's Bookshelf*, 11 August 2009 <<http://lizoksbooks.blogspot.com/2009/08/mikhail-elizarovs-booker-winning.html>> [accessed 26 October 2019].

²⁶⁷ Lipovetsky, *Postmodern Crises*, p. 99.

²⁶⁸ For a discussion of this, see Chapter Three, p. 210.

forthcoming trilogy, tells the story of a gravedigger in the Russian provinces, creating a raw, unflattering picture of Russia in the early 2000s.²⁶⁹

3.2b *The Librarian*

The Librarian, one of my key texts in this thesis, contains anti-Ukrainian sentiments that are shocking, especially when placed in the context of Elizarov's views. The novel is set in the late 1990s and follows Alexei Vyazintsev as he travels from his home in the newly independent Ukraine to claim the inheritance his uncle has left him in provincial Russia. This inheritance is revealed as the position of Librarian at the head of a library of magical books. These books were all written by the forgettable, fictional Soviet author Dmitry Gromov, and come with titles such as *The Silver Channel*, *Fly On*, *Happiness!* and *By Labour's Roads*. When read in the right circumstances, however — which is uninterrupted, aloud, and directly from an original copy — they bestow special powers on the reader, hence the alternative names they receive. *The Book of Memory* creates (false) positive childhood recollections that inspire the reader, *The Book of Endurance* bestows courage, and the *Book of Power* untold strength.

Meanwhile, the novel is arranged around the quest to find *The Book of Meaning*. A series of Libraries jealously guard and protect these books, and the novel is frequently punctuated by the gruesome battles that ensue. Elderly women residing in a nursing home are transformed into a formidable army by reading these books, and ultimately they claim victory in the war between Libraries. The old women lock Alexei in their basement, and he is tasked with reading the books in perpetuity to keep Russia safe:

What year is it outside now? If the Motherland is free and its borders are inviolate, then the librarian Alexei Vyazintsev is keeping his watch steadfastly in his underground bunker, tirelessly spinning the thread of the protective Veil extended above the country. To protect against enemies both visible and invisible.²⁷⁰

Nostalgia for Soviet times is detectable in *The Librarian*, which Sorokin praised

²⁶⁹ Lawton and Evans considered translating *Zemlia* (interview with Max Lawton, December 2021). However, this has not been revisited since February 2022. For further discussion of this, and the ethics of such decisions, see Chapter Five, p. 317.

²⁷⁰ Elizarov, *The Librarian*, p. 410.

for accurately depicting Soviet life as one ‘unending squabble’.²⁷¹ Paradoxically, any potential nostalgia is negated by the fact that nothing Alexei and his library fight for is ultimately worth having. Dobrenko places Aleksei in the tradition of the superfluous man, ‘a failure who could not find his place in capitalism.’²⁷² He registers the differing reactions to Elizarov’s work and concurs that although ‘a fetishization of the Soviet past’ is not directly present in his novel, it is present in his extra-literary statements.²⁷³ *The Librarian’s* message is ambiguous, argues Dobrenko, because the seemingly bona fide memories of Soviet childhood conjured by reading *The Book of Memory* are revealed to be dreadful. The Soviet ‘virtues’ bestowed on the books’ readers such as heroism and sacrifice, are quickly lost in a quest to gain the precious magical books. Dobrenko concludes that even Alexei himself is forced to live in a form of hell, reading the books and casting his magic spell forever.

Instead of promoting a specific political message, Dobrenko concludes that Elizarov’s primary intention is to shock the reader, without any ‘overarching aesthetic aim.’²⁷⁴ He does, however, wonder whether the anti-Western, anti-liberal themes of Elizarov’s work reflect a shift in this direction by Russian society.²⁷⁵ Dobrenko might be correct — as proof of the 2008 novel’s contemporary relevance, it was serialised by director Igor’ Tverdokhlebov and released on online Russian streaming platforms in June 2023.²⁷⁶ Eliot Borenstein concurs with Dobrenko, that *The Librarian* ‘contained enough ambiguity’ to obscure Elizarov’s politics; critic Pavel Basinskii noted in a 2012 article that this ambiguity has allowed him some influence in the literary sphere.²⁷⁷ *The Librarian* can be read as either a warning, or a vindication of Soviet times, and a longing for its return. Nevertheless, as I will elaborate in Chapter Five, it irrefutably

²⁷¹ Phoebe Taplin, “‘The Librarian’: Philosophical Parable or Fascist Nostalgia?’, *Russia Beyond*, 22 April 2015 <https://www.rbth.com/literature/2015/04/22/the_librarian_philosophical_parable_or_fascist_nostalgia_45435.html> [accessed 1 July 2022].

²⁷² Evgeny Dobrenko, ‘Recycling of the Soviet’, in *Russian Literature since 1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 20–44; p. 34

²⁷³ Dobrenko, ‘Recycling of the Soviet’, p. 37.

²⁷⁴ Dobrenko, ‘Recycling of the Soviet’, p. 39.

²⁷⁵ Dobrenko, ‘Recycling of the Soviet’, p. 40.

²⁷⁶ For a glimpse of the trailer, see ‘Bibliotekar’, 2023’, *Kinopoisk* <<https://www.kinopoisk.ru/series/777031/>> [accessed 1 August 2023].

²⁷⁷ Pavel Basinskii, ‘My vyshli pokurit’ na 17 Let’, *Rosiiskaia Gazeta*, 26 October 2012 <<https://rg.ru/2012/10/26/rasskazi.html>> [accessed 5 September 2020]; Eliot Borenstein, ‘The Orc-Song of Mikhail Y. Elizarov’, *Eliot Borenstein*, 2019 <<https://www.eliotborenstein.net/soviet-self-hatred/njmrdivc10ffjo8rdx1asvvg8z8ftv>> [accessed 14 February 2023].

contains anti-Ukrainian sentiment.²⁷⁸

In *Postmodern Crises*, Lipovetsky chooses not to focus on the political aspect of Elizarov's work, but instead regards *The Librarian* as a reaction to Soviet trauma.²⁷⁹ Like Dobrenko, he finds that the novel's quest is to chase a lost Soviet utopia, it 'transforms into a tragicomic ritual of self-destruction for those who seek the promised truth' but the message remains ambiguous.²⁸⁰ As I argue in this section, there can be no ambiguity in Elizarov's texts once his extra-literary statements and songs are taken into consideration. This includes an understanding of his musical output, which I will outline next. Since, however, this context is largely unavailable to the Anglophone reader, the political nature of his novel is ignored in its Western reception. I will discuss Elizarov's paratextual presentation in Chapter Four, while Chapter Five will deal with the ethics of translating the novel's racially charged language.²⁸¹

3.2c Elizarov's Songs

Elizarov performs in a 'punk-bard-chanson style' accompanied by his acoustic guitar, and regularly tours Russia. Russian journalist Sergei Tolstov regards Elizarov's songs as expanding on the ideology of his novels.²⁸² For Tolstov, these songs are a form of *stiob* which, like Elizarov's fiction, leave the audience unsure of his sincerity. I suggest that while Elizarov's intentions might appear ambiguous when considered on a single text or song basis, the meaning becomes clear when they are contextualised with his statements reported in the press.

Borenstein identifies Elizarov's *Orkskaia* (*Orc Song*) as exemplifying his anti-Western ideology.²⁸³ Elizarov uses J.R.R. Tolkien's term 'Orc', the appellation the British author gives to his most abhorrent, monster-like creatures in *The Lord of*

²⁷⁸ See Chapter Five, p. 323.

²⁷⁹ Lipovetsky, *Postmodern Crises*, p. 99.

²⁸⁰ Lipovetsky, *Postmodern Crises*, p. 100.

²⁸¹ See Chapter Four, p. 224 and p. 241. Also Chapter Five, p. 309.

²⁸² Sergei Tolstov, 'Poeziia Mikhaila Elizarova: ot orskoi do gumanitarnoi', *Prosodia*, 14 December 2020 <<https://prosodia.ru/catalog/shtudii/poeziya-mikhaila-elizarova-ot-orskoy-dogumanitarnoy/>> [accessed 14 February 2023]. Elizarov eschews the use of social media and is rarely interviewed. 'Mikhail Elizarov', *24SMI*, n.d. <<https://24smi.org/celebrity/99092-mikhail-elizarov.html>> [accessed 14 February 2023].

²⁸³ Borenstein, 'The Orc-Song'. See a recording here; *Mikhail Elizarov — 'Orkskaia'*, 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnaogTxUOMY>> [accessed 14 February 2023].

the Rings.²⁸⁴ The term is regularly used in Ukraine to derogatorily describe Russian soldiers, but paradoxically, Borenstein describes Elizarov's use of the term Orc as positive.²⁸⁵ This is because post-Soviet Russia has been rejected by the West, and so in the song Orcs become 'an imaginary weapon against the West.'²⁸⁶ The Orc identity embodies, then, a 'primal strength' to be deployed against enemies. *Orkskaia* is, Borenstein argues, a call to arms to 'restore Orc pride' against a resurgence of fascists, and, paradoxically, Jews and elves who indulge in 'faggot porn'.²⁸⁷ It is perhaps telling of Elizarov's status in Russia that *Orkskaia*, according to Borenstein, is one of his most popular songs. The songs themes lend credence to the hypothesis that his literary themes are indeed in earnest.

Tolstov also provides an assessment of Elizarov's song *Esesovskaia liricheskaia* (*SS Lyrical*).²⁸⁸ Here Elizarov subverts a famous song by Valentina Tolkunova, *la ne mogu inache* (*I can't be any other way*, 1982) by changing the subject of the song from a young girl who cannot help but fall in love, to one of an SS officer who cannot help but be fascist.²⁸⁹ The lyrics are provocative, but again there is no sense that there is a concrete meaning behind them: 'There is no day or night for an SS officer, somewhere a Jewish woman cries, please forgive me my fascism, I can't do otherwise.'²⁹⁰ Analysed as a whole and combined with his extra-literary statements Elizarov's songs represent a world view that is anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-Semitic and anti-Ukrainian. As I argue in Chapter Five, it was only possible to consider publishing him in the West without a full, contextualised understanding of his oeuvre.

3.2d Translations into English

The Librarian is the only one of Elizarov's texts to be translated into English. None

²⁸⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1954).

²⁸⁵ Eliot Borenstein, 'Orknash: Supporting the Home Team', *Eliot Borenstein* <<https://www.eliotborenstein.net/soviet-self-hatred/oopp1wxjlr8ve2vuucpsro82zjth8c>> [accessed 14 February 2023]. Borenstein also highlights the fact that Ukrainian hackers accessed Google translate in 2016, so that in the Ukrainian to Russian function, the Russian Federation was translated as 'Mordor'.

²⁸⁶ Borenstein, 'Orknash: Supporting the Home Team'.

²⁸⁷ Borenstein, 'Orknash',

²⁸⁸ Tolstov, 'Poeziia Mikhaila Elizarova'.

²⁸⁹ See Valentina Tolkunova '*la ne mogu inache*' (1982)

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YQ3zUk4-mQ>> [accessed 14 February 2023].

²⁹⁰ The Russian version reads, 'Net u SS ni sna, ni dnia, Gde-to evreika plachet. / Tyi za fashizm prosti menia, / la ne mogu inache'; Tolstov, 'Poeziia Mikhaila Elizarova'.

of his other novels or short stories have been commissioned by Anglophone publishers, despite his prize-winning status in Russia. While there was discussion of Lawton translating *Zemlia*, this project has been abandoned since Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine. Without a full understanding of Elizarov's politics in the West, however, it is conceivable that his work might be translated in the future. For the purposes of this thesis, the translation history behind *The Librarian* illustrates the difficulties of marketing Russian writers in the UK and US when they cannot be framed as dissident.²⁹¹ This case study also provokes questions of ethics around translator and publisher responsibility, as I will explore in Chapter Five.

3.3 Roman Senchin

Roman Senchin is the least radical of the "nationalist" writers presented in this thesis, and also the most overlooked of the six in Western scholarship.²⁹² Senchin was born in 1971 in the Southern Siberian town of Kyzyl in the Republic of Tuva. He studied in St Petersburg, and at the time of writing lives in Ekaterinburg in central Russia. Despite his former friendship with Prilepin, in 2022 he was targeted by GRAD for not voicing his support for the war.²⁹³ He has also come under attack for referring to the war as the 'tragic events' taking place in Ukraine.²⁹⁴

Senchin is a member of the Communist Party and believes in looking after Russia's social and domestic interests before extending its 'support' abroad. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that he grew up in Tuva which suffered great deprivation when the Soviet Union collapsed. It is this subject that he tackles in his novel *Minus*, his only novel to have been translated into English. Senchin angered Prilepin in 2019 when he voiced his opinion about Ukraine.²⁹⁵ In an earlier interview with Prilepin, Senchin opined that politicians shouldn't

²⁹¹ For more on this, see Chapter Four, p. 251.

²⁹² He is not accorded even a passing mention in Lipovetsky and Dobrenko's *Russian literature since 1991*.

²⁹³ See above, p. 102 for more details on GRAD.

²⁹⁴ Leila Dzhmalieva, 'Dni Romana Senchina v Volgograde', *Zhurnal Otchii Krai Volgograd*, 19 April 2022 <<https://otchiykrai.ru/dni-romana-senchina-v-volgograde/>> [accessed 27 October 2022].

²⁹⁵ Zakhar Prilepin, 'Rossiia mozhnet rukhnut' na etom puti, no mozhnet sobrat'sia, nakonets', *MK.RU*, 19 November 2014 <<https://www.mk.ru/blogs/posts/rossiya-mozhet-rukhnut-na-etom-puti-no-mozhet-sobratsya-nakonec.html>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

listen to writers, and that the two professions are completely separate entities.²⁹⁶ He stated that the only thing he can do is to write as sincerely, and as honestly as he can, in a language that everybody speaks. He states that his political position is typical for a writer — he is never content with the status quo, and he is strongly anti-capitalist, bemoaning the fact that living in Russia now feels like living within a huge corporation. He does not, he says, hold much hope for the future.²⁹⁷

3.2a Senchin's Literary Output

Senchin's reputation as a writer in Russia is a prestigious one. His most well-known novel is *Eltyshevy* (*The Eltyshevs*, 2009) for which he was nominated the State Prize for Culture in 2013, prompting the journal *Literaturnaia Rossiia* to suggest he might also be in line for the Nobel Prize.²⁹⁸ The novel has been translated into thirteen languages worldwide and was shortlisted for the Natsbest and Bol'shaia Kniga awards in 2010, the Russian Booker in 2009, and won second prize for the Bol'shaia Kniga in 2015.²⁹⁹ *Eltyshevy* describes the decline of a family who move from a large town to a village in the Russian provinces. They expect a bucolic experience, but instead are undone by the harsh realities of contemporary Russia, and the death of the Russian village. Andrei Rudalev describes the novel as 'post-village prose', where the village is depleted by industrialisation.³⁰⁰

Just as Shishkin and Prilepin openly write to their own political agendas, so Senchin's novels generally express his social concerns. His work predominantly follows the tenets of New Realism, as described above.³⁰¹ For example, Senchin described the aim of his novel *Chego vy khotite?* (*What Do You Want?*, 2013) as

²⁹⁶ Prilepin, 'Rossiya mozhet rukhnut' na etom puti'.

²⁹⁷ Prilepin, 'Rossiya mozhet rukhnut' na etom puti'.

²⁹⁸ 'Na puti k Nobelevskoi premii', *Literaturnaia Rossiia*, 11 January 2013 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20130808233204/http://litrossia.ru/2013/01/07714.html>> [accessed 23 January 2023].

²⁹⁹ 'The Eltyshevs', *Wiedling Literary Agency*, n.d. <<https://wiedling-litag.com/docs/Expos/Senchin-Eltyshevs-expo.pdf>> [accessed 10 October 2021]. See above, p. 000, fn. 000 for more background on these prizes.

³⁰⁰ For a discussion of Village Prose and its significance to the nationalist movement in Russia, see earlier in this chapter, p. 67. Druzhba Narodov, 'The Literary Naughts, a Place of Residence and Employment: Principal Trends, Events, Books, and Names of the First Decade', *Russian Social Science Review*, 53.2 (2012), 4–42.

³⁰¹ See earlier this chapter, p. 76.

demonstrating to his readers how they might use protest to change history.³⁰² Likewise his novel *Zona zatopleniia* (*The Flood Zone*, 2015) was based on the experiences of the construction of the Boguchany Dam near his hometown.³⁰³ Apart from *Minus*, which I will discuss below, three short stories have been translated into English: 'Idzhim', 'History' and '24 Hours' all address the challenges of post-Soviet life, and latterly military conscription, a recurring theme in contemporary Russian fiction.³⁰⁴

3.3b *Minus*

Senchin addresses contemporary societal problems in his fiction, and this is especially evident in *Minus*. He believes in returning power to literature in order to make a difference to his readers and enabling them to take social action.³⁰⁵ Accordingly, *Minus* is widely regarded as an example of New Realism. It tells the semi-autobiographical story of one Roman Senchin who endures a life of deprivation in the Southern Siberian town of Minusinsk in the 1990s. Like the novel's author, the protagonist has been forced out of his native town of Kyzyl by nationalist unrest following the collapse of the Soviet Union and he struggles to lead a normal life. Roman barely survives, working as a stagehand at a theatre and living in a hostel. He spends most of his time drinking, trying to get a girlfriend, or working out how to make ends meet on his meagre allowance. As with Prilepin's *Sankya*, there is no improvement in Roman's life by the end of the novel. His chaotic existence is contrasted with that of his parents who live in a dacha, a traditional wooden house in the countryside and who, in passages that resemble Village Prose, demonstrate the resilience of the *shestidesiatniki*, the same 'children of the sixties' described in Ulitskaya's *BGT*.³⁰⁶

³⁰² See Liudmila Davydova, 'Roman Senchin: "Patriotizm Dolzhen Byt" Po Otnosheniiu k Strane, a Ne k Vlasti"', *Litva Na Russkom lazyike*, 2016 <<https://m.nedelia.lt/rusworld/25936-roman-senchin-patriotizm-dolzhen-byt-po-otnosheniyu-k-strane-a-ne-k-vlasti.html>> [accessed 29 October 2021]; Roman Senchin, *Chego vy khotite?* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2013).

³⁰³ Roman Senchin, *Zona zatopleniia* (Moscow: Redaktsiia Eleny Shubinoi, 2015). For more on this, see Alena Solntseva, 'Liudei Lomalo Postepenno', *Ogonek*, 18 February 2015 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2724342>> [accessed 14 February 2023].

³⁰⁴ Roman Senchin, '24 Hours', in *War & Peace: Contemporary Russian Prose*, trans. by Arch Tait (Moscow: Glas, 2006); Roman Senchin, 'History', in *Rasskazy*, trans. by Victoria Mesopir (Portland: Tin House Books, 2009), pp. 77–95; Roman Senchin, 'Idzhim', in *Read Russia, An Anthology of New Voices*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (United States: Read Russia, Inc., 2012), pp. 329–39 <https://readrussia.org/files/385-read_russia_anthology.pdf>.

³⁰⁵ Davydova, Roman Senchin: "Patriotizm dolzhen byt"

³⁰⁶ See above, p. 91.

Senchin, then, offers his readers a more civic version of nationalism. His is not based on Russian chauvinism, nostalgia for the Soviet Union, or a desire to see a return to imperialism over all else. Instead, similarly to Ulitskaya, his prose illustrates his humanistic approach and his desire to nurture Russian society first and foremost. He provides a contrast to the ultranationalist politics of Prilepin and Elizarov who support, and in Prilepin's case, take an active part in Russia's war against Ukraine.

3.3c Translations into English

Minus, Senchin's only novel to be published in English, is currently out of print, and not available as an eBook. In 2022 Senchin's agent Wiedling ideologically repositioned the author on his agency's website, and now lists him among writers who are 'critical of the regime' and 'at risk'.³⁰⁷ However, it is highly unlikely, I would suggest, that Wiedling's re-casting of Senchin as a dissident author will lead to the commission of his novels for translation into English. This is in part because of the downbeat nature of his prose, as I will explore further in Chapter Two, and partly because of his lack of desire to engage with the West — be this as a result of temperament, or because of concerns over personal safety, since he has already been targeted by GRAD.

4 Conclusion

By comparing the translation journeys of six authors whose political beliefs sit along the "nationalist"- "liberal" spectrum, including some who have altered their stance over the past decade, I aim to demonstrate the influence of politics on author acceptability in the Anglophone publishing market. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to select authors who have, or who are perceived to hold, strong political views. Ultimately, it appears that the majority of contemporary Russian authors published in the UK and US fall in to this category, as I will explore further in Chapter Two. I have presented an overview of Western scholarship on each of these authors to create an understanding of their target culture context, and to highlight the difference in critical reception accorded to each group, although there is variance in academic treatment between "liberal" and "nationalist" writers: ultranationalist Prilepin receives more attention than "liberal" Shishkin — a fact

³⁰⁷ 'Wiedling - Literary Agency' <<https://wiedling-litag.com/>> [accessed 30 May 2023].

that I suggest is due to his notoriety, and the sometimes-paradoxical nature of his political beliefs. Academic studies aside, and as I noted in the summaries of these six authors' translations into English, a writer's politics generally correlates with the size of publishing firm willing to translate them. As I will explore in Chapter Two, larger firms such as FSG, PRH and Quercus tend to publish "dissident" authors, while "nationalists" are relegated to smaller houses such as Pushkin Press, Glagoslav and Glas.

As is evident from my discussion throughout this chapter, academic studies thus far have predominantly considered contemporary Russian novels as artefacts of their source culture, rather than researching how their translations interact with the literary markets in the UK and the US. However, as I will demonstrate, I believe that there is value in assessing translations from Russian as they are marketed to, and consumed by the target audience. For the majority of readers, who do not have specialist knowledge of Russia, or Russian politics, translated novels do indeed circulate without their context, as suggested by Heilbron and Sapiro.³⁰⁸ I propose that this absence of context leads to a reduction of contemporary Russian fiction to its lowest common denominator of 'politics' in order to create texts that meet presumed reader expectations. In the case of Russian fiction, this tendency frequently results in publishing houses deciding to market "liberal" Russian authors as "dissident". I will explore this trend in my description of the Russian-English translated fiction scene in Chapter Two, and further develop my argument in Chapter Four with an analysis of the predominantly politicised paratexts that position these novels in the target market.

In this chapter I have also identified and explored the principal themes in contemporary Russian fiction that relate directly to my six authors and their novels. New Realism is deployed by "nationalists" Prilepin and Senchin, who also reference Village Prose. Sorokin's use of *stio*b paradoxically allows him to create what Rutten argues is a 'sincere' text in *Oprichnik*. Shishkin expresses his political stance by freeing himself from the shackles of 'totalitarian language.' The magical historicism of Elizarov's *Librarian*, and to an extent *Oprichnik*, is a response to national trauma. I argue that these themes, and their origin, are misinterpreted in the target US and UK cultures. As a result, Sorokin's *Oprichnik* is predominantly

³⁰⁸ Heilbron and Sapiro, 'Outline for a Sociology of Translation', pp. 102-3.

marketed as an anti-Putin statement, while the author would disagree.³⁰⁹ Similarly, Ulitskaya's *Daniel Stein* is incorrectly received as postmodernist, and she is marketed as a dissident writer, despite her protestations to the contrary.³¹⁰ *Sankya* and *Minus* are each read primarily as a 'news dispatch' from Russia. Meanwhile, *Maidenhair* is overwhelmingly, and in some ways only, received as the work of a Russian dissident author, and *The Librarian* is 'just' about Soviet Russia.³¹¹

As I will demonstrate throughout the rest of this thesis, where source information is lost or absent, it tends to be replaced by a new, politicised context. In this way, Russian novels are distilled to the lowest common denominator and are marketed either as the 'Russian Exotic', or as a 'a book about our enemy'.³¹² Over the next five chapters, I will describe each of these six novels' translation journeys. I will analyse why they were commissioned, and how they were funded, translated, and marketed, and ultimately how they were received by the target Anglophone culture. By examining each of these novels' publishing journeys I aim to chart where, how and to what extent politics, or personal and institutional political bias, is involved in the commission, translation, and marketing of contemporary Russian literature.

³⁰⁹ See Chapter Four, p. 257.

³¹⁰ See Chapter Four, p. 257.

³¹¹ See Chapter Four, p. 251 and p. 264.

³¹² Interview with Post, 11 February 2021.

Chapter Two

Publishing Contemporary Russian Literature in English

1 Introduction

In this chapter I offer an overview and analysis of the Russian-to-English translated fiction field to provide context for the translation into English of the six Russian novels at the core of my research. Here I will argue that the Russian novels that have been published in the West since 2000 are often intrinsically politicised. This politicisation begins in the source culture and is first evident in whether a book is commissioned, and freely available in Russia. Once a novel is published, subsequent political bias affects the availability of funding for its translation. Financial support is most often provided by Institut Perevoda, which is partially funded by the Kremlin; according to my interviews, their decisions are to some extent guided by members of the Russian government. As I will demonstrate, politically influenced decisions within Russia can result in translations being denied funding. The provision or denial of such funding directly impacts UK and US publishers' ability and willingness to commission Russian novels.

This chapter is divided into three parts. To create an overview of what commercial success might look like for translated Russian novels, I begin with an analysis of UK sales data from between 2001-2019. I note that nineteenth-century Russian literature far outsells contemporary fiction and register the influence of commercial publishers in defining the Russian literary canon in the UK and US. I will outline the role of independent publishers in bringing Russian fiction to the West, which genres of novel the target audience expects to read, and how independent presses curate their catalogues for their specific readership. I focus in particular on the growing importance of these independent publishers in the sphere of translation, as signalled by Mansell.¹ Such publishers, as I will show, demonstrate a willingness to commission more creatively than the Big Five conglomerates.

¹ Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful'.

In order to create an understanding of what Russian novels are most likely to appeal to Anglophone publishers, I explore Mark Lipovetsky's concept of the 'Russian Exotic'.² This he describes as novels that emulate nineteenth-century Russian classics or deal with popular topics such as Stalin or the Gulag. Lipovetsky contends that these are the most popular genres of Russian novels in translation, while I further propose that novels which do not fit into this category are most often marketed as political.

My second section examines the commissioning process and the role of gatekeepers such as translators, literary agents and editors within it. I will argue that, as suggested by Franssen and Kuipers, editors occupy a central space within translated fiction market networks. I will also demonstrate that without advice from translators, most editors would be ill-equipped to make publishing decisions about contemporary Russian fiction. This is because very few publishers either speak Russian or have an awareness of the Russian literary scene. I will discuss the effect of this dearth of Russian-language skills on publishing decisions in the UK and US. As I will show, compensatory strategies frequently involve sample translations, and the advice of preferred, often self-styled 'celebrity' translators. I also focus on the issues caused by relying on a small group of translators for commissioning advice and consider questions of inclusivity that affect translators across this literary translation field. In conclusion, I argue that despite all of the factors listed above, all editorial decisions are subordinate to the question of finance.

In the final section, therefore, I examine the availability of funding for Russian-English translated fiction. I outline the principal sources of such funding, before focussing on the work of Russia's Institut Perevoda (Institute of Translation, henceforth IP). I detail the links that this organisation has with Russian organs of power. Based on interviewee testimony and evidence from my translation histories, I consider to what extent the decisions made by IP over which novels to support, and which to refuse, reveal political motivation. As I note above, I find that there is frequently some political intent, and investigate the implications of this for translated Russian fiction throughout the rest of this thesis.

² 'Is There a Place for Modern Russian Literature in the Global Context?: [A Znamia Roundtable]', *Russian Studies in Literature*, 49.2 (2013), 7–39 (pp. 21-6).

1.1 An Overview of the Russian-English Translated Fiction Market

‘Our idea of Russian literature is the Classics, and we really have no ongoing engagement with Russian literature beyond the Classics.’³

Publishing contemporary Russian literature in English is fraught with challenges, especially following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In fact, publishing any Russian literature during the current war is in itself a political act and requires a politicised justification.⁴ This is in part the result of a new reluctance among Anglophone publishers to accept funding from Russia for both ethical and practical reasons, as well as the barring of Russia from some major book fairs.⁵ This growing reluctance in the UK and US to publish Russian authors is also a result of calls to ‘cancel’ Russian culture, and due to a necessary preference for amplifying Ukrainian voices.⁶ Despite these issues, the publishing mechanisms and networks described below remain largely in place, if under-used.⁷

I was able to obtain sales figures for the UK between 2001-2019 from Nielsen BookData, though as I will discuss below, it has been impossible to obtain sales figures for the US.⁸ The sales figures provided by Nielsen represent the amount

³ Interview with Marian Schwartz, 18 January 2021.

⁴ See Chapter Four, p. 220 for an example of this. See also Conclusion, p. 333.

⁵ Although Russia was not permitted to attend book fairs in London, Frankfurt or Bologna in 2022, the country was represented at the SHARJAH book fair in the UAE, and at the Kolkata Bookfair See: Ruth Comerford, ‘PRH, S&S and Gardners Pull Back from Russian Trade as Industry Debates Ukraine Response’, *The Bookseller*, 2 March 2022 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/prh-ss-and-gardners-pull-back-from-russian-trade-as-industry-debates-ukraine-response>> [accessed 5 February 2023]; ‘SIBF’ <<https://www.sibf.com/en/home>> [accessed 5 February 2023]; Souvik Ghosh, ‘Book Lovers’ Enthusiasm over Russian Literature in Kolkata Book Fair Unperturbed by Ukraine War’, *Indiablooms.Com*, 6 May 2022 <<https://www.indiablooms.com/life-details/LIT/6402/book-lovers-enthusiasm-over-russian-literature-in-kolkata-book-fair-unperturbed-by-ukraine-war.html>> [accessed 5 February 2023].

⁶ There are many examples of this tendency towards ‘cancellation’. See for example: Platt, ‘The Profound Irony of Cancelling Everything Russian’; Sauer, ‘Putin Says West Treating Russian Culture like “Cancelled” JK Rowling’. For further discussion, see Conclusion, p. 320.

⁷ Since the following overview of the Russian translation market has been based largely on interviews taken between 2019 and late 2021, the focus of the following chapters is located before the war began. I will address the consequences of the war for both the contemporary Russian literary scene and the translation industry in my Conclusion.

⁸ Melanie Walsh, ‘Where Is All the Book Data? - Public Books’, 4 October 2022 <https://www.publicbooks.org/where-is-all-the-book-data/?utm_content=buffer21a77&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer> [accessed 9 October 2022]. Publisher Will Evans noted that it would cost \$5500 to obtain access to BookScan for similar data in the US; Interview with Evans. For further discussion of the difficulties of obtaining book sales information, and the importance of this data in commissioning decisions, see Chapter Two, p. 156.

of money spent by consumers at the point of sale, rather than any profit made by publishers.⁹ The UK figures are provided by British retailers, including Amazon and independent bookshops, and are collated at the point of sale via barcodes. Nielsen claims that these figures represent ninety per cent of all printed novels sold in the UK, but they do not account for ebooks, or books sold direct from the publisher.

Prior to the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's escalation of its war against Ukraine, annual sales of Russian novels in translation had reached a steady number. Nielsen BookData figures for UK sales 2001-2019 show that they rose from £500,000 in 2001 to £1.7 million in 2009. In 2019 UK sales figures were down a little on the peak year of 2009, at £1.5 million. However, in 2019, 876 different ISBNs were sold, a considerable increase from the 315 ISBNs sold in 2001.¹⁰ That sales figures remain steady despite the increased number of Russian translations published, suggests that there is a limited demand for Russian fiction in the UK — increased variety does not appear to positively affect the number of books sold. As I will show, that sales figures remain steady despite an increased number of titles might result from the fact that the majority of new titles are published by independent firms, rather than the Big Five. Independents do not have as much presence in the bookselling market. They have less reach in their distribution, and so are unlikely to reach the same size of audience and achieve the same sales as, for example, Penguin Random House (henceforth PRH).

There is a marked preference for non-contemporary titles among the best-selling Russian novels. Nielsen create a list of the top-fifty bestselling translations from Russian each year, and Russian nineteenth-century classic novels by writers such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky make up its core. This suggests that while nineteenth-century Russian literature occupies a central position within the translation market, contemporary Russian fiction sits on the periphery.¹¹ Out of a

⁹ This information was given by Nielsen when they provided sales data for Russian translations in the UK to the RusTrans project.

¹⁰ According to the data provided by Nielsen, ISBNs might represent different editions of the same novel. These differences are significant – they might be translated by a different translator or come with different paratextual material.

¹¹ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 18. Translator Marian Schwartz wrote about the role of 'Russian Classics' in perpetuating the popularity of Russian fiction. See Marian

possible nine hundred entries in the top-fifty titles between 2001-2019, Tolstoy appears 198 times, followed by Dostoevsky at 146, and Mikhail Bulgakov at 107. Mikhail Lermontov and Ivan Turgenev hold twenty-five spots each. In the same time period, the best-selling translation from Russian was a 2016 BBC edition of *War and Peace* (*Voyna i mir*, 1867), which sold 27,578 copies as a tie-in to the BBC television series screened that year, suggesting that television is an important factor in selling books.¹² The second most popular titles were a Penguin £1 edition of Tolstoy's *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* (*Mnogo li cheloveku zemli nuzhno?*, 1886) (26,881 copies), closely followed by the fantasy novel *The Night Watch* (*Nochnoi dozor*, 1998) by Sergei Lukyanenko in 2007 (23,000 copies — after it was adapted for cinema).¹³ This overwhelming predominance of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century classics, then, is only challenged by contemporary genre fiction from authors such as Boris Akunin, Dmitry Glukhovsky or Sergei Lukyanenko.¹⁴

Aside from these examples, contemporary Russian literary fiction hardly features in Nielsen's top-fifty by sales. It accounts for only thirteen per cent of the list and is represented by just eight different authors.¹⁵ With the exception of Viktor Pelevin, who appears in the top-fifty list four times and who sold 3196 books in total between 2001-2019.¹⁶ The only other entries were Ludmila Petrushevskaya's short story collection *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour's Baby: Scary Fairy Tales* (1561 copies, 2011), and Eugene

Schwartz, 'The Russian Canon in Retranslation', in *Is This a Classic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 101–9.

¹² The influence of television and computer games is also evident in the examples of Glukhovsky and Lukyanenko – see below p. 118. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. by Maude Aylmer and Maude Louise (London: BBC Books, 2015). BBC Books is an imprint of Ebury Publishing, which in turn belongs to Penguin Random House.

¹³ Sergei Lukyanenko, *Nochnoi Dozor* (AST, 1998); Leo Tolstoy, *How Much Land Does a Man Need?*, trans. by Ronald Wilks, Penguin Little Black Classics, 57 (London: Penguin Books, 2015). This book was one of the popular series 'Little Black Classics: 80 Books for Penguins 80th Birthday'; 'Penguin Little Black Classics' <<https://www.penguin.co.uk/series/LBC/penguin-little-black-classics>> [accessed 5 February 2023]. The film is *Night Watch*, dir. by Timur Bekmambetov (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2004).

¹⁴ Titles from these authors, all translated by Andrew Bromfield, include Boris Akunin, *The Winter Queen*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Phoenix, 2004); Dmitry Glukhovsky, *Metro 2033*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Gollancz, 2011); Sergei Lukyanenko, *The Night Watch*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Arrow, 2007).

¹⁵ Nielsen BookData.

¹⁶ The novels that reached the top-fifty were *Babylon* (1807 copies combined in 2001 and 2002); *Clay Gun Machine* (615 copies in 2001); and *Helmet of Horror* (774 copies in 2006). Pelevin, *Babylon*; Viktor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine-Gun*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Faber and Faber: Harbord Pub., 2000); Viktor Pelevin, *The Helmet of Horror: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (Edinburgh; New York: Canongate, 2006).

Vodolazkin's *Laurus* (*Lavr*, 2012; 2360 copies, 2016).¹⁷ As evidenced here, Russian fiction in translation sells in consistently small numbers, especially when we consider that a publisher will typically need to sell 3000 copies of a translated novel in order to break even.¹⁸ Between 2001-2019 most of the top-fifty bestselling titles translated from Russian sold fewer than a thousand copies in total in the UK.¹⁹

Despite these issues, there has been a marked and sustained increase in the number of Russian titles being translated year on year in the UK.²⁰ As I will argue below, growth in the translation of contemporary Russian novels into English is supported by the increased amount of available funding from Russian sources such as IP and also the Transcript programme, run by the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation.²¹ The increase in the number of titles translated has also been fuelled by a perceived increase of interest in translations in general, encouraged by the rigorous promotion of translated fiction by independent publishers such as Deep Vellum, Fitzcarraldo Editions and Open Letter.²² The growing number of

¹⁷ Ludmila Petrushevskaya, *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour's Baby: Scary Fairy Tales*, trans. by Keith Gessen and Anna Summers (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2016). Andrey Kurkov appears thirty-five times in the Russian top-fifty titles and sold a total of 119,786 novels of those listed in the top-fifty alone. I have not included him here since he is a Russophone Ukrainian writer who is barely sold in Russia. See Methodology, p. 54.

¹⁸ Mark Polizzotti, *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), p. 68. For more on this topic, see p. 162 [cost of translation I think].

¹⁹ This amount would be considered a success for an independent publisher, but a failure for a commercial publisher: Interviews with Alan Cameron, 6 October 2021; Chad Post, 11 February 2021.

²⁰ Nielsen BookData on sales of translations into Russian in the UK between 2001-2019. In 2001, 111,820 Russian novels translated into English were sold, with 315 different ISBN numbers listed. In 2019 the total was 168,394 copies, comprising 876 ISBNs.

²¹ See later this chapter, p. 153 onwards. Bourdieu notes the availability of funding as the reason that Finnish writers were translated into English in the mid-1990s; Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution in Publishing', p. 145. For more on Russian funding bodies see: 'About the Institute' <<https://eng.institutperevoda.ru/>> [accessed 30 November 2022]; 'Transcript' <<https://www.prokhorovfund.ru/projects/own/detail/120/>> [accessed 30 November 2022]. At the time of writing in May 2023, the English version of Transcript's website had been removed.

²² A number of studies indicate that the percentage of translated fiction read in the UK is higher than the regularly cited figure of three per cent – approaching 5.5% according to Alison Flood; Alison Flood, 'Translated Fiction Enjoys Sales Boom as UK Readers Flock to European Authors', *The Guardian*, 6 March 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/06/translated-fiction-enjoys-sales-boom-as-uk-readers-flock-to-european-authors>> [accessed 24 November 2022]. This is confirmed by Jasmine Donahaye; Donahaye, *Three Percent?*. This perceived trend of the growing reputation of translated fiction is analysed by Mansell; Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful'. It also appears that it is the younger generation who are purchasing translated fiction. For more on this, see 'Generation TF: Who Is Really Reading Translated Fiction in the UK | The Booker Prizes', 2023 <<https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/generation-tf-who-is-really-reading-translated-fiction-in-the-uk>> [accessed 21 April 2023].

translated Russian titles published in the UK and US prior to 2022 might also have geopolitical roots. In an interview with the *New York Times*, NYRB Classics publisher Edwin Frank suggested that geopolitical concerns might be a catalyst for reading Russian fiction, an argument he repeated to me in April 2022.²³

1.1a Who Publishes Russian Fiction in English?

The Nielsen data show not only what sells, but who publishes it. This, I contend, is important because larger publishing firms have greater resources to promote novels, access shelf space in book shops, and influence the commissioning decisions of other publishers via comparative titles.²⁴ In 2019 PRH held a 72% market share in translated Russian fiction in the UK.²⁵ This market dominance remains the case despite the public's growing awareness of independent publishers, as is evidenced by their increased visibility and acquisition of prizes.²⁶ However, as I will discuss in the following section, this increase in awareness usually leads to gains in symbolic and cultural, rather than economic capital.

In comparison to PRH, other publishers of Russian literature in Britain control a relatively small market share. The next most active publisher is Pushkin Press with 1.85% of the market in 2019. All others remain below 1%, with Glagoslav, which specialises in Russian literature, sitting at 0.01%.²⁷ This is relevant because PRH's large portion of the market influences readers' perception of contemporary Russian fiction. This is especially significant if we consider that, between 2001-2019, PRH only published three contemporary Russian fiction authors: Boris Akunin, Ludmila Petrushevskaya, and Vladimir Sorokin, alongside a memoir by Pussy Riot activist Maria Alyokhina and a non-fiction account of contemporary Russia by graphic artist Victoria Lomasko.²⁸ It is pertinent to note

²³ Barry, 'The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin'; Interview with Edwin Frank, 5th April 2022.

²⁴ For discussion of comparative titles, see p. 156 below. For an overview of the monopoly that the Big Five hold, see 'Smorgasbords Don't Have Bottoms', November 2020 <<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-36/the-intellectual-situation/smorgasbords-dont-have-bottoms/>> [accessed 4 December 2020].

²⁵ Nielsen BookData.

²⁶ See Introduction, p. 44. Also, see Self, "It's Exciting, It's Powerful".

²⁷ As Will Evans noted, however, BookData, or BookScan as it is known in the US, is not completely accurate. It does not include every book-shop sale and ignores eBook data, which would account for a large amount of Glagoslav's sales since they run a print-on-demand service that renders physical books expensive. Interview with Evans.

²⁸ PRH publish Boris Akunin's Erast Fandorin novels in the United States, while he is published by Orion in the UK. PRH's other contemporary Russian novels are: Maria Alyokhina, *Riot Days*,

that all of these authors have positioned themselves and their art in opposition to Putin and are either marketed as, or are known to be, dissident.²⁹ If we consider that commercial publishers (as opposed to independents) only tend to commission what they think will sell, then these titles illustrate what such firms believe to be profitable options. As one commercial publisher stated in our interview, ‘everything that we do, we try to be ambitious about it, and we want to sell a lot of books.’³⁰

Despite publisher assumptions, anecdotal reader responses from my book group suggest that “liberal”, or “dissident” authors are not always more popular than their so-called “nationalist” counterparts. Book-group attendees preferred *Sankya* over *Oprichnik* when they read them in succession, with a common complaint being about the level of violence, and the incidents of gang rape in Sorokin’s novel.³¹ *BGT* was the subject of one of the best attended book-group sessions (fifteen participants) and produced the general consensus that *BGT* exemplified what readers wanted from a Russian novel. Meanwhile, the *Maidenhair* discussion was poorly attended, in part due to the length and complexity of the novel, although external factors such as the lifting of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions meant that participants became short on time. Only five attendees discussed *The Librarian*, with one stating that he only read to the end because he had promised to do so. Others admitted to skimming sections of *The Librarian* because of the repetitious nature of its battle scenes. In contrast to previous discussions of Sorokin’s novels *Oprichnik* and *Blizzard*, when we read his newly

trans. by Anonymous (London: Penguin Books, 2018); Victoria Lomasko, *Other Russias*, trans. by Thomas Campbell (London: Penguin Books, 2017); Ludmila Petrushevskaya, *The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing up in Communist Russia*, trans. by Anna Summers (New York: Penguin Books, 2017); *There Once Lived a Mother Who Loved Her Children, Until They Moved Back In: Three Novellas about Family*, trans. by Anna Summers (New York: Penguin Books, 2014); *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour’s Baby; There Once Lived a Girl Who Seduced Her Sister’s Husband, and He Hanged Himself: Love Stories*, trans. by Anna Summers (New York: Penguin Books, 2013); Sorokin, *The Blizzard*; Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*. It is, however, difficult to be absolutely sure that this is all of the contemporary Russian fiction Penguin has published in both the UK and the US - see Methodology, p. 50 for a discussion of the challenges around tracking translations. Also, PRH was not the original publisher for Lomasko, or Sorokin – these were originally published by *n+1* and FSG in the US. Finally, Note that the translator of the politically sensitive *Riot Days* by a member of Pussy Riot, chose not to be named. See Chapter Five, p. 268 for more on this.

²⁹ See my Conclusion, p. 338 for details of Petrushevskaya’s reaction to Russia’s war against Ukraine.

³⁰ Interviewee #1. It is informative to contrast this approach with that of Will Evans at independent Deep Vellum. See his comments later in this chapter, pp. 133.

³¹ See below, p. 223.

translated *Telluria* in 2022, only six people attended. This was despite that fact it was widely advertised, and its translator Max Lawton hosted the event.³²

1.2 The Freedom of the Independent Publisher

Although, as we have seen, PRH's market share may ensure that it disproportionately influences the average reader's exposure to translated Russian literature, that share is increasingly challenged by independent publishers who are re-shaping the market. As I will demonstrate below, independent publishers produce the most diverse range of contemporary Russian fiction in translation. This concurs with Mansell's findings, as he charts the accrual of symbolic capital by independent publishers in the British publishing field.³³ By analysing data for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (2001-2015) and its later incarnation the Man Booker International Prize (2016-2019), and comparing this with prize data for the (Man) Booker Prize (2001-2019) which is awarded to non-translated fiction, Mansell demonstrates a significant shift. Translated fiction published by the Big Five won more prizes between 2001-2015 than it did between 2016-2019 when these large firms were challenged by increasingly influential or new independent publishers. Fitzcarraldo (founded 2014), Peirene Press (founded 2008) and Pushkin Press (founded 1997) were all listed among the top five prize-winners for the first time during the 2010s.

As Bourdieu notes, 'it is the newcomers who generate movement' within the literary world.³⁴ New, smaller publishers introduce innovation and gain symbolic capital by obtaining industry awards and signing foreign authors, even if this does not immediately translate to economic capital. This symbolic capital enables independent firms to subsequently sign more writers, who can then contribute to the publisher's reputation, and the publisher can perhaps follow the model of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, which I will describe in Chapter Three.³⁵ Certainly, independent publishers translate the largest number of contemporary Russian

³² Vladimir Sorokin, *Telluria*, trans. by Max Lawton (New York: New York Review Books, 2022).

³³ Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful' p. 278. He argues that this signals 'a clear movement toward profound change.' (p. 279).

³⁴ Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 141. This movement can be seen in the above example of Lomasko moving from *n+1* to PRH; see p. 129, fn. 28.

³⁵ Grants play a major role in mitigating the economic risks involved in publishing translations. See p. 159 below for a discussion.

authors in the UK and US.³⁶ The movement of some Russian authors such as Sorokin and Ulitskaya from small independent presses to commercial firms confirms this trajectory, even if these larger firms have not retained these authors in the long term.³⁷

Since Chad Post, CEO of US firm Open Letter launched his Translation Database in 2008, US independents such as Deep Vellum have published seven different contemporary Russian authors, Dalkey Archive – seven, Oneworld – six, and NYRB Classics – four.³⁸ Of these, Lisa Hayden's translation of Vodolazkin's *Laurus* won the Read Russia Prize in 2016, which may have contributed to its status as a top-fifty Nielsen bestseller that year. Hayden's translation of Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha (Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza, 2015)* was longlisted for the EBRD literature prize, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, and shortlisted for

³⁶ See footnote 40 below for some examples of this diversity.

³⁷ As I will explore in later chapters, Sorokin is now published by independent but prestigious Dalkey Archive and NYRB Classics, while Ulitskaya is published by Granta, and Yale University Press.

³⁸ See 'Translation Database', *PublishersWeekly.Com*

<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/translation/home/index.html>> [accessed 1 December 2022]. **Deep Vellum** have published: Alisa Ganieva, *Bride and Groom*, trans. by Carol Apollonio (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2018); Alisa Ganieva, *Offended Sensibilities*, trans. by Carol Apollonio (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2022); Alisa Ganieva, *The Mountain and the Wall*, trans. by Carol Apollonio (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2015); Alla Gorbunova, *It's the End of the World, My Love*, trans. by Elina Alter (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2022); Dmitry Lipskerov, *The Tool and the Butterflies*, trans. by Reilly Costigan-Humes and Isaac Stackhouse Wheeler (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2021); Nataliya Meshchaninova, *Stories of a Life*, trans. by Fiona Bell (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2022); Ludmila Petrushevskaya, *Kidnapped: A Story in Crimes*, trans. by Marian Schwartz (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2022); *The New Adventures of Helen: Magical Tales*, trans. by Jane Bugaeva (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2021); Mikhail Shishkin, *Calligraphy Lesson*. **Dalkey Archive** have published: *Contemporary Russian Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. by Evgenii Bunimovich and J. Kates (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008); Kirill Kobrin, *Eleven Prague Corpses: Stories*, trans. by Veronika Lakotová (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2016); Sergey Kuznetsov, *The Round-Dance of Water*, trans. by Valeriya Yermishova (Dallas, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2022); Vladislav Otroshenko, *Addendum to a Photo Album*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015); Igor Vishnevetsky, *Leningrad*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield, (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013); Sorokin, *Their Four Hearts*. **Oneworld** have published: Narine Abgaryan, *Three Apples Fell from the Sky*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2020); Vadim Levental, *Masha Regina*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2016); Eugene Vodolazkin, *Solovyov and Larionov*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2019); Eugene Vodolazkin, *The Aviator*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2019); Vodolazkin, *Laurus*; Guzel Yakhina, *Zuleikha*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2019). **NYRB Classics** have published: Polina Barskova, *Living Pictures*, trans. By Catherine Ciepiela (London: Pushkin Press, 2022); Maksim Osipov, *Kilometer 101*, trans. by Boris Dralyuk, Alex Fleming, and Nicolas Pasternak Slater (New York: New York Review Books, 2022); *Rock, Paper, Scissors and Other Stories*, trans. by Boris Dralyuk, Alexandra Fleming, and Anne Marie Jackson (New York: New York Review Books, 2019); Sorokin, *Ice Trilogy*, Sorokin, *Telluria*. See Introduction, p. 57 for a discussion of the database, and other methods of gathering data on translations.

the Read Russia prize.³⁹ The success of these novels confirms the view held by some independent publishers that their firms are actually more successful at promoting translations than the Big Five.⁴⁰

Sapiro asserts that the larger publishers eschew translations because of their poor economic return.⁴¹ As is demonstrated by the data from Nielsen, when commercial publishers do publish translations from Russian, they are not guaranteed higher sales.⁴² For example, *Oprichnik* sold 203 copies in total for PRH in the UK between 2018-2019, and 802 copies for Farrar, Straus & Giroux (henceforth FSG) between 2011-2019, averaging eighty-nine copies a year.⁴³ Meanwhile, *Jacob's Ladder* by Russia's renowned author Ulitskaya, sold only twelve copies in its first year in the UK for FSG.⁴⁴ This should be compared with independent Pushkin Press's sales of Elizarov's *The Librarian* between 2015-2019, which amounted to 359 copies at an average of seventy-one annually, and Open Letter's *Maidenhair* which sold 301 copies between 2013-2019, averaging forty-three per year.⁴⁵ This difference would seem to attest that smaller publishers can, indeed, equal the Big Five with translated fiction titles, even when pitting relatively minor authors against major ones. This fact has not escaped Will Evans of Dalkey Archive and Deep Vellum, who admitted to regularly checking the translation sales of commercial publishers when he had access to BookScan, the US equivalent of Nielsen BookData.⁴⁶ As noted above, he feels that the advantage of the independent publisher lies in their ability to market translations.⁴⁷

³⁹ Bourdieu, Mansell, and Franssen and Kuipers all note the importance of prizes in measuring symbolic capital. See Bourdieu 'Conservative Revolution'; Franssen and Kuipers, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 53; Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful', p. 277.

⁴⁰ Marling cites Chad Post's comments that "You're going to have a hard time competing on a grand scale with Penguin, Random House, F.S.G. or whoever else ... We are going to find the most passionate fans who love all of our books, rather than take one book and try to outsell Penguin."; Marling, *Gatekeepers*, p. 155.

⁴¹ Sapiro, 'How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?', p.88.

⁴² Nielsen BookData.

⁴³ Nielsen BookData. Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (Penguin Classics, 2018).

⁴⁴ Nielsen BookData; Ulitskaya, *Jacob's Ladder*.

⁴⁵ Nielsen BookData; Elizarov, *The Librarian*; Shishkin, *Maidenhair*.

⁴⁶ Interview with Evans.

⁴⁷ Interview with Evans.

Independent firms' approach to marketing sees them focus on curating a loyal readership, and then publishing books directly for that community.⁴⁸ For Post, this close link with readers is the most important difference between presses like Open Letter and the Big Five.⁴⁹ As an example, Post's decision to publish *Maidenhair* was driven by a belief that his readership prefers complex, challenging novels.⁵⁰ As I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, *Maidenhair* was rejected by numerous larger presses as a direct result of its complexity before it was signed by Open Letter.⁵¹

By selecting novels aimed at a specific, loyal readership, a publisher is able to build cultural capital. This in turn allows them to publish literature that commercial houses would not consider. For independents, this decision is rarely linked to whether they can make a profit, although as I will discuss below, it is often reliant on external funding.⁵² However, it should be noted that publishing novels the Big Five would not consider also forms a key facet of independent firms' identity and brand — it is their *raison d'être*. In Evans's explanation, which echoes Bourdieu's, independent publishers are virtuous by necessity:

We are a non-profit publisher which means we *should* be publishing books that the commercial publishing houses aren't doing anyway, which means we don't have the same commercial viability. We should be publishing books for their art, and the conversation that they can invoke. And so sales can come after that, but the main thing is that we are focussing on the art, and then the dialogue between readers and writers and cultures and all that stuff that goes along with it. That's a mission-driven publisher in America.⁵³

Both Post and Evans profess to the altruistic nature of their literary mission, and both are able to make a living doing what they love and believe in. As not-for-profit publishers in the US they are exempt from taxes, and they benefit from

⁴⁸ Interview with Evans.

⁴⁹ Interview with Post.

⁵⁰ Interview with Post. To date, the US-based publisher has translated over eighty authors from thirty different countries including Iceland, Peru and the Baltic States, with three translations from Russian. As well as *Maidenhair*, the other two titles from Russian are a collection of poems by Olga Sedakova, *In Praise of Poetry*, trans. by Caroline Clark, Ksenia Golubovich and Stephanie Sandler (Rochester NY: Open Letter, 2014) and Il'f and Petrov (*The Golden Calf*, trans. by Helen Anderson and Konstantin Gurevich (Rochester NY: Open Letter, 2009).

⁵¹ See Chapter Three, p. 203.

⁵² Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution'; Sapiro, 'How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?', p.90.

⁵³ Interview with Evans.

grants, which potentially furnish two thirds of their income.⁵⁴ This allows them to follow their aim of ‘creating global conversation through literature.’⁵⁵ But, as hinted at by some reader responses to Sorokin in Chapter Five, this connection to their community of readers does not protect them from making potentially misguided decisions.⁵⁶

There are further challenges, however. Being an independent can impede a publisher’s reach with regards to sales. In addition to data provided by Nielsen, sources such as Amazon-affiliated site Goodreads demonstrate the sales power and reach enjoyed by commercial publishers.⁵⁷ The site’s users are able to review novels and rate them out of five. In October 2022, FSG’s and PRH’s *Oprichnik* had the most reader ratings with 6395 and an average of 3.73 stars awarded by both Russian and Anglophone readers. Meanwhile FSG’s *Big Green Tent* had 3517 reviews and an average of 4.04 stars. This contrasts with Open Letter’s *Maidenhair* which garnered an average of 3.93 stars from 826 ratings. Pushkin Press’s *The Librarian* gained slightly higher ratings with 959 and an average of 3.56 stars. Meanwhile, Glagoslav’s *Sankya* received 869 ratings, predominantly from Russian readers, and 3.64 stars. The statistics for *Minus* reflected its poor sales, and the fact that it is out of print — it had three stars, from twelve ratings, and no reviews.

1.3 What We Expect to Read — The ‘Russian Exotic’

Notwithstanding the literary mission of independent presses, the popularity of the Russian classics, and of a certain neo-classical type of contemporary fiction, endures. In large part, this is because these are the preferred output of the Big Five, as I demonstrated above. In this section I argue that such expectations can make it challenging to market Russian fiction that does not fall into these categories, leading to an over-reliance on the theme of politics to market contemporary novels. This preference for a certain kind of Russian literature concurs with a pattern identified by Mark Lipovetsky in 2013. During a round table

⁵⁴ John Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2013), p.156.

⁵⁵ ‘Why Support Deep Vellum’, *Deep Vellum* <<https://www.deepvellum.org/ways-to-support>> [accessed 6 February 2023].

⁵⁶ See Chapter Five, p. 223.

⁵⁷ Walsh, ‘Where Is All the Book Data?’. See also Chapter One, p. 128.

discussion for the journal *Znamia* titled 'Is There a Place for Modern Russian Literature in the Global Context?', Lipovetsky described two genres of Russian novels that are popular in the United States.⁵⁸

The first category he identified are novels that represent the 'Russian Exotic'. These are novels that offer a version of what the target audience imagines Russian literature to be. For Lipovetsky this is predominantly fiction that is reminiscent of nineteenth century novels, with stereotypically morose, downtrodden, suffering characters. Such novels might also latterly blend in elements of Stalin, the Gulag, or even the mafia of the 1990s. Lipovetsky offered Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (*Zhizn' i sud'ba*, 1959) as a perfect example of the Russian Exotic since it is about Stalin and World War Two and at over nine-hundred pages, inhabits nineteenth-century proportions.⁵⁹ The second group of Russian novels that Lipovetsky describes are books which do not require any cultural translation.⁶⁰ In these, the Russian context is often irrelevant, leaving the Anglophone reader's lack of contextualising knowledge unchallenged. Examples include Glukhovsky's *Metro* novels (*Metro 2033*, 2005) and Lukyanenko's *Night Watch* series (*Nochnoi dozor*, 1993) which also appeared in Nielsen's top-fifty titles.⁶¹

Lipovetsky's analysis of what appeals to a Western audience leaves little space for contemporary writers who do not fit these neat categories, such as Sorokin, Elizarov, Prilepin, Senchin and Shishkin. Lipovetsky's two categories thus exclude authors of literary fiction whose work is both contemporary and intrinsically linked to modern Russian culture. If their work is neither exotic nor generic, how, then, is it to be categorized and marketed for the benefit of Anglophone readers and (ideally) to the profit of Anglophone translators and publishers? I argue that these writers are marketed via paratexts in terms of their personal political affiliations, or by publicising politicised aspects of their careers

⁵⁸ 'Is There a Place for Modern Russian Literature in the Global Context?: [A *Znamia* Roundtable]', pp. 21-6.

⁵⁹ Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. by Robert Chandler (London: Vintage Books, 1980). The novel sold a total of 78,657 copies across all editions between 2001-2019; Nielsen BookData. Grossman is also associated with one of today's most well-known and influential translators from Russian, Robert Chandler. See p. 139 below for further details.

⁶⁰ 'Is There a Place for Modern Russian Literature in the Global Context?', p. 24.

⁶¹ These were translated by Andrew Bromfield, who is one of the most prolific of Russian-English translators. As I will discuss below, he has translated over seventy titles also including work by Pelevin, Shishkin, Senchin and Elizarov.

in order to make them a more viable market commodity.⁶² As stated in Chapter One, their source-culture context is recreated in the target US and UK markets as a politicised, frequently dissident one. I will explore this re-contextualisation in depth in Chapter Five.

In order to further define the Russian-English translated fiction field and the influence of political bias at work within it, I will now explore successively the translation commissioning process, the role of literary gatekeepers, and the power of ‘celebrity’ translators both to accrue and exert symbolic capital within the literary world. I will also examine the consequences of editors using comparative titles to make their commissioning choices, the availability of funding, and the role of soft-power institutions in bringing contemporary novels to the West.

2 The Commissioning Process: Networks, Gatekeepers, ‘Celebrity’ Translators and Resisting Homogeneity

My interviews have revealed that most contemporary Russian novels are translated into English by chance — such commissions rarely take place because an editor has proactively sought a contemporary Russian novel to publish. Instead, an editor might be pitched a book by a translator; they might hear about a book from a friend or relative; they might meet an author or their agent at a book fair; or they might want to share a book they themselves have encountered.⁶³ On rare occasions, a publisher or editor has a pre-existing interest in Russian literature, as well as Russian language skills. Will Evans, for example, has a master’s degree in Russian, and thus the ability to both seek and evaluate Russian titles. Other publishers are more likely to commission Russian books for translation if they have Russian speakers among their staff.⁶⁴

Without a special interest, however, the process relies on a gatekeeping network of literary agents, and most frequently, translator-advisors, to pitch contemporary

⁶² See Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of paratexts.

⁶³ Interview with Evans; Interview with Mark Krotov, December 2020; Interview with Post.

⁶⁴ Freelance editor Gesche Ipsen noted that Pushkin Press published Anna Starobinets’ *Catlandis* because a member of the editorial team spoke Russian; Anna Starobinets, *Catlandis*, trans. by Jane Bugaeva (London: Pushkin Press, 2015). Post admitted to a preference for Hispanic literature and was able to read some Spanish. Interviews with Ipsen, June 2021, and Post. For further discussion, see p. 151 below.

Russian fiction to editors at both independent and commercial firms. In the following section, I will define these networks, identify their principal gatekeepers, and analyse the role of the ‘celebrity’ translator. I will also evaluate the role of sample translations as a form of resistance against the homogeneity that results from a high-risk translated fiction market that is dominated by the Big Five. I argue that while translators are at the heart of the network that brings contemporary Russian fiction into English, ultimately the entire system is subordinate to money.

2.1 Networks

‘A small victory for one of us is a victory for all of us.’⁶⁵

Strong networks are essential to the circulation of Russian literature abroad. An analysis of their modus operandi is central to understanding both how and why contemporary Russian fiction is commissioned for translation into English. These publishing networks are made up of gatekeepers that include translators, editors, and literary agents. Working together, these mediators address the difficulties of commissioning, producing, and marketing contemporary Russian fiction in the West. These difficulties are caused by a dearth of linguistic expertise, and a lack of interest and understanding among most Anglophone publishers about contemporary Russian literature.⁶⁶ These challenges are compounded by the reading public’s expectation that Russian novels conform to Lipovetsky’s category of exoticism, and are therefore likely expected to be depressing, long, and challenging to read.⁶⁷ As I will demonstrate below in my discussion of comparative titles, this issue is exacerbated by publishers who commission what they expect their readers want based largely on what has been translated in the past.⁶⁸

Translators actively pitch and contextualise contemporary Russian novels for editors, while also sharing information with other members of their gatekeeping networks. In this way translators provide publishers with information that is

⁶⁵ Interview with Evans.

⁶⁶ For more on this, see p.151 below.

⁶⁷ ‘Is There a Place for Modern Russian Literature in the Global Context?’, p. 23.

⁶⁸ See ‘Comparative Titles’ below, p. 156.

usually inaccessible to them due to an absence of Russian-language ability.⁶⁹ As mediators, translators form alliances and promote the circulation of literature in a market that, as I have demonstrated above, is still dominated economically by the Big Five.⁷⁰ As Evans notes, ‘translators are the resource that runs our corner of the industry.’⁷¹

Besides the connections that exist between editors, translators and literary agents, networks also exist between publishers. A contributing factor to the increasing success, measured by prizes, of independent publishers in the translated fiction field is their mutual cooperation and alliance. As Buzelin’s study of the French-Canadian publishing market shows, smaller publishers commonly join forces in order to challenge the supremacy of large publishing conglomerates.⁷² Cooperation between independent publishers can be considered a ‘strategy of resistance’ that enables them to forge their own way and create their own symbolic capital.⁷³ I will now consider the various actors who participate in these publishing networks, focussing first on literary agents and scouts, followed by the specific and significant role of translators.

2.1a Literary Agents and Scouts

Literary agents play an important role in the circulation of literature. These agents, who might work as part of a larger company, or might work alone, curate relationships with authors, and market their novels to publishers. They also negotiate publishing rights, and in some cases handle PR demands.⁷⁴ Buzelin holds that literary agents ‘create the norms that regulate the selection of books to be translated.’⁷⁵ However, as I will demonstrate in the translation histories for the

⁶⁹ An anonymous account speculated that one of Russia’s most famous authors was only commissioned by a large publisher because they were recommended by a pre-existing author. The author had not been on the publisher’s radar before this recommendation, which happened by chance.

⁷⁰ Franssen and Kuipers, ‘Coping with Uncertainty’, p. 49.

⁷¹ Interview with Evans.

⁷² Buzelin, ‘Independent Publisher’, p. 134.

⁷³ Bourdieu, ‘Conservative Revolution’, p. 141. Buzelin also noted the strategy of co-publishing between Paris and Quebec as another way of reducing risks; ‘Independent Publisher’, p.167. In the case of contemporary Russian fiction, this can be seen in the cooperation between Dalkey Archive and NYRB Classics around the translation of Sorokin. See Chapter One, p. 86 and Chapter Three, p. 212.

⁷⁴ For a detailed history of literary agents in the UK and US, see Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*, pp. 59-100.

⁷⁵ Buzelin, ‘Independent Publisher’, p. 160.

novels I have studied, it is instead the translator who more commonly acts as a literary agent by proposing new titles directly to publishers. It is perhaps telling that at the time of writing only four literary agencies specialise in selling world rights from Russian: Elkost in Barcelona, Russia-based Banke, Goumen & Smirnova, and Galina Dursthoff, and Thomas Wiedling, both working from Germany.⁷⁶

Evidence from my case studies confirms that literary agents play a minor role in the commission of contemporary Russian fiction in the UK and US.⁷⁷ Although Evans notes the close relationship he has with agents, evidence from my interviews indicates that only *Maidenhair* was commissioned because of the work carried out by its agent, Markus Hoffmann.⁷⁸ While *Oprichnik* was pitched to then FSG editor Mark Krotov by literary agent Galina Dursthoff, he only signed the book because his grandmother had read and enjoyed it.⁷⁹ The importance of the translator rather than the agent in the commissioning process was also registered by literary agent and former Glas CEO Natasha Perova. She told me, ‘usually it’s the translators who recommend books to publishers. In this sense, translators function much better than literary agents.’⁸⁰

The role of the literary scout is almost redundant in the case contemporary Russian fiction. Scouts might usually be employed by publishers, or literary agencies, and aim to bring new works of fiction to publishers’ or agents’ attention. However, the majority of British and American publishers do not actively seek to commission translations of Russian novels: if they do, they tend not to prioritise

⁷⁶ Find their websites here: ‘Banke, Goumen & Smirnova’ <<http://bgs-agency.com/en/authors/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]; ‘ELKOST International Literary Agency’ <<https://www.elkost.com/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]; ‘Literary Agency Galina Dursthoff – A literary agency for Russian authors’ <<https://dursthoff.de/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]. ‘Wiedling - Literary Agency’ <<https://wiedling-litag.com/>> [accessed 5 February 2023].

⁷⁷ This concurs with Thompson’s findings in regard to independent publishers. See *Merchants of Culture*, p. 159.

⁷⁸ Interview with Markus Hoffmann, 27 October 2021. For a discussion of Hoffmann’s role in promoting Shishkin, see p. 203.

⁷⁹ This should perhaps be treated with circumspection. Although Krotov told this story about his grandmother during our interview, it was made much of in a press article announcing *Oprichnik*’s commission. It is possible that this story was better able to create the mystique around the novel; Leon Neyfakh, ‘After Years of Patience, FSG Finds a Vladimir Sorokin Book They Want to Publish in English’, *Observer*, 2 December 2008 <<https://observer.com/2008/12/after-years-of-patience-fsg-finds-a-vladimir-sorokin-book-they-want-to-publish-in-english/>> [accessed 4 December 2020].

⁸⁰ Interview with Natasha Perova, 11 October 2021. See Chapter Three for a discussion of the role of Glas, pp. 193-99.

contemporary titles. In Summer 2021, two large publishing firms stated that they had published enough Russian novels and were not actively pursuing any more.⁸¹ In contrast, in their study of the Dutch literary market, Franssen and Kuipers describe scouts actively seeking Anglophone literature to translate into Dutch. However, for translations into English in the UK and US markets, regardless of the source language, there is somewhat less competition.⁸² Apart from Wiedling's remark that he initially relied on Russia-based literary scouts to help find new literature to represent, no publishers use them in the search for Russian fiction.⁸³ Evans described the same approach, stating, 'we don't have scouts [...] That's like a Big Five thing [...] translators for us are really the best scouts.'⁸⁴

Marling describes a similar pattern in his analysis of literary gatekeepers. In contrast to Franssen and Kuipers, he finds that the market for translation into English lacks literary scouts who hunt for literature to translate, and those that exist usually conform to a similar demographic type. Marling references John Thompson's example from his study of the publishing world, *Merchants of Culture* (2013), stating that most scouts are 'young women [...] living in New York, London and Frankfurt' who are not usually 'multi-lingual.'⁸⁵ Marling speculates that this might lead to further homogenisation of the literary market.

This observation echoes other concerns about the increasing isomorphism of the publishing world, caused by lack of diversity among translators, and both caused by, and leading to, conservative commissioning choices among the Big Five.⁸⁶ Since contemporary Russian novels are so rarely commercially successful, we should question whether the Big Five's commissioning policy is out of touch with what Anglophone readers want, or whether there will ever be a self-sustaining market for contemporary Russian literature in the English-speaking world. Considering the importance of the translator in the process, it is also appropriate to question the role of the literary agent here. As I will discuss below, however, the translator is far from all powerful. In a market governed by funding, editors

⁸¹ Interviewee #1 and Interviewee #2, Summer 2021. As I will discuss in my Conclusion, the advent of war has made selecting Russian titles for translation even less likely.

⁸² Franssen and Kuipers, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 57.

⁸³ Interview with Thomas Wiedling, 2 November 2020.

⁸⁴ Interview with Evans.

⁸⁵ Marling, *Gatekeepers*, p. 154.

⁸⁶ See below, for a discussion of comparative titles (p. 156) and translator diversity, (p.162).

have to make difficult decisions about what to commission. In this sense, as Kuipers and Franssen assert, editors hold the most powerful position within translator networks.

2.1b Translator Networks

As noted above, Franssen and Kuipers do not place translators at the heart of their Dutch publishing networks.⁸⁷ Instead they find that editors are at the centre of the acquisitions process. This impression is confirmed by my research — although in my interviews editors often describe translators as possessing a large amount of influence, in reality it is the editor who makes the final decision about what to commission. There is, however, an important caveat. In contrast to Franssen and Kuipers's example, which considers translations from numerous languages into Dutch, the specific Russian-English market suffers from a dearth of language expertise, as I will explain later in this chapter.⁸⁸ As a result editors regularly rely on translators to pitch them novels and provide sample translations.⁸⁹ As I will demonstrate in the section that follows, translators from Russian, and their interpersonal networks therefore play a central role in the commissions process, even if the final decisions over what to publish are beyond their control. Below I will describe the importance of networks for translators in building their careers. I will also demonstrate that some translators wield more influence than others and consider the implications of this on the Russian-English literary market.⁹⁰

Translator networks are underpinned by personal connections which allow their members to build cultural and social capital. Such networks are formed in part via academic connections, and, as I will describe below, serendipity. That a large number of translators from Russian are also academics confirms their symbolic capital and also indicates that it is very difficult to make a living from translation

⁸⁷ Franssen and Kuipers, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 70. Mansell also makes the point that literary borders are 'managed by a network of agents...and editors have to rely on these decisions'; Mansell, 'Where Do Borders Lie in Translated Literature?', p. 59.

⁸⁸ See below, p. 151.

⁸⁹ This is a conclusion also reached by Milutinović. He finds that for smaller literatures, translators hold a greater amount of gatekeeping power since there are fewer speakers of that language able to advise publishers, and publishers are not able to easily source such novels themselves; Zoran Milutinović, 'Translators as Ambassadors and Gatekeepers: The Case of South Slav Literature', in *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*, ed. by Zoran Milutinović and others (Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 27–47 (p. 44).

⁹⁰ See 'Celebrity Translators', p. 145 below.

— it is often necessary to have an additional form of income. For example, translator Oliver Ready lectured until recently at the University of Oxford.⁹¹ Roger Cockrell, who translates nineteenth-century Russian classics for Alma Books, is a retired Senior Lecturer in Russian at the University of Exeter.⁹² Rosamund Bartlett was formerly Head of Russian at the University of Durham, and also now translates nineteenth-century Russian classics.⁹³ Robert Chandler lectures in translation at Queen Mary, University of London. Boris Dralyuk lectured at the University of Saint Andrews, and Polly Gannon taught for years at Saint Petersburg State University. Many of these translators, such as Bartlett, Ready and Chandler, until recently held influential positions advising on the board of the University of Columbia's now defunct Russian Library, and sitting on the jury for Read Russia prizes.⁹⁴

The community that an academic background affords a translator is supplemented by personal connections which can act as an entry point into established translator networks. My interviews have revealed some pertinent examples of such career-building connections. Translator, writer and former editor of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (LARB), Dralyuk was inducted into the network when he replied to a translation query from Robert Chandler on the SEELANGS email group.⁹⁵ This led to a long-term correspondence and Dralyuk eventually edited and translated for Chandler's *Penguin Book of Russian Poetry* alongside poet Irina Mashinski.⁹⁶ Consequently, Chandler recommended Dralyuk to Adam Freudenheim, editor of Pushkin Press since 2012, to translate Isaac Babel's *Konarmii* (*Red Cavalry*, 1927).⁹⁷

⁹¹ Ready has translated Russian authors Yuri Buida, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Maisky and Vladimir Sharov.

⁹² Cockrell has translated novels by Dostoevsky and Gogol for Alma Books. See 'Roger Cockrell', *Alma Books* <<https://almabooks.com/alma-author/roger-cockrell/>> [accessed 24 June 2023].

⁹³ Bartlett has translated Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov. See 'Translations', *Rosamund Bartlett* <<http://www.rosamundbartlett.com/website/Translations.html>> [accessed 24 June 2023].

⁹⁴ See below p. 165 for details of the Russian Library and Read Russia.

⁹⁵ The SEELANGS email group for academics working in Slavic and East European Languages, Literatures and Cultures, and is currently hosted by Indiana University. For details, see 'Welcome to SEELANGS', *SEELANGS List Instructions* <<https://seelangsgithub.io/>> [accessed 4 February 2023].

⁹⁶ *The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*, ed. by Robert Chandler, Boris Dralyuk, and Irina Mashinski, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2015).

⁹⁷ Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry*, trans. by Boris Dralyuk (London: Pushkin Press, 2014). Dralyuk has subsequently translated a number of authors including Mikhail Zoshchenko, Tolstoy, Maxim Osipov and Andrey Kurkov.

In another example, translator Bela Shayevich described how she studied for a master's degree in Russian Translation at the University of Columbia (2007-2008) and attended a course run there by the late Jamey Gambrell.⁹⁸ By chance Mark Krotov, who later worked as an editor at FSG (2009-2012), also attended the course, and the three formed an enduring friendship. Consequently, Shayevich was commissioned to translate Ulitskaya's *Big Green Tent*, and to edit Victoria Lomasko's *Other Russias* with Krotov at *n+1* magazine.⁹⁹ This in turn led to a commission from Fitzcarraldo to translate Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich's *Vremia sekond khend (Second-Hand Time, 2013)* and from Canongate to translate Evgeny Zamiatin's *My (We, 1924)*.¹⁰⁰

Despite the surface appearance of an equitable, collegiate translator network, some translators have considerably more influence than others, and tend to share this power with a select group. This, as I will describe in the next section, seems to rely on translators often consciously creating their own 'brands' and working to grow their symbolic capital. Translators who do not prioritise curating their image, or reinforce personal connections, might find themselves outside this of this group and might subsequently struggle to have their own pitches commissioned by publishers. For example, despite Andrew Bromfield's status as a veteran translator of commercially successful, culturally significant authors like Akunin, Glukhovsky, Pelevin and Lukyanenko, he claims that he has never had one of his own translation pitches accepted.¹⁰¹ Instead, to ensure a consistent income,

⁹⁸ Interview with Bela Shayevich, 11 November 2020.

⁹⁹ Lomasko, *Other Russias*; Ulitskaya, *Big Green Tent*.

¹⁰⁰ Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize while Shayevich was in the process of translating her book. Svetlana Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. by Bela Shayevich (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016); Evgenii Zamiatin, *We*, trans. by Bela Shayevich (London: Canongate, 2021).

¹⁰¹ For more on Bromfield, see above p. 126, and Chapter Five p. 322. Interview with Andrew Bromfield, 10 December 2021. Bromfield has translated over seventy novels and short story collections. It is not possible to list them all here since they number over fifty titles. He translated Pelevin for Glas and went on to work on the majority of Pelevin's novels and short stories over the next twenty years. He is also the source for the majority of the best-selling Russian translations into English, including Mikhail Bulgakov, the Strugatsky brothers, Tolstoy, Shishkin, Lukyanenko, Glukhovsky, and Akunin. He was shortlisted for the ERBD prize in 2018 for Akunin's *All the World's a Stage*, and was nominated for the Rossica Prize in 2005, 2009 and 2014. For Glas, Andrew Bromfield translated *The Blue Lantern* (p.14) and *The View From the Window* (p.44), in *Love & Fear*, Glas New Russian Writing, 4 (Moscow: Glas Publishers, 1993). Also an excerpt from *Omon Ra* (p.58) in *Booker Winners and Others*, Glas New Russian Writing, 7 (Moscow: Glas Publishers, 1994). His excerpt from *Oman Ra* went on to be published in full in 1994; Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996). 'Rossica Prize «Academia Rossica» <<https://www.academia-rossica.org/en/literature/rossica-prize>> [accessed 8 February 2023].

Bromfield has translated novels which he would not have selected himself. He stated that had he been able to translate according to his own tastes and interests, his publishing history would look very different.¹⁰²

Bromfield exemplifies the type of translator whom Sela-Sheffy describes as choosing to remain largely 'in the shadows', though it does not appear that this approach has hindered his ability to receive prestigious commissions.¹⁰³ Similarly to Bromfield, Marian Schwartz (who at the time of our interview had translated nearly a hundred novels), claimed to have hardly had any success in pitching her own ideas.¹⁰⁴ Translator Polly Gannon reported a similar issue.¹⁰⁵ Although Gannon had been approached to translate *The Big Green Tent*, she also claimed that she had never had one of her own pitches accepted.¹⁰⁶

Accordingly, it seems that publishers' decisions rest in part on their perception of translators' symbolic and cultural capital rather than their previous work. Two large publishing firms, one independent and one commercial, noted that they each rely on the same translator, who happens to possess large amounts of symbolic capital, to recommend projects to them.¹⁰⁷ One of these interviewees noted that they mostly always said yes to the ideas offered by this particular translator:

Usually for each language, we might have our go-to person. So for Russian I [...] would almost always ask [the same well-established translator], because [they] just know everything – [they are] just a friend of [the publisher].¹⁰⁸

When prompted, the same publisher did, however, note that this system might have to change in the future since it prevented them from working with a diverse selection of translators.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² 'If I could choose what to translate, my translation history would probably look rather different from the way it does'; Interview with Bromfield.

¹⁰³ Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae', p. 619. This approach was evident throughout my interview with Bromfield.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Marian Schwartz, 18 January 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Polly Gannon, 15 December 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Gannon.

¹⁰⁷ Interviewee #5 July 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Interviewee #1.

¹⁰⁹ Interviewee #1.

It appears to be the case, then, that editors do not take advice from all translators. Instead, they are more often inclined to accept translation pitches from a very small, select group whose members they deem to hold the most symbolic capital. Membership of this group, I will argue below, is acquired by self-promotion, as opposed to a decision to remain out of the spotlight. There are, then, in line with Sela-Sheffy's description, two categories of translator. The first group, like Bromfield and Schwartz, treat translated fiction primarily as a means of making a living, and accept commissions accordingly. The second group curates a public image for themselves, hoping to either 'capitalise' on it in order to increase their chances of finding work, or to raise their literary profile for reasons of their own, as I will describe in the next section.¹¹⁰

2.2 'Celebrity' Translators, Brands, and the Power of Consecration

As I have shown, the most effective gatekeeping is performed by a small number of well-known translators. In this section I will demonstrate that some translators achieve this influential status by creating a 'brand' for themselves. The literary translator's brand is an expression of their identity; the image they create for themselves via interviews, on social media, through paratexts such as introductions to their translations, and also via the translations they choose to carry out.¹¹¹ A translator's brand might be shaped by advocating for a particular author or building close relationships with individual publishers. Some, as in the case of Lawton and the *Sorokinaissance*, are extremely successful in their attempts to promote their chosen writer and enjoy an increase in their own reputation, which has subsequently extended beyond the realm of Russophone novels.

A translator's brand can affect which publishers they work with, whether their pitches are accepted, and subsequently their ability to shape the Russian-English translation field. Some translators, such as Bromfield, Marian Schwartz and Lisa Hayden rely on the quality and relative commercial success of the novels they translate to build their reputation — though as we have seen, this has not made publishers more receptive to their pitches. Instead they rely on other avenues to

¹¹⁰ Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae', p. 620.

¹¹¹ An interrogation of the literary translator's brand can be found here, Wenqian Zhang, 'Constructing the Literary Translator as a Brand: Methodological Considerations', *Translation in Society*, 2.2 (2023), 123–45 <<https://doi.org/10.1075/tris.23009.zha>>.

create their ‘translator image’. Marian Schwartz, whose work I will discuss in detail in Chapter Five, regularly participates in author events, and contributes to the academic debate on Russian literature, most recently in her article about the popularity of Russian classics in the edited volume *This is a Classic* (2023).¹¹² Lisa Hayden, who has translated some of the best-selling Russian authors in the UK such as Eugene Vodolazkin and Guzel Yakhina maintains a relatively prominent profile in the translation community largely through her blog on contemporary Russian fiction, *Lizok’s Bookshelf*.¹¹³

Others find that a brand is being ‘created’ for them by publisher expectations and decide to embrace it. Following her translation of Alexievich, and her work with Lomasko, Shayevich felt that she had come to be regarded as a translator willing to work with texts that would be sold with a clear political angle.¹¹⁴ This was, she felt, the reason that she was approached by Canongate to translate Zamiatin’s *We*.¹¹⁵ Shayevich’s translation is accompanied by several paratexts that highlight the publisher’s politicised marketing strategy. Dystopian author Margaret Atwood provides the introduction, describing *We* as prophetic of twenty-first century society.¹¹⁶ George Orwell’s 1946 review, ‘Freedom and Happiness’ also draws parallels between *We* and contemporary politics, which in the 1940s were all the more alarming. Ursula LeGuin’s review, ‘The Stalin in the Soul’, questions the censorial nature and in essence, the gatekeeping function of the literary establishment. Shayevich then reinforces her own translatorial image, using the novel as a platform to signal her own political stance. She concludes her translator’s note with a poem by ‘anti-Soviet’ poet Vsevolod Nekrasov (1934-2009) on the nature of freedom, confirming her role and brand as a translator of ‘political’ texts.

Yet other translators concentrate on a single author with whom they are subsequently linked, and who can, intentionally or otherwise, be regarded as

¹¹² Schwartz, ‘The Russian Canon in Retranslation’.

¹¹³ Hayden’s translation of Vodolazkin’s *Laurus* is one of the few contemporary Russian novels to have reached the top-fifty Russian bestsellers list in the UK. See above, p. 119. See her blog here; Lisa Hayden, ‘Lizok’s Bookshelf’, n.d. <<https://lizoksbooks.blogspot.com/>> [accessed 21 February 2023].

¹¹⁴ Interview with Shayevich.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Shayevich; Evgenii Zamiatin, *We*, trans. by Bela Shayevich (London: Canongate, 2021).

¹¹⁶ For a discussion of the importance of paratexts in positioning novels in the target culture, see Chapter Four, p. 222.

representative of their translator image. This can be seen with Chandler's decades of work to promote Andrei Platonov, which created a foundation for his translation career.¹¹⁷ This approach has been taken to the extreme by emerging translator Max Lawton. He has achieved rapid success by initially working exclusively on novels by Sorokin. With Sorokin's support, since 2016 Lawton has first translated, and then subsequently signed contracts for all of the writer's major novels with Dalkey Archive and NYRB Classics.¹¹⁸ Lawton's success in promoting Sorokin's novels means that up to eight novels and short story collections are scheduled to be released in English between 2022-2027, — Lawton, Evans's and Frank's *Sorokinaissance*.¹¹⁹ By bolstering his reputation through close collaboration with Evans and to a lesser degree with Frank and NYRB Classics, Lawton has used his brand to build networks and secure work with authors working from Turkish, German and French into English.¹²⁰ As a result of his connections, Lawton signed contracts to co-translate Louis-Ferdinand Céline with British author Ian Sinclair, and to translate Jonathan Littell from French before any of his translations of Sorokin had even been published.¹²¹ Sorokin's readiness to appear alongside Lawton, both in print and at author

¹¹⁷ See also my research on Russian publisher Glas, and the firm's role in fostering translators such as Chandler; Chapter Three, p. 195. Robert Chandler is one of the most well-known translators from Russian into English. Alongside Platonov, his many translations include novels by Vasily Grossman and Teffi, as well as poetry and short story collections for Penguin. See for example: *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*, ed. by Robert Chandler (London: Penguin Classics, 2012; Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. by Robert Chandler (London: Vintage Books, 1980);); Andrei Platonov, *The Portable Platonov*, trans. by Robert Chandler and Elizabeth Chandler, Glas New Russian Writing, v. 20 (Moscow: Glas, 1999); Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, trans. by Robert Chandler, Elizabeth Chandler, and Ol'ga Meerson (London: Vintage Classic, 2010).

¹¹⁸ Interviews with Max Lawton, 11 October 2020 and 3 November 2021. Already published are: *Telluria* and *Their Four Hearts*. Forthcoming titles include: Vladimir Sorokin, *Blue Lard*, trans. by Max Lawton, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2024); Vladimir Sorokin, *Dispatches from the District Committee*, trans. by Max Lawton (New York: Dalkey Archive, 2023); Vladimir Sorokin, *Red Pyramid and Other Stories*, trans. by Max Lawton, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2024). Publication dates are not yet available for translations of the following: Vladimir Sorokin, *Norma* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2002); Vladimir Sorokin, *Sakharnia Krem'* (Moscow: AST: Astrel', 2008).

¹¹⁹ Ecem Lawton, "The Sorokinaissance Is upon Us in English Courtesy of One Man: @maxdaniellawton". See also Chapter One, p. 79 for more about the *Sorokinaissance*.

¹²⁰ Interviews with Lawton.

¹²¹ Jonathan Littell, *The Damp and the Dry: A Brief Incursion into Fascist Territory*, trans. by Max Lawton (New York: OR Books, 2023). Littell is bilingual. He speaks English but writes in French.

events in the US in 2022, provides evidence of the pair's professional relationship, and consecrates Lawton as his author's translator.¹²²

Lawton's engagement in self-promotion across social-media platforms, and through extensive interviews with bloggers and translation websites displays many of the qualities described by Sela-Sheffy in her study of Israeli translators.¹²³ Lawton's activities can be regarded as a challenge to the assumption that the translator is somehow subservient, or 'kept in the shadows.'¹²⁴ Although, as Lawton himself admitted, the literature he is being offered is all of a similar genre — hyper-masculine and usually violent.¹²⁵ This, it appears, is Lawton's 'brand'.¹²⁶

With this proliferation of novels earmarked for publication, Sorokin's unique style might come to represent contemporary Russian literature in an insular market that likes to find trends and generalities.¹²⁷ Sorokin's novels were not all straightforward projects to pitch, however. Lawton encountered some reluctance from editors, such as criticism of the complexity of the translation and challenging nature of the subject matter. One editor responded to Lawton's pitch that they 'found [the text] to be incomprehensible' and suggested that Lawton needed to 'find an editor who was willing to go down Sorokin's weird rabbit hole with him.'¹²⁸ Since a larger number of Sorokin's novels, more than any other modern Russian author's, are now being published as a result of Lawton's advocacy, these will influence reader perception of what contemporary Russian literature is. However, as members of my book group commented, this challenging literature might not improve the image of contemporary Russian fiction in the Anglophone West.¹²⁹

¹²² See for example: Alexandra Alter, 'Vladimir Sorokin Says Russian Writers Should Fight Back in War on Truth', *The New York Times*, 16 April 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/16/books/vladimir-sorokin-russia-ukraine.html>> [accessed 5 February 2023]; *Vladimir Sorokin: Translated & Untranslatable. Conversation with Writer & His Translator*, dir. by The Harriman Institute at Columbia University, 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUeXtAhmGDk>> [accessed 1 June 2023].

¹²³ Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae'.

¹²⁴ Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae', p. 611.

¹²⁵ Interview with Lawton.

¹²⁶ This was confirmed by the theme of a talk Lawton gave at the International Centre for Writing and Translation, University of California Irvine on 16 March 2023 titled 'Translating Impossible Books, on Schattenfroh and Others'.

¹²⁷ See later in this chapter for an explanation of the impact of comparative titles, p. 156.

¹²⁸ Interview with Lawton. This is similar to the response Shishkin received when he was trying to pitch *Maidenhair*. See Chapter Three, p. 204.

¹²⁹ For example, for their responses to Sorokin, see Chapter Four, p. 214.

2.3 Resisting Homogeneity

While the translation community relies on personal relationships to bring new Russian novels to potential publishers, an over-reliance by some of the largest publishing firms on one or two translators can lead to a narrow selection of Russian fiction available in English. Since these translators tend also to be academics, and are predominantly white, the novels they select might be more likely to appeal to similar demographics to themselves. This homogeneity is expressed by the narrow selection of Russian novels published by the larger houses, who prefer nineteenth-century Russian classics over all else.¹³⁰ Translator from Russian and Spanish, and English PEN grants assessor Robin Munby voiced his concern about relying on a ‘narrow demographic’ of translators who bring their own preferences with them and crowd other translators and their ideas out of the publishing market.¹³¹

There are some measures in place to resist this homogenisation. Words Without Borders (WWB) announced a new annual competition in January 2023.¹³² WWB established a \$3000 grant to support a new translator to create a ‘lengthy’ sample translation from any language into English.¹³³ The aim of the prize is to help diversify the translation profession by supporting ‘underrepresented’ translators.¹³⁴ The prize’s definition of ‘underrepresented’ is a useful description of people who do not traditionally carry out translations:

Translators who identify as Black, Indigenous, people of colour, disabled, LGBTQIA; non-native English speakers translating into English; translators who do not hold MAs or MFAs or have had some equivalent type of training.

¹³⁰ See above, p. 124.

¹³¹ Interview with Robin Munby, 7 May 2021. For a further discussion of the difficulties and constraints translators face, see Conclusion p. 358.

¹³² ‘Words Without Borders Announces First Annual Momentum Grant for Early-Career Translators’, *Words Without Borders*, 2023 <<https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2023-01/words-without-borders-announces-first-annual-momentum-grant-for-early-career-translators/>> [accessed 12 January 2023].

¹³³ See below, p. 153 for a discussion of sample translations, and the issues around these.

¹³⁴ ‘Words Without Borders Announces First Annual Momentum Grant for Early-Career Translators’ Translators can be from any country and must not have had a book length translation published before.

Translators working from Indigenous, endangered, and other often-marginalized languages are especially encouraged to apply.¹³⁵

The frequently unpaid labour required by literary translation can act as a barrier for individuals who come from poor economic circumstances, or who have caring responsibilities. Preparing translation samples, locating novels to translate, creating pitches and offering them to publishers, are all part of the translator's remit, and often come with low if any economic return.¹³⁶ The fact that some translators are prepared to work for free, or at least for very low pay, creates a barrier to entry into the market for those who rely on the income from translations. Lawton, for example carried out the majority of his Sorokin translations speculatively, bypassing the need to pay for publishers or agents to pay for sample translations and accelerating the usually lengthy publication process.¹³⁷ Arch Tait also acknowledged that he had carried out translations of Ulitskaya for very little money in the hope of acquiring commissions once she became better-known.¹³⁸

This problem is exacerbated by some publishers. According to interviews, Glagoslav might ask translators to work for royalties instead of a fee. Due to the fact that barely any Russian novels sell, this will be a small amount of money, if anything.¹³⁹ If translators are unable to perform the unpaid work that is required in order to prepare a sample and pitch for a publisher, let alone translate an entire book for free, their chances of participating in the translation gatekeeping network are reduced. Subsequently they have less chance of getting their commissions accepted, and the choices offered to publishers will likely remain limited.

If the result of such polarising commissioning choices is the perpetual commissioning and re-commissioning of Russian classics for translation, or a

¹³⁵ 'Words Without Borders Announces First Annual Momentum Grant for Early-Career Translators'.

¹³⁶ Rates of pay recommended by the Society of Authors are £100 per thousand words, and a minimum of £35 a poem; 'The Society of Authors, Translators Association' <<https://societyofauthors.org/Groups/Translators>> [accessed 5 February 2023]. Andrew Bromfield spoke about publishers offering less than this during the financial crisis of 2008; Interview with Bromfield.

¹³⁷ Interview with Lawton. For a description of the usual times and costs associated with translating and publishing a novel, see below, p. 159.

¹³⁸ Interview with Tait. As the translation microhistory of Ulitskaya's *BGT* reveals, this did not transpire. See Chapter Three, p. 187.

¹³⁹ Interviewee #4, August 2020.

strong focus on one contemporary Russian author over another as with Sorokin, then it is right to question the publisher practices that are currently in place.¹⁴⁰ If Russian novels sell in such low quantities as to be generally uncommercial then it is possible that a move away from relying on a limited demographic of translator-advisors might lead to an increased interest in contemporary Russian fiction. This is however unlikely while Russia continues its war against Ukraine, as I will discuss in my Conclusion.¹⁴¹

2.4 Publishing Across the Language Barrier

*'None of us can Google anything in Russian.'*¹⁴²

As I determined in the previous section, strong translator/publisher relationships are essential to the translation of Russian fiction because most publishing firms lack Russophone editorial staff. The inability to read Russian is a barrier for publishers to discover new Russian novels or to assess their suitability for commission. One commercial publisher whom I interviewed was clear about the need for Russian-language advisors in the research phase, as well as inadvertently revealing the potentially ad hoc nature of the commissioning process:

Definitely for the languages that we don't speak, we have to ask specialists for help. Whereas if it's French or German or Italian or Spanish, there is normally someone in the team who can speak it and we can do the research. But none of us can Google anything in Russian.¹⁴³

Understandably, when an editor is not able to read a source text in its original language, this creates a barrier to assessing and contextualising a foreign novel. Below, I will consider the propensity of editors to commission translations from languages they know. I will also outline the strategies used when an editor does

¹⁴⁰ At the time of writing there are sixteen editions of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in print, and twelve of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

¹⁴¹ See Conclusion, p. 333.

¹⁴² Interviewee #1.

¹⁴³ Interviewee #1. Ipsen also spoke about the role of language expertise. 'Academic knowledge is one part of the commissioning process, I don't tend to commission or acquire titles in languages that I am less familiar with, although I will.'; Interview with Gesche Ipsen, 18 June 2021.

not have access to the original text. These include the use of pivot languages, and, as I will explain in detail, a reliance on sample translations.

Many of the publishers I interviewed felt that their own interests and expertise guided them towards certain languages; thus, their habitus informed their editorial decisions.¹⁴⁴ For example, Chad Post speaks Spanish, and has an affinity for South American fiction, evident in the twenty-six South American, and ten Spanish titles he has published.¹⁴⁵ Just as Post has a preference for Hispanic fiction, so Evans's academic background and interest in Russia has guided some of his editorial decisions. Evans reads Russian-language book reviews and is familiar with the literary scene in Russia, and this influences what books he commissions.¹⁴⁶ For example, he discovered Alla Gorbunova, a contemporary experimental novelist, because of positive online reviews in Russia. In light of her reception in Russia, he told me he was astounded that a small publisher like himself could afford to translate her — he expected that she would have already been signed by a larger Anglophone press.¹⁴⁷

In contrast to the above examples, an absence of language skills impacts what information is accessible to publishers, and by extension which books they consider for translation. When German-born Gesche Ipsen, a former editor at Pushkin Press (mid-2010s), decided to proactively search for information on new Russian novels, she had little success (by her own admission she does not speak much Russian). This was in part because Russian publishers were not forthcoming when contacted directly.¹⁴⁸ Ipsen acknowledged, therefore, the importance of having employees with specific language skills.¹⁴⁹ Russian author Anna Starobinets' children's novel *Catlantis* was published by Pushkin Press largely because they employed a Russian-language graduate at the time who suggested the novel.¹⁵⁰ The difficulties of accessing contextualising information

¹⁴⁴ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁵ 'About Us', *Open Letter* <<https://www.openletterbooks.org/pages/about>> [accessed 8 January 2023]. This is in comparison to Open Letters' three titles from Russian, ten from French and five from Germany.

¹⁴⁶ For an illustration of how this informs which novels he publishes, see the list pertaining to Deep Vellum novels earlier this chapter, p. 131.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Evans. He published her novel in 2023; Alla Gorbunova, *It's the End of the World, My Love*, trans. by Elina Alter (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2022).

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Ipsen.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Ipsen. At the time of writing Ipsen had just translated, from German, Shishkin's politicised history of Russia; Mikhail Shishkin, *My Russia: War or Peace?*.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Ipsen; Starobinets, *Catlantis*.

without Russian-language ability will resonate with my later discussion of Pushkin Press's translation of Elizarov's *The Librarian*.¹⁵¹

For lesser-known languages in the West such as Russian, pivot, or relay languages can also play an important role in the discovery of new titles.¹⁵² Ipsen related an anecdote demonstrating the particular role of pivot languages in the commissioning process. Translator Bryan Karetnyk was invited to suggest Russian novels to Pushkin Press in 2012 when Adam Freudenheim first bought the business.¹⁵³ Karetnyk was working for the UK Civil Service at the time and had pitched some translation projects to Freudenheim when the latter worked at Penguin Classics. Although the projects were not commissioned, the pair stayed in touch. For Pushkin Press, Karetnyk suggested the mid-twentieth-century Russian-Ossetian émigré author Gaito Gazdanov, among other candidates. The commission was not accepted however until much later when Ipsen read a translation of Gazdanov's novel *Prizrak Aleksandra Vol'fa*, (*The Spectre of Alexander Wolf*, 1948) in her native German at the Frankfurt Book Fair.¹⁵⁴ She decided to read it based on a review she happened upon in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, which runs a literature supplement during the annual event. Ipsen did not mention to me that Gazdanov had previously been translated into English in 1950 by Nicholas Wreden for E.P. Dutton & Co.¹⁵⁵ Possibly this was because Pushkin Press did not consider the existence of a previous translation many decades out of print to be relevant, or simply because she was unaware. Again, this absence of context is crucial to my analysis of *The Librarian* in Chapter Four.

2.4a Sample Translations

Aside from accessing texts via pivot languages, sample translations can also help publishers to overcome their frequent inability to assess a Russophone text. As part of their pitch, translators and agents often provide an English sample

¹⁵¹ See Chapter Four, p. 251.

¹⁵² For a detailed discussion around pivot languages and their definition, see Mansell, 'Where do Borders Lie in Translation', p. 55.

¹⁵³ Interview with Ipsen; Interview with Bryan Karetnyk, 25 May 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Ipsen, Interview with Karetnyk; Gajto Gazdanov, *Das Phantom des Alexander Wolf: Roman*, trans. by Rosemarie Tietze (Munich: Hanser, 2012).

¹⁵⁵ Mikhail Elizarov, *The Librarian*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Pushkin Press, 2015); Gaito Gazdanov, *The Specter of Alexander Wolf*, trans. by Nicholas Wreden, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1950).

translation of a few thousand words.¹⁵⁶ For example, New York-based agent Markus Hoffmann had a sample of Shishkin's *Maidenhair* translated by Gambrell (although the final translation was carried out by Schwartz).¹⁵⁷ Wiedling's literary agency uses Bromfield's sample translation of Senchin's *Eltyshevy* to market the novel.¹⁵⁸ Wiedling maintains that English-language samples are not only indispensable in the UK and US, but are also key to selling foreign rights in other languages, even when the novel is not ultimately commissioned for translation into English.¹⁵⁹

Agents do not, however, possess sufficient resources to afford many sample translations, and will only fund them when they feel a novel has a chance of commission. Before COVID-19, Wiedling commissioned roughly three sample translations a year.¹⁶⁰ Typically, these translations cost literary agents about a thousand euros (for fifty pages), but they do not guarantee that the rights will be sold.¹⁶¹ Wiedling stated that it might take years for a sample to be commissioned for a full translation. He was puzzled by the fact that *Eltyshevy* remains uncommissioned in English despite its high-quality sample.¹⁶²

Although the benefit of sample translations in the commissioning process is in no doubt, this is negated by the high cost of production. Their importance to the translation industry has been reflected however, in the recent attention they have received. Wiedling, along with other literary agents, lobbied Institut Perevoda to fund sample translations.¹⁶³ However, they had no success.¹⁶⁴ In early 2020

¹⁵⁶ In fact, translators often make a portion of their income from translating samples. For a discussion of the issues around translation, and the free speculative work translators have to engage in when pitching novels, see above, p. 162.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Hoffmann, 27 October 2021; Interview with Shishkin. A portion of this sample translation was published before the novel was commissioned for translation. See Mikhail Shishkin, 'We Can't Go On Living This Way', trans. by Jamey Gambrell, *World Literature Today*, 18 April 2012 <<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/we-cant-go-living-way-mikhail-shishkin>> [accessed 17 September 2021].

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Wiedling; Roman Senchin, *Eltyshevy*, (Moscow: Eksmo, 2010).

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Wiedling.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Wiedling.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Wiedling.

¹⁶² This might change, since Wiedling rebranded Senchin as an anti-Putin author in 2022. For more on this, see Chapter One, p. 119.

¹⁶³ This took place before February 2022. As I will discuss in my Conclusion, Western publishers are not currently accepting funding from IP. See p. 351.

¹⁶⁴ During our interview Wiedling discussed the fact that a number of literary agents had lobbied Institut Perevoda to pay for sample translations. At the time of writing they had not had any success, and post-2022 this looks increasingly unlikely. PEN launched a scheme for funding translation samples at the London Book Fair in 2022 and their first round of funding focused on

RusTrans launched PUBLISH with European Research Council funding. This was a one-off seed-funding project that awarded money to support the production of sample translations of twelve contemporary Russian translation projects, and to compensate translators for the job of pitching these novels to publishers.¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, English PEN relaunched Pen Presents in April 2022 specifically to fund sample translations.¹⁶⁶ In 2022 the first round of PEN funding focused on sample translations from Indian authors, and every six months the programme alternates between calls for translations from specific languages, regions or genres, and a more open call for translations from any language.¹⁶⁷

The importance of translators in publishing networks cannot be overestimated, since they are key to alerting publishers to new titles, to providing contextualising information, and to producing sample translations. Through this work, sometimes low-paid or undertaken for free, translators cultivate their image in order to grow their reputation and career. Some, such as Chandler and Dralyuk, form an exclusive group of translators who might work to support one another, and also to confer their symbolic capital on others.¹⁶⁸ Some translators, such as Lawton, are unique in fostering close relationships with specific publishers and authors in order to create their brand. Other translators, such as Schwartz, Hayden, and to a greater degree Bromfield, work ‘in the shadows’ and do not have as much influence on which titles are published, despite the fact that they are prolific in

six samples from India. They aim to promote bibliodiversity and highlight under-translated languages. See ‘Pen Presents’, *English Pen* <<https://www.englishpen.org/translation/pen-presents/>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

¹⁶⁵ RusTrans funded twelve sample translations for their PUBLISH project; ‘PUBLISH: Studying Translation Dynamically’ <<https://rustrans.exeter.ac.uk/translation-archive/>> [accessed 30 November 2022]. Of these projects, only two were successful. Shelley Fairweather-Vega published her translations of short stories by Nadezhda Chernova and Asel Omar in *Amanat: Women’s Writing from Kazakhstan*, trans. by Zaire Batayeva and Shelley Fairweather-Vega (New York: Gaudy Boy Translates, 2022). Alex Shvartsman’s translations of K.A. Teryna’s ‘The Factory’ was published in *The Best of World SF: Volume 2*, ed. by Lavie Tidhar (London: Head of Zeus, 2022).

¹⁶⁶ ‘Pen Presents’, *English Pen* <<https://www.englishpen.org/translation/pen-presents/>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

¹⁶⁷ ‘PEN Presents: A New Programme to Support Sample Translations’, *English Pen*, 2022 <<https://www.englishpen.org/posts/news/pen-presents-a-new-programme-to-support-sample-translations/>> [accessed 24 January 2024].

¹⁶⁸ In our interview, emerging translator Reuben Woolley told me that Chandler connected him to publishers and introduced him to key figures that would eventually help him to secure a contract with Maclehose Press for translating a novel by Andrey Kurkov; Andrey Kurkov, *Jimi Hendrix Live in Lviv*, trans. by Reuben Woolley (London: Maclehose Press, 2023).

their work.¹⁶⁹ However, no amount of translator influence can negate the need for funding for the majority of titles translated from Russian into English.

3 Funding and Comparative Titles

Despite editors' and translators' intentions, commissioning decisions are subordinate to the question of money. Even arts-oriented independent publishers must battle with what Bourdieu terms a 'dual consciousness' in their efforts to reconcile the publisher's literary mission with economic reality.¹⁷⁰ Ipsen described the impact of such economic concerns at a middling-sized independent publishing firm. At an editorial meeting the book under discussion was not commissioned because the sales department argued that they would be unlikely to sell the rights, and that the novel would therefore not make the firm any money.¹⁷¹ In this section I will discuss similar financial and logistical constraints, encompassing the key issues of comparative titles and publishers' reliance on funding.

3.1 Comparative Titles

As part of the commissioning process, a list of comparative titles, or "comps", is usually made. Comps are titles already published in the target culture that have comparable themes and sales expectations. The reasons for producing comps are multifarious. Since authors in translation are often unknown to the target market, comps provide a framework for editors to project sales, and to lobby for a book's commission. Comps also provide salespeople with an invaluable shorthand by which to describe a novel when pitching it to booksellers.¹⁷² Every publisher I have interviewed has referenced comps in one way or another, although because of the differences between the ways in which commercial and independent publishers are funded (and since commercial publishers have greater access to sales information, as I will explain below) comps are more likely to play an integral part in the commissioning process for firms such as PRH. In fact, PRH recommends that aspiring authors include comps when pitching a novel. PRH advises that comparative titles need to be recently published, of a

¹⁶⁹ Sela-Sheffy, *The Translators' Personae*, p. 619.

¹⁷⁰ Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 138.

¹⁷¹ Interview with Ipsen.

¹⁷² Interviews with Evans; Krotov.

similar format, a similar genre, and have a similar target audience to the book in question.¹⁷³ Evans described how comparing sales figures disadvantaged new Russian authors. He could not, for example, compare Sorokin to American best-seller Don DeLillo, despite their thematic similarity. This is because the two would not have comparable sales prospects.¹⁷⁴

The comps system contributes to the issue of isomorphism in the literary market. This is especially true for novels translated from Russian, due to their small number — there are not many other Russian novels in English to compare them with. This reliance on comps means the novels that reach bookshop shelves are frequently similar to others that have already been published. Where there is no comparable novel in existence, new Russian novels are less likely to be published at all, by the larger firms at least.¹⁷⁵ Market logic dictates that only by comparing new novels to similar titles already in print can a publisher or bookseller have any sense of how well the book will fare economically. For smaller publishers this issue is exacerbated by the fact that (certainly in the US) they cannot afford to access the sales data that might help them to position their books within the market.¹⁷⁶

Evans illustrated this issue, stating that access to BookScan, which records most book sales across Northern America, costs \$5500 a year.¹⁷⁷ This makes it unattainable for most smaller independent firms. Former FSG editor Krotov highlighted the importance of BookScan for researching comps at a large publisher. Access to sales information enabled editors at FSG to remove some guesswork from the commissioning process. Krotov was aware, however, of the pitfalls in the system, since he was only able to see the books that had amounted

¹⁷³ 'Comp Titles—An Elevator Pitch for Your Book'

<<https://authornews.penguinrandomhouse.com/comp-titles-an-elevator-pitch-for-your-book/>> [accessed 19 December 2022]. The article suggests following recommendations such as 'other readers bought this' on Amazon or asking Goodreads to recommend titles based on your reading lists.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Evans.

¹⁷⁵ This can be seen in PRH's limited number of contemporary Russian titles, as described above, p. 128.

¹⁷⁶ Interviews with Evans; Krotov.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Evans. For more details, see 'NPD BookScan', *The NPD Group* <<https://www.npd.com/industry-expertise/books/>> [accessed 8 January 2023].

to sales, and not those that had failed to make any sales at all. He notes that there was a 'lot of bias' against non-English novels inherent in the system.¹⁷⁸

Because of the reliance on comps in commissioning Russian novels at least, PRH's decisions remain influential, even if independent publishers are beginning to make some headway in shaping the market. As I argued above, PRH's commissioning decisions either follow the Russian Exotic model or are novels marketed via politics which purport to be written by dissident authors, or to reveal something about Putin's Russia.¹⁷⁹ What the Big Five publish matters because, reinforced by the comps system, they are the model that other publishers are supposed to emulate. Reliance on sales figures, and title recognition, which are dominated in the UK by PRH, skews decision-making: if PRH publish a novel, it will likely reach more book shops, and as a result, sell more copies.¹⁸⁰

Meanwhile, the Russian authors published by independents such as Glagoslav, who because of their small size and limited marketing success rarely sell many books, are likely to be considered too great a risk by larger firms due to previous low sales: being published by such presses can relegate Russian authors to obscurity.¹⁸¹ This reliance on comps means that commercial publishers are more likely to make conservative commissioning choices based on past successes — as we have seen, no contemporary Russian novels sell in any great quantity.¹⁸² This leaves independent presses to take the most risks, forcing them to remain in their marginal position in the publishing field, as with Bourdieu's model, and to publish from the periphery.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Krotov.

¹⁷⁹ For example, all of PRH's contemporary Russian novels are overtly political. See above p. 121. See Chapter Four for an analysis of the political marketing around new translations from Russian.

¹⁸⁰ As noted above, despite the rise in symbolic capital held by independent publishers, PRH held 72% of the UK market share for Russian fiction in 2019; Nielsen data.

¹⁸¹ None of Glagoslav's predominantly contemporary Russian authors have subsequently been commissioned by larger publishers. See; 'Russian Books Archives | Glagoslav Publications' <<https://glagoslav.com/product-category/russian-books/>> [accessed 23 June 2023].

¹⁸² See above, p. 124.

¹⁸³ Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 135. As discussed above, this is becoming an increasingly winning strategy when it leads to winning literary prizes. See p. 130.

3.2 The Role of Funding

Independent firms' readiness to commission more contemporary Russian books than the Big Five is in large part down to funding, as well as their desire to accrue symbolic capital and create their own 'brand'. As the following section explores, the role of external funding differs between large and small publishing firms. As every publisher I have spoken with has explained, publishing a translation is expensive.¹⁸⁴ In addition to purchasing the rights, there is the matter of time. When a novel is translated, the rights will typically be purchased before translation can begin. This creates a delay of around a year, depending on the length of the novel and speed of the translator, until the translation is ready.¹⁸⁵

There is also the additional cost of paying the translator. The minimum rate recommended by the Society of Authors for translated fiction at the time of writing was £100 for a thousand words, making longer novels an even riskier enterprise.¹⁸⁶ However, this rate, the society recommends, should increase depending on context, such as how quickly a translation is required, or how much additional research it will entail. The translation survey carried out by Dalkey Archive in 2011 identifies the cost of paying translators as the largest barrier to publishing translations, with 77.8% of publishers stating that this was the biggest issue.¹⁸⁷ The survey also revealed that in 2011, the average cost of producing a 250-page translation with a print run of 3000 was \$22,400 (£13,300). Although most contemporary Russian fiction has a smaller original print run than this, these figures demonstrate that it would be unlikely for a publisher to make a profit by selling under a thousand copies, which as I have shown is the case for the majority of contemporary Russian fiction in translation in the UK.

¹⁸⁴ In 2011 Dalkey Archive carried out a survey of Anglophone publishers, who all confirmed the importance of funding for the production of translations; '*Research into Barriers to Translation and Best Practices. A Study For The Global Translation Initiative* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2011). Available at <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Global_Translation_Initiative_Study.pdf>, p. 31.

¹⁸⁵ Literary agent Markus Hoffmann noted that Gambrell couldn't work on Shishkin because she took so long with her Sorokin translations. Interview with Hoffmann.

¹⁸⁶ This is despite the fact that not all translators demand to be paid for their work. Bromfield also commented that he had to fight to be paid more than this rate, and that most translators would be lucky to receive it. See above, p. 150.

<<https://societyofauthors.org/Groups/Translators>> [accessed 5 February 2023].

¹⁸⁷ *Research into Barriers to Translation and Best Practices. A Study for The Global Translation Initiative*, pp. 34-5.

Because of the almost certain economic losses publishers incur when producing a translation, external funding is frequently necessary, especially for smaller firms. During my interviews, independent publishers acknowledged that translation should be properly paid, and that the only way to achieve this was through external funding.¹⁸⁸ Natasha Perova, co-founder of Moscow-based publishing house Glas, agreed, observing that small presses, who she opined are the only ones willing to publish contemporary Russian novels, are only able to produce a translated book 'if there is a grant.'¹⁸⁹

Finally, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, there is the issue of sales. The majority of contemporary translations do not sell in large quantities, and it is unlikely that a publisher will make significant money from them. This leads to a preference among commercial publishers for nineteenth-century Russian classics, and to a lesser extent to early twentieth-century authors. In part this is because titles over a hundred years old are out of copyright and free to obtain, but this is also because older novels often come with audience recognition and attendant sales.¹⁹⁰ These issues can make publishers reluctant to translate contemporary novels which, without author name-recognition, require much more effort to market. These challenges were addressed by Evans, who complained that publishers often have a reputation for paying translators small amounts of money, while in reality he might pay a translator \$10,000 to translate a novel that will only sell a thousand copies.¹⁹¹ Although as a non-profit publisher he regards it as his mission to publish the novels that the commercial publishers will not consider, he acknowledged that the economics of this situation are 'dire.'¹⁹²

Larger publishers do not rely on funding to the same extent as the smaller houses. One commercial publisher stated that they do not always apply for grants, because they want to leave money for the smaller publishers that need to access it.¹⁹³ This same publisher's principal stated aim was to publish quality

¹⁸⁸ Interviewee #4.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Perova.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Ipsen.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Evans.

¹⁹² Interview with Evans. Sapiro notes that the decision to publish translations that will not make any money is common among gatekeepers, and that they often press ahead with such projects in order to gain 'symbolic profits such as recognition in the field.' Sapiro, 'How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?', p. 90.

¹⁹³ Interviewee #1.

literature. The subtext of this conversation confirmed that the publisher benefitted from publishing well-regarded, and at times obscure Russian titles (though rarely contemporary) by an accumulation of symbolic capital.¹⁹⁴ In further demonstration of the difference in attitude towards grants between independent and commercial publishers, Krotov stated that he did not apply for funding for his novels at FSG because it would have been too much additional work.¹⁹⁵ Meanwhile, a large independent press noted that they could take a risk and publish without a grant because their funding worked in such a way that the more successful novels could support low sales for others.¹⁹⁶

The availability of external funding in recent years, the sources of which I will outline in the following section, led to an increased number of translations from Russian. Despite the positive effect of external funding on the production of Russian translations, Karetnyk sounded an alarm about reliance on such support during our interview in 2021 — he worried what would happen if funding ever ceased to be available. He expressed concern that publishers might only be commissioning Russian novels because they were funded externally, most often by Russia's IP, rather than commissioning a book because they loved it.¹⁹⁷ He regularly hears the phrase 'we would love to do this, but it would be dependent on securing funding from one of these bodies.'¹⁹⁸ Munby echoed this observation, commenting that if a source-culture funding body finances the entire publication of a book then publishers do not have to be so concerned with sales, since they will not make a financial loss.¹⁹⁹ As the following section, as well as my Conclusion demonstrate, Karetnyk's and Munby's concerns were not misplaced with regards to Russian fiction.

3.3 Funding Bodies: English PEN, PEN/Heim, Arts Council England and Transcript

As is the case for most languages, there are limited sources of funding available specifically for the translation of Russian fiction in the UK and US. There are two

¹⁹⁴ Interviewee #1. This ties with Bourdieu's description of the French literary market; Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution'.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Krotov.

¹⁹⁶ Interviewee #5.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Karetnyk.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Karetnyk.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Munby.

Russian, source culture funding sources, Transcript and IP, and which I will introduce in full later in this chapter. In the UK publishers are able to apply for financial support to English PEN via its PEN Translates project, which is supported by Arts Council England.²⁰⁰ Publishers may apply for up to 75% of translation costs, or more if their firm turns over less than £500,000 annually. PEN hires established translators to assess both the source text and the translation sample. This information is then evaluated by a selection panel of publishing professionals who make the final decision. In contrast to the application process at IP, Munby described the process as ‘rigorous’ and ‘protracted’.²⁰¹

One of English PEN’s guiding principles is bibliodiversity: they aim to highlight literature from lesser represented languages and cultures.²⁰² In many ways, this principle contradicts the system of comps described earlier, since it gives preference to novels that might not easily be matched with comparative titles.²⁰³ Russian translations funded prior to 2022 include Guzel Yakhina’s *Zuleikha (Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza, 2015)* which tells the story of an ethnic Tatar woman; Narine Abgaryan’s *Three Apples Fell from the Sky*, which is set in Armenia; and a collection of Jewish author and dissident Maria Stepanova’s poetry, *War of the*

²⁰⁰ ‘PEN Translates’, *English Pen* <<https://www.englishpen.org/translation/pen-translates/>> [accessed 9 January 2023]. Other funding might be available from other agencies such as Creative Scotland, but no translations from Russian have been funded by such organisations at the time of writing. In the United States regional funding might be available. For example Deep Vellum received some funding from National Endowment for the Arts. See ‘Deep Vellum, Translators to Receive Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts!’, *Deep Vellum* <<https://www.deepvellum.org/news/nea-2021>> [accessed 9 January 2023].

²⁰¹ Karetnyk also noted, ‘I never received PEN funding for any of it because it is generally accepted that they’re so much more difficult to get funding from, and you have to jump through a lot more hoops and the funding is usually a bit lower than the publishers usually get.’; Interview with Karetnyk.

²⁰² PEN’s website defines bibliodiversity as ‘the variety and diversity of literature available in a region or country. The books supported by PEN Translates contribute to or enhance the UK’s bibliodiversity in a number of ways. Books might: Be translated from a language underrepresented in UK publishing; Emerge from a country or culture underrepresented in UK publishing; Be of a form or genre underrepresented in UK publishing; Offer new or previously elided perspectives on existing or already-represented themes, contexts or cultures; Come from and represent less-heard voices – from both authors and translators whose perspectives and identities are less-represented in UK publishing; Address themes that are underrepresented in UK publishing.’; ‘PEN Translates’, *English Pen* <<https://www.englishpen.org/translation/pen-translates/>> [accessed 9 January 2023].

²⁰³ See above, p. 156.

Beasts and the Animals.²⁰⁴ All of these are written by minority groups, although *Zuleikha* especially achieved great success in Russia.²⁰⁵

While supporting bibliodiversity, English PEN's choices are also likely to be political. This tendency is in line with their mission statement that they support 'writers at risk' and the right to 'freedom of expression nationally and internationally.'²⁰⁶ For example, in 2004 PEN awarded a grant to *Putin's Russia* (2004) by the journalist and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya.²⁰⁷ In January 2023 PEN funded three translations from Russian: Sergey Khazov-Kassia's *The Gospel According To... (Evangelie ot..., 2017)*; Kira Yarmysh's *The Incredible Events in Women's Cell Number Three (Neveroiatnye proisshestviia v zhenskoi kamere no. 3, 2021)*; and Belarusian Maxim Znak's *The Zekameron (Zekameron, 2022)*.²⁰⁸ These last three novels can also be considered political, since they are written respectively by a gay rights activist, Alexei Navalny's press secretary, and an imprisoned Belarusian lawyer. These books are political, rather than examples of Lipovetsky's Russian Exotic.

The system for PEN grants in America — the PEN/Heim — differs in that translators apply for a grant prior to signing a publishing contract.²⁰⁹ If successful, they have the advantage of pitching a translation project to publishers with pre-approved funding. Like English PEN, the PEN/Heim translation grant advantages peripheral languages. According to their website, about 70% of their grants lead to publication. Between 2004-2016 PEN/Heim awarded grants to novels

²⁰⁴ Russophone titles awarded grants before 2022 are: Abgaryan, *Three Apples Fell from the Sky; The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*; Anna Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia*, trans. by Arch Tait (London: Harvill Press, 2004); Maria Stepanova, *War of the Beasts and the Animals*, trans. by Sasha Dugdale (Bloodaxe Books, 2021); Yakhina, *Zuleikha*.

²⁰⁵ The novel was made into a series and aired on Russia's main television channel, although its negative representation of Stalinist Russia resulted in its star Chulpan Khamatova receiving death threats. See 'Skandal s serialom Zuleikha', *TIA*, 2020 <<https://tvernews.ru/news/257706/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]. For more on Khamatova, see Conclusion, p. 334.

²⁰⁶ 'What We Stand For', *English Pen* <<https://www.englishpen.org/about/what-we-stand-for/>> [accessed 1 June 2023].

²⁰⁷ Anna Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia*, trans. by Arch Tait (London: Harvill Press, 2004).

²⁰⁸ Brown, 'English PEN Announces PEN Translates Winners'. *The Gospel According to...* is yet to be published but is being translated by Reuben Woolley and is slated to be published by Polari Press; Kira Yarmysh, *Neveroiatnye proisshestviia v zhenskoi kamere no. 3* (Moscow: AST, 2021). Kira Yarmysh, *The Incredible Events in Women's Cell Number Three*, trans. by Arch Tait (London: Serpent's Tail, 2023); Maxim Znak, *Zekameron* (Moscow: Vremia, 2022); Maxim Znak, *The Zekameron*, trans. by Jim Dingley and Ella Dingley (Edinburgh: Scotland Street Press, 2023); Sergei Khazov-Kassia, *Evangelie Ot...* (Moscow: Kolonna publication, 2017).

²⁰⁹ 'PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grants', *PEN America*, 2019 <<https://pen.org/pen-heim-grants/>> [accessed 4 May 2023].

translated from thirty-five languages. Of these, eight awards were made to translators working from Russian, though not all appear to have been published.²¹⁰ This funding system does not reduce the risk of a translator working for free — there is no guarantee that a publisher will take on their project even if it is funded by PEN/Heim, as indicated by the 70% success rate cited above. In such cases, the translator will have prepared a pitch without payment. Translator and PEN assessor Munby commented, however, that the work of preparing a pitch would have to be done by translators regardless.²¹¹

There are other avenues to funding. Authors might self-fund.²¹² Other private sources might be available, or translators might opt not to be paid at all.²¹³ There are some occasions when funding is not required — this is more likely to be the case with commercial publishers, as discussed earlier. However, Evans published Lawton's translation of Sorokin's *Their Four Hearts* without external funding, deciding, I suggest, to take a financial risk in order to create symbolic capital.²¹⁴ Ipsen remarked that Pushkin Press was initially able to fund some translations without external grants when Adam Freudenheim took over the firm in 2012, and had some of his own capital.²¹⁵ However, in line with other small publishers, funding soon became necessary. In October 2021, director of IP Evgeny Reznichenko remarked that the institute had been supporting a project with Pushkin Press.²¹⁶ Although a number of the publisher's early twentieth-

²¹⁰ A full list of recipients can be found here; 'PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant Recipients', *PEN America*, 2018 <<https://pen.org/pen-heim-recipients/>> [accessed 20 January 2023].

²¹¹ Interview with Munby. This confirms the large amount of speculative unpaid work translators are expected to carry out, as discussed on page p. 141.

²¹² Interviews with Perova and Schwartz. For example, Deep Vellum's *The Tool and the Butterflies* was funded by a private benefactor; Interview with Evans; Lipskerov, *The Tool and the Butterflies*.

²¹³ See above, p. 150.

²¹⁴ Interview with Lawton; Sorokin, *Their Four Hearts*. I have not been able to discover how the novel was paid for, but it has been published with no funder listed, and Lawton was aware that this would be the case. It is possible that Evans was so excited to work with Sorokin that he decided the symbolic capital he would gain from his publication would be worth it; Interview with Evans.

²¹⁵ Interview with Ipsen.

²¹⁶ Lee Yew Leong, 'An Interview with Evgeny Nikolaevich Reznichenko from Russia's Institute for Literary Translation - Asymptote', trans. by Sophie Benbelaid, October 2021 <<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/an-interview-with-evgeny-nikolaevich-reznichenko-from-russias-institute-for-literary-translation/>> [accessed 26 January 2022].

century Russian translations were funded by IP, it has not been possible to find out any more information about the arrangement.²¹⁷

The most active funding source after IP, which is the subject of the next section, is Russia-based Transcript, founded in 2009 by the Prokhorov Fund.²¹⁸ This organisation funds translations of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry into languages around the world. Most years they award grants for around a hundred translations, with a portion going to Anglophone publishers, and with a focus on contemporary authors. Recent recipients include novels by Natalia Meshchaninova, Alisa Ganieva, Sorokin, Polina Barskova, and Maria Stepanova.²¹⁹ Unlike IP, as we shall see, Transcript's choices tend to favour predominantly dissident writers.²²⁰

3.4 Institut Perevoda, Read Russia and Glagoslav

The most influential force in Russian translated fiction until February 2022 was Institut Perevoda (IP), and its Anglophone representative Read Russia. To begin, I will describe the activities and motivations of both of these organisations and detail their links to the Dutch/British publisher Glagoslav. I will then outline IP's role as one of the principal gatekeepers in the translation of Russian fiction. IP began operation in 2011 chaired by Vladimir Grigoriev, deputy head of the Russian Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication (Rospechat').²²¹

²¹⁷ The following Pushkin Press novels have been funded by IP: N. Berberova, *The Last and the First*, trans. by Marian Schwartz (London: Pushkin Press, 2021); Elizarov, *The Librarian*; Gaito Gazdanov, *The Beggar and Other Stories*, trans. by Bryan Karetnyk (London: Pushkin Press, 2018); Gaito Gazdanov, *The Flight*, trans. by Bryan Karetnyk (London: Pushkin Press, 2016); Irina Odoevtseva, *Isolde*, trans. by Bryan Karetnyk (London: Pushkin Press, 2019); Alexander Pushkin, *Yevgeny Onegin*, trans. by Anthony Briggs (London: Pushkin Press, 2016); Starobinets, *Catantia*; Teffi, *Subtly Worded and Other Stories*, trans. by Anne Marie Jackson and others (London: Pushkin Press, 2014).

²¹⁸ Although at the time of writing in August 2023 Mikhail Prokhorov had not been sanctioned, Transcript's website was only accessible in Russian, and there were no British or American publishers on their list of grant recipients for 2022. See 'Transcript' <<https://www.prokhorovfund.ru/projects/own/detail/120/>> [accessed 30 November 2022].

²¹⁹ Barskova, *Living Pictures*; Ganieva, *Bride and Groom*; Ganieva, *Offended Sensibilities*; Ganieva, *The Mountain and the Wall*; Meshchaninova, *Stories of a Life*; Sorokin, *Telluria*; Maria Stepanova, *In Memory of Memory: A Romance*, trans. by Sasha Dugdale (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2021). The Prokhorov Fund also runs the prestigious NOS literary prize. Recent winners include Alla Gorbunova (2020), Maria Stepanova (2018), while finalists have included Natalia Meshchaninova, Guzel Yakhina and Polina Barskova. Sorokin won the 'Nos of the Decade' for his novel *Metel'* in 2019. For more details, see 'Literaturnaia Premiia NOS' <<https://www.prokhorovfund.ru/projects/own/detail/108/>> [accessed 29 May 2023].

²²⁰ Despite numerous attempts, I was not able to speak with anyone from Transcript.

²²¹ 'Institut perevoda poivavitsia v Rossii', *RIA Novosti*, 3 September 2010 <<https://ria.ru/20100903/271894213.html>> [accessed 9 January 2023].

Grigoriev is an important figure in Russia's literary scene — he founded Vagrius, one of Russia's largest publishers in 1992, as well as establishing the Bol'shaia Kniga Prize in 2006.²²² IP was founded with the aim of supporting literary translation from Russian into languages all over the world, and to date has supported over 1,177 translations into forty-eight different languages.²²³

Read Russia (henceforth RR) was a cultural body that represented the work of IP in the UK and US, and was launched in New York by Peter Kaufman in 2012.²²⁴ There was also a French branch, the Bibliothèque Russe, but in 2023 it was unclear whether either of these organisations were still operating.²²⁵ RR was fully funded by Institut Perevoda and organised events such as book festivals, Russian literature week, author events and a translator symposium in Chatham, in the US.²²⁶ Additionally, in 2016 RR launched the Russian Library at the University of Columbia. The project aimed to publish a hundred key Russian literary texts of varying genres, but in 2023 it appears that this has come to an end — albeit without any official statement from RR.²²⁷ Finally, RR also hosted the Read Russia prize, which awarded the best translations from Russian into any foreign language for the categories of nineteenth-century Russian classics, twentieth-century literature, contemporary literature, and poetry.²²⁸

The influence of IP on Russian translations into English is vast. In a 2021 interview with Evgeny Reznichenko, published on the translation website *Asymptote*, the director of IP claimed that his organisation supports

²²² 'Natsional'naia Literaturnaia Premiia "Bol'shaia Kniga"' <<http://www.bigbook.ru/>> [accessed 9 January 2023].

²²³ 'Opublikovanny pri nashei podderzhke' <https://institutperevoda.ru/knigi/published/filter/clear/apply/page2_42/> [accessed 4 May 2023].

²²⁴ 'Read Russia' <<https://readrussia.org/>> [accessed 20 January 2023].

²²⁵ The website for the French branch appears to be 'under (re) construction' in January 2023. See 'Site En Cours de Reconstruction' <<https://mailchi.mp/41671e8a51e9/rbf/>> [accessed 9 January 2023].

²²⁶ 'Read Russia' <<https://readrussia.org/>> [accessed 20 January 2023].

²²⁷ 'Russian Library', *Columbia University Press* <<https://cup.columbia.edu/russian-library/>> [accessed 9 January 2023]. Since the war began in February 2022, the University of Columbia has ceased accepting funding from Institut Perevoda. For a discussion of the literary scene post- February 2022, see Conclusion, pp. 351-2.

²²⁸ Read Russia, 'Announcing the 2020 READ RUSSIA PRIZE' <<https://readrussia.org/journal/article/announcing-the-2020-read-russia-prize/>> [accessed 20 January 2023].

approximately one hundred and fifty translations every year.²²⁹ Many of these translations were into English.²³⁰ Reznichenko noted:

Translation into English often paves the way for translations into other languages. Even if it is because the publisher, who ultimately has the last word, will not read a book in Russian, but can do so in English. So we, of course, are interested in the English translations of books by Russian authors. It is not by accident that we support many English translations, including the Russian Library initiative that publishes translations by readers from the United Kingdom, the United States, and other anglophone countries.

According to my research, it is inaccurate to suggest that publication in English leads to rights being purchased by other countries, however. In a 2023 telephone conversation with Wiedling, he opined that although this is helpful, since so few translations are published in English in comparison to French and German for example, relying on UK/US commission strategies for guidance makes little sense.²³¹ Instead Wiedling asserted that while the existence of a published English translation might persuade a publisher to buy the rights to a book, they are more likely to be influenced by the reputation of the firm. For example, Wiedling argued that when established UK publisher Polity signed a biography of Volodymyr Zelensky at the London Book Fair in April 2022, this triggered publishers from other countries who had not yet decided, to quickly follow suit.²³² While there could have been other factors involved in this chain of events, Wiedling felt that the reputation of the publisher was the most significant factor in the book's success.

For Wiedling, the existence of sample translations in English is more important to foreign publishers than the fact of publication in the UK or US because most publishers speak English; an English sample makes the text widely accessible — it acts as a pivot language.²³³ Wiedling noted that it is the need for English

²²⁹ Lee Yew Leong, 'An Interview with Evgeny Nikolaevich Reznichenko'.

²³⁰ In comparison to support for 120 translations into English, P funded 111 translations into French, 96 into Spanish, and 49 into German. Wiedling's figures revealed that Serbia was in fact the country that he sold rights for Russian books to the most frequently, revealing a geopolitical link. IP have funded 59 of translations into Serbian — a book market that is considerably smaller than Germany's.

²³¹ Conversation with Wiedling via email, February 2023.

²³² Wiedling noted that publishers such as Gallimard, Polity, Faber & Faber and Knopf are all key players in this regard. Conversation with Thomas Wiedling via Zoom, 8th February 2023.

²³³ See earlier in this chapter, p. 153.

translation samples of Russian novels that sometimes prompts him to sell rights to UK-based Glagoslav.²³⁴ According to interviews, ‘ninety-nine per cent’ of this Dutch-British publisher’s translations are funded by IP, and they operate on a print-on-demand system, which means that they can keep their costs low. In 2019 they represented 0.01% of the Russian-to-English translated fiction market, and yet they accounted for 40% of Wiedling’s contracts for Russian-English translations between 2018-2022.²³⁵

Since Glagoslav do not sell their books via shops, but rely on online trade, their sales figures, and visibility, are low.²³⁶ Given Wiedling’s point that having sample translations in English is key to selling rights to other countries, Glagoslav’s publications could be instrumental in popularising Russian literature if not for English speakers, then for the world literary market. This strategy does not, however, appear to be successful. Wiedling revealed that for his own business, translations published by Glagoslav only prompted uptake by other publishers on two occasions.²³⁷ Again, the effectiveness of this publishing strategy, as with IP’s other efforts detailed above, remains minimal, and actually works to reduce the popularity of contemporary Russian literature abroad. Accordingly, I propose that Reznichenko’s assertion that publication in English increases the chances of rights being sold to other countries indicates Russia’s lack of understanding of the Anglophone publishing market. This would align with the lack of success and visibility Russian novels have in the UK and US. It also might explain the limited success of RR in promoting Russian literature in the Anglophone West, as described in Theocharis’ study.²³⁸

²³⁴ Phone conversation with Wiedling. This is because it is expensive to produce translation samples. See above, p. 156.

²³⁵ Nielsen BookData. Email correspondence with Wiedling.

²³⁶ See Chapter Four for a discussion of reviews. I reviewed Prilepin’s *The Monastery*, and the novel also received some attention in the London Review of Books, but as a rule, reviews are few. See: Sarah Gear, ‘Camp Russia: On Zakhar Prilepin’s “The Monastery”’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 18 December 2020 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/camp-russia-on-zakhar-prilepins-the-monastery/>> [accessed 12 February 2021]; James Meek, ‘Stubborn as a Tomb’, *London Review of Books*, 22 April 2021 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n08/james-meek/stubborn-as-a-tomb>> [accessed 1 June 2023].

²³⁷ Email correspondence with Wiedling.

²³⁸ Theocharis, ‘Russian literature will fix everything’. See Chapter One, p. 72.

3.5 Institut Perevoda as the Ultimate Gatekeeper

*'Support for translations works better than any system of propaganda.'*²³⁹

Despite IP's limited success in encouraging sales of Russian literature in the UK and US, until 2022 the institute was Russian literature's most powerful gatekeeper, and the principal source of translation funding, as I will demonstrate in the following pages. I contend that, due to their control over which novels are translated out of Russian, IP can be regarded as a vehicle for Russian soft power.²⁴⁰ In total, IP funded the translation of 121 Russian novels into English between 2011-2022, including titles produced by the Russian Library.²⁴¹ As Evans noted, up until 2022 IP was the most important, and indeed most reliable funder available to publishers translating both contemporary and classic Russian fiction.²⁴² Prior to 2022, some questions were raised over the ethics of accepting money from IP. These centred around the funding decisions made by the organisation, and their links with the Russian government. As I will elaborate in my Conclusion, these concerns have grown since the intensification of the war against Ukraine, to the extent that Western publishers are now unwilling to accept their money.

Of the translators I spoke to prior to February 2022, only Bela Shayevich had refused to accept money from IP. She realised that this stance might well cost her work but was determined to stand by her principles.²⁴³ Others did raise doubts, but since translators were largely dependent on external funding to carry out their work, these were not many. In an interview with journalist Liesl Schillinger, an anonymous source summarised the difficult position translators

²³⁹ Georgy Manaev, "Russia Needs Support for Its Book Culture Instead of Missiles and Oil", *Russia Beyond*, 5 November 2014 <https://www.rbth.com/literature/2014/11/05/russia_needs_support_for_its_book_culture_instead_of_missiles_and_41165.html> [accessed 19 December 2022].

²⁴⁰ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). See also Liesl Schillinger, 'The Rise of Bulgakov Diplomacy', *Foreign Policy*, 31 August 2015 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/31/the-rise-of-bulgakov-diplomacy-russian-literature-vladimir-putin-read-russia/>> [accessed 27 November 2020].

²⁴¹ I have reached this figure by collating Russian-English translations as described in my Methodology, p.50. I have cross-checked all of the translations listed to find out whether they have been funded by IP or Transcript.

²⁴² Interview with Evans.

²⁴³ Interview with Shayevich.

occupied in relation to IP. The interviewee noted their split loyalties towards the Read Russia-led (IP funded) Russian Library:

The problem here is that, despite the very noble nature of the project, which is long overdue and timely and necessary, the Russian authorities are using it to make good face. And that's why I am split. I don't want to add my two pennies to the Kremlin bank.²⁴⁴

The frequency with which IP awarded money, evident in the large number of translations IP have supported, made translators more reliant on IP for funding than they might like.²⁴⁵ Considering the many translations they funded between 2011-2022, IP exerted a far greater influence than PEN on which Russian novels are published abroad. As such, the decisions they have taken over what books to support, and more importantly what to decline, are revealing.

IP's funding of Shishkin's translations, as I outlined in the introduction, is a case in point. The English translation of *Maidenhair* was funded by IP, prior to Shishkin's refusal to represent Russia at the BEA in 2013.²⁴⁶ Schwartz claimed that since Shishkin's open letter he had not been invited to any of IP's events, although she doubted that he would attend anyway.²⁴⁷ In Shishkin's opinion, IP funding ceased because he became a 'national traitor'.²⁴⁸ This is borne out by other interviewees who have noted that IP appears to award funding to authors they approve of: IP funding seems to be guaranteed for some, therefore, but not for others. The translator of one "nationalist" author felt that funding for their project was guaranteed as a direct result of the writer's support for the Russian State.²⁴⁹ This raises questions over IP's motivations, and their role as principal gatekeeper to the Russian-English literary market.

The influence that IP's decisions have on the circulation of Russian fiction and its perception abroad is clear to Perova:

²⁴⁴ Schillinger, 'The Rise of Bulgakov Diplomacy'.

²⁴⁵ As mentioned above, only one translator I spoke with refused to accept IP funding prior to February 2022; Interview with Shayevich.

²⁴⁶ See also Chapter Four, pp. 239-51.

²⁴⁷ Interview with Schwartz.

²⁴⁸ Interview with Shishkin.

²⁴⁹ Interviewee #7, August 2020.

Of course they expect Russia to support the publication of their modern classics. But Russia [...] doesn't always support outstanding books. What they consider should be harmless from the political point of view. Russian books are published by small publishers only if there is a grant, which makes it very difficult to get anything published. So if [the] Translation Institute [IP] or Transcript agrees to support a certain book, then it may appear.²⁵⁰

This scepticism about IP's motives was also voiced by translator Arch Tait. In an article for *Publishers Weekly* in 2012, Tait cautioned that any investment by the Russian government in translation should be treated with circumspection.²⁵¹ When I asked Tait in 2021 about his statement, he clarified that 'where there is Russian government money there is usually a trick.'²⁵²

Pym asserts in his *On Translator Ethics* that the high cost of translation means that it is often subsidised. He worries that there is a risk that the provision of money will serve 'the interests of the subsidisers' instead of those of the author.²⁵³ This however, as Vimr demonstrates, does not always mean that the subsidiser has any ulterior political goals beyond the recognition of a country's literature abroad. Indeed, many small literatures, a category to which I argue contemporary (rather than nineteenth-century) Russian fiction belongs, require funding by the source culture to garner any attention at all.²⁵⁴

Pym's concern is valid when considering IP, however, due to the opacity of its funding structures. Reznichenko clarified the Institute's funding sources in his interview for *Asymptote*:

Given that we are not a state organization, we do not have a fiscal budget. However, in Russia, there are a series of state programs that support

²⁵⁰ Interview with Perova. Perova's publishing house Glas was unable to access funding by IP because it was based in Russia. For more on this, see Chapter Three, p. 196.

²⁵¹ 'There is a need to be watchful that the present Russian government investment in promoting translations does not lead to a relapse into old ways. Publishing programmes such as those advocated by philanthropic oligarchs Andrei Skoch [who founded the Pokolenie Foundation that has gone on to support the Debut Prize] and Mikhail Prokhorov [of the Prokhorov Foundation and Transcript translation program] are a necessary counterbalance.'; Teri Tan, 'Arch Tait on Translating Russian Works: Publishing in Russia 2012', *Publishers Weekly*, 24 May 2012 <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/52104-arch-tait-on-translating-russian-works-publishing-in-russia-2012.html>> [accessed 27 September 2021].

²⁵² Interview with Tait.

²⁵³ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 167.

²⁵⁴ Vimr, p. 51.

literature and translation and so we, of course, like other institutions similar to ours (both in Russia and abroad), compete for funding by submitting tenders, participating in online auctions, etc. We might receive funds from non-state organizations, and sometimes we manage to attract sponsors, too, but unfortunately not on as large a scale as we would like. From time to time it is necessary to earn money by taking assignments from foreign organizations or our Russian partners — obviously only if the matter concerns literature and translation, and if it is mutually beneficial and aligned with our mission.²⁵⁵

IP receives financial support from the Kremlin, as well as from other politically motivated sources. In apparent transparency, the institute lists its main sponsors online.²⁵⁶ Among these is ‘RT’ (formerly ‘Russia Today’), a media outlet that is currently under Western sanctions, and which the US government considers a source of Kremlin propaganda.²⁵⁷

As Russia’s Deputy Minister for Culture, IP’s chair Grigoriev is a further link to the Kremlin. It is also perhaps indicative of Kremlin involvement with IP that it was Grigoriev who publicly accused Shishkin of being a traitor for refusing to represent Russia abroad.²⁵⁸ Despite Reznichenko’s insistence that IP is both financially and politically autonomous, one publishing professional, who wished to remain anonymous, regarded Grigoriev as the key decision-maker in IP’s funding process:

Basically there is a committee, and the committee consists of critics and writers. They discuss books but they don’t decide anything, they recommend books for the support of this programme. But then of course they give their list to the boss, and the boss is Vladimir Grigoriev who is the real decision-maker [...] They have a council for this and a council for that, [...] they give a list of their recommendations. But then Vladimir Grigoriev, who is head of

²⁵⁵ Lee Yew Leong, ‘An Interview with Evgeny Nikolaevich Reznichenko’.

²⁵⁶ ‘Ucheriditeli’ <<https://institutperevoda.ru/about/uchrediteli/>> [accessed 5 February 2023].

²⁵⁷ See the US report here; G.E.C., *Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik’s Role in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*. Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz provide examples of RT’s alignment with Kremlin talking points for the domestic Russian audience. See Hutchings and Tolz, ‘Truth with a Z’.

²⁵⁸ Grigoriev said, ‘Tak byvaet, kogda Russkii pisatel’ nadolgo otryvaetsia ot rodiny.’; ‘V Rospechati Udivleny Otkazom Mikhaila Shishkina Predstavliat’ Rossiia Na BookExpo v SSHA’, *Gazeta.Ru*, 8 March 2013 <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2013/03/08/n_2788809.shtml?updated> [accessed 29 October 2021].

the whole project, he just crosses out whatever he wants and puts in the names he likes, or he thinks that for various reasons this person should be included in the list, and some other should go.²⁵⁹

This same interviewee regarded Grigoriev's involvement as one of the principal catalysts for the politicised decisions around what IP would and would not support:

The fact is that several times Institut Perevoda would reject a certain book on the grounds that it criticises the Russian authorities. It's critical about Russia. So why should we spend government money on a book that criticises our politics and Russia in general? I have heard this said several times [...] They said precisely this. They said the same about some other well-known Russian writers, interesting, serious authors rejected precisely for the same reason. And they said it in so many words.²⁶⁰

This testimony may be exaggerated to an extent, since some novels written by "liberal" authors were funded before 2022, including for example Yakhina, Abgaryan, Ulitskaya and Ganieva.²⁶¹ However, taking Shishkin's experience as an example, as well as IP's apparent eagerness to fund Prilepin, a pro-government author, there may be a significant element of truth in this description.²⁶²

In his interview with *Asymptote*, Reznichenko gave an entirely opposite account of IP's process than described above:

As for "special considerations," if you are referring to pressure from those who determine our budget, I certainly do not feel it, and the Board of Experts, as a completely independent team, even less so. I repeat that in essence, it is the foreign publishing house that chooses the work; they are our main partners and associates. After all, they are the ones investing their money in the book's publication; their interest in any given work of Russian literature is a business one. If the text is bad, then the publishers, as a rule, are

²⁵⁹ Interviewee #3.

²⁶⁰ Interviewee #3.

²⁶¹ For novels funded for translations into English, see, 'About the Institute' <<https://eng.institutpervoda.ru/>> [accessed 30 November 2022]. See the Conclusion for these authors' response to the war since 2022 — they have all been critical of the war against Ukraine, especially since 2022.

²⁶² For more on this, see Chapter Three, p. 214.

uninterested in whether the author wrote it from a conservative or liberal standpoint, whether they were a patriot or pro-West. The text is useless—what else is there to say? And if the text is good, then again, generally speaking, what difference do the author’s social and political opinions make? After ten years the writer’s views will be different and all that will be left are their royalties!²⁶³

IP’s decisions over what titles to support, and what to reject, have a direct effect on Western publishers who rely on IP for funding. Because of the market’s economic constraints detailed at the beginning of this chapter, IP’s financial support plays a significant role in determining which Russian novels travel to the Anglophone West. This readiness to support some titles over others can manifest negatively in numerous ways. One interviewee was told by a publisher that they preferred not to deviate from the list of recommended titles on IP’s website, or to publish a novel IP would not fund.²⁶⁴ The publisher feared that if they commissioned an unapproved (unfunded) Russian novel then their future IP grant applications might very well be rejected.

IP’s gatekeeper status also means that the institution reinforces Russian social mores, and indeed laws, beyond the country’s borders.²⁶⁵ Reuben Woolley found that he could not secure Russian funding to translate the LGBTQ+ novel *Evangelie ot...*²⁶⁶ Woolley posited in our interview that without Russian funding from either IP or Transcript, the novel could not find a publisher in the UK. While funding is not always an absolute barrier to publication of an unknown author in the West the lack of Russian funding creates an additional challenge.²⁶⁷ As a result, the UK publishing scene is in effect echoing the homophobia of the Russian Federation. While *Evangelie ot* secured some funding from English PEN,

²⁶³ Lee Yew Leong, ‘An Interview with Evgeny Nikolaevich Reznichenko’.

²⁶⁴ For IP’s list of recommended titles, see ‘Rekomenduem k perevodu’ <<https://institutperevoda.ru/knigi/rekomendovannye-dlya-perevoda/>> [accessed 20 January 2023].

²⁶⁵ Laws against ‘gay propaganda’ were tightened in Russia in later 2022, and as a result novels touching on this subject are no longer being sold. For a summary of this, see my Introduction, p. 19 and also the Conclusion, pp. 335-38. See also, ‘Vse, “gei-propaganda” (chto by eto ni znachilo) teper’ v Rossii pod pol’nyim zapretom’.

²⁶⁶ Sergei Khazov-Kassia, *Evangelie Ot...* (Moscow: Kolonna publication, 2017).

²⁶⁷ Another LGBTQ+ novel was commissioned by MacLehose Press, however, and is due to be published in early August 2023. This indicates that UK publishers are willing to publish Russian authors that go against Putin’s narrative; Oskana Vasyakina, *Wound*, trans. by Elina Alter (London: MacLehose Press, 2023).

as noted above, this was not sufficient, leaving the project in jeopardy despite the grant.

Through its funding decisions IP acts as one of the major gatekeepers to Russian literature, and a vehicle of the Russian government's soft power. While this has meant an increase in the volume and diversity of contemporary Russian literature translated into English, IP might not fund novels that do not represent Russia in their preferred way. As shown by Woolley's experience, it is also likely that IP's decisions will reflect Russian laws and societal mores. To date no LGBTQ+ literature has been funded by IP for example, and it appears likely that in 2023 they will not be willing to fund writers now listed as foreign agents.²⁶⁸

4 Conclusion

As I have shown, nineteenth-century literature — out of copyright, free to obtain and a well-established genre — is central to the Russian-English translated fiction field, while contemporary novels remain on the periphery. It is unclear whether the unpopularity of contemporary Russian fiction in the West is in part a result of misguided choices made by even the most well-informed editors and literary agents such as Wiedling, Evans and, as we will see in Chapter Three, Perova. Wiedling believes that Russian novels are not popular because they do not address the same issues as novels in the West; important themes such as the #metoo movement and gender equality are largely ignored.²⁶⁹ Indeed, this is as much to do with the domestic laws of the Russian Federation which ban any mention of homosexuality or transgender issues in literature, and which have recently decriminalised some types of domestic violence.²⁷⁰ As I will show in Chapter Four, readers in my book group agree.²⁷¹ Both they and myself find it challenging to repeatedly read contemporary Russian novels that frequently present entrenched misogyny, sexism, and violence against women.

²⁶⁸ Under the auspices of GRAD ('Group for the Investigation of Anti-Russian Activities) Zakhar Prilepin has been instrumental in creating a list of foreign agents in the cultural sphere. Books belonging to these 'foreign agents' are currently forbidden to anyone under eighteen and have to be packaged in brown paper in book shops; 'Kak v Rossii prodaiut knigi inoagentov', *RBK Life*, 8 December 2022 <<https://www.rbc.ru/life/news/639076749a794733c8871ee1>> [accessed 20 January 2023]. Also see Chapter Three, p. 198 for more on foreign agents.

²⁶⁹ Zoom call with Wiedling, February 2023.

²⁷⁰ See the Conclusion to this thesis for further discussion of these issues.

²⁷¹ For their comments, see Chapter Four, p. 223.

Lack of interest in contemporary Russian fiction could also be grounded in Classic Russian literature's reputation as dense and depressing, as characterised by Lipovetsky's definition of the Russian Exotic.²⁷² Whatever the reason, according to Nielsen sales figures, hardly any contemporary Russian literature sold in large quantities between 2001-2019 apart from the genre fiction of Akunin, Glukhovsky, and Lukyanenko.²⁷³ Instead, as I have demonstrated with the sales figures for the BBC edition of *War and Peace*, and the success of Lukyanenko, the most effective way to sell Russian novels in translation is to adapt them for the screen. Meanwhile, efforts to publish a larger number of Russian titles has not led to an overall growth in sales of Russian translations, in the UK at least. I suggest this might indicate that there is a finite number of readers willing to purchase Russian titles. However, low sales are also a symptom of the limited marketing power of the independent publishers who produce the majority of contemporary Russian fiction in translation.

I have found that commissioning decisions made by both commercial and independent publishers are subject to constraints such as linguistic expertise in-house, relationships with translators and literary agents, and the availability of external funding. The contemporary Russian novels that reach the Anglophone West do so with the support of a network of publishers, translators, editors and literary agents who resist these challenges to the best of their ability, but who ultimately have little sway without the financial support of organisations such as IP, Transcript, English PEN or PEN/Heim. Despite the current surge of interest in translation, and in the work of translators, as I noted above, I agree with Franssen and Kuipers that editors occupy a central position in translation publishing networks. This is despite editors stressing the importance of translators in my interviews. Although translators are integral to the commissioning process, providing context and pitching novels, ultimately they possess little real power. This issue is compounded by the fact that while a small group of translators enjoy influence with some editors, the remainder have to compete in a market plagued by limited funding and resources. This competition is increased by some

²⁷² See earlier this chapter, p. 134.

²⁷³ A liberal Russian critic discusses this issue in relation to Sorokin. See Galina Yuzefovich, 'Vladimir Sorokin i problemyi russkogo feminizma: chto mne ne nraivitsia v publichnom vyskazyvanii pisatel'ia o zhenshchinakh', *Dzen*, 21 October 2021 <<https://dzen.ru/a/YXEnEL-ly2gguv8b>> [accessed 14 February 2023].

translators who are prepared to work for low fees, or even occasionally for free, in the hope of establishing their reputations, or in order to publish a passion project.

Editors, rather than translators, are central to commissioning decisions.²⁷⁴ However, editors themselves are constrained by market forces, as emblematised by the system of comps. This system favours publishers from larger firms who have access to sales information, while forcing smaller firms to operate blind. In addition, comps also promote conservatism in commissioning decisions, leading publishers to produce novels that are similar to successful predecessors. Again, this aligns with Franssen and Kuipers's comments about increasing isomorphism in World Literature.²⁷⁵ As far as Russian fiction is concerned, the resulting selections tend to follow either Lipovetsky's paradigm of exoticism, or preference genre fiction. I contend that novels which cannot be characterised in this way are sold by generating political interest through paratexts, as I will explore further in Chapter Four.²⁷⁶

Despite their relative lack of direct power, translators resist the isomorphism caused by the structure of the world literary market by offering diverse novels to publishers. These translators are invaluable to independent firms who also challenge the conservative commissioning tendencies of firms such as PRH by seeking diversity. In accordance with Bourdieu's findings, they are forced to publish from the periphery. This tendency is, however, increasingly used as a marketing tool and proof of such publishers' artistic integrity, and can lead to recognition in the form of literary prizes. In this way, I contend that Sela-Sheffy's description of translators who seek recognition to build their career can also apply to independent publishers, especially when they align themselves closely with translators, as with Evans and Lawton.²⁷⁷ Smaller firms' attempts to commission diverse titles can be seen in recent publications from Deep Vellum and Dalkey Archive and in the challenging world of the *Sorokinaissance*.²⁷⁸ At the same time, the example of graphic novelist Lomasko, who was initially published by tiny independent press *n+1*, and later signed by PRH, proves the influence of

²⁷⁴ Franssen and Kuipers, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 49.

²⁷⁵ Franssen and Kuipers. 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 67.

²⁷⁶ See Chapter Four for a discussion of the role of paratexts in marketing translations.

²⁷⁷ Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae'.

²⁷⁸ These authors include Gorbunova, Meshchaninova, Petrushevskaya, Sorokin.

independent publishers on the publishing ecosphere, as suggested by Bourdieu's assessment of the French literary field.²⁷⁹ Since independents are funded differently to commercial houses, they are able to take risks with their commissioning choices, which in turn influence the target culture's literary scene.²⁸⁰ As I will discuss in the Conclusion to this thesis, the issues noted above do not only hamper translators from Russian, but affect the literary translation field as a whole.²⁸¹

My research identifies that translators require support within the publishing industry in order to maintain their ability to bring diverse offerings to publishers, and thus to continue enriching the market. Solutions to the issues of working for free in the production of sample translations and pitches are beginning to appear with the provision of funding from English PEN, and schemes like the one-off RusTrans PUBLISH! programme mentioned above.²⁸² However, as I have demonstrated, translation commissions remain largely reliant on external funding, with the majority of that funding until 2022 being from IP. Returning to Pym's concern that subsidised translations might further the interests of the funding bodies rather than the author, it is significant that so many translations have been funded by IP. My research indicates that IP make decisions based on their ideal representation of Russia, or are politically driven as in the case of Shishkin. I therefore agree with Pym's concerns, and accordingly regard IP as an instrument of soft power.

If IP, as indicated above, make their decisions over which novels to fund along political lines, I would contend that those novels commissioned for translation into English are politicised at the point of commission. This initial politicisation has the potential to permeate all subsequent translation decisions: the ability and willingness of commissioning editors in the UK and US to read a pitch; the readiness of translators to promote a novel without worrying about their reputation; the decisions taken by translators over how to approach politically and

²⁷⁹ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution'.

²⁸⁰ Interview with Krotov.

²⁸¹ See Conclusion, p. 355.

²⁸² See earlier this chapter, p. 155.

ethically challenging language. I suggest that all of these factors might ultimately affect the paratextual positioning of novels in the target culture.²⁸³

²⁸³ For a discussion of paratexts, see Chapter Four.

Chapter Three

Translation Histories: Commissioning “Nationalist” vs. “Liberal” Writers

‘Not another Russian book!’¹

Heilbron and Sapiro consider three elements essential to exploring the sociology of translation: the structure of the supra-national literary field within which cultural exchange takes place (the World Literary market), that field’s political and economic constraints, and the role played by ‘agents of intermediation’ within it.² This categorisation, they argue, is necessary in order to fully understand the significance and role of translated fiction both for its mediators and a text’s reception in the target culture.³

In this chapter, I will examine the role of ‘agents of intermediation’ in commissioning contemporary Russian fiction. I detail how translations of two Russian novels came to be commissioned by Anglophone publishers, namely Ludmila Ulitskaya’s *Zelenyi shater* (*Big Green Tent*, first published in Russia 2011; in English 2015) and Roman Senchin’s *Minus* (first published in Russia 2002; in English 2008).⁴ To demonstrate that this reliance on “dissident” authors to build symbolic and economic capital is part of a long-standing publishing tradition, I consider the trajectory of Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Their publication of Russian dissident authors was instrumental in their evolution from small, independent publisher in 1946 to a large commercial firm known for its prestigious authors in the twenty first century. I will show that their decision to consecrate Ulitskaya was, in part, one that continued this reliance on “dissident” authors to create symbolic capital.

In order to interrogate the publisher, translator and funding-body practices highlighted in the examples of Ulitskaya and Senchin, I will also briefly outline the journeys to commission of the four other novels examined in this thesis: *Day of the Oprichnik* (FSG), *Maidenhair* (Open Letter), *Sankya* (Dzanc Books and Glagoslav), and *The Librarian* (Pushkin Press).⁵ I will demonstrate that an

¹ Interview with Perova.

² Heilbron and Sapiro, ‘Outline for a Sociology of Translation’, p. 94.

³ Heilbron and Sapiro, ‘Outline for a Sociology of Translation’, p. 95.

⁴ Senchin, *Minus*; Ulitskaya, *The Big Green Tent*.

⁵ Elizarov, *The Librarian*; Prilepin, *Sankya*; Shishkin, *Maidenhair*; Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*.

author's politics, whether "liberal" or "nationalist", has a direct effect on who publishes them, who translates them, and whether they will receive external funding. I will also prove that, as asserted by Franssen and Kuipers, editors remain central to the commissioning process, no matter how much influence they ascribe to translators.⁶

I begin with Ulitskaya because *Big Green Tent's* (henceforth *BGT*) pathway demonstrates the apparently arbitrary nature of some commissioning decisions, as well as the degree to which editors control all aspects of the translation process.⁷ The microhistory around *BGT*, which saw Polly Gannon replace Bela Shayevich as the novel's translator, reveals that translators rarely have any real support or protection in the publishing world. In contrast to *BGT's* publication by commercial firm Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Senchin's *Minus* followed a very different path. Published by small, Russia-based Glas, the translation of this "nationalist" author faced economic, and therefore marketing, constraints. As I will explore, these financial issues were later compounded for Glas when IP launched, only to announce (as is common with source-culture funding) that it would not provide funding to the Russian publisher, and the firm was forced to close after twenty-four years in operation.

The case studies in this chapter demonstrate that the symbolic capital gained from publishing a prestigious, apparently dissident author such as Ulitskaya is unlikely to be replicated by translating a "nationalist" author such as Senchin, regardless of his reputation in Russia.⁸ In fact, Ulitskaya's publishing trajectory began with Glas, and I suggest progressed to commercial FSG partly because of her "dissident" views. As established in Chapter Two, commercial publishers' preference for "dissident" over "nationalist" Russian writers has implications for how both kinds of authors are commissioned, marketed, and received in the West. I will consider the functions of this preference below, alongside the role of institutional political bias in the provision of funding for authors of both pro- and anti-Putin stances. I examine the crucial role of translators and editors as mediators who import these Russian novels into English and argue that their

⁶ Franssen and Kuipers, p. 56.

⁷ As described by Franssen and Kuipers, 'Coping with Uncertainty'.

⁸ See Chapter One for a discussion of both authors' politics.

decision to consecrate an author via translation reflects their desire to create their own positive self-image, as suggested by Sela-Sheffy.⁹

1 Farrar, Straus & Giroux and *The Big Green Tent*

Ulitskaya's *Big Green Tent* was commissioned for translation into English by Farrar, Straus & Giroux (henceforth FSG) in 2013. FSG's tradition of publishing dissident writers, and their historic interest in translations, meant that this prestigious author was appropriate for their firm. Despite this seemingly logical fit the commission might not have taken place without the involvement of Russophone editor Mark Krotov. Before presenting the translation microhistory of *BGT*, I assess FSG's tradition of publishing dissident authors, and their historical reliance on such commissions to accrue symbolic capital and grow their business. I also analyse the intermediary role of Krotov in advocating for the novel, confirming the centrality of editors in the commissioning process. I will show that, similar to the example of Evans in Chapter Two, Krotov's native Russian background and cultural network, in other words, his habitus, appears to have influenced his editorial decisions. Subsequently I will examine the circumstances surrounding the translation of *BGT* and consider the lack of professional support available to translators that it demonstrates. I close this section by evaluating the advantages to reputation conferred on Ulitskaya by FSG, who likewise benefit from translating an author they can frame as a modern Russian dissident.

1.1 A Tradition of Publishing Dissident Authors

FSG was founded in New York in 1946 by Roger Straus and John Farrar, and remained an independent publishing house until it was sold to publishing conglomerate Holtzbrinck in 1994.¹⁰ Today FSG is a division of Macmillan Publishers, one of publishing's so-called Big Five.¹¹ FSG has a strong reputation for publishing well-regarded native-Anglophone and translated authors such as

⁹ Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae', p. 612.

¹⁰ Lawrence Van Gelder, 'The Media Business; Holtzbrinck Buys a Majority Of Farrar, Straus & Giroux', *The New York Times*, 14 December 1994 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/14/business/the-media-business-holtzbrinck-buys-a-majority-of-farrar-straus-giroux.html>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

¹¹ John Thompson, 'Trade Publishing', in *The Oxford Handbook of Publishing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 244–58. Macmillan, Penguin Random House, Hachette, Simon & Schuster, and HarperCollins make up the Big Five; Milliot, 'Over the Past 25 Years'.

Philip Roth, Jonathan Franzen, Roberto Bolaño, Pablo Neruda and Mario Vargas Llosa.¹² By 2022, the publishing house boasted twenty-one Nobel Prize laureates in their catalogue, including Russian exiles Joseph Brodsky and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.¹³

When FSG was founded, it operated, according to Bourdieu's definition, as a dominated publisher within the literary field.¹⁴ Starting with little to no symbolic capital, FSG sought affordable foreign literature to bolster and legitimise their catalogue. In this way, they followed a trajectory from 'heroic beginnings' to established publisher similar to that described by Bourdieu, and also realised by publishers such as Penguin.¹⁵ Unable to secure American authors of the calibre FSG required in order to build their reputation, and shore up funds, Straus turned to Italy in his search for attainable literature that had already won accolades in its source culture. FSG's first foreign acquisition in 1946 was Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, 1945) which was followed by a succession of other Italian writers, and ever more high-culture foreign authors.¹⁶ This subsequently helped to attract well-known Anglophone writers T.S.Eliot, Philip Roth, Susan Sontag, and Jack Kerouac. In 1980 Straus told *The New York Times* that as an independent publisher he could take risks on little-known authors at the start of their careers, without having to justify any economic risk to a publishing conglomerate. He was content to either look abroad, or sign novels rejected by other publishers.¹⁷ This allowed him to grow the firm's reputation, gain

¹² Alexandra Alter, 'A New Publisher for Farrar, Straus & Giroux', *The New York Times*, 8 March 2018 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/books/mitzi-angel-new-publisher-farrar-straus-giroux-replaces-jonathan-galassi.html>> [accessed 6 June 2022].

¹³ Both of these writers were expelled from the Soviet Union: Solzhenitsyn in 1974, Brodsky in 1972.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 41.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution in Publishing', p. 139; Boris Kachka, *Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), pp. 48-49; McAteer, *Translating Great Russian Literature*.

¹⁶ Kachka, *Hothouse*, p. 49; Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, trans. by Frances Frenaye (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1947).

¹⁷ Kachka points out that in the first few years, FSG were commissioning books for 'survival, then maybe growth.' Kachka also relays a story about Straus approaching agents, and offering, as a new publisher, to take unusual books from them: 'I expect to be around a long time, and I hope that once in a while, when you have perhaps an experimental novel that you care to lay off in a hurry, you'll think of us.' Kachka, *Hothouse*, p. 47. See also: N. Kleinfield, 'Roger Straus: Making It as an Independent; Straus', *The New York Times*, 23 March 1980 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1980/03/23/archives/roger-straus-making-it-as-an-independent-straus.html>> [accessed 6 June 2022]; Donald Hall, 'Robert Giroux: Looking for Masterpieces; Giroux', *The New York Times*, 6 January 1980

both symbolic and economic capital, and to take on more established authors over time.

While signing overseas authors, FSG created a reputation for publishing dissident writers. Authors such as Pablo Neruda found a natural home with the press which, Boris Kachka writes, liked authors with an ‘international dissident pedigree.’¹⁸ This reputation was cemented by FSG’s work with Russian dissident Solzhenitsyn. FSG’s decision to publish Solzhenitsyn increased their standing in the literary field, conferring the symbolic capital they required to build commercial success. The firm’s relationship with Solzhenitsyn began when they published *Cancer Ward* (*Rakovyi korpus*, 1966) in 1969, despite a complex battle over rights.¹⁹ Kachka argues that Straus persisted with the publication despite the existence of another, pirate version, because he believed that Solzhenitsyn might win the Nobel Prize.²⁰ The novel’s success led FSG to bid nearly \$500,000 for Solzhenitsyn’s *August 1914*, which would form the first part of *The Red Wheel* cycle.²¹ Although FSG were outbid by US publisher Little, Brown who had offered

<<https://www.nytimes.com/1980/01/06/archives/robert-giroux-looking-for-masterpieces-giroux.html>> [accessed 6 June 2022].

¹⁸ Kachka, *Hothouse*, p. 315. This interest in politics is highlighted by Kachka in a story about FSG’s work in Italy. Kachka mentions the CIA were placing operatives in Italy to follow the spread of communism there, and that they were posing as FSG scouts. Straus agreed to it because he didn’t have much money to pay scouts anyway, so it was good for the firm. Kachka, p.50.

¹⁹ Kachka, *Hothouse*, p. 183. Henry Raymond, ‘Dial Press Faces Copyright Query; Its Edition of “Cancer Ward” Disputed by Bodley Head’, *The New York Times*, 12 November 1968 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1968/11/12/archives/dial-press-faces-copyright-query-its-edition-of-cancer-ward.html>> [accessed 2 June 2022]. There is also a comprehensive account of the complications around acquiring these books, as well as the difficulties of paying Solzhenitsyn in: McAteer, *Translating Great Russian Literature*, pp. 130-144; Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, trans. by Nicholas Bethell and David Burg (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969).

²⁰ Kachka, *Hothouse*, p. 184. Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. It is common for books to be commissioned in the hope of winning a major prize. This has been given as a reason by an anonymous translator as the sole reason one of the books they worked on was commissioned. The translator, however, felt that the book was edited far too quickly, and that attention wasn’t paid to the final copy because it was expected that a potential prize would sell the book; Interviewee #8, 2020. McAteer relates a similar issue in quality around hurried translations of Solzhenitsyn; McAteer, *Translating Great Russian Literature*, p. 132.

²¹ McAteer, *Translating Great Russian Literature*, p. 136. *The Red Wheel* (*Krasnoe koleso*) is a cycle of eight novels that describe Russia’s transition from Empire to the Soviet Union. *August 1914* and *November 1916* were published by FSG. At the time of writing Marian Schwartz was working on the remaining untranslated novels, funded by an anonymous donor. See: Alison Flood, ‘Solzhenitsyn’s Russian Revolution Epic to Be Published in English’, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/22/solzhenitsyn-russian-revolution-epic-novel-the-red-wheel-complete-english-translation>> [accessed 7 June 2022]; Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *August 1914*, trans. by H. T Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014); *March 1917: The Red Wheel, Node III, Book 3*, trans. by Marian Schwartz, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021); *November 1916*, trans. by H. T Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014).

over \$600,000, FSG was successful. They secured the commission in large part because of their literary reputation. They also had integrity; FSG had published Solzhenitsyn before and had ensured that the dissident writer could collect his royalties.²²

Built on a history of past success, in part based on their willingness to publish “dissident” authors, FSG’s reputation has allowed them to acquire and publish writers who have won the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer, and the National Book Award. The firm remains committed to translation and publish on average between five and nine new translated novels in each year.²³ FSG’s dominant position in the literary field allows them to be selective about whom they publish, and in the case of Ulitskaya, and as I will outline later in this chapter also Sorokin, they continue to prefer “dissident” authors. However, as I will argue in the next section, they would not have signed any contemporary Russian “dissidents” had Krotov not been involved in the process.

1.2 The Role of the Russophone Editor: Mark Krotov and the Russian Luminaries

Mark Krotov was the primary influence responsible for signing both Ulitskaya and Sorokin, to FSG. I will demonstrate that his habitus informed his commissioning preferences and had a considerable impact on the titles published by FSG, and later at independent magazine *n+1* where Krotov works as editor.²⁴ As I will show, Krotov’s habitus positioned him perfectly to understand the nuances of *BGT*, and to relate to it as more than a novel by a “dissident” author.²⁵ This led to him

²² Kachka, *Hothouse*, p. 186. *The New York Times* carried numerous stories about the difficulties of publishing *August 1914*. See Henry Raymond, ‘Store Here Withdraws Pirated Solzhenitsyn Book’, *The New York Times*, 7 December 1971 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1971/12/07/archives/store-here-withdraws-pirated-solzhenitsyn-book.html>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

²³ ‘Translation Database’, *PublishersWeekly.Com*.

²⁴ For further discussion of habitus, see Introduction, p. 000. This concurs with my emphasis on editor background in Chapter Two, p. 133. Krotov also suggested that FSG was approached by Sorokin’s agent with *Day of the Oprichnik* precisely because the firm had published dissident writers such as Joseph Brodsky. Under Krotov’s editorship, *n+1* has published a number of Sorokin’s short stories. Krotov is also close with Sorokin’s translator, Lawton. When Krotov left FSG in 2012, he worked as editor for The Overlook Press; Interview with Krotov. Vladimir Sorokin, ‘Horse Soup’, trans. by Max Lawton, *n+1*, June 2021 <<https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-40/fiction-drama/horse-soup/>> [accessed 7 June 2022]; Vladimir Sorokin, ‘White Square’, trans. by Max Lawton, *n+1*, 15 January 2020 <<https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-36/fiction-drama/white-square/>> [accessed 7 June 2022].

²⁵ I explore these nuances, along with a consideration of Ulitskaya’s supposedly dissident politics, in Chapter Four, p. 230 and p. 257-60.

commissioning his long-term friend Shayevich to translate the novel — a task that Krotov felt she would perform in accordance with his own interpretation of *BGT*.

Krotov's habitus, his disposition as it was formed by his upbringing, class and education, informed his publishing decisions.²⁶ He was born in the Soviet Union and is a native speaker of Russian but has lived in the United States since the age of six.²⁷ Before college he interned with author and translator Keith Gessen at *n+1* and, after completing his higher education in 2008, began work as an editorial assistant with FSG. While at college, he studied Russian translation under Jamey Gambrell with translator Bela Shayevich.²⁸ In keeping with FSG's dissident tradition, Krotov prefers politicised texts: *n+1* which he now edits, is a 'magazine of literature, culture and politics.'²⁹ Krotov himself has also translated some chapters in *It's No Good*, a collection of essays and poems by Russian political activist Kirill Medvedev and, at Krotov's recommendation, *n+1* published dissident artist Lomasko's graphic novel.³⁰

Krotov's language specialism and background, alongside his literary connections and political interests, in short, his habitus, directly influenced FSG's commissions. While Krotov was in post between 2008-2012, FSG either published or commissioned seven contemporary Russian novels, including Sorokin's *Oprichnik* and *The Blizzard*, and Andrei Bitov's *The Symmetry Teacher*.³¹ Since Krotov's departure from FSG the firm have only published one more contemporary Russian novel — Ulitskaya's *Jacob's Ladder*. Even this might not have been secured had Ulitskaya not first been signed by Krotov for *BGT*.³²

Krotov's professional engagement with Russian literature was already established when he met Ulitskaya in 2012 while she was in New York promoting

²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, p. 127.

²⁷ Interview with Krotov.

²⁸ For more on Shayevich, see Chapter Two, p. 143.

²⁹ 'About', *N+1*, 2013 <<https://www.nplusonemag.com/about/>> [accessed 7 June 2022]

³⁰ Kirill Medvedev, *It's No Good*, trans. by Keith Gessen, Mark Krotov, Bela Shayevich, and Merril (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016); Lomasko, *Other Russias*.

³¹ Andrei Bitov, *The Symmetry Teacher*, trans. by Polly Gannon, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014); Sorokin, *The Blizzard*; Ulitskaya, *Jacob's Ladder*. Two books of poetry were also published: Aleksandr Kushner, *Apollo in the Grass: Selected Poems*, trans. by Carol Ueland and Robert Carnevale (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); *Night Wraps the Sky: Writings by and about Mayakovsky*, ed. by Michael Almercyda and Vladimir Mayakovsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

³² Ulitskaya, *Jacob's Ladder*.

Daniel Stein, Interpreter (published in Russian 2006; in English 2011; translated by Arch Tait).³³ Krotov signed *Big Green Tent* to FSG around the same time, following a recommendation from his Russian-speaking grandmother.³⁴ Since he too could read the original, Krotov wrote the reader's report, and persuaded FSG to commission the novel. He explained that he had a very clear vision of how the finished text should read. However, as will be seen below, this vision dissipated when Krotov left the firm, and a new editor (unnamed by my interviewees) took charge. Unlike Krotov, this editor did not have a background in Russian, and this, among other interventions from Ulitskaya's Russian editor and literary agent Alex Klimin, caused difficulties for Shayevich's translation.

1.3 *The Big Green Tent* and the Search for the 'Right' Translator

The translation history behind *BGT* which follows reveals a number of issues around translator rights, the extent of editorial influence, and the necessity of understanding the Russian context when producing translations, a subject I return to in Chapter Four. This microhistory demonstrates the level of control that editors enjoy, and the degree to which translators are frequently powerless both within the publishing hierarchy, and over the final text. Translators' lack of agency, and the influence of editorial preference is signalled by the fact that, following Krotov's wishes, Shayevich was considered for the translation of *BGT* over other more experienced translators. British translator Arch Tait had already translated several of Ulitskaya's novels into English: *Sonechka*, *Medea and Her Children*, and *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*.³⁵ When FSG commissioned *BGT*, however, they stated their preference for an American translator, and he was not offered the project.³⁶

Krotov also rejected other well-known translators. Ulitskaya was acquainted with "celebrity" translators Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, who together have translated over thirty Russian classics, including Dostoevsky, Tolstoy,

³³ Ulitskaya, *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*.

³⁴ Interview with Krotov.

³⁵ Tait translated *Sonechka* for Glas publishing house, and also translated Senchin's *Minus* – see below p.193 for a discussion. Ulitskaya, *Medea and Her Children*; Ulitskaya, *Sonechka and Other Stories*.

³⁶ Interview with Tait.

Gogol and Chekhov.³⁷ FSG considered them for the translation, because of their reputation for translating nineteenth century Russian classics, and their link to Ulitskaya, but Krotov rejected the idea. He felt that Pevear and Volokhonsky are generally over-literal and thus create a ‘spikiness’ that is not necessary in the English, and would not accord with the style he intended for the final text.³⁸ He did, however, state that not using them might have been a misguided ‘publishing decision.’³⁹ Krotov felt that Shayevich would be better suited to what he called the ‘autumnal’ tone of the novel, and so the commission went to her instead.⁴⁰

Krotov had been seeking a novel for Shayevich to translate for some time.⁴¹ Like Krotov, Shayevich was also from a Russian émigré family, and she preferred translations with a political subtext.⁴² Both she and Krotov had worked on Medvedev’s *It’s No Good*, and Shayevich edited Pussy Riot’s end-of-trial statements for *n+1*.⁴³ Krotov acknowledges that at the time he asked Shayevich to translate *BGT* she was not well known as a translator.⁴⁴ This lack of name recognition could have led to the difficulties that she subsequently faced on submitting her manuscript.

³⁷ For more background on these translators, see Susannah Hunnewell, ‘Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, The Art of Translation No. 4’, *The Paris Review*, 2015 <<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6385/the-art-of-translation-no-4-richard-pevear-and-larissa-volokhonsky>> [accessed 27 July 2023].

³⁸ Krotov was able to make this judgment because of his language ability. Interview with Krotov.

³⁹ Interview with Krotov. For a discussion of the power of the ‘celebrity’ translator, see Chapter Two, p.145. Pevear and Volokhonsky translated the most recent set of Ulitskaya’s short stories, published in the UK and US in February 2024. In her review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Muireann Maguire considered their translation ‘occasionally wooden’ [...] ‘not the best match of Ulitskaya’s aesthetic of whimsical but relentless defamiliarization.’ Muireann Maguire, ‘Sex, Spirituality and Despair in Russia’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16 February 2024 <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-body-of-the-soul-ludmila-ulitskaya-book-review-muireann-maguire/>> [accessed 28 February 2024]; Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Body of the Soul: Stories*, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2024).

⁴⁰ Interview with Krotov.

⁴¹ The pair met and became friends at Columbia University under the tutelage of Jamey Gambrell. See Chapter Two, p. 143.

⁴² For a discussion of Shayevich’s ‘political’ brand, see Chapter Two, p. 143.

⁴³ Bela Shayevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, ‘Pussy Riot Denied Parole’, trans. by Kevin Platt, *n+1*, 1 August 2013 <<https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/pussy-riot-denied-parole/>> [accessed 7 June 2022]. Shayevich also translates the political poet Vsevolod Nekrasov; Vsevolod Nekrasov, *I live I see: selected poems*, trans. by Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013). Shayevich and her co-translator can be seen performing Nekrasov’s poems here; *A Translation Reading of Nekrasov’s I Live I See by Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich*, 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-jJUO21asQ>> [accessed 12 November 2020].

⁴⁴ Krotov told me, ‘This is before Alexievich won a Nobel, so Bela herself did not have the reputation’; Interview with Krotov.

Krotov left FSG a month after *BGT* was commissioned, leaving Shayevich to work with an editor who knew little about the book, was not a Russian specialist, and who had not been instrumental in its commission. Shayevich felt that this new editor did not understand the novel. He wanted to call it *Children of the Revolution*, which, although it referenced Anatolii Rybakov's anti-Soviet novel set in the 1930s *Deti Arbata* (*Children of the Arbat*, written 1966-1983), to her demonstrated a lack of understanding of *BGT*.⁴⁵ In her opinion, the proposed title did not fit a book that focused on the dissidents of the 1960s.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Shayevich translated the novel. According to all parties interviewed, the relatively straightforward translation process was then overshadowed by conflict around the English text. Although an excerpt of Shayevich's work was published in *The New Yorker*, Alex Klimin, who is both Ulitskaya's agent at Elkost, and her Russian editor, did not approve of the translation and highlighted what he felt were numerous errors.⁴⁷ The text was subsequently proofread by an anonymous Ulitskaya scholar, and Shayevich was asked to re-edit the translation and account for her decisions.⁴⁸

Although this stage is in itself not wholly unusual, the steps that FSG took next, were. The editor at FSG contacted translator Polly Gannon and asked her to edit Shayevich's work. Gannon's impression was that she had been contacted because she was close to Ulitskaya in age and had lived in Russia in similar circumstances to the writer.⁴⁹ She also had the cultural pedigree that Ulitskaya's agent required. Gannon is a freelance translator who lived in Russia from the mid-1990s to 2018.⁵⁰ She has a PhD in Russian literature, was Academic Director of Cultural Studies at the New York-Saint Petersburg Institute of Linguistics and taught literary translation at Saint Petersburg State University for fifteen years.⁵¹ Gannon initially refused to edit the text, although during our interview she was not explicit as to her reasons. However, Gannon was ultimately persuaded by the

⁴⁵ Anatolii Rybakov, *Deti Arbata* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987).

⁴⁶ Interview with Shayevich.

⁴⁷ Interview with Shayevich; Ludmila Ulitskaya, 'The Fugitive', trans. by Bela Shayevich, *The New Yorker*, 5 December 2014 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/12/the-fugitive>> [accessed 10 September 2020].

⁴⁸ Interview with Shayevich.

⁴⁹ Interview with Gannon.

⁵⁰ Interview with Gannon.

⁵¹ Gannon has translated four novels by Max Frei for the Overlook Press. When asked to review Shayevich's *BGT*, she had recently translated Andrei Bitov's *The Symmetry Teacher* for FSG.

new editor at FSG to translate the entire novel again, rather than edit Shayevich's translation.

Gannon's translation of *BGT* took about ten months to complete. Once the first draft was finished she worked closely with Klimin to finesse the text. Gannon had a good working relationship with Klimin, as he had an excellent grasp of English and knew Ulitskaya's novel intricately.⁵² Once translated, the text was sent to the editor at FSG, and to a Russophone proof-reader, before publication in 2015. Shayevich, however, asked to retain the copyright to the published translation, and Gannon was paid a lump sum for her own work.⁵³ When *BGT* was finally published Shayevich was upset to find out that, without her knowledge, the novel had been funded by Institut Perevoda.⁵⁴ As mentioned in Chapter Two, Shayevich is my only interviewee to claim that she always refused to take money from IP because of what she regarded as their links to the Russian government.⁵⁵

Regardless of whether there were genuine issues with the translation, the convoluted background to the translation of *BGT*, the consequences of which I will investigate in the following section, appears to have been caused by editors, to the general detriment of both translators. Neither Shayevich nor Gannon had much agency in the translation process. Shayevich was forced out of the project and unknowingly paid by an organisation she did not support, while Gannon was placed in an uncomfortable position and surrendered her rights to the final text, which was entirely her own translation. Krotov's decision to commission his friend for *BGT* was not, I would argue, a misguided one, but was based on his own understanding of the novel, which was informed by his habitus. Shayevich's work was considered acceptable enough to be published in the *New Yorker*, and the fact that she has subsequently translated Zamiatin and Alexievich is testament to the quality of her translations.

The root of the issue, as I will note in the following section, is symbolic capital. Klimin might simply have sought a well-established translator with the most

⁵² Interview with Gannon.

⁵³ Gannon was subsequently commissioned by FSG to translate *Jacob's Ladder*. In our interview Gannon acknowledged that Shayevich holding the copyright for her translation was 'probably not a great thing', but that she could do nothing about it; interview with Gannon.

⁵⁴ Shayevich did not reveal how she had found out about the involvement of IP in *BGT*. Interview with Shayevich.

⁵⁵ See Chapter Two, p. 169.

possible symbolic capital, as he found in Gannon, to represent one of Russia's most famous authors. Meanwhile, without the advantage of a knowledge of Russian, or understanding of *BGT*'s domestic context, the editor who inherited the novel from Krotov was ill-equipped to solve the dispute.

1.4 FSG's Dissident Brand: From Solzhenitsyn to Ulitskaya

FSG's literary prestige, built in part through their historical association with dissident Russian authors, meant that they possessed the requisite cultural capital to take a risk on a Russian author like Ulitskaya who, despite her fame at home as described in Chapter One, was relatively unknown in the West.⁵⁶ In the section below I will evaluate the benefits this capital conferred on Ulitskaya, and its implications for my wider research. I also question whether FSG might have been less inclined to publish Ulitskaya had it not been possible to market her as a "dissident" writer, or without the possibility of her winning a major literary prize.⁵⁷ This, I suggest, is in direct contrast to the treatment of "nationalist" authors Senchin, Elizarov and Prilepin, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter.

FSG played a pivotal role in introducing Ulitskaya to a wider readership and helped to create her reputation as a "dissident" figure, whilst honouring their tradition of publishing eminent, politicised writers.⁵⁸ Ulitskaya's perceived dissident status, and Krotov's advocacy, ensured that FSG were willing to spend time and money on two translations of her work – *BGT*, and *Jacob's Ladder* which followed in 2019. For *Big Green Tent* especially, I suggest that FSG submitted to Klimin's editorial input to produce a carefully vetted translation in part because

⁵⁶ See Chapter One, p. 87.

⁵⁷ See for example: Alexandra Guzeva, 'Why Russian Writer Ludmila Ulitskaya Should Win the Nobel Prize', *Russia Beyond*, 8 October 2019 <<https://www.rbth.com/arts/331100-ludmila-ulitskaya-nobel-prize>> [accessed 21 January 2023]; 'Jewish Russian Author among Frontrunners for Nobel in Literature', *The Times of Israel*, 8 October 2020 <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-russian-author-among-frontrunners-for-nobel-in-literature/>> [accessed 6 February 2023]; 'Crowd-Pleaser or Obscure Pick for Literature Nobel?', *France 24*, 6 October 2022 <<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221006-crowd-pleaser-or-obscure-pick-for-literature-nobel>> [accessed 6 February 2023].

⁵⁸ For a discussion of marketing, see Chapter Four. This moral standing is evident in the books and articles Ulitskaya has written since *Jacob's Ladder* was published. In 2021 Granta published a screenplay, *Just the Plague*, which included an interview that critiques Putin's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ulitskaya has also written in the Western press against Russia's war on Ukraine. See: Ulitskaya, *Just the Plague*; Harriet Sherwood, 'Eminent Writers Urge Russian Speakers to Tell Truth of War in Ukraine', *The Guardian*, 5 March 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/05/eminent-writers-urge-russian-speakers-to-tell-truth-of-war-in-ukraine>> [accessed 8 June 2022]. For more on *Just the Plague*, see Chapter Four, p. 235.

they hoped Ulitskaya might one day win a literary prize based on her past success, and partly in order to recreate and capitalise on the cultural capital she possessed at home.⁵⁹ The fact that *Jacob's Ladder* was published without external funding demonstrates the firm's belief that Ulitskaya might achieve the higher sales that accompany a literary prize.⁶⁰ Despite FSG's investment, however, *BGT* only sold 387 (hardback and paperback) copies in the UK between 2015-2019, and in the year it was published, 2019, *Jacob's Ladder* sold only twelve.⁶¹ FSG, however, still retain Ulitskaya, an eminent Russian writer who might yet confer more symbolic capital on the publisher.⁶²

Regardless of Krotov's motivations, it is clear that without his involvement *BGT* might not have been published by FSG. This confirms Franssen and Kuipers's assertions about the central role of editors, especially because in this case, the commissioning editor was Russophone. Krotov's habitus (and previous success in commissioning Sorokin for FSG, which I discuss in Chapter Five) meant that he was perfectly placed to commission Ulitskaya, and trusted by his publisher to make an informed decision on a Russian author. This case study also demonstrates the importance placed by publishers on the "dissidence" of Russian authors. This is evidenced by the publisher-produced paratexts that surround both Ulitskaya and Sorokin. As I will show in Chapter Four, these paratexts tend largely towards creating a "dissident" narrative around "liberal" authors.

⁵⁹ In our interview, Krotov stated that Ulitskaya's status as a 'perennial Nobel favourite' was one of the reasons FSG signed the book; interview with Krotov. See Chapter One, p. 87 for a list of literary prizes won by Ulitskaya.

⁶⁰ FSG were not alone in hoping Ulitskaya would win the prize. See: Alison Flood, 'Nobel Prize for Literature Tipped to Make Safe Pick after Years of Scandal', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/05/nobel-prize-for-literature-tipped-to-make-safe-pick-after-years-of-scandal>> [accessed 8 June 2022].

⁶¹ It is possible that the book has sold more copies since 2019, but I do not have access to this data; Nielsen BookData for sales in the UK between 2001-2019. These do not include eBook sales. It was not possible to obtain sales data from the US: for more on this topic see Chapter Two, p.124.

⁶² Straus spoke about playing what he called 'the long game' when it came to selecting his authors; Kleinfield, 'Roger Straus: Making It as an Independent.'

2 Glas, Senchin and the Freedom to Publish

*'Everything is based on personality and charisma.'*⁶³

As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, commercial firms such as FSG and PRH give preference to novels by “liberal” authors they can market as dissident, rather than those with “nationalist” politics, or authors such as Senchin who cannot be marketed as political at all. In the commissioning history of Senchin’s *Minus* that follows, I will demonstrate that this lack of political interest was one of the challenges in marketing his novel in the West – along with the generally downbeat nature of his New Realist prose.

Additionally, in this section I will consider the important role small publishers play in bringing otherwise unheard voices such as Senchin’s into English. I will also explore why some Russian novels are more appealing to Western publishers than others, and the role of funding in the commissioning process.⁶⁴ I will compare the publishing resources of commercial FSG with those of independent Russian publisher Glas in order to demonstrate the constraints that smaller publishing firms face when translating contemporary Russian fiction for Western consumption. Finally, I will evaluate the role of geopolitics in the closure Glas, which was the last independent publisher translating Russophone fiction to operate completely free of funding from IP.

2.1 Glas and *Minus* — Commissioning ‘Gloomy’ Russian Novels

While FSG appeared to be a logical choice out of several options for Ulitskaya due to her perceived dissidence, Russia-based publisher Glas was simply the only firm prepared to publish Roman Senchin’s *Minus* in English. This, I argue, is because Senchin (unlike Prilepin) could not be marketed to Western readers as a “dissident” writer — a lack of appeal that was compounded, according to Perova, by the ‘gloominess’ of his New Realist novel.⁶⁵ In our interview, she explained that she selected *Minus* solely because she valued Senchin as an author. As with Krotov and *BGT*, the translation history of *Minus* that follows

⁶³ Interview with Shayevich.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of these funding agencies, see Chapter Two, pp. 162-75.

⁶⁵ Interview with Perova. For a discussion of New Realism see Chapter One, p. 73. Despite the fact that Prilepin could be marketed as “anti-Putin” in 2008, his novel was only published with the advocacy of his translator Jeff Parker – who was editor for the new imprint Disquiet. See Chapter Five, p. 282 for more on this.

confirms the importance of an editor's personal interests and habitus in making commissioning decisions. In order to outline the constraints and motivations behind publishing *Minus*, I will begin by presenting an overview of Glas, and the translators involved in the project, before discussing the brief translation history of Senchin's novel.

Perova directed Glas, which she founded with translator Andrew Bromfield, between 1991-2014.⁶⁶ The press was committed to publishing a large number of contemporary Russian authors in English. Perova had previously worked as Editor-in-Chief for *Sovetskaia literatura* (*Soviet Literature*, 1946-1990), a journal which specialised in publishing contemporary Russian fiction in translation during *perestroika*.⁶⁷ Perova explained her motivations for founding the press. As restrictions around publication were relaxed in the late 1980s, Russians were able to access 'delayed', or previously banned Russian fiction (*zaderzhannaia literatura*) as well as literature from abroad, and as a result were less interested in reading contemporary Russian novels.⁶⁸ At that time, due to her editorial work, Perova was among the few people regularly reading contemporary Russian books, and she formulated her intention to share modern Russian literature 'with the rest of the world' via Glas.⁶⁹

During its twenty-three years in operation, Glas published thirty-three novels, as well as short-story collections, essays, and memoirs, representing one hundred and seventy different authors.⁷⁰ Writers such as Sorokin, Pelevin, and Ulitskaya were all first published in English by Glas, despite the fact Perova did not receive

⁶⁶ Phoebe Taplin, 'Glas Publishing House Is Suspending Its Activity', *Russia Beyond*, 31 October 2014
<https://www.rbth.com/literature/2014/10/31/glas_publishing_house_is_suspending_its_activity_41081.html> [accessed 6 January 2022].

⁶⁷ The journal ran between 1946 and 1991.

⁶⁸ Interview with Perova. Parthé, *Russian Village Prose*, p. ix. This exhilaration at being able to access previously unavailable, largely twentieth-century literature, and its sudden ubiquity, is described in Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever*, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁹ Interview with Perova. It has not been possible access sales figures for Glas. From Nielsen data it is clear that their books did not feature in the top fifty bestsellers in the UK between 2001-2019. I was only able to access sales data for *Minus*, which sold a total of fifty copies, and Arch Tait's translation of *Sonechka*, which sold forty copies between 2001-2007. Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Sonechka and Other Stories*, trans. by Arch Tait, 17 (Moscow Birmingham: Glas, 1998).

⁷⁰ Interview with Perova. Glas's full list of publications can be found here:
<<http://www.glas.msk.su/list.html>>. Ulitskaya, *Sonechka and Other Stories*.

any funding.⁷¹ She explained that often the proceeds from one book would be used to fund the next, and Tait doubted that she ever made any profit.⁷² When literary-funding infrastructure was introduced in Russia in 2011 in the form of IP, Perova was told that she would not be eligible to apply because she was based in Russia. As is common with source-culture funding, IP would only fund publishers located abroad.⁷³

Despite lacking external funding, Glas was able to continue publishing because of the close connections and networks that Perova fostered between translators and authors.⁷⁴ Perova warmly acknowledged the role played by her translators, and also noted that many of them, such as Tait, Bromfield, Chandler and Joanne Turnbull, owe their subsequent careers to Glas; they accrued symbolic capital while working for her small publisher, dominated in the Russian-English literary translation field, and later used this capital to build their careers. They also worked with her as co-editors: Bromfield first, then Tait and finally Turnbull.⁷⁵ Chandler established himself by translating Andrei Platonov for Glas, and Turnbull first brought Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky into English (and later went on to translate him for NYRB Classics).⁷⁶ Bromfield, whose work I discussed in Chapter Two, translated Pelevin for Glas and went on to work on the majority of Pelevin's novels and short stories over the next twenty years.⁷⁷

Glas was in part successful because in the early 1990s Russia was the focus of intense interest from foreign publishers. Wiedling, Senchin's agent in Germany, suggested that this was fuelled by the fact that authors were finally able to control their own publishing rights.⁷⁸ Perova and Wiedling both underline that this interest

⁷¹ An excerpt of Sorokin's *Their Four Hearts*, translated by Jamey Gambrell appeared in Glas 2: Soviet Grotesque; *Glas 2: Soviet Grotesque*, ed. by Natasha Perova, Glas New Russian Writing, 2 (Moscow: Glas, 2000). Ulitskaya's work appeared in various volumes, translated by Arch Tait and Andrew Bromfield.

⁷² Interview with Tait.

⁷³ Interview with Perova. For more on this, see below, p. 198.

⁷⁴ Interview with Perova.

⁷⁵ Natasha Perova, 'The Story of Glas: Publishing New Russian Writing in English', *European Literature Network*, 18 August 2017 <<https://www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-story-of-glas-publishing-new-russian-writing-in-english-translation-by-natasha-perova/>> [accessed 24 June 2023].

⁷⁶ Andrei Platonov, *The Portable Platonov*, trans. by Robert Chandler and Elizabeth Chandler, Glas New Russian Writing, v. 20 (Moscow: Glas, 1999); Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, *Seven Stories*, trans. by Joanne Turnbull, Glas New Russian Writing: Contemporary Russian Literature in English Translation, v. 39 (Moscow: Chicago: Glas, 2006).

⁷⁷ For details of Bromfield's translations for Glas, see p. 143.

⁷⁸ Interview with Wiedling.

in contemporary Russian fiction has since waned. Instead, it has become increasingly difficult to interest Western publishers in new and unknown Russian writers:

Today they don't even want to listen. They say, 'that will be again about Gulags and suffering. That's again something Dostoevsky-like. Russia is always suffering – everything always goes wrong there.' This is their attitude today. I still talk to many publishers, and they still react in this way; 'Not another Russian book.'⁷⁹

During our interview in October 2021, Perova noted that she had selected *Minus* for publication because she admired both the novel and its author.⁸⁰ Perova asked Tait, then co-editor at Glas, to translate a sample from *Minus* with the aim of finding a publisher in the UK or US to produce the book. Their efforts proved unsuccessful, even though it was nearly signed by a UK publisher, whose name Perova did not disclose, and instead Perova decided to publish it herself. She asked Tait to translate the whole novel, and it was published in English by Glas in 2008.⁸¹ The novel sold a total of fifty copies in the UK, and at the time of writing is, as with all Glas publications, out of print.⁸²

2.2 The Difficulties of Selling New Realism

*'If it's a cheerful book, then it doesn't reflect real life, it's just not true.'*⁸³

The translation histories of *BGT* and *Minus* both demonstrate the limited appeal of contemporary Russian fiction in the Western market. Despite the size and resources of FSG, they did not vastly outsell Glas in the UK at least.⁸⁴ As highlighted in Chapter Two, despite the number of Russian titles published, there seems to be a limit to how many sales such novels will achieve. It seems that *Minus's* small sales are not only the product of its publisher's dominated position in the literary field. *Minus* might simply be too depressing, an issue compounded

⁷⁹ Interview with Perova. Since February 2022 attitudes have hardened against Russian culture. See the Conclusion to this thesis for a discussion.

⁸⁰ Interview with Perova.

⁸¹ Interview with Perova.

⁸² Nielsen BookData. The novel is not available as an eBook.

⁸³ Interview with Perova.

⁸⁴ *BGT* sold 356 copies between 2015-19, *Jacob's Ladder* sold twelve in 2019; Nielsen BookData.

by its lack of political selling points with which to entice the reader.⁸⁵ While the downbeat nature of Senchin's novel fulfils one of Lipovetsky's criteria for the Russian Exotic, *Minus* contains none of the other elements that might render it an easily marketable book. Neither was it framed as anything other than an ethnographic exposé of a small Siberian town.⁸⁶ As I explore in Chapter Four, the paratexts that market a novel play a vital role in presenting it to the target reader.

This suspicion about *Minus*'s overriding 'gloom' is confirmed in part by the fact that none of Senchin's subsequent novels have been signed by any Anglophone publisher. Wiedling had a similar experience when attempting to sell Senchin's *Eltyshevy* and *Zona zatopleniia*.⁸⁷ He was not able to recall specific reasons given by publishers for rejecting the novels but felt in general that publishers do not like 'dark, repressive, negative' novels about Russia.⁸⁸ This did not prevent translators working on *Eltyshevy*, however. Bromfield provided a sample translation of the first three chapters of *Eltyshevy* to promote the book, and Lisa Hayden recalled translating a section of the same novel for Perova.⁸⁹ Despite the immediacy of Senchin's writing, however, and what Hayden describes as the relatable nature of his characters' lives, the rest of his novels remain uncommissioned.⁹⁰

If a UK or US publisher were interested in one of Senchin's novels, his low sales figures, and lack of symbolic capital, coupled with the near impossibility of marketing him as a dissident prior to 2022, would render him an unenticing prospect. Perova understood Senchin's lack of appeal in the West, and even Tait commented, 'of the writers you have mentioned, Senchin is the most colourless'.⁹¹ This, Perova explained, is an issue that affects most contemporary Russian fiction. Despite Lipovetsky's thoughts about the popularity of the Russian Exotic, Perova felt that readers in the West want uplifting novels, not 'gloomy, tragic' books.⁹²

⁸⁵ See Chapter Two, p. 134 for more on the 'Russian Exotic'.

⁸⁶ See Chapter Four, p. 268.

⁸⁷ See Chapter One for more about these novels.

⁸⁸ Interview with Wiedling

⁸⁹ Interview with Lisa Hayden, 19 October 2021. I have been unable to ascertain who commissioned Bromfield for the sample translation.

⁹⁰ There are a few short stories in English, however. See Chapter One, p. 119.

⁹¹ Interview with Tait.

⁹² Interview with Perova.

2.3 Geopolitics and the Closure of Glas

Although Senchin was not successful in the US or UK, without Perova's advocacy he would not have been translated at all. However, Senchin is just one of the large number of authors Glas translated into English. The promotional work carried out by both Perova and the networks of translators and publishers she fostered at Glas ensured that a large number of authors could be read outside of Russia, even though chances of commercial success were low.⁹³ Indeed, as Perova explained in her interview, publishing a wide range of Russian fiction, rather than seeking commercial success was her principal aim, and is evident in the one hundred and seventy different authors she succeeded in bringing into English.⁹⁴ However, no matter the laudable aims of the press, Glas was not able to withstand the realities of the translation market once IP launched its funding scheme in 2011.

Perova had welcomed the founding of IP in 2011 and hoped that it would provide support for her struggling press. However, she was soon informed that, as is common among national funding bodies, IP was only willing to fund foreign publishers. As a Russian operating a Russia-based business, she would not be able to access their support.⁹⁵ Since Perova was also ineligible for funding from organisations such as English PEN because she was not British or UK-based, Glas was left in a precarious position. The publisher was unable to access home-grown governmental support, but now had to compete with a potentially increased number of Russian translations from US- and UK-based firms. To compound matters, these projects were now supported by funding which Glas was unable to access, and in the meantime IP were able to benefit from the translator networks fostered by the small publisher. In addition, with the closure of Glas, IP were able to exert greater control over which novels were published in English.

During our interview, Perova suggested that geopolitics had also impacted the later fortunes of Glas. In summer 2014, a few months after Russia invaded

⁹³ Natasha confirmed the status of Russian fiction in her interview when she revealed she had been told by a Western publisher that Russian novels were 'not commercial by definition'; Interview with Perova.

⁹⁴ Interview with Perova. As well as those listed already, other authors include; Arkady Babchenko, Anna Babiashkina, Dmitry Bykov, Vladimir Makanin, Alexander Snegriev, Olga Slavnikova, and Dmitry Vachedin.

⁹⁵ Interview with Perova.

Donbas and annexed Crimea, her US distributor stated that they would no longer be comfortable stocking Glas publications. They feared that being associated with Russia might negatively affect their reputation.⁹⁶ Perova also noted that around this time, the costs involved in printing and exporting books from Russia had begun to rise. Geopolitics also affected Glas through the introduction of the Foreign Agent law from 2012 onwards.⁹⁷ Since Perova primarily sold novels in the West, sometimes receiving small amounts of money, she feared that she would be at risk of being declared a foreign agent. All of these considerations culminated in the closure of Glas in 2014. While not an economically powerful gatekeeper, Glas had been an important starting point for some of Russia's contemporary authors who later went on to be widely published in the UK and US. The press was also an important training ground for a number of Russian-English literary translators who are well-respected in the field today.

3 The Key to Commissioning Novels in Translation: Networks, Symbolic Capital, Money, and Dissidence

The willingness of commercial publisher FSG to commission Ulitskaya, compared to a reluctance to sign a non-dissident writer like Senchin, illustrates a pattern of behaviour among publishers. This pattern, reinforced by the comps system described in Chapter Two, sees “liberal” writers, who can be marketed as dissidents, signed to larger publishing firms. These publishers perpetuate the accepted role of Russian literature as political critique that was cemented by FSG via writers such as Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky. Publishers continue this practice despite the lack of sales for either “liberal” or “nationalist” Russian writers. I argue that this is because in part because publishers can rely on “dissident” Russian authors to confer symbolic capital on their firm. Aside from a tendency to follow tested publishing patterns, this preference for “liberal” writers might also be due

⁹⁶ Perova also discussed this in her interview for *RBTH*; Taplin, ‘Glas Publishing House Is Suspending Its Activity’. Since February 2022, many publishers and distributors have also refused to work with Russia. See Comerford, ‘PRH, S&S and Gardners Pull Back from Russian Trade as Industry Debates Ukraine Response’.

⁹⁷ Interview with Perova. Since 2012 Russia has required people who live in Russia and receive money from abroad to register as foreign agents. Foreign agents must identify themselves as such when distributing any information over social media, as has been seen with media outlets such as Meduza. Among other requirements, they must also present detailed financial reports. See Todd Prince, ‘Russia’s “Foreign Agent” Amendments “Seriously Violate” Human Rights: Venice Commission’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 7 July 2021 <<https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-foreign-agents-europe-/31346269.html>> [accessed 5 February 2022].

to such authors' willingness to engage with the West, either in order to increase their reputation, or for reasons of activism.⁹⁸ It might likewise be a product of translators' need to preserve their symbolic capital, an asset they might be unwilling to risk by recommending "nationalist" authors to editors. As I will show, this preference for dissident authors has led "liberal" writers to be commissioned by publishers with substantial economic and cultural capital. Hence FSG's and PRH's association with Ulitskaya and Sorokin. It also led in part to the commission of Shishkin's *Maidenhair* by prestigious, though small, independent publisher Open Letter.⁹⁹

Russian writers who cannot be categorized as "dissidents", such as Senchin, Elizarov and Prilepin, are more difficult to place within the Western literary ecosystem and are therefore less likely to be commissioned by such publishers as those listed above.¹⁰⁰ Prilepin's *Sankya*, although described as "dissident" at the time of commission, was published by a small press only as a result of the passionate advocacy of translators who believed they were championing an 'anti-Putin' author.¹⁰¹ From my selection of "nationalist" authors, only Elizarov's *The Librarian* was placed with a publisher with any considerable symbolic capital in the form of Pushkin Press. As noted in Chapter Two, this could have been the result of a lack of information, or indeed editorial research, about the author.¹⁰²

Below I will discuss the various factors that led to the commission and publication of *Oprichnik*, *Maidenhair*, *Sankya* and *The Librarian*. I will demonstrate that, as with *BGT* and *Minus*, the commissioning histories of these novels exemplify a divide between how "nationalist" and "liberal" writers are regarded by American and British publishing firms. Drawing upon Sela-Sheffy's work on the translator's personae, I will consider to what extent translating "liberal", as opposed to "nationalist" authors builds not just a translator's but also a publisher's symbolic

⁹⁸ Shishkin is an especially good example of this; see Chapter Two, p. 243. All of the "liberal" authors here have been outspoken against the war. See Conclusion, p. 338.

⁹⁹ For more details on Open Letter and its publisher Chad Post, see p. 131. I suggest, based on the commissioning history of *Maidenhair*, that larger publishers eschewed the novel because it was difficult, and not commercially viable.

¹⁰⁰ It remains to be seen how the West will change its attitude towards popular writers who have not come out as against the war such as Eugene Vodolazkin and Tatiana Tolstaya. See Conclusion, p. 343.

¹⁰¹ See later this chapter, p. 207.

¹⁰² During our interview, Gesche Ipsen, who had worked on *The Librarian*, said that she had no knowledge of Elizarov's political views; Interview with Ipsen. I argue in Chapter Four, that Elizarov was instead consecrated by Pushkin Press; see p. 251.

capital. I will also consider what happens when translation causes a perceived loss in capital, as in the case of Jeff Parker and his work with *Sankya*.¹⁰³ I will evaluate how the position of a publisher within the publishing field shapes their decisions about whom to publish. I will explore what happens when a publisher experiences a change in their position within this field, as in the case of Dalkey Archive and their work with Sorokin.¹⁰⁴ Subsequently, I will consider the impact of “liberal” and “nationalist” author status on both their ability to attract, and need for, external funding. Finally, I propose that publishers prefer to commission novels written by authors whom they can market to the target reader as dissident.

3.1 Liberal Writers Generate Symbolic Capital

All three “liberal” writers — Sorokin, Ulitskaya and Shishkin — are marketed in the West as dissidents and were published as the result of an extensive network of agents in possession of a considerable amount of symbolic capital.¹⁰⁵ These networks can lead to so-called “dissident” authors being signed by the most well-known publishing houses and on some occasions, being translated by the most experienced translators regardless of whether funding is available. Conversely, the same networks might also lead “liberal” authors to independent presses who are in the process of building their reputations. As I will discuss below, and as demonstrated by the early years of FSG, publishing such writers can help to increase a firm’s standing in the literary market.

In accordance with Bourdieu’s findings, the larger presses that sign “liberal” Russian authors might rely on their backlists to compensate for potentially small sales in exchange for the cultural capital these authors might confer. In other words, they risk economic capital in exchange for cultural capital, and the opportunity to confirm their dominance in the publishing field.¹⁰⁶ For the smaller publishers, for whom the stakes are much higher, publishing “liberal” authors is often worth the economic risk in order to gain cultural capital — although this risk is often mitigated to some degree by subsidies.¹⁰⁷ Accruing cultural capital improves their position in the field, and subsequently increases these firms’

¹⁰³ Sela-Sheffy, ‘The Translators’ Personae’.

¹⁰⁴ See later this chapter, p. 211.

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of marketing and reception, see Chapter Four.

¹⁰⁶ Bourdieu, ‘A Conservative Revolution’, p. 141

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter One, p. 130.

chances of being able to commission even more prestigious authors and to attract translators.

At the same time, publishing well-known Russian writers with “liberal” politics might help to attract authors of similar calibre from other languages (at least, this was the case before February 2022). Meanwhile, Russian authors who are published abroad are consecrated by their publishers — some of them are signed to more prestigious firms after they have been published by dominated publishers — creating movement from the peripheries of the field, as described by Bourdieu.¹⁰⁸ Of Senchin, Sorokin and Ulitskaya, all three of whom were first published by Glas, only Senchin remained relegated to the small, underfunded, if passionately run publishing house. The subsequent publishing trajectory of “liberal” authors Sorokin and Ulitskaya can be seen as validation of Perova’s wishes to promote contemporary Russian fiction. Meanwhile, Glas was able to enjoy some of the symbolic capital they bestowed on the press in their wake.¹⁰⁹

3.1a *Day of the Oprichnik and Maidenhair*

The networks that support the translation and recognition in the West of these “liberal” writers can be best imagined as a community of translators, editors and agents with potential consecrating authority. I will now explore the role of these networks, and the value of cultural capital in brief microhistories of *Oprichnik* and *Maidenhair*. As discussed above, Krotov’s cultural heritage and his position as editor at FSG placed him advantageously for commissioning Ulitskaya’s *BGT*. Even though he was very new to the profession, Krotov also facilitated FSG’s commission of *Day of the Oprichnik*.¹¹⁰ It was no accident that the latter novel came to the firm, validating Bourdieu’s assertion that goal-oriented ‘decision making’ in prestigious publishing houses is illusory: rather than any active ‘seeking’ on the publisher’s part, as they indicate, editors are instead approached

¹⁰⁸ Bourdieu, ‘A Conservative Revolution’.

¹⁰⁹ For example, the following articles on the closure of Glas reference these authors: Dennis Abrams, ‘Russia’s Glas Gives Up Publishing: What Happened?’, *Publishing Perspectives*, 3 November 2014 <<https://publishingperspectives.com/2014/11/glas-publishing-house-cease-operations-happened/>> [accessed 27 September 2021]; The New Inquiry, ‘From Russia With Literature’, *The New Inquiry*, 20 July 2011 <<https://thenewinquiry.com/from-russia-with-literature/>> [accessed 3 June 2023].

¹¹⁰ This is not unusual. Franssen and Kuipers note that there is a trend for a young demographic among literary scouts in New York, for example; Franssen and Kuipers, ‘Coping with Uncertainty’, p. 55.

by authors and agents because of their position in the publishing field.¹¹¹ Although the decision to publish is usually made by editors, this process is presented as somehow mysterious. In my interview with Ipsen, she stressed that people in the publishing world do not like to frame their work as simply ‘business’.¹¹²

In accordance with forging the impression of a creative process rather than a business transaction, FSG celebrated signing *Oprichnik* with an article titled ‘After Years of Patience, FSG Finds a Vladimir Sorokin Book They Want to Publish in English.’¹¹³ Once *Oprichnik* was commissioned, Krotov’s previous connections led him to approach the acclaimed translator Jamey Gambrell both because he knew and respected her as his former Russian translation tutor, and because she was a close friend of Sorokin’s.¹¹⁴ Gambrell is described by translator Marian Schwartz as ‘one of the best translators of our generation’.¹¹⁵ Her work with challenging Russian texts gained her the respect of publishers and translators and led her to translate notoriously complex novels, such as Tatiana Tolstaya’s *Kys’* (*The Slynx*, 2000), and Sorokin’s *Ice Trilogy* and *The Blizzard*.¹¹⁶

As a result of Gambrell’s reputation and experience, she was also sought by Shishkin’s agent Markus Hoffmann to translate *Venerin Volos* (*Maidenhair*).¹¹⁷ Shishkin’s novel was commissioned for translation via a series of personal connections, which Hoffman described as an ‘expat network’.¹¹⁸ Shishkin met Hoffmann at a party in New York in 2008. The agent was intrigued by this ‘real

¹¹¹ Bourdieu, ‘A Conservative Revolution’, p. 124.

¹¹² Interview with Ipsen. She told me, ‘people in it think that they are doing something quite special, that it isn’t really business – it’s like business is a dirty word.’

¹¹³ Neyfakh, ‘After Years of Patience, FSG Finds a Vladimir Sorokin Book They Want to Publish in English’.

¹¹⁴ The large number of interviews with Gambrell, as well as the obituaries on her death in 2020, are testament to her reputation. See: Alina Cohen, ‘A Strange and Endless Journey: A Conversation with Jamey Gambrell, Translator of Vladimir Sorokin’s “The Blizzard”’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 31 January 2016 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-strange-and-endless-journey-a-conversation-with-jamey-gambrell-translator-of-vladimir-sorokins-the-blizzard/>> [accessed 5 November 2019]; Daniel Slotnik., ‘Jamey Gambrell Dies at 65; Made Russian Writing Sing, in English’, *The New York Times*, 10 March 2020, section Books <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/books/bookupdate/jamey-gambrell-dead.html>> [accessed 11 March 2020];

¹¹⁵ Interview with Schwartz.

¹¹⁶ Sorokin, *The Blizzard*; Tatiana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: New York Review Books, 2003)

¹¹⁷ For a further discussion of Gambrell and her work, see Chapter Five, p. 292. Interview with Hoffman. An excerpt of Gambrell’s translation appeared in *World Literature Today*; Shishkin, ‘We Can’t Go On Living This Way’.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Hoffmann.

deal' Russian writer with 'Siberian husky eyes.'¹¹⁹ Hoffmann saw the opportunity to take on a project for love rather than one with the possibility of commercial success. His friend Wiedling, who also promoted Prilepin and Senchin, managed Shishkin's global rights, and Hoffmann began working as Shishkin's US agent.¹²⁰

Despite Shishkin's fame in Russia, and the originality of his work, it was clear that identifying a target readership, and thereby securing sales, would be the main obstacle for most publishers.¹²¹ Shishkin provided me with one of the rejection letters he received, demonstrating the commercial concerns of US publishers when selecting novels for translation:

The novel seems a very complex and impressive work. [...] It is a completely original tour de force. [...] The richness and erudition made me breathless. [...] Jamey Gambrell's translation of excerpts from different narrative perspectives in the novel is excellent and very helpful. [...] But I think this project is too difficult for me to take on. And I am not at all sure how many readers in this country will come to Mikhail Shishkin's novel.¹²²

By contrast, when Chad Post of Open Letter heard about *Maidenhair*, he felt that it would suit his readers perfectly.¹²³ As a result of his position in the translation community, which I detailed in Chapter Two, Post has been able to amass the symbolic capital that allows him to acquire and publish a novel like *Maidenhair*, and to make it a success — at least relative to most translated fiction.¹²⁴ During our interview, Post revealed that the novel is in Open Letter's top twenty bestsellers, and has sold over three thousand copies in the US.¹²⁵ This could be a result of Shishkin's political stance, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, but sales are also driven by astute marketing on the part of both publisher and writer, as well as the loyal readership of Open Letter.¹²⁶ When publishing authors who are

¹¹⁹ Interview with Hoffmann. Shishkin's physical appearance is often referenced in paratextual material. See Chapter Four for a discussion on marketing both Shishkin and other contemporary authors.

¹²⁰ Interview with Hoffmann.

¹²¹ See Introduction, p. 12, and Chapter One, p. 93 for a discussion of Shishkin's reputation in Russia.

¹²² Interview with Shishkin.

¹²³ Interview with Post.

¹²⁴ He also publishes what he thinks his readers want. See Chapter Two, p. 133.

¹²⁵ Interview with Post. This is a good example of the 'long tail' sales model relied on by publishers. See Chris Anderson, *The Longer Long Tail: How Endless Choice Is Creating Unlimited Demand* (London: Random House Business, 2009).

¹²⁶ For a discussion of marketing, and paratexts, see Chapter Four.

relatively unknown in the West, Post's marketing strategy has been to publish a particular kind of book; in our interview, Post stated that his readers actively seek "complicated novels". By publishing *Maidenhair*, Post gave his readers what they want, while simultaneously confirming his publishing "brand".¹²⁷

Just as Krotov's networks led him to secure Gambrell to translate *Oprichnik*, Post's close connections with the US Russophone translator network led him to Schwartz, and he signed her as translator for *Maidenhair*. Although she had not worked with Post before, Schwartz had previously translated Shishkin's short story 'Calligraphy Lesson' for *Words Without Borders* in 2007.¹²⁸ Commissioning such an experienced translator as Schwartz also augmented Post's symbolic capital. When I first spoke with Schwartz in 2021, she had translated, she estimated, almost one hundred books, and had won numerous prizes for her work, which spans classic Russian literature to Soviet and contemporary authors.¹²⁹ During interviews, both Post and Schwartz mentioned meeting each other at the American Literary Translators Association, ALTA conference, where, according to Schwartz, Post approached her about translating the book. Schwartz subsequently translated a sample of *Maidenhair*, securing the commission.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ For a discussion of translator brands, see above, p. 145.

¹²⁸ Mikhail Shishkin, 'Calligraphy Lesson', trans. by Marian Schwartz, *Words Without Borders*, July 2007 <<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/calligraphy-lesson>> [accessed 10 November 2021]. This translation also appears in Shishkin, *Calligraphy Lesson: The Collected Stories*, trans. by Marian Schwartz, Leo Shtutin, Sylvia Maizell, and Mariya Bashkatova, (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2015).

¹²⁹ Interview with Schwartz. Schwartz has received awards for: Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, for which she won the Soeurette Diehl Frasier award in 2016, and Bulgakov's *White Guard*, awarded the ASTEEL Award for Best Translation in 2009, Olga Slavnikova's *2017*, which won her the Heldt Prize Best Translation in 2011, and Leonid Yuzefovich's *The Harlequin's Costume*, which won the Read Russia prize in 2013. She has also won the Linda Gaboriau Award for Translation in 2018 for her contribution to translation; Lynda Vang, 'Marian Schwartz Named Recipient of 2018 Linda Gaboriau Award for Translation', *Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity*, 2018 <<https://www.banffcentre.ca/articles/marian-schwartz-named-recipient-2018-linda-gaboriau-award-translation>> [accessed 23 November 2021].

¹³⁰ Schwartz comes closest to Bromfield in her approach to translation, though is a little more active in self-promotion and gives interviews to the press and appears beside authors at events. See for example: Bud Parr, 'Understanding Is Not the Most Important Thing: Shishkin, Schwartz, and Post in Conversation', *Words Without Borders*, 10 July 2012 <<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/understanding-is-not-the-most-important-thing-shishkin-schwartz-and-post-in>> [accessed 29 October 2021]; Ryan Strader, 'A Conversation with Translator Marian Schwartz', *Cleaver Magazine*, 16 October 2018 <<https://www.cleavermagazine.com/a-conversation-with-translator-marian-schwartz-interview-by-ryan-k-strader/>> [accessed 18 January 2021]; Notre Dame Press, 'Marian Schwartz on the Translator's Vocation and Bringing the Work of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to an English-Speaking

The relative ease with which these commissions of “dissident” writers took place, and the involvement of well-known translators, provides a contrast to the histories behind “nationalist” authors which now follow. It appears that the translator network is more eager to support “liberal” authors as opposed to “nationalists” who might threaten their symbolic capital by tarnishing their reputation through association. However, as I will explore, this did not initially worry the translators working with Prilepin, and Elizarov was seriously considered for translation by Lawton and Evans up until Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Prilepin’s actions since *Sankya* was published, alongside geopolitical tensions, have revealed a Russian-English translated fiction field that is polarised even further.¹³¹

3.2 “Nationalists” Have Smaller Networks Abroad: Posing a Risk to Symbolic Capital through Association

The networks that bring about the translation of “liberal” writers into English and which, if successful, confer symbolic and cultural capital on their participants, can be contrasted with the networks around “nationalist” authors. Despite Perova’s connections, she was unable to sell a purportedly ‘gloomy’ “nationalist” writer, and even when she published *Minus* herself, the novel made little impact.¹³² *The Librarian* was commissioned by Pushkin Press because it won the Russian Booker Prize in 2008.¹³³ However, despite asking numerous interviewees involved in the project, it has not been possible to ascertain why the novel was commissioned, or who suggested it.¹³⁴ This might be, I surmise, because no one wished to risk their reputation through association with Elizarov. As I will explore in more detail in Chapter Five, Bromfield accepted the commission because of his pragmatic approach to his profession as a translator.¹³⁵ For Bromfield, it is the publisher, rather than the translator, who is responsible for the content of the novels they produce.

Audience’, *Notre Dame University Press*, 22 September 2021
<<https://undpress.nd.edu/2021/09/22/marian-schwartz-on-the-translators-vocation-and-bringing-the-work-of-aleksandr-solzhenitsyn-to-an-english-speaking-audience/>> [accessed 22 November 2021].

¹³¹ See my Conclusion to this thesis for further discussion.

¹³² The novel sold fifty copies in the UK; Nielsen Data

¹³³ Interview with Ipsen.

¹³⁴ Despite sending requests to Pushkin Press for an interview, I have not been successful in speaking to the publisher.

¹³⁵ Interview with Bromfield.

Bromfield is perhaps the exception. I have found that few translators are willing to work with contemporary “nationalist” writers, and suggest that this is because such authors do not confer as much cultural capital and are accompanied by potential reputational risk. This reluctance is evident among the interviewees whom I questioned about Prilepin for example, as I will show. This preference for “liberal” over “nationalist” authors reinforces Sela-Sheffy's argument that many translators regard their reputation as a central factor in their success.¹³⁶ However, it is also likely that a translator will have ethical reasons for declining to translate an author whose politics they cannot support, as I will explore both in the following section, and in Chapter Five.

Bryan Karetnyk, who has translated novels for Pushkin Press, remarked that reputation is one of his considerations, especially in a climate where translators are held accountable for their decisions.¹³⁷ In accordance with Karetnyk's comments, the majority of translators and publishers I interviewed do not wish to squander their cultural capital through association with “nationalist” Russian authors. To support my argument, which I continue with a consideration of ethics in Chapter Five, I now detail the journeys to commission for *Sankya* and *The Librarian*. I question which publishers and translators are willing to work with “nationalist” authors such as Prilepin and Elizarov. I also suggest that despite potential reputational risk, larger publishing firms perceive that they have more freedom to consider publishing controversial writers, although commissioning patterns show that this is rarely followed through.

3.2a *Sankya*

This risk to reputation can be seen in the translation history of Prilepin's *Sankya*, which has resulted in a self-perceived loss of cultural capital for at least one of its translators.¹³⁸ Around 2008, *Sank'ia* came to the attention of Jeff Parker, an American writer, editor and academic, who ran an annual Summer Literary Seminar programme in St Petersburg.¹³⁹ Parker had been looking for a novel to

¹³⁶ Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae', p. 611.

¹³⁷ Interview with Karetnyk. I will discuss the ethics around translator and publisher decisions in more detail in Chapter Five.

¹³⁸ This is the opposite process to the one described by Sela-Sheffy.

¹³⁹ Parker's published books, including editions he has worked as editor on include: *Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States*, ed. by Mikhail Iossel and Jeff Parker (Illinois, IL: Dalkey

translate and saw in *Sank'ia* an accurate depiction of Russia in the early 2000s, and more specifically, of the anti-government protest scene at the time. He pitched *Sank'ia* to independent, non-profit US publisher Dzanc Books and they eventually signed it to their imprint Disquiet in 2012. This was around the same time as Prilepin published his controversial 'Pis'mo tovarishchu Stalinu' ('Letter to comrade Stalin').¹⁴⁰ The rights were brokered by Thomas Wiedling, and the novel was published on 8 February 2014, shortly before Russia's invasion of Crimea the following month. At this time Prilepin's support for the invasion, and for Putin, was becoming ever more clear.¹⁴¹ As a result of Prilepin's increasingly vocal support for Putin's actions, the translators chose not to promote *Sankya* when it was released in English.

Parker has expressed his profound regret at having translated Prilepin. Despite the fact that Prilepin published his controversial letter in 2012, around the same time the contract for the translation was finally signed, the translators had decided to proceed with the project, ostensibly because they still believe the novel would tell the reader something about modern Russia.¹⁴² I do not believe that Parker's regret is necessary, and like the translators, I also understand the value of *Sankya* both as a work of fiction, and as a snapshot of the NBP movement.

Although the translators took a risk in translating *Sank'ia*, since they were aware of Prilepin's Natsbol activism, they could not have predicted that the author of the novel they selected in 2008 as an example of the anti-Putin protest scene would support Putin so vocally in 2014, or indeed that Putin would invade Ukraine. I suggest that the translators could, however, have been more proactive. While they decided not to promote *Sankya* when it was published, they allowed

Archive Press, 2004); *Rasskazy: New Fiction from a New Russia*, ed. by Mikhail Iossel and Jeff Parker (Portland, OR: Tin House Books, 2009); Jeff Parker, *Where Bears Roam the Streets* (London: Harper Collins, 2015).

¹⁴⁰ See above, Chapter One, p. 93 for more about the letter. Interviewee #9, 2020. Parker was editor for this imprint; see Chapter Five, p. 269. Claire Kirch, 'Dzanc Books Launches New Imprint', *PublishersWeekly.Com*, 9 January 2013 <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/55337-dzanc-books-launches-new-imprint.html>> [accessed 26 August 2022]. Dzanc have since been linked to another controversial author. See Claire Kirch, 'Dzanc Drops Novel Criticized for Islamophobic Themes', *Publishers Weekly*, 24 April 2019 <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/79864-dzanc-drops-novel-criticized-for-islamophobic-themes.html>> [accessed 14 June 2022].

¹⁴¹ See Chapter One, p. 99 for a discussion of Prilepin's politics.

¹⁴² Interviewee #9. The translators compounded their representation of the author as dissident via a consecrating introduction from Navalny.

Navalny's foreword to the novel, which framed Prilepin as against the Russian government, to stand without comment.¹⁴³ While I agree that *Sankya* should be read today, I argue in Chapter Four that it is unethical to present such a politically active author without adequate context, and as such I believe the translators acted unethically by declining to highlight Prilepin's change in political allegiance. As I conclude in Chapter Four, however, this was not their responsibility alone.

Perhaps as a result of his remorse, Parker has not translated any other novels since *Sank'ia*.¹⁴⁴ The sense of regret around the novel was compounded by accusations that the English text to some extent obscured the anti-Semitism present in Prilepin's book.¹⁴⁵ I will discuss this in detail in Chapter Five, where I will argue that any reduction in the anti-Semitism of *Sankya* was the result of the translators' personal dispositions, or translatorial *hexis*, compounded by minimal editorial support, rather than a deliberate attempt to make Prilepin more acceptable to his Western reader.¹⁴⁶ Parker, however, feels that what symbolic capital he had was squandered on Prilepin and that this loss was exacerbated by the accusations of anti-Semitism.¹⁴⁷ As mentioned in the introduction, Parker and his two co-translators are not the only intermediaries to abandon Prilepin. Parker's efforts to establish 'distinctive professional prestige' by translating a radical book about Russia, and to teach the West about contemporary Russian politics, backfired.¹⁴⁸ In 2021, Wiedling claimed that even if Prilepin were to write a bestseller, he could not represent him.¹⁴⁹

The example of Prilepin seems to suggest that translators are less willing to work with authors who profess to "nationalist", or effectively, pro-Putin politics. I asked most interviewees whether they would translate or publish Prilepin.¹⁵⁰ Almost every translator and publisher I spoke to claimed that they would not translate his

¹⁴³ For more details on Navalny's foreword, See Introduction, p. 14, and also Chapter Four, p. 235.

¹⁴⁴ Interviewee #9.

¹⁴⁵ For allegations made specifically about *Sankya*, see: Ian Ross Singleton, 'Of Translation and Politics in Russian Literature', *Fiction Writers Review*, 22 February 2016 <<https://fictionwritersreview.com/essay/of-translation-and-politics-in-russian-literature/>> [accessed 27 November 2019].

¹⁴⁶ For more on translatorial *hexis*, and a translation analysis of *Sankya*, see Chapter Five, pp. 285-301.

¹⁴⁷ Interviewee #9.

¹⁴⁸ Sela-Sheffy refers to 'distinctive professional prestige.' See Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae', p. 610.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Wiedling.

¹⁵⁰ See Methodology, p. 62.

work, even though most admitted to never having read any of his novels.¹⁵¹ Prilepin's shockingly casual admission in 2019 that his battalion had killed 'lots of Ukrainians', not surprisingly had the effect of deterring almost everyone — no one would be willing to surrender their symbolic capital, or challenge their own personal ethics, by endorsing Prilepin.¹⁵²

3.3 Publishing and Politics: Size Matters

As I will discuss in detail in Chapter Five, the example of *Sankya* shows what happens when an author's status changes in the West from acceptable dissident to pro-Putin, publicly pro-Stalin politician. An author's political beliefs, and more importantly, their extra-textual activities, fundamentally influences the size and prestige of publishing firms willing to commission them.¹⁵³ In contrast to 2012, were a literary agent to pitch Prilepin to Dzanc Books today, the publisher would likely not commission his novels.¹⁵⁴ While Glagoslav did publish Prilepin's *The Monastery* in 2020, this was the result of an agreement that was made prior to his involvement in Ukraine in 2017.¹⁵⁵ As I will discuss in Chapter Four, the book was tempered with a candid introduction to the author by US academic Benjamin Sutcliffe detailing Prilepin's controversial background, and the venture was funded by Institut Perevoda.¹⁵⁶

A publisher's ability and willingness to translate controversial authors increases with their dominance in the publishing field, even if they rarely put this into practice. NYRB's Edwin Frank stated that he can contemplate translating Nazi

¹⁵¹ Prilepin, *The Monastery*. Although *The Monastery* was published in English after Prilepin's admissions, through interviews it seems that its translator, Nicholas Kotar, was unaware of Prilepin's politics and actions before he accepted the commission. Kotar himself is a Russian Orthodox Deacon living in a monastery in the US and is a committed supporter of right-wing twentieth century philosopher Ivan Ilyin. His habitus may have influenced his decision to translate *The Monastery*. Interviewee #7, August 2020. See also: Nicholas Kotar, 'What Is Art? Part I of an Essay by Ivan Ilyin', *Nicholas Kotar*, 2017 <<https://nicholaskotar.com/2017/01/25/what-is-art-ivan-ilyin/>> [accessed 13 June 2022];

¹⁵² *Polnoe Inter'viu Zakhara Prilepina, Redaktsia Iskhodniki*, dir. by Aleksei Pivovarov, 15 August 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5HM4VKHc3U&feature=youtu.be&t=1329>> [accessed 11 March 2020].

¹⁵³ For a definition of extratextual activities, see Chapter Four, p. 226.

¹⁵⁴ The press has courted controversy since Prilepin, by publishing a novel criticised for Islamophobia, although at the time of writing in 2023 it was still available on Amazon. See: Hesh Kestin, *The Siege of Tel Aviv* (Ann Arbor, MI: Dzanc Books, 2018); Kirch, 'Dzanc Drops Novel Criticized for Islamophobic Themes'.

¹⁵⁵ Prilepin, *The Monastery*; Interview with Wiedling.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Wiedling. It is unclear from interviews whether IP were aware of *The Monastery's* paratextual framing, although, extrapolating from what information I have, it seems unlikely; Interviewee #7.

sympathiser Louis-Ferdinand Céline or Natsbol founder Eduard Limonov because the firm's reputation is already so secure that 'the series will sell the series.'¹⁵⁷ For Frank, it is important to challenge his readership, and publish novels that push their expectations, and in this case, publishing controversial authors is possible.¹⁵⁸

My interview with a commercial publisher revealed a similar opinion. This publisher explained that they included a range of political views in their catalogue and would be willing to consider politically controversial authors. My interviewee expressed more concern about whether such right-wing books would find an audience, rather than worrying about damage to their reputation. This concern is perhaps reflected in the fact that none of the Big Five firms have published a "nationalist" Russian author to date.¹⁵⁹ The ability of larger firms to entertain the publication of politically unacceptable authors should be compared to Evans's thoughts on publishing Prilepin at Deep Vellum. He was quick to point out that he could never publish the author, but that larger publishers might be able to do so: 'Prilepin is — I can't go there. It could doom us, in a way that it wouldn't doom Penguin'.¹⁶⁰

Despite his feelings about Prilepin, in summer 2022 Evans published Sorokin's highly controversial *Their Four Hearts* (*Serdtsa chetyrekh*, 1991) at Dalkey Archive. This prompted Krotov to speculate on Twitter that the book could get his friend Evans 'kicked out of Texas'.¹⁶¹ As discussed in Chapter One, the novel deals with graphic scenes of paedophilia and abuse. However, the book is regarded as more acceptable than *Sankya* because its author Sorokin is considered to be a "liberal". In reality, Sorokin's novel is far more morally challenging. Evans's readiness to publish a novel like *Their Four Hearts* could

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Frank. For more details on Limonov, and his links with Prilepin, see Chapter One, p. 99.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Frank. Without sales data for the US it is not possible to judge to what extent this is successful. This drive to publish complex novels can be seen in his decision to push Sorokin, even though sales have been low before, and reception has been muted (which could of course be war-related).

¹⁵⁹ Interviewee #1.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Evans.

¹⁶¹ Sorokin, *Their Four Hearts*; Will Evans [@willefans], 'Curious about the Book That @markkrotov Thinks Will Get Me Kicked out of Texas? Hit Me up for a Galley of Vladimir Sorokin's Postmodernist Classic, Their Four Hearts, Translated by Madman @maxdaniellawton, Coming Soon from @Dalkey_Archive <https://t.co/EjwAotEe6R>', *Twitter*, 2022 <<https://twitter.com/willefans/status/1487178818766917633>> [accessed 13 June 2022]

signal that he has accumulated enough symbolic capital to avoid reputational damage, as is the case with NYRB.¹⁶² It is also possible that publishing such controversial novels generates publicity, and thus allows Evans to accumulate symbolic capital and join the likes of independent NYRB Classics with whom he is currently sharing the *Sorokinaissance*. In our interview, Evans was explicit about the high regard he has for NYRB, and his desire to emulate their success.¹⁶³ It appears that controversy might, then, be helpful in building a reputation, so long as its source can be marketed as anti- rather than pro-Putin.¹⁶⁴

3.3a Elizarov and *The Librarian*

Not all publishers are as diligent in the consideration of an author's politics as Evans or Frank, no matter their subsequent endorsement. *The Librarian* was commissioned by Pushkin Press, but in our interview, editor Gesche Ipsen revealed that she had not known about Elizarov's right-wing politics. When I spoke with Bromfield, the novel's translator, however, he was not surprised to learn about Elizarov's views, as he felt they were hinted at in the novel. Had Pushkin Press been alerted to Elizarov's politics either at the time of commission, or indeed by Bromfield during his translation, they might have been able to investigate Elizarov's background.¹⁶⁵ Had they done so, they might have learnt about Elizarov's anti-Semitic songs and would also have uncovered the Russian criticism of the novel that referred to it as 'fascist trash.'¹⁶⁶ *The Librarian* was not a commercial success in the UK, selling a total of 359 copies between 2015-2019. Subsequently, Pushkin Press has only published four more contemporary Russian novels, despite the fact that they have access to a rich seam of translators and advisors to inform their commissioning process.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² He published *The Tool and the Butterflies* without incident, despite the paedophilia and racism it contained. Lipskerov, *The Tool and the Butterflies*.

¹⁶³ Interview with Evans.

¹⁶⁴ For more on this, see Chapter Five, 'When to Translate', p. 317.

¹⁶⁵ I have been unable to discover how Pushkin Press first heard of *The Librarian*.

¹⁶⁶ For more on this, see Chapter One, p. 57. Taplin, "The Librarian": Philosophical Parable or Fascist Nostalgia?'

¹⁶⁷ Contemporary titles include: Barskova, *Living Pictures*; Starobinets, *Catlantis*; Yulia Yakovleva, *Punishment Of A Hunter A Leningrad Confidential.*, trans. By Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp (London: Pushkin Press, 2021); Yulia Yakovleva, *Death of the Red Rider*, trans. by Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp (London: Pushkin Press, 2023). Pushkin Press have continued to publish older Russophone novels however, including fiction by Isaac Babel (1894-1940), Nina Berberova (1901-1993), Gaito Gazdanov (1903-1971), Irina Odoevtseva (1895-1990), Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), and Nadezhda Teffi (1872-1952).

It is not only Pushkin Press who failed to research their author, however. In 2020, Evans stated in his interview that he would like to publish Elizarov's novel *Zemlia* (*Earth*, 2019) and had been surprised when Lawton informed him that the author had fascist views.¹⁶⁸ In December 2021, Lawton revealed that Evans was still considering publishing the novel. Lawton defended the writer, claiming that none of his politics were present in the text, and surmised that Evans would not publish anyone who held fascist beliefs.¹⁶⁹ As I will explore in Chapter Five, the norms around commissioning politically challenging authors, as demonstrated by Frank's apparent plans to publish Céline, change quite significantly once the author has passed away.¹⁷⁰

3.4 Funding Across the Political Spectrum

Funding from IP might be more readily available to "nationalist" rather than "liberal" authors. This is balanced by the fact that "liberals" such as Shishkin, Sorokin, and Ulitskaya are more likely to be published either by a commercial firm which does not necessarily require external funding such as PRH, FSG, or Quercus, although it remains that case that larger firms might use funding on occasion.¹⁷¹ As in the case of Sorokin's *Their Four Hearts*, novels might also be published by an independent firm without funding in the hope of accruing maximal cultural capital.¹⁷² As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, larger firms are not necessarily guaranteed higher sales for their contemporary Russian fiction, however.¹⁷³ Thus, although they have to carefully consider the financial implications of commissioning a book that will barely sell, they might rely on other titles to make enough profit to cover any losses they might incur.¹⁷⁴ In this sense, larger firms are freer to fund titles they deem the most likely to benefit their overall brand, and are not necessarily limited by IP's gatekeeping decisions.

¹⁶⁸ Elizarov, *Zemlia*. Interview with Evans.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Lawton, October 2020. I would challenge the proposition that none of Elizarov's politics are evident in his novels. See my discussion of the translation, Chapter Five, p. 322.

¹⁷⁰ For more on this, see Chapter Five, p. 317.

¹⁷¹ Shishkin's *Maidenhair* was funded by IP before he refused to represent Russia at the BookExpo in 2013. *BGT* was funded by IP, for example, but *Jacob's Ladder* was not.

¹⁷² Evans published Sorokin's *Their Four Hearts* without a grant, see Chapter Two, p. 164.

¹⁷³ See Chapter Two, pp. 132.

¹⁷⁴ The system is very similar to the one Perova describes using at Glas. See earlier this chapter, p. 193.

As noted above, larger publishing houses are not necessarily reliant on grants to publish translations. Although *BGT* was funded by Institut Perevoda, for example, *Oprichnik* was not. Krotov revealed that FSG paid \$10,000 for the rights to Sorokin's novel, which although in comparison to Anglophone commissions was not a large sum, is a substantial amount for a foreign text.¹⁷⁵ Krotov claimed that FSG did not apply for funding to support the translation since the funding apparatus was not fully functioning by 2010, and that subsequently applying for funding took up a lot of time in an already stretched department.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, Ulitskaya's potential consecrating value to FSG might be indicated by the fact that, despite low UK sales for *BGT*, *Jacob's Ladder* was published without funding.¹⁷⁷ Ulitskaya's subsequent book, *Just the Plague* published by Granta in 2021, was likewise published without funding, perhaps because of its timely subject matter.¹⁷⁸ As I will outline in Chapter Four, the novelised screenplay deals with an outbreak of the plague and was published during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was rendered even more topical by a postscript interview with the author about Putin.¹⁷⁹

In contrast to "liberal" writers, "nationalist" authors seem not to have any difficulties in securing Russian funding. Although *Minus* was not eligible for financial support because it was technically published in Russia (by Glas), *The Librarian* was funded by Institut Perevoda, and *Sankya* by Transcript. One interviewee expressed surprise that Prilepin had been funded by Transcript, because of his ultra-nationalist politics. However, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the novel was commissioned for translation before Prilepin's decision to support Putin. Prilepin's *The Monastery*, meanwhile, was funded by IP. The veracity of one interviewee's assumption — that funding was pre-guaranteed for this project — is bolstered by a similar account by Edwin Frank. Peter Kaufman of Read Russia (which represents IP in the UK and US) contacted Frank to let him know that there would be funding available to publish early twentieth-century Russian author Konstantin Vaginov. He told Frank, 'word from

¹⁷⁵ Though not by the standards of Solzhenitsyn. See earlier this chapter, p. 184.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Krotov.

¹⁷⁷ I was unable to ascertain whether FSG applied for funding for this title.

¹⁷⁸ Ulitskaya, *Just the Plague*. For more on this book, see Chapter Four, p. 237. It was not possible to discover whether Granta had applied for funding or not. In either case, they proceeded to publish without external financial support.

¹⁷⁹ See Chapter Four, p. 238.

on high is that it's time for Vaginov, submit your application!"¹⁸⁰ Both of these anecdotes illustrate the lack of transparency in the funding body's decisions process, and lend credence to the anonymous statements in Chapter Two that there is political impetus behind which projects IP decides to fund.

3.5 Publishers Prefer “Dissident” Authors

As I will explore in depth in Chapter Four, despite the different translation histories of these six books, and the variation in experience between the “liberal” and “nationalist” writers, each novel was pitched to potential publishers, and subsequently marketed, as political.¹⁸¹ The potential to market a novel as “dissident”, I will argue here, exerts an important influence on a publisher's decision to commission a Russian novel for translation. To some extent, Sorokin's *Oprichnik* was commissioned by Krotov at FSG because of its political message. In his study on Sorokin, Uffelmann stated that in fact, for the rest of the world, the novel's publication had come much earlier: eleven countries published the novel in 2008 to coincide with the Russian elections that year.¹⁸² As I discussed above in relation to sample translations, it is not uncommon for Anglophone publishers to translate novels after other countries.¹⁸³ I suggest that this is the result of the relatively low rate of translations typically published in the UK and US, coupled with comps-driven, conservative commissioning practices.¹⁸⁴ In the specific case of *Oprichnik*, the novel might have required the additional endorsement of a Russophone specialist such as Krotov to gain any traction with a large publisher such as FSG.

While *Maidenhair* may not have been selected by Post for its political message, Shishkin's political statements once the novel was published bolstered its reception.¹⁸⁵ In our interview, Hoffmann explained that Shishkin's status as an

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Frank. For further discussion of Institut Perevoda and their selection process, see Chapter Two. At the time of writing, there was no mention of Vaginov on the NYRB Classics website. See 'New York Review Books', *New York Review Books* <<https://www.nyrb.com/>> [accessed 7 February 2023]. For more on Read Russia's activities, see Chapter Two, p. 165.

¹⁸¹ For a discussion of their reception, see Chapter Four.

¹⁸² Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, p. 132. For more details on this, see Chapter Five, p. 301.

¹⁸³ See above, Chapter Two, p. 159.

¹⁸⁴ See Chapter Two, p. 153 for a discussion of comparative titles. This tardiness also relates to novels written by Shishkin, Senchin, Elizarov, Prilepin with only Ulitskaya enjoying timely translations into English.

¹⁸⁵ I will discuss the effect of Shishkin's assertion of his political stance in detail in Chapter Four, p. 240-51.

émigré writer was helpful in marketing the book to potential publishers, as were his literary prizes.¹⁸⁶ Hoffmann also stated that although he had started to pitch *Maidenhair* before Shishkin made his overt political statements against Russia, the fact that he did not ‘toe the party line’ was helpful when trying to promote him as an author.¹⁸⁷ One of the principal themes of the novel, the plight of refugees and the question of immigration, was certainly political in the US at the time, and helped Hoffmann to create the pitch that eventually sold *Maidenhair* to Post.¹⁸⁸

Like *Oprichnik*, *Sankya* was marketed as a political novel in the West, as it was in Russia. What Parker pitched to Dzanc as a documentary of modern Russia was published with a foreword by Prilepin’s then ally, Navalny, who described the novel as a true depiction of contemporary Russia.¹⁸⁹ This is how Prilepin regards his own work. During an interview via email in 2021, Prilepin stated that ‘If [readers in the West] read this book carefully, they would understand a lot.’¹⁹⁰ In the same interview, Prilepin revealed that he believed *Sank’ia* had been commissioned for translation because it fulfilled the role of the “Russian novel” for Western readers:

Traditionally abroad, people love Russian revolutionaries. If you believe that Russia is ‘totalitarian’, ‘authoritarian’, it means that revolutionaries there are ‘good’. Meaning that they are ‘against Putin’.¹⁹¹

For *Minus* and *The Librarian*, the dissident roles of the novels were less clearly drawn when they were pitched to publishers. Although Perova advocated reading *Minus* as a way of learning about contemporary Russia, she did not attempt to contextualise the novel’s politics.¹⁹² Despite Elizarov’s opinions, and the themes of *The Librarian*, the novel was neither marketed nor received as a commentary on contemporary politics. As I will explore further in Chapter Four, had Pushkin Press examined the book’s reception in Russia, or read Lisa Hayden’s review

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Hoffmann.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Hoffmann.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Hoffmann. In the absence of any further sales figures, it is not possible to judge how far Shishkin’s popularity has continued. He has, though, just released a new book about Russia, translated from German by Gesche Ipsen; Shishkin, *My Russia: War or Peace?*. He might not, however, always be on message. See Conclusion, p. 345 for his sometimes-controversial statements about the war in Ukraine.

¹⁸⁹ *Sankya*, p.6. For more on Navalny’s introduction see Chapter Four, p. 235.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Prilepin.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Prilepin.

¹⁹² For more details, see Chapter Four, p. 268.

that cited the controversy, they would have uncovered the controversial beliefs of its author.¹⁹³ This includes a 2008 YouTube interview with Elizarov where he uses the same anti-Ukrainian talking points as Putin adopted in 2022.¹⁹⁴ The interview is titled ‘Evropa nash vrag’ (‘Europe is our enemy’).¹⁹⁵ As Hoffmann pointed out in our interview about his work promoting Shishkin, it would be very difficult to sell such anti-Western views to an American publisher.¹⁹⁶

4 Conclusion

My analysis of the microhistories that surround the commission of the six novels in this chapter considers the elements that Heilbron and Sapiro regard as central to creating a sociological understanding of the literary translation field. I have examined the Russian-English translated fiction field’s political and economic constraints in the form of author affiliation, symbolic capital, and financial challenges. I have also summarised the roles of different agents of mediation and their concerns with reputation. I have demonstrated the effect an author’s politics and inherent marketability has on their symbolic capital. This also influences the networks that advocate for them, the publishers that sign them, and their access to funding. A well-known Russian author with dissident, and therefore marketable, politics is more likely to sign their novel with a well-known and respected, financially robust publishing house such as FSG, or indeed with a small publishing firm with an established reputation and significant amounts of cultural capital, like Open Letter. Meanwhile, Russian authors who cannot be marketed as dissident, or whose politics run counter to popular opinion in the West, are more difficult to place: they are often translated by less influential publishers, if they are translated at all. I would argue that this proves my claim that Russian novels are politicised at the point of commission in the West. I substantiate this argument further in my analysis of paratexts in Chapter Four.

Larger publishing firms will readily translate “liberal” writers they can market as dissident such as Sorokin and Ulitskaya, even if they are not able to receive

¹⁹³ See Chapter Four, p. 251. Lisa Hayden, ‘Mikhail Elizarov’s Booker-Winning Librarian’, *Lizok’s Bookshelf*, 2009 <<http://lizoksbooks.blogspot.com/2009/08/mikhail-elizarovs-booker-winning.html>> [accessed 26 October 2019].

¹⁹⁴ Mortimer, *Evropa - Nash Vrag (Elizarov)*, 2008 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzlkAGQYBXk>> [accessed 25 March 2022]

¹⁹⁵ ‘Evropa nash vrag’.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Hoffmann.

funding. This is, I suggest, because such authors confer symbolic and cultural capital on their publishers. Paradoxically, as I have shown, if any publisher could risk publishing a controversial author, it would be a commercial house, or an independent with increasing symbolic capital such as Dalkey Archive. Despite statements that such publishers would be willing to commission right-wing authors, that I have not found evidence of this practice. I suggest this is due to the risk to publishers' economic, rather than cultural capital. In practice, then, this preference for "liberal" authors means that those who cannot be marketed as "dissident" are relegated to smaller publishers who are less likely to secure sales. This is demonstrated by the low sales and obscurity suffered by *Minus*, and the low profile of *Sankya*, even though these novels won prestigious prizes in Russia.

Despite the fact Elizarov's *The Librarian* was published by award-winning independent Pushkin Press, it also endured the limited sales typical of contemporary Russian fiction. Elizarov's limited popularity is in part a result of the fact that he could not be marketed as "dissident", and did not engage with the Anglophone reading public, as I explore in Chapter Four.¹⁹⁷ I suggest that ultimately, the decision to commission *The Librarian* raises questions about the responsibilities of a publishing house to contextualise their authors' politics for the target audience.¹⁹⁸ I will return to the question of ethics in Chapter Five.

It appears that the 'agents of mediation' involved in the process of commissioning novels decide which authors to work with based in part on their desire to guard or build their own reputations.¹⁹⁹ Such mediators act differently depending on the politics of the authors involved. However, as I will explore in Chapter Five, some translators such as Bromfield, and indeed Kotar, do not feel responsible for the message of the texts they translate. Meanwhile, Parker as described above, takes full responsibility for his text: perhaps, I suggest, too much. Regardless of Parker's past decisions, most translators today will not risk being associated with a "nationalist" Russian author such as Prilepin. Meanwhile, many are keen to work with "liberal" authors whose politics might be marketed as "dissident". This can be regarded as a function of translators' desire to create and maintain a

¹⁹⁷ See Chapter Four, p. 251.

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter Four for a discussion of paratexts and their role in creating a context for the target culture.

¹⁹⁹ Heilbron and Sapiro, 'Outline for a Sociology of Translation', p. 94.

positive persona.²⁰⁰ Meanwhile, funding from the most readily available Russian sources is more likely to subsidise the translation of “nationalist” rather than “liberal” Russian authors. This might be a result of the decision-making processes at IP described in Chapter Two. It is evidenced particularly starkly by Shishkin’s experience of being spurned by IP in 2013.²⁰¹

An understanding of why such intermediaries take the decisions they do is necessary to construct a picture of the Russian-to-English translated fiction field, and the political and economic forces that bear upon it.²⁰² As is clear from the commissioning histories above, and as suggested by Bourdieu, novels lose their context as soon as they leave the confines of their source culture, and have new contexts imposed on them directly they land on the target-culture editor’s desk. By understanding the processes and motivations that bring novels from Russian into English it is possible to analyse the source of these new contexts, and what their function is in the Anglophone West. It is also possible to assess to what extent this newly imposed context is a politically biased one, created in order to market a novel more effectively. I will examine these contexts, and their effects on the target audience, in detail in the following chapter

²⁰⁰ Sela-Sheffy, ‘The Translators’ Personae’.

²⁰¹ See Introduction, p. 13.

²⁰² Heilbron and Sapiro, ‘Outline for a Sociology of Translation’, p. 102.

Chapter Four

Paratexts, Extratexts, and Reception

Bourdieu argues that when a foreign writer's novel is introduced into a new culture, what matters is not necessarily the author's message, but how translators might alter it to say something else.¹ This, Bourdieu contends, leads to 'misunderstandings stemming from importation.'² Such 'misunderstandings' occur because texts circulate globally without their original context — a new context is created for each translation in the receiving culture. I will argue in this chapter, that in the case of contemporary Russian fiction, this new Western context is frequently a politicised one. As I will demonstrate, this new contextualisation, oriented towards the demands of the target culture, is achieved largely through paratexts.

I follow Gérard Genette's definition of paratexts as 'prefaces, postfaces, titles, dedications, illustrations, and a number of other in-between phenomena that mediate between the text and the reader and serve to 'present' the work'.³ Paratexts guide the target reader to interpret a novel in a particular way. They can lead to what Bourdieu refers to as the 'instrumentalisation' of authors translated from abroad, whereby their ideas might be used for a cause they might reject at home.⁴ In this chapter I will argue that the content and political concerns of such paratexts are central to assessing the role that publishers expect contemporary Russian fiction to play for their Anglophone target audience. Accordingly, in the pages that follow I will explore the paratexts that accompany these six books and their effect on the critical reception.

I also consider authors' extra-literary actions and statements, which I define as extratextual.⁵ In this way, I expand Turkish Translation Studies scholar Tahir-Gürçağlar's definition of extratexts as 'general statements on translation, or [...] other socio-cultural phenomena that may have a bearing on how translations are

¹ Bourdieu, 'Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées', p. 3.

² Pierre Bourdieu, 'Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 154:1 (2002), 3-8 (p. 4).

³ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.

⁴ Bourdieu, 'Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées', p. 3.

⁵ For more on my use of this definition, see below, p. 226.

produced and received'.⁶ Such extratextual activities include Prilepin's participation in the war in Ukraine (2016-17, and 2023), Shishkin's refusal to represent Russia at BookExpo America (2013), and Sorokin's opinion pieces in the liberal Western media (2014-2022). As I will demonstrate, these authors' extratextual statements and actions are often either ignored or taken out of context in order to market their novels in the West. In Prilepin's case, his extratextual actions have led to rejection from most Western publishers. I will analyse the influence of these extratextual phenomena on the publishing process, from commission to publication and finally to reader reception in the target audience.

I begin with a summary of the importance of paratexts in shaping reader reception of *Oprichnik* and *Sankya* in the West. Subsequently, I define the terminology I employ, and outline my paratextual corpus. I will then present case studies of *Maidenhair* and *The Librarian*, and briefly consider the role of paratexts in positioning the remaining four novels in the UK and US markets. I will also refer to the paratexts around Prilepin's *The Monastery*, Yuri Felsen's novel *Deceit* (*Obman*, 1930, published in English 2022), and Ulitskaya's *Just the Plague* (*Chuma*, 2019, published in English 2022). I argue that, ultimately, the new context created around each novel in the Anglophone West relies chiefly on marketing contemporary Russian authors as dissident and that, as we saw in Chapter Three, only those Russian authors who can be marketed as "dissident" sell commercially to Anglophone readers. This appears to be the case whether these authors regard themselves as dissident, as with Shishkin, or refute this label through a general aversion to politics, as with Ulitskaya. As will become clear throughout this chapter, a number of ethical questions arise around the use of paratexts. I will explore these ethical questions in depth in Chapter Five.

⁶ Şehnaz Tahir-Gürçağlar, 'What Texts Don't Tell: The Uses of Paratexts in Translation Research', in *Crosscultural Transgressions: Research Models in Translation Studies 2: Historical and Ideological Issues* (Manchester: St. Jerome Pub, 2002), pp. 44–60.

1 How Paratexts Shape Reception

‘Watch out for the paratext!’⁷

As we saw in the last chapter in the case of *Oprichnik*, politics is regularly used by publishers to market Russian writers in the West. The most visible contemporary Russian novelists such as Sorokin and Ulitskaya have been published by members of the Big Five and are marketed as “dissidents”.⁸ This takes place regardless of these authors’ statements to the contrary, although since February 2022, both have been vocal in their condemnation of the war.⁹ Meanwhile, despite being published by a smaller press than the other “liberal” writers, Shishkin’s openly anti-Putin stance has guaranteed him a voice in the Western media.¹⁰ At the opposite end of the spectrum, the nationalist politics of Senchin and Prilepin have relegated them to smaller presses, Glas, Dzanc and Glagoslav, while Elizarov’s publication by Pushkin Press appears to have taken place because they were not sufficiently informed about his politics.¹¹

In spring 2020, the first two novels read by my Russian literature book group were Prilepin’s *Sankya*, and a month later, Sorokin’s *Oprichnik*.¹² I selected these titles because each book represented a different perspective, one “nationalist”, and one “liberal”, and also because they directly influenced my research. In the sessions devoted to *Sankya*, I presented Prilepin in the context of his ultranationalist politics, which was not expected by the readers (I had not mentioned his politics before participants read the book). During the sessions dedicated to *Oprichnik*, we discussed Sorokin’s politics, and it was clear that readers took their understanding of the author from the paratexts such as the cover, and taglines that accompany the novel. From these paratexts, readers

⁷ Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 410.

⁸ Two factors might contribute to the fact that Sorokin is now being published by Dalkey Archive and NYRB Classics rather than Penguin and FSG. The first is likely to be his low sales to date. The second is that, according to interviewees, Penguin does not typically publish multiple editions by the same author – there is a limit to the number of titles they would be willing to commit to in the Modern Classics series. Interviewee #2.

⁹ Since February 2022 both Sorokin and Ulitskaya have been vocal in their opposition to Russia’s war in Ukraine. I will discuss their post-February political views in the Conclusion.

¹⁰ Chad Post, ‘Maidenhair by Mikhail Shishkin’ « Three Percent’, 23 September 2016 <<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepersent/2016/09/23/maidenhair-by-mikhail-shishkin-an-open-letter-book-to-read/>> [accessed 15 November 2022].

¹¹ See Chapter One, p. 102 for a discussion of Elizarov’s politics.

¹² The group met twice to discuss each book. We talked about politics, themes, plot, and translation issues. For a discussion of the book group, see Methodology, p. 63.

understood the novel to be an anti-Putin satire.¹³ Once the group had read both novels, I asked which they preferred and which they would recommend to a friend, if either. The majority said that they would recommend *Sankya* rather than *Oprichnik*. This, the majority felt, was because *Sankya* had taught them something about Russia, despite its author's politics. Sorokin's novel was deemed too gratuitously violent, with one reader commenting: 'I skipped the last few pages of the *Day of the Oprichnik*. I found the misogyny too unpleasant and pointless to continue.'¹⁴

Contrary to my expectation that Prilepin's anti-Semitism and Russian nationalist *krymnash* stance (a *krymnash* is a person who believes that 'Crimea is ours') would place him beyond the realms of acceptability, it was Sorokin's violence and apparent misogyny that proved far more problematic for the group.¹⁵ Some of the group had been aware of Prilepin's politics before our meeting, but the majority had been uninformed about either author. Comparing the two novels, a respondent to my reader survey noted that they found Sorokin more challenging to read than Prilepin, and that Sorokin's characters, unlike Prilepin's, were 'deeply unsympathetic.'¹⁶ Another noted that 'as a dystopian modern novel [*Oprichnik*] could have been less clichéd with all the rape and pillaging.'¹⁷ The response to Prilepin's novel was very different. Although the author's politics were acknowledged to be problematic, readers felt that it was important to read *Sankya* because it taught them something about contemporary Russia. In addition, they appreciated that the main character Sasha was, despite everything, sympathetic. Rather than being deterred from the novel by Prilepin's *krymnash* opinions, one book-group member commented, 'I suppose that makes a novel like this even more relevant now, even if it makes for very uncomfortable reading at times.'¹⁸

¹³ For a discussion of Prilepin's politics see Chapter One, p. 99.

¹⁴ Book group comment, May 2020. Such reactions raise questions over the *Sorokinaissance* led by Max Lawton, Dalkey Archive and NYRB Classics.

¹⁵ These opinions were echoed in my reader survey. These findings tie with Wiedling's comments about the unpopularity of contemporary Russian fiction. He felt that there were no books on offer that matched Anglophone novels about movements such as #metoo; telephone conversation with Wiedling, 9th February, 2023. Similar issues are raised in a study of teaching *Lolita*; *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita in the #metoo Era*, ed. by Elena Rakhimova-Sommers (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021); *Reimagining Nabokov: Pedagogies for the 21st Century*, ed. by Sara Karpukhin and José Vergara (Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 2022).

¹⁶ Reader response to survey, 2020.

¹⁷ Reader response to survey, 2020.

¹⁸ Book group comment, May 2020.

This anecdotal preference, taken from a small sample group, for an anti-Semitic novel written by an ultranationalist author over a hyperviolent novel written by a liberal ‘old-school Russian sage’ was to some degree surprising.¹⁹ It does not, I suggest, accord with the publishing market’s apparent preference for “dissident” Russian authors no matter the thematic content of their novels. Evidence of this preference can be seen in the commissioning practices of commercial firm Penguin Random House [PRH], who published 72.3% of Russian translations in the UK in 2019.²⁰ PRH extends this anti-Putin emphasis to their non-fiction imprints, which publications include titles such as Anne Applebaum’s *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps*; David Remnick’s *Resurrection, the Struggle for a New Russia*; and John Sweeney’s *Killer in the Kremlin: The Explosive Account of Putin’s Reign of Terror*.²¹

Although it is challenging to market a new Russian novel after February 2022 without a political point of reference, this was not an imperative before the war intensified. Publishers who took the decision to translate “nationalist” writers like Elizarov, Senchin or Lukyanenko, avoided highlighting these authors’ political views within their novel’s paratexts.²² Meanwhile, publishers such as FSG and Open Letter have been unequivocal about the role of politics in shaping their marketing strategies. Former FSG editor Krotov commented that *Oprichnik* was commissioned because it was the ‘most overtly political’ Russian novel at the time.²³ Likewise, in 2020, Open Letter publisher Post’s perception of the marketing of Russian novels was that it was innately political, and a reflection of the increasingly complex geopolitical relations between Russia and the West. He

¹⁹ Barry, ‘The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin’.

²⁰ See Chapter One, p. 129 for a discussion of the politicised novels PRH publishes.

²¹ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004); David Remnick, *Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); John Sweeney, *Killer in the Kremlin: The Explosive Account of Putin’s Reign of Terror* (London: Bantam Press, 2022).

²² More recently, there has been no acknowledgement of Lukyanenko’s involvement in an interview where the host advocated drowning Ukrainian children. See Andrew Roth, ‘Russian TV Presenter Accused of Inciting Genocide in Ukraine’, *The Guardian*, 24 October 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/24/russian-tv-presenter-anton-krasovsky-accused-of-inciting-genocide-in-ukraine>> [accessed 15 November 2022].

²³ Interview with Krotov. For discussion of the political positioning of *Oprichnik* see below, p. 229 and p. 260.

stated that the approach was, ‘not just “here is a book about Russia”, it’s “here is a book about your enemy”’.²⁴

The rationale behind publishers’ commissioning decisions can be seen in their marketing strategies, which themselves are evident in a novel’s paratexts. As I describe in detail below, these include titles, cover design, introductions, afterwords, and translator’s notes; in essence, any accompanying text separate from the main body of the novel itself. Maria Tymoczko suggests that such paratexts can reveal a translator’s political and moral stance towards a text.²⁵ In *Translation and Paratexts*, Kathryn Batchelor agrees, stating that paratexts illustrate ‘how people try and persuade, educate, share opinions for reasons of self-interest or benevolence, sell products, demonstrate allegiance.’²⁶ Likewise, in her introduction to *Text, Extratext, Metatext and Paratext in Translation*, Valerie Pellatt states that paratexts hold ‘political, ideological and commercial power.’²⁷

In this chapter, I will describe the function of different paratexts in both the signalling of a publisher’s politicised stance in the marketing of Russian novels in translation, and in informing a novel’s reception by readers and critics. After defining my use of terminology, I will analyse the paratexts that accompany contemporary Russian novels as evidence of their political positioning, and hence as indicative of their publishers’ marketing strategies. I will consider to what extent publishers instrumentalise politics to sell contemporary Russian fiction as well as the impact of authors’ extratextual pronouncements and activities on both paratexts and reader reception. By referencing responses from my book group and reader survey, as well as reader responses and ratings on the Amazon-affiliated website Goodreads, I will assess to what extent the paratextual materials that surround a novel influence a reader, and question to what extent extratextual activities impact an author’s acceptability.²⁸

²⁴ Interview with Post. These comments also tie with Edwin Frank’s statements in both the *New York Times*, and in our 2022 interview; Barry, *The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin*.

²⁵ Tymoczko, ‘Translation and Political Engagement’, p. 24.

²⁶ Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, p. 195.

²⁷ *Text, Extratext, Metatext and Paratext in Translation*, ed. by Valerie Pellatt (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 1.

²⁸ ‘Goodreads’ <<https://www.goodreads.com/>> [accessed 15 November 2022].

2 Defining a Paratextual and Extratextual Corpus

Batchelor expands Genette's definition of paratexts as 'in-between phenomena' which mediate between author and audience.²⁹ Batchelor states that 'a paratext is a consciously crafted threshold for a text which has the potential to influence the way(s) in which the text is received.'³⁰ While I intend to use Batchelor's definition, my analytical framework will also encompass Genette's terms *peritexts* and *epitexts* as productive categories.³¹ Genette describes paratexts that physically accompany a novel, such as the title and introduction, as peritexts, while epitexts are paratexts that exist outside of the novel's physical space, but still relate directly to it, such as reviews and author interviews.³² An examination of the peritexts that accompany a translation makes it possible to evaluate the originator's approach to packaging and marketing the novel. From such analysis, it is possible to study the direct effect of the peritextual content of a book on epitexts such as reviews, and ultimately on reader reception, and vice versa. I can thus analyse the influence of epitexts such as previous author interviews on the peritexts that accompany a novel. I will explore this in the following pages by examining the effect of Alexei Navalny's introduction to *Sankya* on epitexts such as reviews. I will also explore the influence on epitextual reception of the blurb attached to both Ulitskaya's *BGT*, and her most recent text in English, *Just the Plague*. I will also briefly comment on the peritextual presentation of the translation of Russian-Jewish émigré author Yuri Felsen's *Deceit*.³³ Although it was written in the 1920s, its publication in English for the first time in 2022 meant that it was accompanied by peritexts that situated it within the current political climate.

In order to fully evaluate the influence of outside events on both paratexts and reader reception, I argue for a third category of paratextual definition — the extratext. Batchelor does not incorporate the term 'extratext' in her framework, but it is productive for understanding the implications of authors' political stances in the translation marketplace. This is because their extra-literary actions can

²⁹ Genette describes paratexts as, 'prefaces, postfaces, titles, dedications, illustrations and a number of other in-between phenomena that mediate between the text and the reader and serve to 'present' the work'. Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 1.

³⁰ Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, p. 142.

³¹ Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 5.

³² Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 5.

³³ Yuri Felsen, *Deceit*, trans. by Bryan Karetnyk (London: Prototype Publishing, 2022).

affect their reception. Tahir-Gürçağlar's identification of extratexts as 'general statements on translation, or [...] other socio-cultural phenomena that may have a bearing on how translations are produced and received' is key to my own definition.³⁴ Tahir-Gürçağlar views extratexts as distinct from Genette's category of epitexts, in that epitexts relate to a specific text, while extratexts are not directly linked to any particular novel. As noted by Batchelor, Tahir-Gürçağlar's inference that extratexts can be 'socio-cultural phenomena' indicates that extratexts do not have to be texts per se, but 'can encompass anything that helps towards a 'contextualization of translational phenomena'.³⁵

With this in mind, I am broadening Tahir-Gürçağlar's use of the term to encompass all actions or statements that might influence the commission, translation, or reception of a text, but which do not directly relate to it. In doing so, I am moving beyond her concern with 'socio-cultural phenomena' by broadening the definition to include political actions and statements. In the context of my research, such extratexts are often political in nature, and take place without direct reference to the text in question. In my definition, therefore, the term extratext applies to Shishkin's opinion pieces about Putin in the Western media, Sorokin's interviews about political activism, and Prilepin's decision to fight in Donbas. These authors' extratextual texts and actions are separate from the novels in question, but nevertheless have the potential to influence the target reader's reception of them.

Actions and statements that predate the publication of a novel might also influence its accompanying peritexts. If and when extratextual activities and statements become known to the Western reader, they might affect both critical and reader reception.³⁶ Of course, this will only occur if the target culture is aware of these extratextual activities. With the case of Elizarov, as I will demonstrate, the target culture has remained largely uninformed of his political views — as a result, any mention of his politics has been mostly absent from his epitextual reception. Extratextual actions and statements might also affect a novel's existence and ultimately their longevity in English translation, as in the case of

³⁴ Tahir-Gürçağlar, 'What Texts Don't Tell', p. 58.

³⁵ Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, p. 58.

³⁶ Batchelor is clear that although these paratexts and epitexts exist, there is no guarantee that a reader will encounter all, or indeed any of them; Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, p. 143.

Prilepin. From a Western reader's perspective, awareness of Prilepin's extratextual activities may lead them consciously to boycott both the book and the author.

2.1 Judging a Book by its Cover — Peritexts and Politics

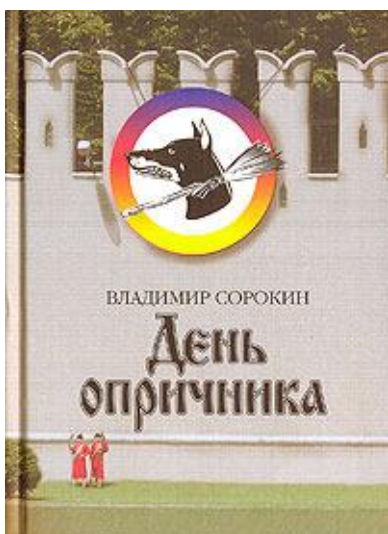
The audience-facing peritexts that comprise a book's bindings, that is to say the cover, title, taglines, and blurb, are the most obvious and unavoidable of a novel's paratexts.³⁷ They usually constitute the first paratext that a publisher will use to indicate their chosen marketing strategy for a novel, and its intended position in the marketplace. Although, as indicated by the microhistory around *BGT*, and Shishkin's *The Light and the Dark*, this is typically a part of the process that translators have little control over.

In the following section I examine the bindings of three novels from this study: Sorokin's *Oprichnik*, Ulitskaya's *BGT*, and Elizarov's *The Librarian*. I selected these particular novels because I was not only interested in the covers of each book, but in the decision processes that produced them; each of these covers was discussed during my interviews. It is also significant, I suggest, that two of these novels were published by commercial firms and can therefore be considered among the most visible of the Russian novels analysed in this thesis. In the following examples, the bindings help to define the politically oriented space each book occupies within the target market. I find, in line with Duygu Tekgöl's research on paratexts and book covers, that the design and message of a book's bindings often reflect the reasons for its initial commission for translation into English.³⁸

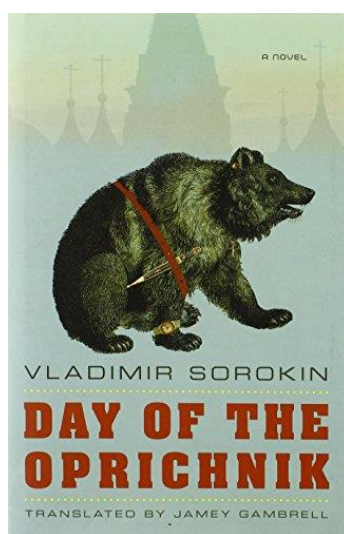
³⁷ I am using the term 'binding' in the same way as Keith Harvey does in his "'Events' and 'Horizons': Reading Ideology in the 'Bindings' of Translations", in *Apropos of Ideology. Translation Studies on Ideology – Ideologies in Translation Studies* (Manchester: St. Jerome Pub, 2003), pp. 43–70.

³⁸ Duygu Tekgöl, 'Around the World in English: The Production and Consumption of Translated Fiction in the UK between Cosmopolitanism and Orientalism' (University of Exeter, 2012) <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/9701/TekgulPD_TPC.pdf?sequence=3> [accessed 31 January 2024], p. 157.

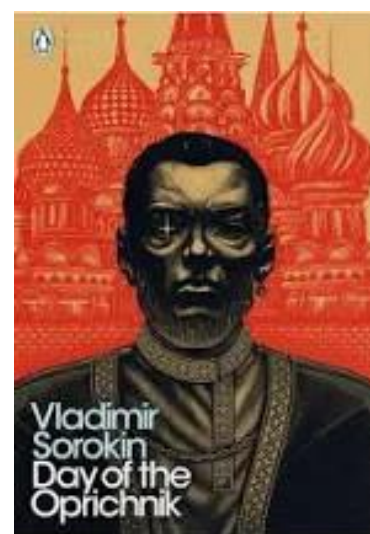
2.1a *Day of the Oprichnik*



Zakharov Edition, 2006



FSG Edition, 2011



PRH Edition, 2019

Editor Mark Krotov led the decision on *Oprichnik's* FSG cover and title, yet in 2020, he admitted to disliking both.³⁹ When asked what he would have chosen instead, he replied that it would have been a title without a difficult word like 'Oprichnik' in it.⁴⁰ The cover was inspired by what Krotov termed a 'meta joke' about how Americans think that Russia is full of bears.⁴¹ Krotov had not been aware that PRH had bought the rights to *Oprichnik* in 2019 and had created their own cover. However, he approved of the image, which reminded him of the tension between history and modernity that is central to the novel.⁴² The covers of both translations feature a silhouette of the Kremlin in the background, implying that this is a Russian novel about politics and power. Survey respondents were clear about the impression this cover conveyed of the novel they were about to read. One response registered that they expected the book to be about Russian stereotypes, while another expected *Oprichnik* to be a historical novel, and a third expected the novel to be a 'sort of state-of-the-nation satire.'⁴³

The political positioning evident in FSG's design is enhanced by a tagline quote from *Newsweek* on the front cover that the novel is 'Lurid, wildly inventive... [A]

³⁹ Interview with Krotov. See Chapter Three p. 202, for *Oprichnik's* translation journey.

⁴⁰ Interview with Krotov.

⁴¹ Interview with Krotov.

⁴² Interview with Krotov.

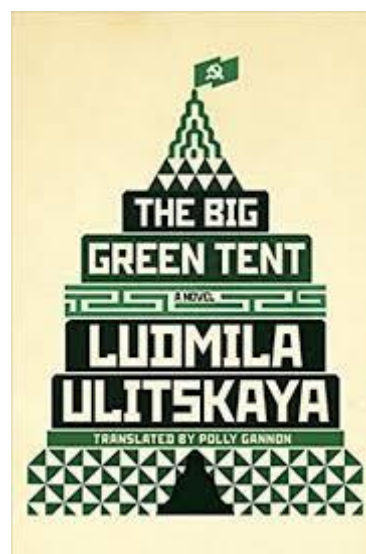
⁴³ Reader Survey responses, 2020.

take-no prisoners satire from one of Russia's literary stars.' The blurb is even more explicitly political. It describes the novel as 'A startling, relentless portrait of a troubled and troubling empire, *Day of the Oprichnik* is at once a richly imagined vision of the future and a razor-sharp diagnosis of a country in crisis.' Meanwhile, although the Penguin Classics edition carries no comment on the front cover, the blurb on the back is stark. Here *Oprichnik* is described as revealing 'a futuristic world too chilling to contemplate, and too real to ignore.' An additional quote from the Russian-American author Gary Shteyngart describes the novel as 'a terrifying vision of modern Russia'. As I will discuss below, the epitextual critical reception of Sorokin's novel echoed the cover designers' political framing of *Oprichnik*, not only by interpreting the novel as a political artefact but fashioning its author as an 'earnest-dissident writer.'⁴⁴ As I discussed in Chapter One, and further explore later in this chapter, this took place despite Sorokin's assertions that he was no such thing.⁴⁵

1.1b *The Big Green Tent*



EKSMO Edition, 2011



FSG Edition, 2015

The title and cover of FSG's *Big Green Tent* also situate the novel politically. Neither Krotov, nor translators Shayevich or Gannon approved of the translation's

⁴⁴ Barry, 'The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin'.

⁴⁵ See below p. 260 for Sorokin's comments at the 2011 PEN International event he took part in as *Oprichnik* and *Ice Trilogy* were published; *In Conversation: Vladimir Sorokin and Keith Gessen*.

title.⁴⁶ All of them would have preferred a more whimsical choice, with Gannon suggesting *The Green Canopy*.⁴⁷ The decision over the title was regarded as a deliberate marketing stance on the part of the editor who took over from Krotov. When Gannon objected to *Big Green Tent*, the new editor informed her: ‘I know better because this is about selling books, and we have our own reasons.’⁴⁸ Krotov disliked the title because it sounded ‘blunt and aggressive’, while Shayevich revealed that alternatives suggested by the editorial team at FSG were even more blatantly politicised.⁴⁹ Krotov summarised his, Shayevich’s and Gannon’s attitudes towards *BGT*:

I felt very strongly that the book should not be called *The Big Tent*, *The Green Tent*. I really wanted it to be called *Under the Green Tent* and the reason for that was that I think *Zelenyi shater* just syllabically sounds really nice. It just doesn’t sound blunt. It sounds like the canopy that it to some extent is – *Zelenyi shater*. *The Big Tent* just sounds blunt and aggressive and really stupid. *Under the Green Tent* ... it’s a little more like *100 Years of Solitude*-esque.⁵⁰

The ‘bluntness’ of the title was carried over to the cover of the novel itself, which Krotov also disliked.⁵¹ Gannon felt the cover hinted at both the Kremlin and the circus.⁵² Responses to my reader survey concurred. One respondent noted that the cover did not tell the potential reader anything about the content of the book.⁵³

This positioning of *BGT* as a Soviet dissident novel for the American and British markets contrasts with the sales pitch created by Ulitskaya’s agent Elkost.⁵⁴ At

⁴⁶ It seems the title was the choice of the new editor; Interviews with Gannon; Krotov; Shayevich. See Chapter Three, p. 187 for *BGT*’s translation history.

⁴⁷ Interview with Gannon.

⁴⁸ Interview with Gannon. This is not the only example of a translator disliking a title that appears to have been chosen for marketing reasons. Andrew Bromfield described his dislike for the title of Shishkin’s *Pis’movnik* as *The Light and the Dark*. Bromfield would have preferred the more literal ‘Letter Book’, but the publishers deemed this ‘too confusing’ for the target audience. Interview with Andrew Bromfield, 10 December 2021; Mikhail Shishkin, *The Light and the Dark*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (London: Quercus, 2013).

⁴⁹ Interviews with Krotov; Shayevich. See also Chapter Three, p. 188.

⁵⁰ Interview with Krotov.

⁵¹ Interview with Krotov.

⁵² Interview with Gannon.

⁵³ ‘The book cover for *Big Green Tent*, at least the edition I bought, only has a very stylized tent illustration. It doesn’t convey any information about what the book will be about.’ Survey response, 2020.

⁵⁴ The blurb that accompanies the 2011 Eksmo edition pictured above begins by stating that ‘this is a novel about love, fate, and personalities.’ See *Zelenyi Shater* <<https://www.labirint.ru/books/299324/>> [accessed 10 November 2022].

the time of writing, the literary agent lists the book on their website under the title *Imago*, or *Under the Green Tent* (the latter in reflection of the English publication) and offers a reading of the novel that focuses on love, human relationships, and personal growth rather than on the characters' roles as dissidents:

'Imago' is a term from biological science and, trained as a biologist, Ulitskaya deciphers human personality in genetic and medical terms in all her books. The imago is the phase in the development of an insect which corresponds to its formal adulthood. The insect imago is capable of reproduction and gradually proceeds through life to death. For a human being, however, the civilised and intelligent homo sapiens, there is potentially more to this phase, a phase of maturity, adulthood, responsibility, mental development, self-sacrifice, and struggle. As always with Ulitskaya, *Imago* is a novel about love, about destinies, and about characters. It is authentic psychological prose, but her new work is also broader than these definitions.⁵⁵

Elkost's evaluation of the novel was not reflected in the blurb on the back of FSG's edition, which in contrast to both this and the blurb on the Russian edition, highlights Ulitskaya's political status instead. FSG's marketing pitch somewhat opportunistically compares Ulitskaya to Boris Pasternak, 'that other plot-forward dissident', and hints that she might one day win the Nobel Prize. Rather than focussing on the personal growth of the novel's characters, the blurb suggests that *BGT* investigates the 'Soviet dissident experience' by describing 'life after Stalin', and 'the possibilities for individual integrity in a society defined by the KGB.'

By including references to Stalin and the KGB, while emphasising the epic nature of *BGT*, the blurb fulfils the requirements listed by Lipovetsky for creating what he terms the 'Russian Exotic' as outlined in Chapter Two.⁵⁶ Lipovetsky feels that this is one of only two genres of Russian novels which people in the West are prepared to read, since such books are 'fully in line with cultural expectations.'⁵⁷ The dissident themes in the novel make up only one of its aspects, and it is telling that dissidence is the main theme that was highlighted by FSG. Having spoken

⁵⁵ 'ELKOST International Literary Agency - Under the Green Tent, a Novel by Ludmila Ulitskaya (2010)' <<https://elkost.com/authors/ulitskaya/books/694-imago2010>> [accessed 19 May 2022].

⁵⁶ 'Is There a Place for Modern Russian Literature in the Global Context?'. For further discussion of the Russian Exotic see Chapter Two, p. 134.

⁵⁷ 'Is There a Place for Modern Russian Literature in the Global Context?', p. 24.

with Krotov, Shayevich and Gannon, as detailed in Chapter Three, it seems likely that had this project been carried out by an editor who had more knowledge of Russian literature and politics, a more subtle approach might well have been taken. Although Ulitskaya's agent Klimin exerted a large degree of influence over the text, details such as the title and blurb appear to have fallen outside his remit. From interviews, it seems that the novel's translators also had little input over these details.

2.1c *The Librarian*

The Sovietisation of *The Librarian's* bindings is in keeping with the sentiment of both the text and its author, and with Pushkin Press's own aesthetics. Despite David Pearson's eye-catching cover design, editor Ipsen felt that the cover, alongside the uninspiring title, had the effect of making *The Librarian* appear challenging to read.⁵⁸ Ipsen therefore regarded the novel's bindings as partly responsible for *The Librarian's* lack of success.⁵⁹ By contrast, the Russian cover relies far less on Soviet aesthetics, and tends instead towards depicting some of the cartoon-like violence that characterises the novel. Since it is in many ways more indicative of *The Librarian's* tone, Ipsen felt that this cover would have immediately sold more copies.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Interview with Ipsen. Artist David Pearson had started designing covers for Pushkin Press in 2012, not long after Adam Freudenheim bought the publisher. See Charlotte Williams, 'New Hardback Plans for Pushkin Press', *The Bookseller*, 30 July 2012 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/new-hardback-plans-pushkin-press>> [accessed 27 January 2024].

⁵⁹ Interview with Ipsen. Pushkin Press have published little contemporary Russian fiction since *The Librarian*. See Chapter Three, p. 212.

⁶⁰ Interview with Ipsen.



Ad Marginem, 2010



Pushkin Press, 2015

Aside from the Soviet themes of the book's bindings, such as its font and colour scheme, in contrast to *BGT* and *Oprichnik*, there is no reference to contemporary politics either on *The Librarian's* Pushkin Press cover or in the blurb. There is a brief mention of Elizarov casting 'a satirical eye over Soviet Russia' and a note that the novel won the Russian Booker prize in 2008. Neither the scandal that *The Librarian* was criticised as 'fascist trash' in Russia, nor Elizarov's ultranationalist views are mentioned.⁶¹

Despite the fact that at the time Pushkin Press commissioned *The Librarian* Elizarov's politics were already extreme in Russia, this was not addressed in the target novel's accompanying paratexts, and was subsequently overlooked in its critical reception in the West.⁶² This might be because the publisher was unaware of the issues around both the novel and Elizarov, or more simply a result of Pushkin Press's literary mission, evident in the wide range of literature they publish.⁶³ However, this does not appear to be an isolated incident in the publishing world. As mentioned above, Lukyanenko's political views have evaded

⁶¹ Taplin, "The Librarian": Philosophical Parable or Fascist Nostalgia?'

⁶² See below p. 251 for a discussion of *Librarian's* reception.

⁶³ For more on Pushkin Press's catalogue, see 'Our Books' <<https://pushkinpress.com/our-books/>> [accessed 1 March 2024].

scrutiny, and Senchin's reception also fails to mention politics.⁶⁴ Only Glagoslav has been bold enough to provide a thorough, peritextual account of Prilepin in their introduction to *The Monastery*, which I will discuss in detail below.⁶⁵ I suggest that this might be in part because his extratextual activities are almost impossible to ignore.⁶⁶

2.3 Peritexts: Introductions, Afterwords and Translator's Notes

The decisions taken over titles, cover design and back-cover blurbs are market conscious, and are made as carefully as decisions over both the inclusion and content of introductions, afterwords and translator notes. These peritexts can provide explicit evidence of a translator's, publisher's or author's position towards a novel, and their expectations of the role it will play in the target market. They can also act as consecrating paratexts which augment the legitimacy of a foreign author and improve the marketability of a Russian novel in translation.⁶⁷ Below I will consider the use and effect of these peritexts in marketing contemporary translations of Russian fiction, taking examples from Prilepin's *Sankya* and *The Monastery*, Ulitskaya's *Just The Plague*, and Yuri Felsen's *Deceit*.⁶⁸

Alexei Navalny's preamble to *Sankya* is an example of the consecrating power of an introduction, written by someone widely known in the West as being 'anti-Putin'. It also confirms the significance for publishers of framing Russian writers as dissident. This influential three-page peritext guides the reader towards an understanding of Prilepin that aligns with the views of the target text's originators — in this case, more or less solely its translators.⁶⁹ In the introduction, Navalny praises his then colleague Prilepin as a truth-teller and literary savant. He suggests that we read *Sankya* instead of *Anna Karenina* in order to understand modern Russia.⁷⁰ The inclusion of an introduction from a well-known anti-Putin

⁶⁴ In 2022 Senchin was being promoted as a Russian dissident by his agent Thomas Wiedling. See below, p. 270.

⁶⁵ Prilepin, *The Monastery*. An anonymous interviewee stated that Sutcliffe had been given free rein to decide on the content of his introduction to *The Monastery*; Interviewee #4.

⁶⁶ When a bomb exploded in Prilepin's car in May 2023, there was some publicity around him in the Western media, and he is now definitely a persona non grata in the West; see below, p. 267.

⁶⁷ Pascale Casanova, 'Consecration and Accumulation of Literary Capital: Translation as Unequal Exchange', p. 409.

⁶⁸ Felsen, *Deceit*; Prilepin, *Sankya*, *The Monastery*; Ulitskaya, *Just the Plague*.

⁶⁹ Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, p. 2. I will discuss their approach towards the translation in detail in Chapter Five, pp. 282-301.

⁷⁰ Prilepin, *Sankya*, p. 6.

activist who counted Prilepin as an ally serves to market *Sankya* to Western readers, even though the two men had already parted ways by the time the novel was published in English.

In Russia in 2021, Navalny seemed such an incongruous choice to write an introduction to *Sankya*, that his involvement was reported with incredulity when Prilepin referred to it around the time Navalny was jailed.⁷¹ However, in 2013, when the preface was organised by Prilepin, he and Navalny were united against Putin and were close enough that Navalny named his only son Zakhar.⁷² Prilepin's decision to back Putin in 2014, however, caused a rift in their relationship.⁷³ Despite this, Navalny did not withdraw the foreword that endorses his former ally. As a result, *Sankya* gives no hint of Prilepin's changed attitude to Putin, or, incidentally, of the fact that the author is currently under Western sanctions. *Sankya's* peritexts therefore have the potential to influence and mislead any target audience readers about the nature of Prilepin's politics.

Prilepin's problematic views and extratextual activities were acknowledged by Glagoslav in 2020 when they published Nicholas Kotar's translation of *The Monastery*. The publisher included an eleven-page introduction by a scholar — on this occasion Benjamin Sutcliffe — that directly confronts Prilepin's politics and acknowledges the controversial act of bringing *The Monastery* into English.⁷⁴ Sutcliffe opens his essay by asking 'how can we read a brilliant work written by

⁷¹ "Menia mogut osudit" i vyslat' na Ukrainu', Zakhar Prilepin - o Naval'nom, liberalakh i voine.", *It's My City*, 14 April 2021 <<https://itsmycity.ru/2021-04-14/menya-mogut-osudit-ivyslat-naukrainu-zahar-prilepin-onavalnom-liberalah-ivojn>> [accessed 25 August 2022]. Navalny was initially sentenced to eleven and a half years in 2021 for fraud, and his sentence was later increased. Navalny died in prison on 16th February, 2024. Jonathan Steele, 'Alexei Navalny Obituary', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2024, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/16/alexei-navalny-obituary>> [accessed 26 February 2024].

⁷² Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin* (Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 204. Prilepin and Navalny launched the political movement NAROD in June 2007, aiming to oppose Putin in the 2008 election. NAROD is an acronym for Natsional'noe Russkoe osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie [National Russian Liberation Movement]. NAROD's nationalist manifesto is available here; 'Manifest Natsional'nogo Russkogo osvoboditel'nogo dvizheniia "NAROD"', *APN – Politicheskikh Novostei*, 2007 <<https://www.apn.ru/index.php?newsid=17321>> [accessed 25 August 2022]. See also Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, pp. 180-93. Navalny was pushed out of liberal party Yabloko for founding NAROD. He left both NAROD and the Russian March after failing to be elected Mayor of Moscow in 2013.

⁷³ See Prilepin's reaction to Navalny being poisoned in 2020 on YouTube; *Zakhar Prilepin. Uroki Russkogo: Urok No.117. Nava'nyi ili bunt sytykh detei*.

⁷⁴ Benjamin Sutcliffe, 'Beyond The Monastery: Prilepin, Putin and The Gulag', in *The Monastery* (London: Glagoslav, 2020), pp. 7–18.

an author whose ideology is deeply disturbing?’ and closes by stating that ‘*The Monastery* is a remarkable book produced by a deeply flawed author whose politics and prose promote extremism.’ Self-aware, Sutcliffe also admits that Prilepin’s politics place a ‘special burden on the reader (and even more so on the critic).’⁷⁵

Although it appears morally sound to openly address an author’s unacceptable political opinions and actions, an introduction like Sutcliffe’s could also be regarded as a marketing strategy, and a way to justify the translation of a contentious author. Glagoslav’s decision to commission a new Prilepin novel despite the author’s then recent public admission of having killed Ukrainian soldiers, rests in his status as one of their ‘best-selling authors’.⁷⁶ *The Monastery*’s introduction does provide a more accurate account of Prilepin than Navalny’s now-misleading introduction to *Sankya*, if only because when the latter was published it was already out of date. Nevertheless, Sutcliffe’s analysis might also be regarded as justifying the translation of a morally problematic author. It is unlikely that Glagoslav could justify publishing Prilepin without such an introduction, however.

2.4 The Influence of Peritexts

As I have outlined, some introductions and afterwords market novels by highlighting their political or temporal relevance, or by simply confirming what their implied reader might already believe. I will expand this idea further now with a consideration of the peritexts that frame *Just the Plague* and *Deceit*. Written by Ulitskaya in the 1980s, the screenplay for *Plague* was published for the first time in Russia in 2020.⁷⁷ It is based on the true story of an outbreak of the plague in 1930s Russia and explores the implications of being ruled by a totalitarian government in a time of crisis. In the play, a full-scale outbreak of the plague is only averted because Stalin’s secret police, the NKVD, is so efficient at tracking and tracing (and detaining) Soviet citizens.

⁷⁵ I will discuss the approach of different translators to this issue, and the ethics of translating authors such as Prilepin and Elizarov, in Chapter Five.

⁷⁶ Interviewee #4.

⁷⁷ Ulitskaya, *Chuma*.

When the English version of the screenplay was published by Granta in 2021, they also conducted a lengthy author interview, which was included at the end of the book.⁷⁸ The book's other peritexts already frame Ulitskaya as a dissident writer. On *Just the Plague's* cover, Masha Gessen describes Ulitskaya as a 'moral authority'. In the interview, Ulitskaya openly criticises Putin and his response to the COVID-19 pandemic, confirming his inefficacy for the Western reader, and indicating her opposition to the president. This combination of Gessen's consecrating cover tagline and postscript interview renders this COVID-esque story even more relevant to the target audience's concerns.⁷⁹

Yuri Felsen's *Obman*, translated by Bryan Karetnyk as *Deceit*, and published by Pushkin Press in 2022, was also marketed to the Western reader in relation to contemporaneous events.⁸⁰ *Obman* was written in the 1920s by Russian Jewish émigré Felsen and explores themes of love, identity, and deracination.⁸¹ The initial proofs of Karetnyk's translation were distributed by Pushkin in December 2021, and came with no peritextual introduction. However, when the final published edition was released in May 2022, it was accompanied by a foreword from political commentator Peter Pomerantsev.⁸² In it, Pomerantsev compares the mass emigration of Russians in 1928, of which Felsen was a part, with Russians leaving the country in the wake of the war with Ukraine in 2022. To some extent, this foreword aims to justify publishing a novel by a Russophone author when Russian culture was beginning to be cancelled across the world.⁸³ Alternatively this could be regarded as an attempt to use a Russian connection to the text as an excuse to connect the text to the war in Ukraine. Pomerantsev's preface both contextualises and consecrates an obscure, albeit politically 'safe'

⁷⁸ Ulitskaya, *Just the Plague*.

⁷⁹ See Chapter One, p. 88 for a discussion of Ulitskaya's politics.

⁸⁰ Felsen, *Deceit*.

⁸¹ Felsen was born Nikolai Freudenstein in St Petersburg in 1894.

⁸² Pomerantsev's published books include: Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017); Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality* (London: Faber, 2020).

⁸³ In February and March 2022 that were many calls to cancel Russian events. For example: Andrei Kurkov, 'I Am Being Criticized for Signing a Call to Boycott All Russian Cultural Products. Yes, I'm Probably Wrong about Something. You Can Read Everyone Who Does Not Support Putin! Read Sorokin, Platonov, Akunin. but above All, Read Ukrainian Authors to Understand Ukraine and Ukrainians', @AKurkov, 2022 <<https://twitter.com/AKurkov/status/1500347904468340737>> [accessed 7 March 2022]; Platt, 'The Profound Irony of Cancelling Everything Russian'; Sauer, 'Putin Says West Treating Russian Culture like "Cancelled" JK Rowling'.

author for the contemporary audience, while also justifying the decision to publish a Russian author during an illegal war.

A novel's peritexts, then, can be regarded as a signal of the publisher's marketing strategy. The decision to position new translations of older novels, as with *Deceit*, to make them relevant to contemporary politics, or to resurrect a text like *Plague* in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, also clearly demonstrates the attention that publishers pay to current events when commissioning new titles. The decisions taken over physical book-bindings serve to indicate the political themes of the novel in question, and to carve out a place for it in the target culture. The peritexts such as introductions and interviews that appear alongside these novels further exemplify the politicised niche sought by their publishers. This might, as with Prilepin, be an unavoidable act as a result of an author's controversial, extratextual activities — in Prilepin's case, his openly dangerous politics. The peritexts that accompany novels by "liberals" Sorokin and Ulitskaya can be regarded as deliberate attempts to push a novel's "dissidence" as the main point of interest. Meanwhile, on the rarer occasion where a writer with unacceptable politics is published, as in the case of Elizarov, there is more often no mention of politics at all.⁸⁴

3 Shishkin, Elizarov and the Power of the Extratextual Statement

As stated above, the extratextual actions and statements made by an author can impact a novel's peri- and epitexts.⁸⁵ In the following section I will examine the effect of extratextual statements and actions on the epitextual reception of two of my authors — Shishkin and Elizarov. I will compare the effect of Shishkin's openly dissident stance post-2013 on his subsequent recognition in the UK and US by charting the change in reception that was triggered by his open letter. Whereas prior to admission of opposition to the Russian government, critics and journalists predominantly referred to Shishkin simply as an author, after he made his stand against Putin's government in March 2013 they frequently refer to his politics. I contrast this with the absence of reported extratextual information around Elizarov, and his general obscurity in the Western media. I will demonstrate that

⁸⁴ For a discussion of this, see below, p. 251. Interview with Bromfield; Ipsen. See also Chapter Five, p. 322 for an analysis of Bromfield's approach to translating *The Librarian*.

⁸⁵ In some cases, translators might also exert a considerable influence on the reception of their author, as in the case of Lawton and Sorokin. See Chapter Two, p. 147.

while there is considerable material to draw from about Shishkin, who as I will show generates a significant proportion of his own epitexts and extratexts, there is very little in relation to Elizarov. As I will explore further, in relation to “nationalist” authors, this concurs with Venuti’s understanding that actively engaging with other cultures can be regarded as a form of treason.⁸⁶

3.1 Shishkin and the BEA Refusal — Reactions at Home and Abroad

Maidenhair was translated into English by Marian Schwartz and published in 2012 by independent US publisher Open Letter.⁸⁷ In our interview, Shishkin described *Maidenhair* as ‘a classic novel about simple things. About overcoming death through love and words.’⁸⁸ However, as discussed in Chapter Three, literary agent Hoffmann struggled to find a publisher due to *Maidenhair*’s perceived complexity.⁸⁹ When the novel was eventually published it received a small number of laudatory reviews in outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The London Review of Books*, which I will summarise below. However, when Shishkin made a statement against the Russian government in February 2013, both the author’s influence and renown grew in the West, while his reputation fell proportionately in Russia.⁹⁰ Shishkin’s newly dissident status was not only reflected in the reviews *Maidenhair* subsequently received, but in the interviews and opinion pieces that appeared in the Western media after the publication of his letter.

During our 2021 interview, Shishkin explained that he found it impossible to act as an official representative of Russia at the 2013 BEA because of the disintegration of domestic politics over the previous year.⁹¹ He added that these were his feelings even before ‘thousands of people were killed and tens of thousands were disabled’ in the war in Ukraine.⁹² By declining to appear at the

⁸⁶ Venuti, ‘Local Contingencies: Translation and National Identities’, p. 178.

⁸⁷ See p. 96 for more information on *Maidenhair*.

⁸⁸ Interview with Shishkin.

⁸⁹ See Chapter Three, p. 202.

⁹⁰ ‘Why This Book Should Win: “Maidenhair” by Mikhail Shishkin [BTBA 2013] « Three Percent’ <<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepersent/2013/03/21/why-this-book-should-win-maidenhair-by-mikhail-shishkin-btba-2013/>> [accessed 16 September 2021]. See Introduction, p. 14.

⁹¹ Interview with Shishkin; ‘Bylo iasno, kuda vedet Putin moiu strany i khotelos’ eto kak-to ostanovit’, kriknut’: «Rossiia, ostanovis’! Opomnis’!» [...] Krym razdelil Russkikh. Ili ty «krymnash», ili «natsional-predatel’». Eto i est’ voina. Russkie stali vragami russkikh.’

⁹² Interview with Shishkin. This comment predates the escalation of the war in 2022.

BEA, Shishkin wanted to warn ‘Russia, stop! Wake up!’ but he admits this fell on deaf ears. From 2014, the war in Ukraine proceeded to divide the country into “*krymnash*” and “national traitors” [...] Russians became enemies of other Russians.⁹³

Russian authors who were still attending the 2013 BookExpo reacted negatively to Shishkin’s letter. Liberal Russian author and journalist Dmitri Bykov, who was allegedly poisoned in 2019 and currently lives outside of Russia, opined that Shishkin’s actions would not lead to the Nobel Prize, but instead, to a lot of ‘unpleasantness’.⁹⁴ He pointed out that he himself was going to the BookExpo to represent Russian literature, and not Russian politics.⁹⁵ Prize-winning Russian author Olga Slavnikova saw the BookExpo as an opportunity to promote a more positive view of Russia than was currently being projected in the West.⁹⁶ Slavnikova felt that despite Russia having been Guest of Honour at the 2012 BEA, Russian writers had remained largely ignored at the event. This, she claimed, was because the world sees Russians ‘as part of a dark entity, a country of bad guys, about whom nobody wants to know anything more than they already do.’⁹⁷ Krotov, who also attended the 2012 book fair, corroborated her impressions. He found that the majority of Read Russia events were either empty, or full of Russians, who of course were not their intended audience.⁹⁸

Bykov, alongside right-wing figures such as author, and editor of Russian paper *Zavtra* Aleksandr Prokhanov, and Natsbol founder Eduard Limonov, criticised Shishkin for speaking out against Russia ‘from the safety of Switzerland.’⁹⁹

⁹³ Interview with Shishkin.

⁹⁴ In 2022, Bykov was listed as a ‘foreign agent’ by the Russian State. See ‘Mikhail Shishkin otkazalsia ot uchastiiia v knizhnoi iarmarke BookExpo America’.

⁹⁵ Bykov is a dissident writer who was allegedly poisoned in 2019. He left Russia before the war intensified in 2022 and will not return to while the same regime is in power. It is of note that translations of only two of his novels have been funded by Institut Perevoda, one into Arabic (for the Egyptian market), and the other into Italian; Dmitrii Bykov, *ZhD* (Moscow: Prozaik, 2016); Dmitrii Bykov, *liun’* (Moscow: AST, 2017).

⁹⁶ I have not been able to establish Slavnikova’s political stance – she does not make statements about her political beliefs online or to the press.

⁹⁷ ‘Mikhail Shishkin otkazalsia ot uchastiiia v knizhnoi iarmarke BookExpo America’.

⁹⁸ Interview with Krotov. Theocharis also notes that Read Russia events that took place at the London Book Fair in 2018 and 2019 were ‘more relevant at present for the Russophone diaspora than Western audiences.’; Theocharis, “‘Russian Literature Will Fix Everything’”, p. 115. This poor reception should be compared with Evans’ enthusiasm prior to the event, see Introduction, p. 12.

⁹⁹ Eduard Limonov, ‘Geroi dvadtsat’ piatogo chasa’, *Eduard Limonov*, 2013 <<https://limonov-eduard.livejournal.com/303705.html>> [accessed 28 October 2021].

Masha Gessen defended Shishkin from some Russian criticism for his refusal to represent Russia in 2013 in their *New York Times* article.¹⁰⁰ Gessen suggested that the Russian State would rather believe Shishkin had been persuaded to write his open letter as a PR stunt by his American publishers, than choose to take a stand against the Russian government of his own accord.¹⁰¹

The reaction to Shishkin's letter in Russia, and the effect of its aftermath, was noted in an interview for the *Calvert Journal* in April 2013 when journalist Maryam Omidī spoke with Shishkin about his novel *The Light and The Dark*, which was published by Quercus in 2013.¹⁰² She described Shishkin as 'anxious' and gave him the chance to defend himself against Russian accusations that his letter had been a publicity stunt. Omidī highlighted the negative effect the letter had had on Shishkin's acceptability in Russia.

Shishkin himself pointed out to me that since 2013, the idea that he was a 'national traitor' was not only an accusation but had become a 'scientifically proven fact' by a Russian academic. In 2016, an article was published in a Russian journal that demonstrated the ways in which *Maidenhair* was a 'weapon in the war of information' being fought against Russia by the West.¹⁰³ The title of the article translates as 'The symptoms of informational-psychological warfare, or the smell of abandoned Russia (based on Mikhail Shishkin's *Venerin volos*')'. The article's author — Ada Bernatskaia — cites Shishkin's extraliterary statements, including his BEA refusal, as proof of his hatred of the 'homeland'. She also claims that *Maidenhair's* complexity signifies the novel's role as a 'weapon of disinformation' and finds multiple examples in the text of Shishkin's lack of love for his country. This hatred, according to Bernatskaia, is all the more insidious

¹⁰⁰ Gessen prefers to use the pronouns they/them. Masha Gessen, 'From the Safety of Switzerland', *The New York Times; Latitude*, 2013 <<https://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/11/writer-mikhail-shishkin-criticizes-russian-government/>> [accessed 4 November 2019].

¹⁰¹ Gessen, 'From the Safety of Switzerland'.

¹⁰² See Chapter One, p. 97 for a description of this novel. Maryam Omidī, 'The Light and Dark of It: How Russia's Greatest Living Writer Became a Refusenik', *The Calvert Journal*, 2013 <<https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/771/mikhail-shishkin-light-dark-russian-writer-author-corrupt-criminal-regime>> [accessed 15 November 2019]. The Calvert Journal ceased operations in February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. It was named an 'undesirable organisation' by the Russian government in August 2022; 'About', *New East Digital Archive* <<https://www.new-east-archive.org/about>> [accessed 16 May 2023].

¹⁰³ Ada Bernatskaia, 'Simptomy informatsionno-psikhologicheskoi voinei, ili chem pakhnet pokinutaia Rodina (Na materiale romana M P Shishkina «Venerin Volos») ', Nauchno-innovatsionnyi portal SFU', *Ekologia iazika i kommunikativnaia praktika* 1, 2016, 239–58.

because *Venerin Volos*' is written in Russian.

Although the novel was published in Russian in 2005, the alleged attack on Russia contained within the pages of *Venerin Volos* had been overlooked until the moment Shishkin became a 'national traitor'. His continued absence from Russian media confirms this status. Since 2013, Shishkin has not featured in any interviews or articles by the Russian State-sponsored *RBTH*, for example. Since their review of Bromfield's translation of *The Light and the Dark*, which appeared just days after the 2013 letter was published, the outlet has been silent in regard to the author.¹⁰⁴

3.2 Shishkin's Extratextual Statements

The publication of Shishkin's open letter created a platform for him to write a series of opinion pieces in the Western media. The first appeared in the UK's *Independent* on 22 March 2013, citing the 'leading Russian writer and maverick' who dared to stand up to Putin and openly criticise Russia.¹⁰⁵ In what is perhaps Shishkin's least overtly anti-Putin essay published in the Western media, he describes the Russian language as the 'body of a totalitarian consciousness'.¹⁰⁶ The author also states his literary mission, referring to Russian literature as 'an ark, a rescue attempt'.¹⁰⁷ He explains that he aims to rework the Russian language, free it from its totalitarian shackles, and restore dignity to its speakers and readers.¹⁰⁸

In July 2013, Shishkin referenced these same ideas in an essay titled 'Poets and Czars' published in *The New Republic*.¹⁰⁹ Here, Shishkin discusses the importance of literature in Russia, and the position of the writer — from Pushkin to Tolstoy to Brodsky — in relation to the Tsar. He invokes Nicholas I as Pushkin's

¹⁰⁴ Balthasar Weymarn, "'The Light and the Dark' Explores Love and Loss', 3 March 2013 <https://www.rbth.com/literature/2013/03/02/the_light_and_the_dark_exploring_love_and_loss_23439.html> [accessed 30 October 2021].

¹⁰⁵ Mikhail Shishkin, 'A Revolution for Russia's Words', trans. by Marian Schwartz, *The Independent*, 22 March 2013 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/mikhail-shishkin-a-revolution-for-russias-words-8546366.html>> [accessed 4 June 2020].

¹⁰⁶ Shishkin, 'A Revolution for Russia's Words'.

¹⁰⁷ Shishkin, 'A Revolution for Russia's Words'.

¹⁰⁸ Shishkin, 'A Revolution for Russia's Words'.

¹⁰⁹ Mikhail Shishkin, 'Poets and Czars', *The New Republic*, 1 July 2013 <<https://newrepublic.com/article/113386/pushkin-putin-sad-tale-democracy-russia>> [accessed 22 September 2021]

first reader and demonstrates that poets and writers can choose whether to support their Tsar. Shishkin takes the opportunity to make a firm declaration about his attitude to Putin:

The poet cannot align himself with this usurper of the throne, not least because this despot doesn't read. It is impossible to imagine Putin, the grey little KGB colonel, with a book in his hands.¹¹⁰

He also refers to Putin and his government as the 'mafia'. Shishkin writes about emigration as the solution to preserving the 'other Russia' that he describes in his essay, 'the Russia of poets and writers, the Russia of culture, destroyed in the Soviet Union.'¹¹¹ He argues that over the past century this 'other' Russia, founded first by Pushkin and kept alive by the intelligentsia, has been preserved by writers including both himself and Brodsky, by emigrating from Russia.¹¹²

In Spring 2014, Shishkin reappeared in the Western press calling for a boycott of the Winter Olympic Games about to take place in Sochi. Shishkin wrote a series of articles, first on the English PEN website, then republished on book-industry website *Book Brunch*, and a final, partly-related essay in the *Wall Street Journal*.¹¹³ These articles were more direct in condemning Putin as a 'dictator' and accusing his government of corruption.¹¹⁴ They also referenced Shishkin's concerns over misplaced Russian patriotism, stating that he could not be proud of a country that celebrates its sportsmen and women's achievements with a 'Stalinist hymn' while government officials embezzle money out of Sochi and locals are kept away from the games.¹¹⁵ The article in *The Wall Street Journal* was arguably the most visible place for Shishkin's condemnation of the Russian government. He is introduced as one of Russia's most 'revered' writers, while

¹¹⁰ Shishkin, 'Poets and Czars'.

¹¹¹ Shishkin, 'Poets and Czars'.

¹¹² This theme also appears in Senchin's main character in *Dozhd' v Parizhe*, who spends time in Paris only to gain perspective on his life in Russia; Roman Senchin, *Dozhd' v Parizhe: Roman*, (Moskva: AST : Redaktsiia Eleny Shubinoi, 2018).

¹¹³ Mikhail Shishkin, 'Russian Déjà vu at Sochi 2014 – Who Lost the Games?', *PEN Transmissions*, 6 February 2014 <<https://pentransmissions.com/2014/02/06/russian-deja-vu-at-sochi-2014-who-lost-the-games/>> [accessed 21 September 2021]; Mikhail Shishkin, 'Sochi Olympics: Russian Writer Mikhail Shishkin Holds His Applause', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 February 2014, <<https://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303874504579372970763011880.html>> [accessed 14 September 2021]

¹¹⁴ Shishkin 'Russian Déjà vu at Sochi'.

¹¹⁵ Shishkin 'Russian Déjà vu at Sochi'.

both his ‘palpable love of Russia’ and opposition to Putin are highlighted. The essay that follows marks the final iteration of Shishkin’s call to boycott the Sochi Olympics and is his most compelling. Here he references the 2014 annexation of Crimea and states that history is beginning to repeat itself, another of his principal concerns.¹¹⁶

Shishkin’s next essay in *The Guardian* (18 September 2014) presented his ambivalence towards the West, and towards Europe in particular.¹¹⁷ Shishkin criticises the West for only applying sanctions to Russia. He presents the liberal view of the war in Ukraine and criticises the Russian state’s use of television to ‘zombify’ the nation into believing that Ukraine needs to be rescued from fascists who are acting at the behest of Western powers.¹¹⁸ In May 2015, *The New York Times* published an essay by Shishkin condemning the Russian state and damning the Soviet past.¹¹⁹ Shishkin writes about his father who, during World War Two, willingly protected the same regime that killed Shishkin’s grandfather in a Siberian Gulag. He repeats his belief that patriotism is a form of slavery, and that the only thing won by those that defended Stalin’s Soviet Union was yet another form of slavery. He likens the propaganda of the World War Two campaign to Putin’s use of the same rhetoric in his war against Ukraine.¹²⁰

Between 2015-2022 Shishkin was barely present in the Western media. When the war intensified in February 2022, he became visible again. As I will outline in my Conclusion, post-2022 Shishkin has written several articles for the Western press against the war. He also published a book in German — *Frieden oder Krieg: Russland und der Westen, eine Annäherung* — translated from into English by Gesche Ipsen as *My Russia, War or Peace?*¹²¹ In both 2022 and 2023 Shishkin

¹¹⁶ For a discussion of other authors who share this concern see Sorokin later this chapter, p. 301.

¹¹⁷ Mikhail Shishkin, ‘Russia, Ukraine and Europe Have Been into Vladimir Putin’s Black Hole of Fear’, *The Guardian*, 18 September 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/18/russia-ukraine-europe-putin-black-hole>> [accessed 4 November 2019].

¹¹⁸ Shishkin, ‘Russia, Ukraine and Europe’.

¹¹⁹ Mikhail Shishkin, ‘How Russians Lost the War’, trans. by Marian Schwartz, *The New York Times*, 8 May 2015, section Opinion <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/09/opinion/mikhail-shishkin-how-russians-lost-the-war.html>> [accessed 4 November 2019].

¹²⁰ Shishkin, ‘How Russians Lost the War’. This idea is explored in my Introduction, p. 19. For more on this topic, also see McGlynn, *Memory Makers*.

¹²¹ Fritz Pleitgen and Mikhail Shishkin, *Frieden Oder Krieg: Russland Und Der Westen, Eine Annäherung* (Munich: Ludwig, 2019); Mikhail Shishkin, *My Russia: War or Peace?*, trans. by Gesche Ipsen (London: Riverrun, 2023).

appeared at the Frankfurt Book Fair, and in online events, where he accused the Russian government of fascism.¹²² He continues to promote his opposition to the war, and the need to reclaim Russia's culture from the present government, via emails to academics in the UK and US. In this way, he remains one of the most active, and forthright critics of Russia's war. However, this opposition would have been more challenging to voice if he had not already been afforded a platform for his dissident views by the Western media. I would argue that he was permitted this outlet as a direct result of the cultural pedigree, and symbolic capital he possess in the West.

Shishkin's political views on Russia as stated in his letter and his subsequent essays, his repeated calls to boycott the Sochi Olympics, and his response to the war in Ukraine from 2014 onwards, have helped to consolidate his position as a dissident Russian writer in the West. These actions also place him in personal danger — it is clear that opponents of the Russian state are at risk of poisoning, as experienced by Navalny, Bykov, and the Skripals in the UK.¹²³ This sustained activism places Shishkin in contrast with Sorokin who until 2022 was not proactively anti-government. Indeed, the efforts Shishkin makes to promote his views, and his frank accusations that Russia is a fascist state, mean that he is one of the most dangerously outspoken of all of the writers examined here. His statements are not, then, made in an effort to promote himself abroad, or even, in fact, to make him more acceptable to the Western reader. Such statements are made out of honest concern for Russia and Russian culture and are entirely against the war. Although, as I will discuss in the Conclusion, his views do not always completely align with the Western narrative on the war on Ukraine.¹²⁴

¹²² 'The Russophone Literature of Resistance': *The Launch of March 2023 Issue of World Literature Today*, dir. by The Harriman Institute at Columbia University, 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qk88Yj_cT8> [accessed 16 May 2023]. During the talk, Shishkin speaks, in English, about the role of the Russian writer: 'We are talking about regaining dignity for Russian literature. To regain this dignity is impossible without two conditions. The first condition is the total defeat of the Russian regime. And the second condition is a genius novel – someone must write a genius novel about Russia, about how we came to this catastrophe, explaining why we are fascists. Why Russia became a fascist country.'

¹²³ For more on this, see: Jonathan Miller, 'For Dissident Writer, the Fight for Russia's Future Is Personal', *Cornell Chronicle*, 14 April 2022 <<https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2022/04/dissident-writer-fight-russias-future-personal>> [accessed 20 January 2023]; Haroon Siddique, 'Third Russian National Charged over Salisbury Poisonings', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/sep/21/third-russian-national-charged-over-salisbury-poisonings>> [accessed 8 June 2023].

¹²⁴ See Conclusion, p. 343.

3.3 From Extratext to Epitext

As I will argue here, Shishkin's extratextual activities and statements have markedly affected the tone and content of interviews, articles and reviews written about him from March 2013 onwards. Shishkin's literary agent Hoffmann felt that *Maidenhair* was commissioned in part because it was relevant to the discourse around immigration in the US at the time.¹²⁵ However, it was the anti-Putin political views Shishkin expressed in 2013 that acted as a catalyst for the novel's sales, as well as interest from a commercial publisher.¹²⁶ Post explained that there was no doubt the author's political statements helped increase the profile of *Maidenhair*. Post felt that Shishkin's 'anti' stance interested readers and provided a reason for them to buy the novel, although he wondered what they would think of this complex book once they read it.¹²⁷ Not only did Shishkin's letter raise *Maidenhair's* profile, but it provoked further interest from a larger publisher, Quercus. They had already purchased the rights to *The Light and The Dark*, in 2011. Citing Shishkin's new profile, Quercus asked Open Letter to take *Maidenhair* out of print and allow them to acquire all the English rights of a suddenly important author.¹²⁸ According to Post, Quercus' offer originated in their belief that Shishkin's political stance meant his book was more likely to sell, and more importantly, that he might win the Nobel Prize.¹²⁹ Post claimed that Quercus subsequently lost interest in Shishkin when *The Light and the Dark* failed to generate many sales.¹³⁰

The effect of Shishkin's newly dissident stance can also be traced in his epitextual reception. Until March 2013, politics had been absent from reviews of his work. In June 2012, journalist Daniel Kalder interviewed Shishkin for the book trade

¹²⁵ For details on the translation microhistory around *Maidenhair*, see Chapter Three, p. 202. Interviews with Shishkin, Hoffmann.

¹²⁶ Interview with Post.

¹²⁷ Interview with Post.

¹²⁸ Interview with Post.

¹²⁹ See Introduction, p. 13 for a discussion of Shishkin and Nobel Prize prospects. Quercus were due to publish an English translation of *The Taking of Izmail*, but this has not taken place to date.

¹³⁰ Riverrun, an imprint of Quercus, has published Shishkin's most recent *My Russia*, however. According to Nielsen Bookdata, *The Light and The Dark* sold a total of 947 copies in the UK between 2014-2019. This makes it rather more successful than *Maidenhair*, which sold 356 copies in the UK between 2012-2019 (although this figure does not account for copies sold direct from the Open Letter). This is testament to the increased ability of commercial publishers to sell more copies of their books – likely based on their ability to place their books in shops.

magazine *Publishing Perspectives*.¹³¹ Shishkin made clear his thoughts about the Soviet regime and mentioned the criticism he had faced from what he termed 'new patriots' such as Limonov, but he made no mention of his opinion about the current Russian government. Likewise, in July 2012, *Words Without Borders* published an article by Bud Parr about a pre-publication event with Post, Schwartz, and Shishkin at the end of the BookExpo that year.¹³² The article focused on the novel's central themes of love, and a quest for human dignity, rather than Shishkin's political beliefs. Parr described *Maidenhair* as 'a book about human warmth' and emphasised the complex and innovative nature of Shishkin's language, as well as the mammoth task of the translation.¹³³

In November 2012, critic James Meek wrote about *Maidenhair* in the *London Review of Books*.¹³⁴ His substantial review explores the complexity of Shishkin's prose and focuses on the global relevance of his novel's themes of love, the power of words, and the importance of freedom. But Shishkin himself is described simply as a 'journalist, interpreter and writer'. *Words Without Borders* also carried a review of *Maidenhair* in November 2012.¹³⁵ Here, critic Christopher Tauchen claims that the novel 'is an attempt to create and explain everything in existence'. Tauchen praises Schwartz's translation, and hails Shishkin as a great Russian writer, hoping that the novel has 'secured his immortality.' The same month, journalist Phoebe Taplin reviewed the newly published *Maidenhair* for *RBTH*.¹³⁶ Again, no mention is made of his political stance. Finally, the American daily *Morning News* published an excerpt of *Maidenhair* on 17 December 2012, accompanied by a short interview. Shishkin is introduced as one of the most important and successful contemporary writers in Russia, and his triple prize wins

¹³¹ Daniel Kalder, 'An Interview with Mikhail Shishkin (Publishing Perspectives)', *Biblioteka imeni Kal'dera*, 1 June 2012 <<http://kalderarchive.blogspot.com/2012/12/an-interview-with-mikhail-shishkin.html>> [accessed 1 November 2021].

¹³² Parr, 'Understanding Is Not the Most Important Thing'.

¹³³ Parr, 'Understanding Is Not the Most Important Thing'.

¹³⁴ Meek, 'Cloud-Brains'.

¹³⁵ Christopher Tauchen, 'Mikhail Shishkin's "Maidenhair"', *Words Without Borders*, November 2012 <<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/mikhail-shishkins-maidenhair>> [accessed 4 November 2019].

¹³⁶ Phoebe Taplin, 'A Virtuoso Translation of Shishkin's "Maidenhair"', 11 November 2012 <https://www.rbth.com/literature/2012/11/11/a_virtuoso_translation_of_shishkins_maidenhair_19981.html> [accessed 29 October 2021]. As mentioned above, apart from the review of the *Light and the Dark* published on the Russian state sponsored website on 3 March 2013, this was to be their only article exclusively about Shishkin.

are highlighted.¹³⁷ During the brief interview, Shishkin hints at changes to come to Russia in the near future, but these themes are not explored in depth.

The sea-change in epitextual focus occurred three months later. Less than a week after Shishkin's letter was published in the same paper, Taplin's 13 March review for *The Guardian* of *The Light and The Dark* mentions Shishkin's letter and his comments about Russia's 'corrupt criminal regime'.¹³⁸ Politics were also a topic for Shishkin's conversation with American scholar Bradley Gorski.¹³⁹ Gorski highlights Shishkin's refusal to attend the BookExpo and includes an excerpt from his open letter. Shishkin also talks explicitly about his political beliefs, stating that all of his work is 'intimately connected' with politics. He references the cyclical nature of Russian politics in a metaphor that he regularly recycles in his responses:

The twentieth century locked Russian history into a Mobius strip. The country turns out to be an empire every time it tries to build a democratic society, introduce elections, parliament, a republic.¹⁴⁰

Other interviews focused on Shishkin's refusal to represent Russia at the BookExpo. In an interview for *The American Reader*, Alyssa Loh leads with Shishkin's prizes, *Maidenhair*, and then devotes a large section to his letter.¹⁴¹ Loh highlights the main theme of the interview as 'the political responsibilities of intellectuals', and when asked about literary criticism in Russia, Shishkin describes the 'literary civil war' being waged there.¹⁴² Shishkin aligns himself with "liberal" authors in his appraisal of the Russian literary scene, and discusses the verbal attacks he receives from 'nationalist literary critics.'¹⁴³ He is consistently

¹³⁷ Elizabeth Kiem, 'Mikhail Shishkin', *The Morning News*, 17 December 2012 <<https://themorningnews.org/article/mikhail-shishkin>> [accessed 2 September 2021].

¹³⁸ Phoebe Taplin, 'The Light and the Dark by Mikhail Shishkin – Review', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2013, section Books <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/13/light-and-dark-mikhail-shishkin-review>> [accessed 14 September 2021]. From this date onwards, reviews of *Maidenhair* often mention *The Light and the Dark*, which was published on 28 March 2013.

¹³⁹ Bradley Gorski, 'An Interview with Mikhail Shishkin', *Harriman Magazine*, June 2013, pp. 28–43. A recording of an event hosted by the Harriman Institute with both Shishkin and Marian Schwartz is available on YouTube: *Mikhail Shishkin: A Reading and Conversation with His Translator*, 2013 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwnpQmW2qrA>> [accessed 11 November 2019]. Shishkin lectured at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University in spring 2013.

¹⁴⁰ Gorski, 'An Interview with Mikhail Shishkin'.

¹⁴¹ Loh, 'A Conversation with Mikhail Shishkin'.

¹⁴² For the original quote, see Introduction, p. 22.

¹⁴³ Interview with Shishkin.

portrayed as a “liberal” Russian writer firmly against the regime. Indeed, the focus of this interview is firmly on his politics over his prose.

The shift in tone, from lauding Shishkin purely for his art pre-March 2013 to celebrating him as a dissident writer and potential Nobel Prize winner afterwards, is notable here. This shift can be viewed as a direct result of his political self-outing as a dissident. An analysis of his reception underlines the role that politics plays both in the marketing and ultimate success of Russian novels brought to the West via translation. Indeed, as I have illustrated above, and will explore in more detail later in this chapter, this same “dissident effect” is used to market both Sorokin’s and Ulitskaya’s novels via peritexts. This takes place despite these writers’ pre-2022 claims to apoliticism. I will argue below that Sorokin is left with little choice than to claim dissidence if he is to be marketed in the West during the war. Meanwhile, Ulitskaya is “dissident” by nature, rather than any desire to actively involve herself in politics.¹⁴⁴

Ingunn Lunde asserts that not only do Shishkin’s statements in his essays and interviews directly affect his image in the West, but there is also a confluence between Shishkin’s literary themes and his public life.¹⁴⁵ Shishkin’s fiction regularly addresses the power and importance of words, and he commits to the principal theme of much of his literary output by placing his letters and essays in the Western media. Lunde’s hypothesis is identifiable, then, in Shishkin’s reception in the West, where the power of his extratextual statements, widely circulated via social media, directly affected the success of *Maidenhair*.¹⁴⁶ Journalist and anti-Putin activist Oleg Kashin also observed the importance of these extratextual statements. He noted that unlike the medium of literature, ‘the Internet is more important for the opposition and for society in general,’ adding that ‘[N]ot one of [Shishkin’s] books caused as big a stir as Shishkin’s small comment.’¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ For more on this, see Chapter One, p. 88. Her position became more complicated in January 2024. See p. 88, fn. 112 for more details.

¹⁴⁵ Ingunn Lunde, “A Revolution for Russia’s Words”: Rhetoric and Style in Mixail Šiškin’s Political Essays’, *Zeitschrift Für Slawistik*, 61.2 (2016), 249–61.

¹⁴⁶ Chad Post described *Maidenhair* as one of his bestsellers, and it is already in its third print run; Interview with Post.

¹⁴⁷ Emily Parker, ‘Bulgakov’s Ghost’, *The New York Times*, 24 May 2013 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/books/review/bulgakovs-ghost.html>> [accessed 5 November 2019].

3.4 Elizarov and *The Librarian* — When Texts Circulate Without Their Context

Shishkin's openly dissident politics prompted media interest in his books and sparked the increased number of epitexts written around the novel, as well as further extratexts in the shape of his political essays. It is not possible to market *krymnash* writers such as Elizarov through their personal political beliefs, however. Although Elizarov was politically active in Russia prior to the publication of *The Librarian* in English in 2015, hardly any of his views were reported in the UK despite the polarised reception of *The Librarian* in Russia.¹⁴⁸ As I will explore below, lack of political information did not prevent the book from being reviewed in a range of outlets including the consecrating *Times Literary Supplement*. Indeed, one of these reviews, in *RBTH*, directly challenges the charge of fascism, but as I will discuss, this position raises questions around links between the online magazine and the Russian state.

I suggest that reviews in prominent Western publications were probably appeared *The Librarian* was published by Pushkin Press. The firm possesses considerable symbolic capital based on the series of (re)translations of major European prose they published in the early 2000s. In 2015, at the time of *The Librarian's* publication, Pushkin Press were among the publishers with the most titles on the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize longlists.¹⁴⁹ *The Librarian* was thus consecrated by the reputation of its publisher. Pushkin Press in turn attracted a well-known, consecrating translator in the form of Bromfield who accepted the work, and later detected Elizarov's anti-Ukrainian views in the novel. These views, Bromfield felt, were a concern for the publisher rather than himself, and since he did not alert them to it, Pushkin Press consecrated a "nationalist" author

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Ipsen. Russian critic Andrei Nemzer was sufficiently appalled by *Librarian* winning the 2008 Russian Booker prize that he wrote an article in which he refused to comment on it other than to state that it was 'Soviet rot'; Andrei Nemzer, 'Zabyt' by', 5 December 2008 <https://www.ruthenia.ru/nemzer/buker_final_08.html> [accessed 24 October 2022]. Writer Aleksandr Kabakov resigned from the judging panel when *The Librarian* won. He called the novel 'tenth-rate fascist trash'; Velemir Moist and Vadim Nesterov, 'Fashizm prordova', *Gazeta.ru*, 11 December 2008 <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2008/12/11/a_2909047.shtml> [accessed 24 October 2022].

¹⁴⁹ Mansell lists Pushkin Press among the top five publishing groups on longlists, 2011-2015; Mansell, 'Small Yet Powerful', p. 278. See also an interview with Adam Freudenheim in 2014: 'Q&A: Adam Freudenheim, Publisher And Managing Director Of Pushkin Press', *Kirkus Reviews* <<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/news-and-features/articles/adam-freudenheim-pushkin-press/>> [accessed 8 June 2023]. Freudenheim had previously worked at Penguin Classics and is a central figure in the publishing world: Interviews with Dralyuk; Ipsen, Karetnyk.

without a full understanding of his Russian context.¹⁵⁰

3.4a Political Context

The Librarian was commissioned by Pushkin Press following a recommendation, although I was not able to ascertain the source. According to Ipsen, the book was signed predominantly because it had won the Russian Booker Prize.¹⁵¹ This is frequently enough to recommend a book to publishers, but Elizarov's win had proven controversial in Russia.¹⁵² While editors at Pushkin Press did not speak Russian, had they searched for evidence of Elizarov's political views available in English, they would have found it in translator Oliver Ready's summary of the 2011 London Book Fair for the *Times Literary Supplement*.¹⁵³ Ready noted that Elizarov spoke at the event, and had stated, 'with great feeling, and apparent sincerity, that "the Stalin problem has been somewhat exaggerated".'¹⁵⁴

Translator and book blogger Lisa Hayden also reviewed the Russian text of *The Librarian* on her *Lizok's Bookshelf* blog in 2009.¹⁵⁵ Here, she directly referenced accusations of fascism that surrounded the novel and embedded a link to an article about Kabakov's resignation from the Booker Prize jury in protest at Elizarov's win. All other media remained in Russian, however.¹⁵⁶ It is curious to note that even when Evans was considering a translation of *Zemlia* in 2020 and possessed the ability to research Elizarov in Russian, he appears not to have done so. The US publisher had until 2022 been hoping to commission Lawton to translate Elizarov's prize-winning novel *Zemlia*.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁰ I will return the ethics around this in Chapter Five.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Ipsen.

¹⁵² See Chapter One, p. 110.

¹⁵³ Oliver Ready, 'Saplings in the Jungle', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6 May 2011, p. 14, The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive.

¹⁵⁴ Ready, 'Saplings in the Jungle'.

¹⁵⁵ Hayden, 'Mikhail Elizarov's Booker-Winning Librarian'.

¹⁵⁶ For example, in a 2008 YouTube clip Elizarov is seen mooted the same talking points as Putin in 2022 over Ukraine; *Evropa - nash vrag (Elizarov)*, dir. by Mortimer, 2008 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzlkAGQYBXk>> [accessed 25 March 2022]. For a discussion of Elizarov's politics see Chapter One p. 104.

¹⁵⁷ See Chapter One, p. 110. I can only speculate as to why they thought this would be acceptable. No further mention has been made of this since February 2022. Interview Lawton, November 2021.

3.4b Peritexts, Epitexts and Propaganda

There is, I suggest, a need for publishers to be aware of Russian authors' political activities within the context of strained geopolitics between Russia and the West, and the ongoing war against Ukraine, especially since April 2014. This appears not to have taken place in the case of Elizarov, however. Because the majority of Elizarov's extratextual statements and actions have only been reported in Russian (with the exception of Hayden's review of the original) they had not filtered through to his Anglophone publisher and are subsequently absent from *The Librarian's* peritexts. This lack of political contextualisation has in turn influenced the novel's epitextual reception. Unlike the critical reception of "liberal" writers such as Shishkin, Sorokin and Ulitskaya, the epitexts that surround *The Librarian* are free from the subject of the author's politics and focus instead on his general description of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. This lack of peritextual contextualisation is compounded by reviews written by non-Russianists, the majority of whom neglected the significance of some of Elizarov's anti-Ukrainian and nationalist themes. This omission also raises questions about whether poorly researched reviews contribute to the 'misinterpretations' that Bourdieu predicts, a question that I now explore through my analysis of *The Librarian's* reception in the UK.¹⁵⁸

A brief mention of *The Librarian* appeared in *Publishers Weekly*, where the Russian Booker Prize was referenced, followed by a dry summary of the novel's plot. Here *The Librarian* is described as 'a satire about the absurdity of blind faith and the way people fool themselves into believing in systems in which they are forced to inhabit. A clear jab at Soviet Communism'.¹⁵⁹ *The Financial Times* also carried a two-paragraph review of *The Librarian*, describing it as 'a very funny take on the disarray of post-Soviet Russia that has been a bestseller in its author's native land and won the Russian Booker'.¹⁶⁰ Scotland's *Sunday Herald*

¹⁵⁸ Bourdieu, 'Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées', p. 4.

¹⁵⁹ 'The Librarian by Mikhail Elizarov', n.d. <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/9781782270270>> [accessed 29 September 2022].

¹⁶⁰ James Lovegrove, "'The Librarian", by Mikhail Elizarov', *The Financial Times*, 1 May 2015 <<https://www.ft.com/content/e32b8974-ef36-11e4-87dc-00144feab7de>> [accessed 17 November 2022].

described it as a ‘Sovietesque blend between satire, polemic and fantasy.’¹⁶¹ A longer review appeared on well-regarded translation website *Asymptote* where the principal theme of the novel is interpreted as the magical quality of books, without referencing the novel’s political concerns and Stalinist undertones.¹⁶² Meanwhile, in his review for *Open Democracy*, Russian scholar David Gillespie regards *The Librarian* as a satire about post-Soviet Russia. He does not consider the protagonist Alexei’s nostalgia for the Soviet Union as serious, but rather a form of nostalgia that is fully conscious of the Soviet Union’s flaws.¹⁶³

Only two reviews confront Elizarov’s politics directly. Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Russian scholar Alexander Etkind noted the political ambiguity of *The Librarian*.¹⁶⁴ He remarked that the novel was well received by ‘anti-Kremlin dissidents’ in 2007 but that in 2015, during the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the novel should be read differently. Meanwhile, Phoebe Taplin’s review for *RBTH*, “‘The Librarian’: Philosophical Parable or Fascist Nostalgia?’, is the only other article besides Hayden’s online review that confronts the charge of fascism directly.¹⁶⁵ However, in Taplin’s case, the review reads as a defence against the accusation, instead focussing on comparisons with Sorokin, Bulgakov and Nabokov:

Elizarov admits that he remembers his Soviet childhood “with great warmth” and is interested in exploring values that have been lost under the capitalist system, but his ideas are more complex than the debate suggests. “The Librarian” starts with a quotation from Platonov’s dystopian satire “The Foundation Pit” and Elizarov’s cartoon violence obscures a philosophical parable, exploring the power of ideas.

¹⁶¹ ‘Paperbacks’, *The Herald*, 22 March 2015

<https://www.heraldscotland.com/life_style/arts_ents/13206745.paperbacks/> [accessed 29 September 2022].

¹⁶² Isabel Lower, ‘In Review: “The Librarian” by Mikhail Elizarov - Asymptote Blog’, *Asymptote*, 28 April 2015 <<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2015/04/28/in-review-the-librarian-by-mikhail-elizarov/>> [accessed 26 October 2019].

¹⁶³ David Gillespie, ‘Book Review: Mikhail Elizarov, “The Librarian”’, *Open Democracy*, 19 May 2015 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/book-review-mikhail-elizarov-librarian/>> [accessed 25 October 2019].

¹⁶⁴ Alexander Etkind, ‘Wars of Faith’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 July 2015 <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/wars-of-faith/>> [accessed 21 October 2022].

¹⁶⁵ Taplin, “‘The Librarian’: Philosophical Parable or Fascist Nostalgia?”. Taplin is a travel writer. Among other titles she has written four walking guides to Moscow, published by Moscow News in 2012.

Taplin's comments might have reflected the official in-house *RBTH* narrative around Elizarov. The online magazine is run by TV-Novosti, which also operates the sanctioned TV channel *RT*.¹⁶⁶ This is not the only example of soft power being exerted by the Russian State via links to *RT*, as described in Chapter Two.¹⁶⁷

Support for Elizarov from the Russian state was still evident in 2022. In July of that year, it was announced that *The Librarian* would be made into a TV series in Russia. In the promotional material for the venture, the novel was described as a 'post-Soviet fantasy, postmodern thriller or magical social realism.'¹⁶⁸ It is perhaps not surprising that an anti-Ukrainian novel that is noted for its themes of Soviet nostalgia, violence and sacrifice should be commissioned for a TV series during the war with Ukraine, or that it should be supported by positive reviews from outlets sponsored by the Russian State.¹⁶⁹

3.5 Extratexts as Context

A lack of peritextual material for *The Librarian*, coupled with a dearth of knowledge about the author since most of his extratextual statements and actions have taken place in Russian, meant that the novel circulated without sufficient context for its target audience.¹⁷⁰ Without the sort of context that Bourdieu

¹⁶⁶ See Introduction, p. 64 for more about RT.

¹⁶⁷ Links also exist between *RBTH* and the UK's *Daily Telegraph*. Until 2022, the newspaper published a regular *RBTH* supplement for which they were reportedly paid £40,000 a month in 2008. See: Roy Greenslade, 'Telegraph to Continue Publishing Russian Propaganda Supplement', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2014/jul/29/dailytelegraph-russia>> [accessed 11 February 2023]; Valera Liperovsky, 'New RBTH Design inside The Daily Telegraph', *Russia Beyond*, 29 May 2013 <https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/infographics/2013/05/28/new_rbth_design_inside_the_telegraph_26479> [accessed 11 February 2023]. For an example of the content published by *RBTH* in the Daily Telegraph see: Dmitry Babich, 'Russian and British Eurosceptics Unite over EU', *The Telegraph*, 26 March 2011 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/rbth/opinion/9954202/russia-britain-eurosceptics.html>> [accessed 11 February 2023]; Yevgeny Shestakov, 'Russia: Nato Has Overstepped UN Mandate on Libya', *The Telegraph*, 21 April 2011 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/rbth/politics/8466680/Russia-pressure-Nato-Libya.html>> [accessed 11 February 2023]; 'Russia Beyond The Headlines - Telegraph', 2014 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20140208091923/http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/rbth/>> [accessed 11 February 2023]. It appears that the supplement was quietly hidden after the intensification of the war in 2022; Mandrake, 'Telegraph Puts Russian Propaganda out of Site', *The New European*, 15 March 2022 <<https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/mandrake-daily-telegraph-russia-beyond/>> [accessed 11 February 2023].

¹⁶⁸ 'Po romanu "Bibliotekar" Mikhaila Elizarova snimut serial', *Izdatel'stvo AST*, 2 August 2022 <<https://ast.ru/news/po-romanu-bibliotekar-mikhaila-elizarova-snimut-serial/>> [accessed 22 October 2022].

¹⁶⁹ See Chapter One, p. 110 for more details on the TV series.

¹⁷⁰ Bourdieu, 'Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées', p.4.

regards as essential to the global circulation of literature, epitexts are ill-informed.¹⁷¹ In the case of *The Librarian*, this led to its key theme being interpreted in the West as principally about the power of books. Little mention has been made of Elizarov's politics, or indeed the scandal his novel caused in Russia. Had Pushkin Press been aware of Elizarov's politics, they might not have commissioned his novel.¹⁷² At the very least, they had been aware of Elizarov's beliefs, they might have produced contextualising peritexts from which reviewers could have drawn. The lack of curiosity over Elizarov's political beliefs, coupled with the definite absence of a dissident theme, compounded the difficulty of promoting Elizarov. Bringing a foreign author to the UK for marketing purposes is likely to be risky, Ipsen added, if they might say something controversial.¹⁷³

In this sense, "nationalist" writers present their potential publishers with a problem. Shishkin is easy to market as an anti-Putin dissident because he is vocal in Russian, German, and English about his political views, and is given a platform by the Western liberal press. In the case of Elizarov, whose only recorded public comments in the UK have been pro-Stalin, reviewers and publishers have not imposed political interpretations on his work. Although it may be the case, as one editor stated, that the target reader should be trusted to make up their own minds about who they read, this remains a challenging proposition when there is little information about the author readily available.¹⁷⁴ It is also dangerous, I suggest, when an author holds xenophobic beliefs and supports Russia's war against Ukraine.

4 The Power of the Peritext

In light of Russia's war against Ukraine, it is pertinent to ask whether publishers should be translating contemporary writers who support the military action. It could, conversely be argued that such writers offer a representation of Russian society, and in many ways are even more important to read in times of conflict. In the next few pages I suggest, however, that it is not acceptable to publish a

¹⁷¹ Sapiro, 'Translation and the Field of Publishing', p. 163.

¹⁷² As noted above, it was not possible to speak to anyone currently employed at Pushkin Press.

¹⁷³ Interview with Ipsen. Indeed, this can be seen in Ready's recollection of Elizarov's comments at the London Book Fair; see above, p. 252. According to Ipsen, it is much easier to market a 'good-looking young man who speaks English' than someone who is unwilling to engage with the West; Interview with Ipsen.

¹⁷⁴ Interviewee #4.

novel with racist, or anti-Ukrainian elements written by a contemporary far-right Russian nationalist without the publisher acknowledging the author's stance. While it may not be necessary to make this distinction in all translation contexts, it should be regarded as unavoidable during Russia's war against Ukraine, which began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

As I will explore in Chapter Five alongside the question of translator ethics, I argue that considering the tensions between Russia and the West, and the real harm that is being caused by an active war, publishers have a responsibility to be diligent over the paratexts that help position a contemporary Russian novel for the Western Anglophone reader, just as they do in their commissioning choices. In the context of contemporary literary translation from Russia, any publisher duty to make works of fiction publicly available should be married with a duty to provide contextualising information where the author is actively involved in supporting the war. This is because, as I will demonstrate with an analysis of paratexts that frame the novels by Ulitskaya, Sorokin, Prilepin, and Senchin, such contextualising materials exert an overwhelming influence on these authors' reception in the target culture, as well as the target reader's understanding of Russia itself.

4.1 Ulitskaya — An Anti-Political Activist

As demonstrated above, Ulitskaya's dissident, anti-Putin, anti-war status is used to market her novels. Her political awakening, and political activities, which Goscilo regards as 'reluctant', have grown in tandem with her reputation in the West.¹⁷⁵ This marketing reached its apotheosis in the publication in the US and UK of *Just The Plague*, where Ulitskaya was described by Gessen as 'Russia's leading moral authority.'¹⁷⁶ Despite this claim, Ulitskaya described herself during our 2021 interview as 'anti-political'.¹⁷⁷ She elaborated in a later email that her distaste for politics had begun during her childhood, when her grandfathers were both imprisoned by the State. She said that this led her to understand that the State hated her grandparents, although she did not then know why. I interpret her 'anti-political' stance to be one that sees her unwillingly drawn into politics, and yet a political stance is necessitated both by her humanitarian concerns, and her

¹⁷⁵ Goscilo in Skomp and Sutcliffe, *The Art of Tolerance*, p. xviii.

¹⁷⁶ Ulitskaya, *Just The Plague*.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Ulitskaya, 12 November 2021.

position as a member of the liberal Russian intelligentsia. Ulitskaya's principles, which I first discussed in Chapter One, leave her little choice but to engage with Russian politics, no matter how much she dislikes it.¹⁷⁸

Despite her reluctance, the increasing relevance of Ulitskaya's political actions, and their usefulness in marketing her in the West are visible in her critical reception. Although Ulitskaya was initially translated into English in the late 1990s, journalist and author Elizabeth Day was the first to register Ulitskaya's opposition to Putin in April 2011 in a review of *Daniel Stein* for *The Guardian*.¹⁷⁹ Even before the protests in which Ulitskaya participated later that year, Day described Ulitskaya as 'a leading advocate for freedom of expression.'¹⁸⁰ This was no doubt a reaction to Ulitskaya's public correspondence with jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky (2009).¹⁸¹ During the interview with Day, Ulitskaya made her political and moral stance clear:

I'm not a huge fan in general of authority. In every society, government suppresses the individual element, one way or another." She makes a squeezing gesture with her hands, as though wringing out a dishcloth. "That's why I'm always on the side of a private individual."¹⁸²

In 2014, Masha Gessen referenced one of Ulitskaya's rare extratextual statements in their article about her for the *New Yorker*.¹⁸³ Gessen noted that the writer had penned an article for German paper *Der Spiegel* in 2014, condemning Russia's politics as 'suicidal and dangerous' and as a potential trigger for World War Three.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁸ For Ulitskaya's political status in Russia in January 2024, see, p. 88.

¹⁷⁹ Elizabeth Day, 'Lyudmila Ulitskaya: Why I'm Not Afraid of Vladimir Putin', *The Guardian*, 17 April 2011 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/17/lyudmila-ulitskaya-dissident-putin-interview>> [accessed 23 October 2019]; Ulitskaya, *Daniel Stein*, *Interpreter*.

¹⁸⁰ Day, 'Lyudmila Ulitskaya: Why I'm Not Afraid'.

¹⁸¹ Ulitskaya, along with Boris Akunin, exchanged letters with Mikhail Khodorkovsky while he was in jail. Some of these are available here; 'The Khodorkovsky-Ulitskaya Correspondence', *Open Democracy*, 2009 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/the-khodorkovsky-ulitskaya-correspondence/>> [accessed 18 November 2022]. A book was also later published; Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Dialogi* (Moscow: Znamia, 2009).

¹⁸² Day, 'Lyudmila Ulitskaya: Why I'm Not Afraid'.

¹⁸³ Gessen, 'Ludmila Ulitskaya Against the State.'

¹⁸⁴ The original essay in German can be found here; Ljudmila Ulitzkaja, 'Essay: Mein Land Krank!', *Spiegel Online*, 18 August 2014 <<https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-128743771.html>> [accessed 1 November 2019]. A Russian translation of the text is available on her agent's website here 'ELKOST International Literary Agency - Mein Land Krank! - Der

There is a notable difference between the tone of Gessen's article and the reviews of Ulitskaya's earlier work. Gessen describes Ulitskaya as an author 'for differently minded Russians, and one of Russia's most famous writers.'¹⁸⁵ Gessen compares her to the nineteenth-century Westerniser and émigré Alexander Herzen.¹⁸⁶ Despite the dissident, anti-*krymnash* framing of Ulitskaya, however, Gessen is clear that the author only uses topics such as the Gulag and dissent as a backdrop to her stories about real human lives; politics are not the main focus of her work. Paradoxically, this approach leads Gessen to stress the same qualities in *BGT* as the Russian publisher Elkost, in effect countering *BGT*'s own peritexts. Instead, Gessen regards Ulitskaya's so-called activism as a facet of her role as a member of Russia's intelligentsia.¹⁸⁷ Gessen describes Ulitskaya as one of the few remaining 'prominent non-nationalist public intellectual[s]', and notes the pitfalls of being a Russian writer:

It is the classic predicament of the Russian writer: novels are read as manifestos, prescriptions, and protests. Ulitskaya accepted the burden with no apparent difficulty; she had things to say, and more and more people were willing to listen. The worse things got in her country, the better she became at articulating its problems. In the late nineties and early two-thousands, she began organizing small-scale charity projects — helping a homeless family or a single juvenile facility — and writing about them.¹⁸⁸

From this point onwards, reviews stress Ulitskaya's dissident stance. A review on translated literature website *Asymptote* regarded Ulitskaya's political statements as understandable, and inevitable: 'We shouldn't blame her for returning to these painful subjects, then, as Stalin sent both of her grandfathers to labour camps, and the current political climate feels eerily familiar to her.'¹⁸⁹ Russian journalist Leonid Bershidsky framed her as an 'outspoken protester against the Putin

Spiegel, 34/2014 (in German)' <<https://elkost.com/authors/ulitskaya/journalism/1749-mein-land-krankt-der-spiegel-342014-in-german>> [accessed 18 November 2022]. For more about this see Chapter One, p. 82.

¹⁸⁵ Gessen, 'Ludmila Ulitskaya Against the State.'

¹⁸⁶ This supports my argument that "liberal" authors follow in the Westerniser tradition. See Introduction, p. 18.

¹⁸⁷ Gessen gives a thorough account of the Russian intelligentsia after the fall of the Soviet Union here; Masha Gessen, *Dead Again: The Russian Intelligentsia after Communism* (London ; New York: Verso, 1997).

¹⁸⁸ Gessen, 'Ludmila Ulitskaya Against the State.'

¹⁸⁹ Vica Miller, 'Vica Miller on Ludmila Ulitskaya', August 2014 <<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/vica-miller-on-ludmila-ulitskaya/#.XzFLyqFfOeA.twitter>> [accessed 14 August 2020].

regime'.¹⁹⁰ Russian-American author Lara Vapnyar claimed that Ulitskaya 'was among the dissidents of the Soviet era and she opposes Vladimir Putin now.'¹⁹¹

Gessen regards Ulitskaya's public stance as one taken as part of her duty as a Russian intellectual rather than for specifically political reasons.¹⁹² By opposing Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ulitskaya is taking part in a longstanding tradition.¹⁹³ Gessen remarked that speaking out to protect Ukrainians since 2014 continued the tradition of the Russian intelligentsia supporting victims of Russia's empire building.¹⁹⁴ This transformation from neutral to political can in part be seen as a result of the changing nature of the diplomatic relationship between Russia and the West during Putin's governance. It is also the product of Ulitskaya's extratextual actions and statements that have, by necessity, become increasingly pronounced during this time. As I will discuss in the Conclusion, Ulitskaya has not lived in Russia since Russia's war against Ukraine was renewed in 2022.¹⁹⁵

4.2 Sorokin — The Reluctant Dissident

The pigeonholing of Ulitskaya as a dissident writer does at least match her statements, even though she herself would not necessarily agree with the use of the term or approve of the fact that she is primarily marketed and received as such in the West. In contrast, despite a dearth of political extratextual actions prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, in 2011 Sorokin was marketed and received in the West as a dissident writer. This dissident image prior to 2014 was in most part a result of the subject matter and peritexts around his novel

¹⁹⁰ Leonid Bershidsky, 'Big Green Tent and the Subversive Power of Books', *The Atlantic*, 16 November 2015 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/12/big-green-tent-and-the-subversive-power-of-books/413137/>> [accessed 25 October 2019].

¹⁹¹ Lara Vapnyar, "'The Big Green Tent,'" by Ludmila Ulitskaya', *The New York Times*, 25 November 2015 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/books/review/the-big-green-tent-by-ludmila-ulitskaya.html>> [accessed 20 May 2020].

¹⁹² Gessen, 'Ludmila Ulitskaya Against the State.'

¹⁹³ Gessen, *Dead Again*, p. 18.

¹⁹⁴ Gessen, 'Ludmila Ulitskaya Against the State.' Writer Svetlana Alexievich called for the intelligentsia's support during suppression of a revolution in Belarus in 2020:

'I also want to appeal to the Russian intelligentsia, let's call it that according to the old custom. Why are you silent? We only hear rare voices of support. Why are you silent when you see a small proud people being trampled? We are still your brothers,' writes Alexievich; Rights in Russia, 'Svetlana Alexievich: Appeal to the Russian Intelligentsia', *Rights in Russia*, 18 September 2020 <<https://www.rightsinrussia.org/alexievich/>> [accessed 9 November 2022].

¹⁹⁵ See Conclusion, p. 338.

Oprichnik. The Anglophone West's political marketing of Sorokin had taken place regardless of his insistence in 2011 that he was not a political author.

During a book tour in the US to promote Gambrell's translations of *Ice* and *Oprichnik* in 2011, for example, Sorokin appeared with both her and translator Keith Gessen at a PEN International event.¹⁹⁶ During their conversation, Gessen suggested that Sorokin was not the apolitical writer he claimed to be. Sorokin disagreed:

I'm not a prophet, I'm not a teacher. I just ask the questions. I pose them, I pose the questions. I don't think a writer should be a teacher but should know how to pose the questions and explain the problems. I have no desire to influence my readers with any specific actions. I write books and I know that people read them. That's all. I don't need anything else. Literature is not a demolition ball. I just say this so that you understand that I don't believe that you should use literature for non-literary purposes. When I wrote 'anti-Soviet' books, I thought about it as literature first and foremost. I had to set myself certain literary tasks.¹⁹⁷

This did not prevent a primarily political interpretation of *Oprichnik* among both Western and Russian critics. As discussed in Chapter Three, it was clear from the outset that FSG had identified a political role for the novel.¹⁹⁸ In her article introducing Sorokin, 'The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin', journalist Ellen Barry confirmed the author's designated authorial role as a dissident. She referred to the controversy over his novel *Goluboe Salo (Blue Lard)*, and his temporary flight to Estonia following protests against the book from the pro-Putin, government funded youth movement, *Idushchie vmeste (Forward Together)*.¹⁹⁹ Barry's apparently earnest characterisation of Sorokin as the archetypal Russian writer is encapsulated in her invocation of Tolstoy:

One thing you can say about the novelist Vladimir Sorokin: He has the hair of an honest-to-God, old-school Russian sage. It radiates in luxuriant white waves around his unlined face, suggesting that he has emerged — half-

¹⁹⁶ Pen America, In Conversation: Vladimir Sorokin and Keith Gessen, 2011 <<https://pen.org/multimedia/in-conversation-vladimir-sorokin-and-keith-gessen-video/>> [accessed 14 February 2021].

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. The conversation was interpreted by Jamey Gambrell.

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter Five, p. 305.

¹⁹⁹ Sorokin, *Goluboe Salo*; Barry, 'The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin'.

monk, half-lion — from the sun-dappled glades where Tolstoy once walked.²⁰⁰

However, this overtly political hype surrounding Sorokin led to some disappointed reviewers. Post penned a somewhat muted response to *Oprichnik* on his *Three Percent* blog.²⁰¹ He praised the novel, but noted that ‘for all its political concerns, it isn’t the fireball of controversy that I was expecting’. Post admitted that this might be because he lacks the in-depth political knowledge of Russia required to understand all of the novel’s references.²⁰²

The dramatic change to the political landscape in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea prompted Sorokin to write a series of articles in the Western media. Sorokin’s essay in the *New York Review* contrasted the authentic revolution happening in Ukraine with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. That year, he stood in a crowd on Lubianskaia Square waiting ‘politely’ for a crane to come and carefully remove the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky.²⁰³ Sorokin criticised Putin and described his then fifteen years in power as a journey back to the oppression of the Soviet Union. He also bemoaned the fact that Russians had missed their opportunity to completely destroy the Soviet Union in 1991. He could not imagine the same scenes that were taking place in Ukraine happening in Russia, but he wished they would. This tone continued on 24 July 2014 with Sorokin’s article in the *New York Review*, ‘Russia is Pregnant With Ukraine’.²⁰⁴ Here, his trademark grotesque style describes the difficulties inherent in the process of ‘absorbing’ Crimea into Russia, and he questions whether the annexation can really work out for the best. He states that the issue of Ukraine has infiltrated all aspects of life in Russia, causing arguments and debates within families across the country, and acknowledges that ultimately the annexation of Crimea might do more harm than good to Russia.

²⁰⁰ Barry, ‘The Russian Novelist Vladimir Sorokin’.

²⁰¹ Chad Post, ‘Day of the Oprichnik’, *Three Percent*, 4 May 2011 <<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepcent/2011/05/04/day-of-the-oprichnik/>> [accessed 10 February 2021].

²⁰² This frustration was shared by my book group readers.

²⁰³ Vladimir Sorokin, ‘Let the Past Collapse on Time!’, trans. by Jamey Gambrell, *The New York Review*, 8 May 2014 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/05/08/let-the-past-collapse-on-time/>> [accessed 30 November 2020].

²⁰⁴ Vladimir Sorokin, ‘Russia Is Pregnant with Ukraine’, trans. by Jamey Gambrell, *The New York Review*, 24 July 2014 <<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/07/24/russia-pregnant-with-ukraine/>> [accessed 9 February 2021].

More reviews appeared in 2018 once Penguin UK released both *Oprichnik* and *The Blizzard* in Penguin Modern Classics.²⁰⁵ In 2019, *Oprichnik* — now thirteen years old — gained fresh attention in the *LA Review of Books*. Inspired by Charles Clover's *Black Wind White Snow* (2016), about the rise of nationalism in Russia, Victoria Nelson wrote 'His Majesty: On Vladimir Sorokin's Day of the Oprichnik' in which she highlighted the prescience of Sorokin's 2006 novel.²⁰⁶ Nelson suggests the novel is more relevant in 2019 than when it was first published in Russia. She calls *Oprichnik* a 'pitch-perfect channelling of the fascist temperament' and explains that the novel tackles Eurasianism head on. She defined this as 'the "Eurasianism"-versus-the-West brand of ethnic nationalism that has become a cornerstone of Vladimir Putin's governing philosophy since he came to power'.²⁰⁷

Sorokin's anti-government comments of 2014 did not align with the interview he gave to Israeli magazine *Haaretz* in 2018.²⁰⁸ During the interview he does not portray himself as the "liberal" activist one might expect from his paratextual marketing in the West, or his articles in the liberal press. Since the remainder of Sorokin's work is not as politically pointed as *Oprichnik*, in early 2022, at the start of the *Sorokinaissance*, Sorokin was not being positioned as dissident.²⁰⁹ Instead, he was marketed in English as a postmodernist Russian classic, albeit one compared by his translator to the Marquis de Sade.²¹⁰ In contrast to the dissident positioning of *Oprichnik* there was no mention of politics in any

²⁰⁵ Sorokin, *The Blizzard; Metel*'.

²⁰⁶ Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*. Nelson, 'His Majesty: On Vladimir Sorokin's 'Day of the Oprichnik'.

²⁰⁷ Nelson, 'His Majesty: On Vladimir Sorokin's 'Day of the Oprichnik'. Russia's increasing diplomatic proximity to China in 2023 can be regarded as further evidence of *Oprichnik's* prescience. For more on this, see Amy Hawkins and Andrew Roth, 'China and Russia Deepen Ties as Top Diplomat Tells Putin Crisis Is "Opportunity"', *The Guardian*, 22 February 2023, section World news <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/22/china-russia-reaffirm-close-ties-putin-meets-top-diplomat-wang-yi>> [accessed 23 February 2023].

²⁰⁸ See Chapter One, p. 84 for these comments. Rozkovsky, 'This Controversial Russian Novelist'.

²⁰⁹ At the time of writing, it is not clear if this will remain the case. Sorokin was among the first Russian authors to publish an opinion piece against the war in Ukraine; Vladimir Sorokin, 'Vladimir Putin Sits atop a Crumbling Pyramid of Power', trans. by Max Lawton, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/27/vladimir-putin-russia-ukraine-power>> [accessed 7 March 2022]

²¹⁰ The Untranslated, 'Interview with Max Lawton: On Reading Russian Literature'.

paratextual material. Instead, in the blurb for NYRB's proof of *Telluria*, Sorokin is celebrated as 'a virtuoso of the word'.²¹¹

It seems that Sorokin did not ever plan to position himself as a political activist, but that since 2014 with the invasion of Crimea, and to a greater degree February 2022, this has been unavoidable. Whether Sorokin wishes to involve himself in politics or not, and I suggest that based on his 2018 interview for *Haaretz*, and further statements that he does not want to be considered as political in any sense, he currently has no other choice than to take a political stance. Considering the Western public's reaction to the war in February 2022, and the continued calls for boycotting Russian culture, it would be difficult to justify reading a Russian author who did not make statements against the war.

4.3 Prilepin and the Curse of the Extratext

In contrast with Shishkin, Sorokin and Ulitskaya, Prilepin's extratextual activities and statements have detrimentally affected his reception in the West: no more of his novels will be translated into English in the foreseeable future. As discussed in Chapter Three, his stance over Crimea and Ukraine in 2014 led to his translators deciding not to promote his novel, while his 2017 admission of leading a battalion in Donbas resulted in his being dropped by his literary agent Wiedling.²¹² Since Prilepin's translators' decision not to support *Sankya* might have gone unnoticed by potential readers, the novel's peritexts, most specifically Navalny's introduction, likely had some effect on its reception.²¹³

At the time the novel was published in the UK and US in 2014, and during the period that most reviews were written, there was very little available about Prilepin in English, and nothing to indicate that he supported the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. When Prilepin's novel *Sin* had been published in English by Glagoslav in 2012, it was reviewed by Will Evans, and was available on the Three Percent blog, though

²¹¹ Sorokin, *Telluria*.

²¹² For more details, see Introduction, p. 15.

²¹³ See Chapter Five, p. 271 for further discussion of the introduction. When Prilepin's car was bombed in May 2023 a series of articles in the Western press described him as an ultranationalist. For example: Neil MacFarquhar and Anton Troianovski, 'Car Bombing Injures Prominent Russian Nationalist Writer, State Media Reports', *The New York Times*, 6 May 2023 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/06/world/europe/russia-prilepin-bombing.html>> [accessed 8 June 2023]; Reuters, 'Pro-Kremlin Writer Zakhar Prilepin Injured in Car Explosion, Says Russia', *The Guardian*, 6 May 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/06/pro-kremlin-writer-zakhar-prilepin-injured-in-car-explosion-says-russia>> [accessed 8 June 2023].

this has now been mostly removed (only an excerpt remains on the site at the time of writing).²¹⁴ *Sin* also featured in a review from Phoebe Taplin for *RBTH* where Prilepin's opposition to the government is noted.²¹⁵ The only other reference to Prilepin was a 2011 article in *Newsweek*.²¹⁶ This provided an insightful appraisal of Prilepin as 'an unapologetic nationalist' and detailed his then anti-Putin, nationalist stance, noting the paradoxical nature of his political position.

There was plenty of material available in Russian regarding Prilepin's support for the war, though this would not have been easy to find for non-Russian speakers.²¹⁷ However, the Anglophone reviews tended to be written by people who had links to the novel or its translators, and who might therefore have been able to access the Russian texts. It is of note that these reviews of *Sankya* mostly aligned with the attitude of the translators towards Prilepin and his novel, as I will show below. I argue that this absence of commentary about Prilepin's opinions over Crimea was both a direct result of *Sankya*'s peritextual positioning in English, and potentially influenced by the translators' opinions of Prilepin.

Sankya was first reviewed by translator Kaija Straumanis on Post's *Three Percent* blog in April 2014, just before the invasion of Crimea.²¹⁸ Straumanis called *Sankya* 'timely', and Prilepin 'a unique talent'. She connected Prilepin to Turgenev via Chernyshevskii and Solzhenitsyn and referred to *Sankya*'s hero Sasha as 'Holden Caulfield with a Molotov cocktail'. She mentions Navalny in the first paragraph, describing his introduction as 'heartfelt' and Navalny himself as

²¹⁴ [<https://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/2013/02/01/latest-review-sin-by-zakhar-prilepin/>]

²¹⁵ Phoebe Taplin, "'Sin' Reveals Russia's Ambivalent Patriotism', 2012
<https://www.rbth.com/literature/2012/05/23/the_sin_to_reveal_prilepins_ambivalent_patriotism_15696.html> [accessed 30 October 2019].

²¹⁶ Max Avdeev, 'Zakhar Prilepin: Russia's Best Young Novelist', *Newsweek*, 15 August 2011
<<https://www.newsweek.com/zakhar-prilepin-russias-best-young-novelist-67261>> [accessed 28 February 2024].

²¹⁷ See for example: Zakhar Prilepin, 'Plach kلياتogo moskalia', *Svobodnaia pressa*, 3 February 2014 <<https://svpressa.ru/society/article/81592/>> [accessed 30 January 2023]; 'Rossiiskii pisatel' Zakhar Prilepin: Krym dostalsia Ukraine sovershenno sluchaino', *Insider*, 2014 <<http://www.theinsider.ua/art/rossiiskii-pisatel-zakhar-prilepin-krym-dostalsya-ukraine-sovershenno-sluchaino/>> [accessed 26 August 2022]; Zakhar Prilepin, 'Rossiia mozhet rukhnut' na etom puti, no mozhet sobrat'sia, nakonets', *MK.RU*, 19 November 2014 <<https://www.mk.ru/blogs/posts/rossiya-mozhet-rukhnut-na-etom-puti-no-mozhet-sobrasya-nakonec.html>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

²¹⁸ Kaija Straumanis, 'Sankya', *Three Percent*, 2014
<<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/2014/04/08/sankya/>> [accessed 2 May 2020].

an ‘anti-corruption activist’. Straumanis refers to Prilepin’s politics only briefly when acknowledging that many Russians disagree with his beliefs. Despite this she declares that *Sankya* is still a ‘masterpiece’, and that the novel is far from a polemic but was a ‘piece of art’.²¹⁹ In this sense, she echoes the convictions behind the translators’ decision to proceed with *Sankya* after Prilepin’s ‘Letter to Comrade Stalin’.²²⁰

As 2014 progressed, reviews began to register Prilepin’s politics, albeit without a thorough analysis. *The Calvert Journal* covered Prilepin’s appearance at the London Book Fair, referring to the author as a ‘controversial political activist’ and noting that the film adaptation of *Sankya* (which in 2023 has yet to be made) would likely be banned in Ukraine.²²¹ Taplin, who lived for some time in Moscow, and therefore might have been able to access Russian sources about the author, also wrote about Prilepin at the Book Fair for *RBTH*.²²² She described him as cutting an unusual figure in his ripped jeans and leather jacket, and called him ‘Tolstoy’s heir’, and a ‘rabble-rouser’.²²³ Although Prilepin was referenced as politically controversial, he was still described as part of the opposition to Putin.²²⁴ Likewise, Taplin’s invocation of Tolstoy echoes that of Barry’s comparison of Sorokin to Tolstoy. Reviews such as these inadvertently rely on the idea of the ‘Russian Exotic’ to frame contemporary Russian fiction when the reader lacks any contextual understanding.

²¹⁹ This interpretation is thrown into doubt by Prilepin’s comment that Sasha Tishin’s politics reflect his own; Interview with Prilepin.

²²⁰ For more about this, see Chapter Three, p. 208. Although I am not aware of a link between *Sankya*’s translators, and Straumanis, it is not impossible that they had some input towards her view of the novel.

²²¹ Nadia Beard, ‘Read Russia Literary Festival Underway at London Book Fair’, *The Calvert Journal*, 9 April 2014 <<https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/2263/read-russia-literary-festival-underway-at-london-book-fair>> [accessed 16 February 2021]. In a 2014 interview, Prilepin felt that although the rights to *Sankya* had been purchased numerous times, the film was never made because of people’s concerns about the novel’s themes of ‘extremism’. See Dariko Tsulaia, ‘Zakhar Prilepin “V Rossii razlad mezhdru raznymi sferami kul’tury”’, *Kinopoisk*, 30 April 2013 <<https://www.kinopoisk.ru/media/article/2395327/>> [accessed 16 May 2023]. As described in Chapter One, however, *The Monastery* was adapted for television. Its themes are somewhat more ‘patriotic’ and in line with current State ideology. For more about the novel, see Chapter One, p. 104.

²²² Phoebe Taplin, ‘Moscow: A Walk for All Seasons – in Pictures’, *The Guardian*, 11 January 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/gallery/2012/jan/11/moscow-walks-season-in-pictures>> [accessed 29 February 2024].

²²³ Phoebe Taplin, ‘Future Legends of Russian Literature at the London Book Fair’, *RBTH*, 11 April 2014 <https://www.rbth.com/literature/2014/04/11/future_legends_of_russian_literature_at_the_london_book_fair_35823.html> [accessed 16 February 2021].

²²⁴ For a discussion of Prilepin’s extra-textual, political activities, see pp.99-107 in Chapter One.

Writing for *Open Democracy* in September 2014, Maxim Edwards noted Navalny's endorsement, Prilepin's National Bolshevik status, and the author's links with Dugin and Limonov.²²⁵ He also highlighted that Prilepin had become problematic since he endorsed the annexation of Ukraine, a point he supports by citing a Russian source.²²⁶ Edwards pointed out that Western audiences read Russian literature to find out about Russia, and that for this purpose *Sankya* was problematic since its representation of modern Russia was 'not an entirely convenient one.'²²⁷ Similarly, in the Ohio Wesleyan University's *Night Owl*, Scott Laughlin also took his cue from Navalny's introduction to describe *Sankya* as 'anti-state', and referenced Prilepin's 150 arrests.²²⁸ Laughlin suggested that the novel could explain exactly what was happening in Russia 'with the annexation of Crimea, the Olympics, and Putin's antics in Ukraine.' This reiteration of the translators' position towards the novel could be linked to Laughlin's role of co-founder of international literary programme Disquiet, alongside Parker.²²⁹ A final mention of *Sankya* appeared on the *Modern Novel* blog in March 2015 — the only one of these outlets to also review *The Monastery* in 2020.²³⁰ This highlighted Prilepin's opposition to Putin and compared the novel's protagonist Sasha Tishin to Ivan Turgenev's nihilist hero Bazarov.

Since the consolidation of Prilepin's pro-Putin, pro-war position from 2014 onwards, there have been very few reviews of his work in the press. When *The Monastery* was published by Glagoslav in 2020, he was unambiguously positioned as *krymnash* by Sutcliffe's introduction.²³¹ The novel received only a couple of reviews, from the *Modern Novel* blog noted above, and from historian Peter Lowe on the Pushkin House website.²³² The latter subtly questioned

²²⁵ For more about the National Bolsheviks, see Chapter One, p. 99.

²²⁶ This source he cited is no longer available online.

²²⁷ Maxim Edwards, 'Book Review: Zakhar Prilepin, "Sankya"', *OpenDemocracy*, 25 September 2014 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/review-zakhar-prilepins-sankya-national-bolsheviks/>> [accessed 2 May 2020].

²²⁸ Scott Laughlin, 'Review of "Sankya" by Zakhar Prilepin', *Night Owl*, 2014 <<https://nightowl.owu.edu/2014/11/24/review-of-sankya-by-zakhar-prilepin/>> [accessed 4 May 2020].

²²⁹ 'Staff', *Disquiet International*, n.d. <<https://disquietinternational.org/who-we-are/staff/>> [accessed 28 February 2024].

²³⁰ Prilepin, *The Monastery*. 'Prilepin: Sankya', *The Modern Novel*, n.d. <<https://www.themodernnovel.org/europe/europe/russia/prilepin/sankya/>> [accessed 9 February 2021].

²³¹ See earlier this chapter, p. 236.

²³² Peter Lowe, 'What the Writer Saw Or Heard About: Zakhar Prilepin's 'The Monastery' and the Solovki Prison Camp', *Pushkin House*, 5 November 2020

Prilepin's motivations for writing the novel and the significance of him staking claim to historical accuracy. I also reviewed the novel for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in 2020, though this was at my own request rather than via commission. I had expected my pitch to be turned down due to the nature of Prilepin's politics. However, prior to the 2022 war, the journal's editor, translator Boris Dralyuk, had been eager to publish an article about Prilepin — it was simply that nobody had approached him to do so.²³³

As demonstrated by Sutcliffe's introduction to *The Monastery*, Sankya's positive peritexts cannot permanently outweigh the impact of Prilepin's extratextual activities and statements. Since these led to him being dropped by his agent, and have been compounded by his increased notoriety in the Western media since he was nearly killed in May 2023, it is highly unlikely that he will be published in English again.²³⁴ The fact that he is consigned to Glagoslav also means that his books will not reach many bookshop shelves.²³⁵ Prilepin's decreasing visibility as an author in the UK and US also proves his point, which he made in our 2021 interview, that people in the West only want to read authors who are against Putin. This is despite the fact that, as discussed in Chapter Two, prior to 2022 some target readers found his prose more palatable than that of the ostensibly "liberal" Sorokin.²³⁶

4.4 Senchin — When There is No Context

Where there is no dissident, or overtly nationalist politics, and a novel's peritexts provide very little context, there might be nothing to say. This was compounded, in the case of *Minus*, by the fact that it was published by a very small Russia-based publisher.²³⁷ When Senchin's *Minus* was translated by Arch Tait and published by Glas in 2008, it generated only a small number of reviews.²³⁸ In

<https://www.pushkinhouse.org/blog/2020/11/5/what-the-writer-saw-or-heard-about-zakhar-prilepins-the-monastery-and-the-solovki-prison-camp> [accessed 16 February 2021]; 'Prilepin: The Monastery', *The Modern Novel*, n.d.

<<https://www.themodernnovel.org/europe/europe/russia/prilepin/the-monastery/>> [accessed 21 November 2022].

²³³ Sarah Gear, 'Camp Russia: On Zakhar Prilepin's "The Monastery"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 18 December 2020 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/camp-russia-on-zakhar-prilepins-the-monastery/>> [accessed 12 February 2021].

²³⁴ See Chapter One, p. 99.

²³⁵ Chapter Two, p. 156.

²³⁶ See Chapter Two, p. 129.

²³⁷ See above, Chapter Three, p. 193 for more details on Glas and its reach.

²³⁸ Senchin, *Minus*, trans. by Arch Tait (Moscow: Glas, 2008).

2010 *Minus* was reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement* by Oliver Ready.²³⁹ In this short piece, Ready focussed on Senchin's status as a New Realist writer and praised his deliberately 'unliterary' style.²⁴⁰ Like Senchin's agent Wiedling and publisher Perova, Ready underscored the lack of hope in Senchin's prose.²⁴¹ He also mildly objected to what he described as the 'creaking idiom' of Tait's translation, though he did acknowledge a consistent and effective text.²⁴² *Minus* was also reviewed in December 2011 by an expat magazine based in Moscow, *Passport*, under the depressing title (a play on Milan Kundera) 'The Unbearable Heaviness of Being'.²⁴³ In it, writer and journalist Ian Mitchell described *Minus* as a form of 'imaginative travel writing' where the lines between fact and fiction blur. Mitchell also emphasised the downbeat nature of the work and concluded that its lack of hope was primarily a result of the protagonist's weakness of character — this was in contrast to the stoic, motivated attitude of the older generation symbolised by the protagonist (Roman's) parents.

In a further effort to promote Senchin's novel, Perova appeared in a podcast on the *RBTH* website hosted by Mitchell.²⁴⁴ During the interview, she stressed the relevance of Senchin's work to a Western audience, stating that the novel provided readers with political and economic context for their understanding of Russia.²⁴⁵ This is reinforced by the blurb on the back cover of *Minus* which describes the novel as providing 'a wealth of ethnographic details that you won't find in any guidebook'. Her conversation was followed by Tait reading an excerpt from *Minus* over a Russian folk music backing track, which seemed at odds with the novel's overall tone, but in line with Perova's intention to market *Minus* as an example of Siberian ethnography.²⁴⁶ In conclusion, the small amount of

²³⁹ Oliver Ready, 'Life and Pseudo-Life', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 February 2010, p. 20.

²⁴⁰ For a discussion of New Realism see Chapter One, p. 98.

²⁴¹ For more on the reasons for Senchin's lack of success in the UK and US see Chapter Three, p. 196.

²⁴² Ready, 'Life and Pseudo-Life'.

²⁴³ Ian Mitchell, 'The Unbearable Heaviness of Being', *Passport*, n.d.

<<http://www.passportmagazine.ru/article/2444/>> [accessed 8 February 2023].

²⁴⁴ Ian Mitchell, 'Russian Bookshelf' with Natasha Perova - *Russia Beyond*, Russian Bookshelf, 5 December 2011

<https://www.rbth.com/literature/2011/12/01/russian_bookshelf_with_natasha_perova_13876.html> [accessed 2 February 2022].

²⁴⁵ This attempt to market a novel for what it might teach the target reader, rather than for its literary merit, is similar to the argument made by Iossel and Parker in their interview with *Bomb Magazine* in 2009. See Kinsella, 'On the New Russian Realism'.

²⁴⁶ For the commissioning history of *Minus* see Chapter Three, p.193. The novel sold fifty copies and is out of print; Nielsen BookData.

contextualising peri- and extratexts in the case of *Minus* led to an almost complete absence of epitexts.

To counter this lack of contextual information, as well as responding to the general problem of publishing Russian authors since 2022, Wiedling repositioned Senchin as a dissident ‘anti-war’ writer ‘critical of the Russian regime.’²⁴⁷ Although Senchin has not stated his outright opposition to the war, he was blacklisted by GRAD because of his silence on the topic. There is a risk that Wiedling’s decision to reframe his author could further endanger Senchin in Russia. This raises questions over whether literary agents are in this way choosing to once again instrumentalise politics in order to either market their authors, or to justify advertising the rights to Russian authors at all. It remains to be seen whether Wiedling’s repositioning of Senchin’s politics as anti-war will help to sell the rights to his novels *Yeltyshevy* and *Zona zatopleniia* which are currently awaiting translation into English.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that “dissident” status alone does not guarantee either positive reader reception, or high sales. Instead, publisher reputation remains a significant factor in achieving a positive critical and reader reception, if not better sales. As a result of their larger distribution networks, commercial publishers’ preference for dissident writers, whom they can more easily market via their politics, impacts what is most widely available in book shops. This publisher preference is informed by past success and confirms their conservative tendencies. Because of the structure of the publishing market, the commissioning decisions made by dominant firms such as FSG and PRH govern what readers are most likely to find in book shops. In turn, this informs what Western readers expect of contemporary Russian novels; the cycle of conservative commissioning decisions is reinforced by the system of comparative titles.²⁴⁸

Publisher peritexts exert a strong influence on epitextual reception. A book’s introduction, or other supplementary material such as Ulitskaya’s interview in *Just the Plague*, or Navalny’s introduction to *Sankya*, can alter reception of an author’s

²⁴⁷ Find the website here; ‘Wiedling - Literary Agency’ <<https://wiedling-litag.com/>>.

²⁴⁸ See Chapter Two, p. 156 for a detailed discussion of comparative titles.

text. This echoes Bourdieu's thoughts about 'instrumentalisation' — authors' politics are used to sell books, and particularly for Russian writers since 2022, to justify their translation into English.²⁴⁹ In this way, peritexts signal a publisher's marketing strategy and motivations in commissioning a novel. In essence, publisher paratexts recreate the context that Bourdieu believes goes astray when novels are imported into a new culture.²⁵⁰

In some instances epitexts indicate the role that Russian literature plays in the West and confirm Lipovetsky's theory about the popularity of the Russian Exotic. This, however, can lead to misinterpretations. An example can be seen in the comparison made by two different critics between Tolstoy and both Sorokin and Prilepin. Barry's seemingly sincere comparison of Sorokin to the 'silver-haired' Tolstoy evokes an image of a 'Russian sage' and literary genius. Meanwhile, Taplin's comparison between Tolstoy and Prilepin helps to identify these generally little-known writers for the target reader much in the same way as comparative titles.²⁵¹

As demonstrated above, peritexts and epitexts signal a publisher's intention for their positioning of a novel in the target culture. Extratexts, meanwhile, can both help or hinder a novel's reception. Where extratextual statements are anti-Putin and "dissident", as with Shishkin, they tend to be promoted by publishers. Meanwhile, an expression of ultranationalist politics can condemn a Russian author such as Prilepin to obscurity. Where no politics are mentioned, as with Senchin and Elizarov, silence might ensue. The positive effect of "liberal" or "dissident" extratexts is clear. Shishkin's sales increased, and have remained steady since 2013, because he became a relatively prominent dissident. Ulitskaya's ostensible dissidence has been repeatedly instrumentalised to frame her novels. Meanwhile, Sorokin has been marketed as dissident since 2011, despite the fact that his overtly anti-Putin statements did not begin until Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. As with many other writers, the renewal of the war in

²⁴⁹ Bourdieu, 'Les Conditions Sociales', p. 3.

²⁵⁰ Bourdieu, 'Les Conditions Sociales', p. 4.

²⁵¹ This tendency to refer to Tolstoy as a benchmark for Russian literature (a direct result of conservative publishing practices) is echoed here; Amos, 'Tomorrow's Tolstoy'.

February 2022 led him to reconfirm this position.²⁵²

Even where paratexts do offer an accurate account of an author's politics, there is no guarantee they will be read by the target audience. As Batchelor points out, most of these paratexts (and by extension, extratexts) are in fact avoidable.²⁵³ However, as I have shown here, this does not make them redundant. Instead, publisher-endorsed paratexts are crucial to the new target-culture context that is created around each contemporary Russian author. For this reason, it is important to be mindful that in some cases, paratexts can be regarded as a solution to the problem of publishing "nationalist" authors. As I argue above, and will further explore in Chapter Five, although Sutcliffe's frank introduction to *The Monastery* is the only ethical way to approach publishing such an author, the essay still serves to consecrate a highly controversial, and arguably dangerous figure.²⁵⁴ I will explore the ethics around commissioning and translating these six authors in Chapter Five.

Nevertheless, it is my opinion, that it is only ethical to publish controversial Russian authors, at the very least in the context of Russia's active war, if their novels are accompanied by carefully researched peritexts. This, however, also raises the question of whether it is ethical to publish such authors at all while the war is taking place. Even with appropriate paratexts, there is no guarantee they will be read, and there is a chance that an author's source-culture context and activities might go unnoticed by the target audience. In the case of the translation of contemporary Russian fiction into English, it is at the time of writing imperative that where an author supports the war against Ukraine, their politics be registered in peritextual material.

²⁵² For details of author response to the war against Ukraine since 2022, see Conclusion, p. 338.

²⁵³ Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, p. 143.

²⁵⁴ See Yuzefovich's concerns about his book *Platoon*, for example. Chapter One, p. 105.

Chapter Five

Translation, Editing, and Ethics

*'Translation is by definition an art of making concessions or adaptations.'*¹

Paratexts indicate, as we saw in the previous chapter, a publisher's intentions for the role a Russian novel is to play in its target culture. However, these intentions might not always match those of the translator, or the author. As I addressed above, authors might be falsely or somewhat hyperbolically misrepresented as "dissident", or apolitical, via paratexts. Since I am concerned here with both "nationalist" and "liberal" authors, whose positions have become increasingly polarised in reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine from 2014 onwards, it is apt to question not only how these authors should be presented paratextually, but whether they should be translated at all.

I will address this, and other ethical questions raised by my research, in the chapter that follows. First, I will consider how an ethical approach to translation might look, taking Pym's study on the subject of ethics as my point of departure. I will then explore the specific ethical issues translators face when working with a problematic text. This includes the treatment of xenophobic terms, and the use of complex, source-culture specific vocabulary. By carrying out comparative textual analysis of the Russian and English editions of *Sankya*, I argue that translatorial *hexis* and minimal editorial input on a textual level have resulted in a novel that is marginally more acceptable to the Western reader than the original. I compare this approach to Gambrell's translation of *Oprichnik* and consider whether her translation was simplified in order to amplify an anti-Putin message and hence increase its target-audience appeal. I will then compare these translator strategies to Bromfield's faithful approach to translating *The Librarian*, and to Schwartz's reader-oriented translation of *Maidenhair*. I will also consider the extent to which the "liberal"/"nationalist" divide extends to the collaborative work between translators and authors, and the effect this has on the final text. Based on my small sample of translation microhistories, I will suggest that "liberal"

¹ Interview with Gannon.

authors might be more willing to work with their translators than their “nationalist” counterparts.

As well as drawing on the translation microhistories from earlier chapters, I will supplement the textual analyses below with data from my interviews, book group responses, and other extratexts. I also draw on the translation microhistories in earlier chapters. I will ask who or what leads translators to make the microtextual decisions required by the act of translation, and whether these are dictated by editors, are driven by a desire to build careers and protect translator image or are a product of translatorial *hexis*.² I address the question of how far translators are responsible for their texts, and how ethical it is for translators to work with authors whose politics they do not support. While translating pro-Putin, anti-Ukrainian authors might have been possible before 2014, and more tenuously between 2014-2022, this activity seems untenable during the full-scale war. The general refusal to publish contemporary Russian authors at the time of writing, as I will describe in more detail in the conclusion to my thesis, provides the clearest proof of the interference of politics with the flow of World Literature.³

1 Ethics and the Translation of Contemporary Fiction

An ethics of translation consists of many factors, some of which can fall into direct conflict with one another. Andrew Chesterman describes four main ethical categories: the ‘ethics of representation’ and the question of to whom the translator should be faithful – the author, the publisher, or the target reader.⁴ A translator must also consider an ‘ethics of service’, which emphasises the importance of honouring agreements with clients, most often publishers.⁵ Chesterman also considers the ‘ethics of communication’ where the translator is regarded as an agent of cross-cultural communication. This is not only a text-bound concern, but one that should result in an accurate representation of the author’s intention (insofar as this can be determined) to the target audience. The

² See below p. 287, for my definition of *hexis*.

³ This avoidance of Russian authors has extended to novels about Russia. See; Francine Prose, ‘Elizabeth Gilbert Is Pulling a Novel Set in Russia from Publication. That’s Unsettling’, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2023
<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jun/15/elizabeth-gilbert-the-snow-forest-russia>> [accessed 24 June 2023].

⁴ Andrew Chesterman, ‘Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath’, *The Translator*, 7.2 (2001), 139–54 (p. 139).

⁵ Chesterman, ‘Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath’, p. 139.

final category described by Chesterman is that of 'norm-based ethics'.⁶ These dictate that the translator should inculcate trust in their target audience by producing a text in line with their expectations; the text should be recognisable as literature in the target culture. Where translators have to deviate from this, Chesterman argues, they should provide a peritextual explanation.

None of these ethical considerations are independent of one another. The ethical imperative to be faithful to an author might be overridden by a duty to the target reader. The desire to create intercultural understanding might conflict with the readiness of the target culture to receive a text that goes against target culture norms. These ethical problems are further complicated where the translator encounters hate speech, or where source texts condone politically motivated violence. A translator also has to grapple with questions around diversity and mutual respect, which include the need for fair representation of a source text, taking into account a culture or literature's dominated position in the field of World Literature.

Pym discusses the interpersonal demands that play a large role in translator ethics.⁷ Translator loyalty, honouring a contractual agreement, personal relationships with publishers, agents and authors, and a translator's concern about their own career and symbolic and economic capital all compete with one another, along with the overarching issues raised above. Considering the focus of this thesis, these demands are complicated further still when they are placed within a geopolitical context, and as is the case here, in the face of Russian aggression. I agree with Pym that a consideration of translator ethics cannot take place without an understanding of both interpersonal demands, and a consideration of the wider ethical context. As I demonstrate by focussing on the motivations and justifications of translators throughout this thesis, none of the decisions taken by individuals during the translation process, from commission through to marketing, take place within a social or political vacuum.

⁶ Chesterman, 'Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath', p. 141.

⁷ Anthony Pym, 'The Return to Ethics in Translation Studies', *The Translator*, 7.2 (2001), 129–38.

1.1 Pym's *On Translator Ethics*

In *On Translator Ethics*, which I will consider in detail here, Pym presents five ethical principles for translators to consider.⁸ These include the responsibility of the translator for their work, including the 'probable effects' of their translation, the cost of translation and the goal of 'cultural-cooperation'.⁹ Given the complexity and scope of translator ethics, Pym suggests that the first, and most fundamental dilemma a translator faces is whether to translate at all: all subsequent ethical questions flow from this decision.¹⁰ This is because, Pym argues, there is an inherent reason behind each decision to translate: each text is destined to serve a particular purpose, or *skopos*. This is very clear in the translation history around *Sankya*, for example. Parker selected the novel because he wanted to reveal what contemporary Russia was like to the Western reader, and, as I will explore below, this contributed to the overall approach of his translation.

Translation Studies scholar Jean-Marc Gouanvic agrees with Pym, arguing that the ethics of a translation, the way in which the translator and publisher adapt the source text (their partisan approach) is decided in the moment it is commissioned.¹¹ Similarly, Maria Tymoczko suggests that this partisanship is subsequently expressed through translators' choices 'word-by-word, page-by-page, and text-by-text'.¹² Since a translation can never fully reproduce all the meanings of its source text in the target culture, translators have to be selective in what they choose to carry over, and what they omit.¹³ It is helpful then to consider, as I do in the examples below, the translator's moral stance towards a text, and the role this plays in the production of the final translated copy.

The question of translator responsibility can be expressed in the translator's approach to a particular text. Despite Bassnett and Lefevere's assertion that 'translations are made to respond to the demands of a culture, and of various

⁸ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*.

⁹ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 166-7.

¹⁰ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 103.

¹¹ Jean-Marc Gouanvic, 'Ethos, Ethics and Translation: Toward a Community of Destinies', *The Translator*, 7.2 (2001), 203–12 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2001.10799101>> (p. 209).

¹² Gouanvic, 'Ethos', p. 209.

¹³ Maria Tymoczko, 'Translation and Political Engagement: Activism, Social Change and the Role of Translation in Geopolitical Shifts', *The Translator*, 6.1 (2000), pp. 23–47 (p. 24). Lawrence Venuti argues that 'exclusion' and 'reduction' are inevitable in the act of translation; Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 267.

groups within that culture', editors in the UK and US do not appear to direct the text-based decisions that drive a translation's overall *skopos* in order to fulfil a specified political role.¹⁴ Although publishers do control the peritexts that frame a novel, and these, as demonstrated in Chapter Four, influence its epitextual reception, they do not typically interfere with the fabric of the translation itself. Instead, translators' personal preferences, subconscious or otherwise, appear to be the source of any politically or morally biased text-based translation strategies. Indeed, Krotov suggests that any political or moral decisions exist in the 'interstices' of the raft of decisions made by translators and editors, rather than being handed down to translators as a result of editorial policy.¹⁵ Perhaps this is a sign of the sometimes-low importance placed on the fidelity of translations to their source texts, or the role of the text itself in marketing novels in translation.¹⁶

Instead of being determined by editors, I argue that translator decisions are governed by 'translatorial *hexis*' — what Ian Mason describes as a translator's 'discursive history' which governs 'unconscious' lexical, syntactical, and discursive choices.¹⁷ Regardless of the unconscious nature of translatorial *hexis*, translators are still required to make active decisions however, and so a translator's role remains mired in ethical considerations.¹⁸ This is especially relevant when translators are confronted with authors whose views they do not share, or authors who employ controversial or socially repugnant language (for example, language that is homophobic, xenophobic or sexist). This question is particularly acute in the translation of *Sankya*, which I will discuss below.

1.1a Translator Responsibility and Target Text Orientation

Pym's second principle holds that although translators are 'responsible for the probable effects of their translation' they are 'not directly responsible for the matter translated' since 'translators are not authors.'¹⁹ Importantly, Pym highlights

¹⁴ Christiane Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained* (London: Routledge, 2018); Bassnett and Lefevere, *Translation, History*, p.7.

¹⁵ Interview with Krotov.

¹⁶ See for example, Lawton's comments about edits for *Telluria*, see below p. 299. See also Chapter Three p. 176 for an anonymous translator's experience in translating a potentially prize-winning author and the low amount of input from the editor.

¹⁷ Ian Mason, 'Discourse, Ideology and Translation', in *Critical Readings in Translation Studies* (Routledge, 2010), pp. 83–96 (p. 92).

¹⁹ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 166.

that while making a misguided decision about the orientation of a text might be unfortunate, it is not per se unethical. This question of what is ethical, and to what extent a translator should be held responsible for their author's views and actions is particularly important in evaluating the translation process around *Sankya* and *The Librarian*. It also has consequences for translators working in the contemporary geopolitical situation, as I will discuss in my Conclusion.²⁰

However, Pym's second principle goes further — he holds that translators are responsible for the effect of their translations. I argue that this can only be fair if they are also able to predict the future. As I will demonstrate below with my analysis of *Sankya*, and as I discussed in Chapter Three, Parker and his co-translators had no way of predicting the problematic turn that Prilepin's politics would take when Parker first pitched the novel to Dzanc Books. Although there were strong clues to Prilepin's politics in his 'Letter to Comrade Stalin' — indeed clues that with hindsight make sense of his support for the war in Ukraine — the translators could still not have anticipated the 2014 invasion of Crimea. Neither could they have predicted the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Prilepin's participation in it. Despite this, some experts still regard both the translators and their publisher as guilty.²¹ Ethics can only take a translator so far, and as Pym points out, translators might feel responsible even when they have acted ethically.²²

In his third principle, Pym states that translators do not have to orientate their text towards one culture over another, but he does not account for the role of the publisher. In the realm of translated fiction at least, the marketing power of publisher-produced paratexts is, as I demonstrated in Chapter Four, considerable. Typically, translators have little control over these. Indeed, although translators have to act ethically, they rarely have the power to directly influence the appearance and peritextual content of the final published edition. This indicates that publishers also need to consider an ethical approach. For translated fiction, where the finished product will arrive on a bookshelf

²⁰ See Conclusion, p. 344.

²¹ For example, see Steven Seegel ua [@steven_seegel], 'I Really Want a List of All the Publishers Who Circulated & Copied & Distributed #Prilepin's Works. They Are Not Innocent. He Is a War Criminal, at the Very Least.', *Twitter*, 2023 <https://twitter.com/steven_seegel/status/1654873096011096064> [accessed 10 May 2023].

²² As demonstrated in the case of Parker and *Sankya* that follows.

contextualised by the publisher and not the translator, the ethics of translation cannot be the responsibility of the translator alone.²³

1.1b The Cost of Translation, and Cross-Cultural Cooperation

Although I agree with Pym's fourth principle, that the costs of a translation should not exceed the total benefits from it, this also requires an amendment in regard to literary fiction.²⁴ This is because a translator cannot always know what the reward for their translation will be. For translators such as Lawton, the initial risk he took in translating Sorokin without a commission has been rewarded with publishing contracts, and a considerable increase in symbolic and cultural capital.²⁵ In contrast, for Parker, there has been a cost that he could not have foreseen, even if he is the only one who perceives it.

Despite the ethical issues around who should and should not be translated, the majority of translators in this study seem to hope their work will 'contribute to longer-term, stable, cross-cultural cooperation', in accordance with Pym's fifth principle.²⁶ The majority carry out translations because they detect something in the source texts that they feel should be shared. Whether this will remain true five, or ten years after the text has been translated, is impossible to know. Contrary to Pym's principles, I believe that translators can only be held accountable for the decisions they make in a certain time and place and should not have to answer for those decisions years into the future.

Principle five, however, should also be applied to the publishers who produce translations. It seems entirely possible, as in the case of *Oprichnik*, that publishers might give preference to the creation of controversy rather than the promotion of intercultural understanding in an effort to sell more books. Editors have a greater influence than translators on the presentation of the final product. In the realm of translated fiction, then, if publishers do not subscribe to a similar ethics, it matters little what translators themselves do. This is especially true for contemporary Russian fiction now that Russia is conducting an illegal war, which raises the stakes over questions of what we should and should not translate.

²³ Bromfield's ethical approach to translation concurs with this idea. See below, p. 308.

²⁴ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 167.

²⁵ See Chapter Two, p. 147.

²⁶ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 167.

While I argue that it is ethically acceptable to have translated Prilepin, in the light of the war, it is right to question whether it is still wholly ethical to sell *Sankya* without accurate information about its author, and with its now extant introduction from Navalny.

Just as the cost of a translation cannot always be estimated accurately, the accrual of economic and symbolic capital cannot be guaranteed at the point of commission either. In addition, from my interviews it appears that translators who are new to the industry might be more likely to take on work that does not guarantee proper payment. As discussed in Chapter Two, this is because entering the profession can be difficult, and emerging translators might try and create symbolic before economic capital in order to build a career. This can be seen in the case of Lawton, but also Reuben Woolley, and Arch Tait. I have also found evidence that translators who work hard to champion their own authors – as is the case with Jeff Parker and *Sankya*, are more likely to work for little economic return. It is their utterly dominated position in the translated fiction field that prompts these translators to take economic risks in order to gain enough symbolic capital by translated authors they deem to have consecrating value.

Meanwhile, translators who prioritise economic over symbolic capital, and who therefore might be less guided by personal affinities, might find more work, as can be seen in the examples of Bromfield, and Schwartz.²⁷ Prioritising economic gain might explain Bromfield's preparedness to translate *The Librarian*, even though he suspected Elizarov's politics. However as Schwartz revealed, some projects remain unacceptable — she stopped (even anonymously) translating one author because their views were anti-Semitic.²⁸ Pym does not confront the ethics of translating anonymously, which is relevant to the translation, for example of Pussy Riot member Maria Alyokhina's *Riot Days*, where the translator chose not to be named.²⁹

²⁷ See Chapter Two, p. 146.

²⁸ Interview with Schwartz.

²⁹ Maria Alyokhina, *Riot Days*, trans. by Anonymous (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

1.2 The Ethics of Funding, and Translator Conditions

The ethical questions around translation, and Pym's five principles, I argue, should be extended to the issue of funding, as well as the questions of translation payment and recognition. Although Pym does not address the ethics around subsidisers, he does raise the concern that translations might be created to suit their needs, rather than those of the author.³⁰ It is valid to consider, then, whether translators should be wary about who they accept payment from for their work. This is especially the case in the Russian-English translated fiction market because of the links between IP and the Russian government, as I outlined in Chapter Two.

The refusal of most Western translators and publishers to accept IP funding since 2022 suggests that the locus of ethical responsibility needs to be debated in more depth. I argue that it is only ethical to accept funding where a translator or publisher can be confident about its source, the parity of the funding body's decisions, and only when it does not come with expectations over the content of the final text. While it was not clearly unethical to accept IP funding prior to 2022, however, evidence provided in my interviews suggests that the practice of accepting Russian money was seldom questioned. A large proportion of translators I spoke with dismissed the question of funding and explained that it was the publisher who applied for grants. The extent to which the Russian-English translated fiction market relied on IP funding has been made clear since 2022, when it became problematic due to their links with the Russian government. I contend that given the links between IP and the Russian government, and their often-politicised commissioning decisions, it would be unethical to accept their funding in the future. It also appears that it would have been wise to use caution in accepting their money in the past.³¹

The ethics around funding, however, cannot be divorced from the issue of translator pay and recognition. Translators campaign to be paid fairly, and to receive royalties, as well as to have their work recognised on books' front covers. Translator from Spanish and Polish, Jennifer Croft has led the #namethetranslator

³⁰ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 167.

³¹ See Chapter Two, p. 165, for a discussion of IP's funding process.

campaign that seeks to improve translator treatment in the publishing industry.³² Both she and translator from Korean Anton Hur have commented that they do not receive royalties for all of their translations.³³ This issue was also raised by Bromfield, who spoke directly about payment in our interview.³⁴ He explained that he is not interested in royalties because it is rare that a book will ever make enough money to cover his original fee, which is usually paid as an advance against any royalties. Likewise, he commented that despite his experience, he had to fight to earn over £100 per thousand words. He added that in 2008, during the financial crash, publishers tried to drop the payment to £80 for a thousand words across the board.

With all of these ethical questions in mind, a consideration of the interpersonal demands on translators, their loyalty to reader or author, the cost of translation, and the role of publishers, I now analyse the microtextual decisions required by the act of translation. I place the myriad translator decisions against the broader ethical context of cross-cultural literary transfer as described above. I begin with *Sankya*, and then examine *Oprichnik*, before briefly considering *Maidenhair* and *The Librarian*.

3 *Sankya*

Sankya was one of the first books to be published by Disquiet, an imprint of Michigan-based Dzanc books.³⁵ Jeff Parker had initially pitched *Sanky'ia* to Dzanc in 2008, but as with most novels in translation, a considerable amount of time passed before it was formally commissioned. *Sank'ia* was finally signed to the imprint in 2012, just two months after Prilepin's anti-Semitic 'Letter to Comrade Stalin' was published.³⁶ Shortly after this, in 2013, Parker was

³² Jennifer Croft, 'Why Translators Should Be Named on Book Covers', *The Guardian*, 10 September 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/10/why-translators-should-be-named-on-book-covers>> [accessed 29 January 2024].

³³ Rachel Kramer Bussel, '3 Translators On Good Translations, Royalties, Book Cover Credit And The Business Of Translation', *Forbes*, 27 September 2021 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelkramerbussel/2021/09/27/3-translators-on-good-translations-royalties-book-cover-credit-and-the-business-of-translation/>> [accessed 29 January 2024].

³⁴ Interview with Bromfield.

³⁵ Dzanc was founded in 2006. See Kirch, 'Dzanc Books Launches New Imprint'.

³⁶ 'Dzanc to Publish Zakhar Prilepin Through DISQUIET Imprint', *Dzanc Books*, 16 September 2012. <<https://www.dzancbooks.org/blog/2014/2/16/dzanc-to-publish-zakhar-prilepin-through-disquiet-imprint>> [accessed 26 August 2022]; Prilepin, 'Pis'mo Tovarishchu Stalinu'. For a discussion of Prilepin's *Letter to Comrade Stalin* see Chapter One, p. 99.

announced as acquisitions, general and translation editor for Disquiet, meaning that he was working on *Sankya* as both translator and editor.

Sank'ia's translation involved three people: the husband-and-wife team of Jeff Parker and Alina Ryabovolova, and the writer and translator Mariya Gusev.³⁷ Gusev provided a rough literal translation, and Parker polished the English text with the help of Ryabovolova.³⁸ Once the translation was complete, the UK rights were purchased by independent Russian literature specialist Glagoslav.³⁹ *Sankya* was published in both America and the UK on 8 February 2014, shortly before Russia's formal annexation of Crimea on March 18th.⁴⁰ This was the first major issue that *Sankya* faced in the West. The novel was positioned by its paratexts as written by an anti-Putin Russian dissident, but it was released just as Prilepin consolidated his position as exactly the opposite.⁴¹ Disquiet's and Glagoslav's decisions to proceed with the publication, with its paratexts in place, demonstrates the need for an ethical publisher response. Meanwhile, the translators' principal form of protest was to refuse to promote the novel.⁴²

As I will demonstrate, this conflict was expressed by the translators' attempts to grapple with the two versions of Prilepin within the translated text. In order to investigate this, I address literary critic Ian Singleton's accusations that Prilepin's translators sanitised his novel for Western readers. I conduct an analysis of their translation, and conclude that any infidelities were caused in part by the translators' *hexis*, rather than by translator error, or a deliberate attempt to render *Sankya*, and therefore Prilepin, more acceptable to the Western reader.

³⁷ For a discussion of the commissioning process around *Sankya*, see Chapter Three, p. 207.

³⁸ Interviewee #9.

³⁹ See Chapter Two, p. 165 for a discussion of Glagoslav and its business model.

⁴⁰ See Shaun Walker and Ian Traynor, 'Putin Confirms Crimea Annexation as Ukraine Soldier Becomes First Casualty', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/18/putin-confirms-annexation-crimea-ukrainian-soldier-casualty>> [accessed 10 February 2023].

⁴¹ Julie Fedor, 'Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars', *The RUSI Journal*, 163.6 (2018), 18–27. See also Chapter One, pp. 92-102 for more on Prilepin's politics, and the plot of *Sankya*.

⁴² See also Chapter Three, p. 209.

2.1 Political Fallout

When Parker first proposed *Sank'ia* to Dzanc books, Prilepin was an anti-Putin activist, albeit with the NBP, a political movement notorious for blurring the lines between left and right, and for appropriating Nazi imagery for the sake of provocation.⁴³ Parker regarded *Sank'ia* as an anti-Kremlin novel, and he chose to translate it in order to explain both Russia and the anti-government protest movement to the West.⁴⁴ In his pitch on the Dzanc website, Parker enthused that:

Prilepin is a rabble-rouser and one hell of a writer. *San'kya* [sic] is his masterpiece perfectly capturing a moment and a mood in Putin's Russia like nothing else the English world has read.⁴⁵

As discussed in Chapter Three, Prilepin himself sees this anti-Putin stance as the reason for the novel's selection.⁴⁶

The anti-Semitic, pro-Stalin sentiments that Prilepin expressed six years after writing *Sank'ia*, in his 2012 'Letter to Comrade Stalin', heralded an overt change in his politics, albeit one that he denies.⁴⁷ By the time the English translation of *Sank'ia* was ready for publication in April 2014, Prilepin was a high-profile *krymnash* actively supporting Putin's actions in Crimea, and condemning Ukraine's Maidan protests.⁴⁸ Prilepin's actions provoked his translators' refusal to promote *Sankya* when it was released. The novel was published without a press release, and Prilepin's plans to travel to America to promote the book were cancelled.⁴⁹

⁴³ See p. 99 for a discussion of Prilepin's political views. For more on the NBP see Fabrizio Fenghi, *It Will Be Fun and Terrifying*.

⁴⁴ Parker, *Where Bears Roam the Streets*, p. 317. Parker spoke about his reasons for selecting New Realist writers for translation in an interview in 2009 where he described the genre as a 'news dispatch'. He commented that 'this is what Russians see when they look out of their windows every day'; Kinsella, 'On the New Russian Realism'.

⁴⁵ 'Dzanc to Publish Zakhar Prilepin Through DISQUIET Imprint'.

⁴⁶ See Chapter Two, p. 216.

⁴⁷ Prilepin claims that he is not anti-Semitic, and that his pro-Stalin ideas have always been present in his literature. See Prilepin, 'Stesniat'sia svoikh ottsov'.

⁴⁸ See for example, 'Rossiiskii pisatel' Zakhar Prilepin: Krym dostalsia Ukraine sovershenno sluchaino'.

⁴⁹ Interviewee #9. Reviews of *Sankya* did appear however, including on the well-respected Three Percent website, where Prilepin is compared to Tolstoy, and the novel is described in ebullient terms as an eloquent representation of Russian counterculture; '*Sankya* succeeds brilliantly in plunging the reader into the psyche of the young people on the fringes of the success story Russia projected to the world during the Sochi Olympics.' '*Sankya* « Three

2.2 Translation as Treason?

During our email interview in 2021, Prilepin stated that he was not involved in the translation of *Sank'ia*.⁵⁰ He explained that up until 2014, at least ten of his books had been translated annually, and it would therefore be impossible to oversee so many projects.⁵¹ When I asked what he thought about his novels existing in English, Prilepin answered, 'Nichego' ('Nothing').⁵² Before Prilepin launched his political career in earnest in late 2019, however, his translations, and any possible prestige they might confer, appeared to hold more importance to him.⁵³ Comments Prilepin made during an interview with Russian government-sponsored website *RBTH* suggest that he had involvement in his translations into French at least.⁵⁴ Likewise, during a YouTube interview in 2019, the author lamented that since news about his military involvement in Donbas emerged in 2017, his novels were no longer being translated abroad.⁵⁵ He explained that he had lost ninety-nine per cent of his contracts with foreign publishers, and was now only being translated in France and Serbia.⁵⁶

In a further contradiction, Prilepin stated in 2021 that he would like all of his novels to be translated, but not for the 'political reasons' which he saw as inevitable because of his fighting in Donbas, or because he was now opposed to Alexei Navalny.⁵⁷ These 'political reasons' are why Prilepin regards himself as writing on the 'margins' of World Literature:

Percent', 8 April 2014

<<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/2014/04/08/sankya/>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

⁵⁰ Interview with Prilepin, 5 May 2021.

⁵¹ Prilepin has been translated into twenty-three languages. For a full list, see 'Zakhar Prilepin. Ofitsial'nyi sait pisatel'ia' <<https://zaharprilepin.ru/ru/bibliografia.html>> [accessed 29 August 2022].

⁵² Interview with Prilepin. The issue of interviewee cooperation and reliability are discussed in *Methodology*, p. 62.

⁵³ Prilepin announced the founding of his political party *Za Pravdu*, 'For Truth' in 2019. For further discussion of Prilepin's political career, see Chapter One, p.99.

⁵⁴ Alexandra Guzeva, 'Zakhar Prilepin: You Have to Constantly Prove Your Worth in Literature', 28 November 2014

<https://www.rbth.com/literature/2014/11/28/zakhar_prilepin_you_have_to_constantly_prove_your_worth_in_literat_41789.html> [accessed 30 October 2019].

⁵⁵ *Polnoe Interv'iu Zakhara Prilepina, 'Redaktsiia Iskhodniki'*.

⁵⁶ Literary agent Thomas Wiedling ranked Serbia as the country he sold the most Russian literature translation rights to. France was in second place; email correspondence, 9th February 2023. Wiedling explained that only a publisher in the Czech Republic cancelled a contract to translate Prilepin's *Obitel'* as a result of his confessions in 2017; Interview with Wiedling, 2 November 2020.

⁵⁷ Interview with Prilepin.

Since these questions only have one interpretation in the West (Ukraine is right, there is no democracy in Russia, Navalny is good) my books have no chance. I am consigned to the “margins.”⁵⁸

In Prilepin’s case, the margins from which he claims to write are represented by the small presses which publish him. These firms – Glagoslav and Dzanc possess little ability to champion his admission to the category of World Literature.⁵⁹ Neither firms’ novels are readily available in bookshops, and this directly impacts the number of copies that might be sold.⁶⁰ Additionally, my interviews suggest that neither of these presses provides a large amount of editorial support to their translators. In the case of *Sankya*, this led to a text that abounds with issues that undermine the novel’s semantic integrity, resulting in a lack of trust on the reader’s part.⁶¹ Ultimately, these ‘discontinuities’ limit their author’s success, as I will discuss below.⁶²

The apparent contradiction between Prilepin’s concern over losing translation contracts in 2017, and his professed lack of interest in translations of his work in 2021, underlines the need to treat his interviews with circumspection.⁶³ The potentially unreliable nature of the paratexts surrounding Prilepin betray a paradox at the core of his position as an internationally recognised author.⁶⁴ Venuti describes translation out of one nation’s literature into the canon of a foreign country as a ‘scandal to nationalist thinking’.⁶⁵ It follows that seeking recognition in the West via the medium of translation might belie a desire for validation from a culture that nationalists such as Prilepin regard as the enemy.

⁵⁸ Interview with Prilepin.

⁵⁹ See Introduction for a discussion of World Literature, p. 32.

⁶⁰ Although Prilepin is described as one of Glagoslav’s best sellers, it has not been possible to access their online sales figures. As noted in Chapter Two, Glagoslav’s books are expensive and so are usually purchased in electronic form, which is much cheaper. Glagoslav are the least commercially successful publisher in terms of physical books, accounting for 0.01% of the Russian to English translation market in 2019; Nielsen Books. Data is not available for either Dzanc Books or their imprint Disquiet either. See Chapter Two, p. 126 for a discussion of these books’ popularity on amazon affiliated reading site Goodreads.

⁶¹ Andrea Rizzi, Birgit Lang, and Anthony Pym, *What Is Translation History?: A Trust-Based Approach*, Translation History (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), p. 11.

⁶² Hermans, ‘Translator’s Voice in Translated Narrative’, p.199. For Book Group reception, see p. 300 below.

⁶³ Munday, ‘Using Primary Sources’, p. 66.

⁶⁴ Huttunen and Lassila write about the many paradoxes that Prilepin embodies; Lassila and Huttunen, ‘Zakhar Prilepin, the National Bolshevik Movement and Catachrestic Politics’.

⁶⁵ Venuti, ‘Local Contingencies’, p. 178.

This conflict between Prilepin's staunch nationalism and his seeming desire for international recognition via translation is embodied in the existence of *Sankya* in English. The fact that this Russian anti-government protest novel was published in the enemy West just at the point when Prilepin declared his support for Putin underlines the conflicts of the text. These complexities are compounded by Prilepin's assertion during our interview in 2021 that the politics of his protagonist Sasha represent his own.⁶⁶ In a possible bid for political consecration, in 2016 Prilepin suggested that Putin himself had read *Sank'ia*, and that the novel might have been partly responsible for Russia's increasingly nationalistic policies, including the invasion of Ukraine in 2014.⁶⁷

2.3 Translatorial *Hexis* and Translation Strategies

The English text of *Sankya* displays a variety of translation strategies that reflect the translators' divided loyalties to Prilepin's ambiguous political identity. Tymoczko claims that a translator's ideological stance, or 'place of enunciation', can be detected within a translation. This is because translations are intrinsically partial, and therefore no translator can ever truly occupy a neutral 'space in between.'⁶⁸ Below I will analyse the translators' decisions in *Sankya* alongside accusations over translatorial obfuscation of the author's anti-Semitism. I will argue that this self-censorship on the part of the translators is rooted in *hexis*, and exacerbated by lack of editorial support rather than based in human error.⁶⁹ Because I have been unable to obtain data regarding with Ryabovolova and Gusev, I will focus primarily on Parker's role in the translation process.

Parker's approach to the translation of *Sank'ia* was a product of his translatorial *hexis*. Inspired by Bourdieu, David Charlston defines translatorial *hexis* as the physical embodiment of a translator's stance, expressed by the translation

⁶⁶ Interview with Prilepin.

⁶⁷ 'Prilepin zaiavil v Omske, chto Putin-'imperator' prochital ego knigy', *Om1.Ru*, 18 November 2016 <<https://www.om1.ru/afisha/news/97972/>> [accessed 26 August 2022]. It is not completely outlandish to believe it might be true. During his infamous 2019 interview about Donbas available on YouTube, Prilepin mentions meeting Putin on numerous occasions. Ben Judah corroborated Prilepin's claims when he discusses Putin's reaction to reading *Sankya* here; Judah, *Fragile Empire*, p. 106.

⁶⁸ Tymoczko, 'Ideology and the Position of the Translator', p. 216.

⁶⁹ Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 137; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice, (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008), p. 69-70; Michelle Woods, 'Censorship', in *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Translation* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 511–23 (p. 515).

strategies they deploy within the text.⁷⁰ In Parker's case, this *hexis* is governed by societal concerns. In *Where Bears Roam the Streets*, Parker's memoir about his time spent in Russia, he reveals his preoccupation with issues such as domestic violence. Parker cites statistics about violence against women in Russia and describes a visit to a women's crisis centre.⁷¹ He also visits Mothers for Soldiers, a human rights group supporting young men in their efforts to avoid military conscription, and gives a damning overview of the way in which Russia's army conscripts are treated.⁷² Likewise, a large portion of *Where Bears Roam the Streets* is dedicated to the challenges suffered by his friend Igor who, like Prilepin, belongs to the disaffected Perestroika generation.

By choosing to translate the novel of an anti-Kremlin activist such as Prilepin (who is of the same generation as his friend) Parker was seeking to explain Russian society and the protest scene of the early 2000s. He might also have been seeking a similarly politicised role in his capacity as translator and consecrator.⁷³ Or indeed, to build his own image as translator and author.⁷⁴ Parker's decision to pitch *Sankya* to a Western publisher is in itself indicative of his 'set of principles and expectations' and his political stance.⁷⁵ Gouanvic's statement that the ethics of a translation are formed at the time the decision is made to translate is also apposite here.⁷⁶ I would argue, in accordance with Pym, that the subsequent decisions made by Parker and his co-translators reflect the original reason for their selection of *Sank'ia*. Parker chose this 'explicitly anti-Kremlin book' by a 'member of a revolutionary extremist group' to reveal the truth about protests taking place against Putin.⁷⁷ Since Parker was in the unusual, and problematic situation of being both initiator, editor and translator of *Sank'ia*, we can consider the translation decisions in the text to be his, and not driven by external agents. It is therefore fair to regard *Sank'ia* as being chosen for its political messaging

⁷⁰ David Charlston, 'The Politics of Pinkard's Translation of Hegel's Phenomenology', *Radical Philosophy*, 186, 2014, 11–22 (p. 12).

⁷¹ Parker, *Where Bears Roam the Streets*, p. 260.

⁷² Parker, *Where Bears Roam the Streets*, p. 235.

⁷³ Tymoczko states that 'translators are actively involved, and affiliated with cultural movements'; Tymoczko, 'Ideology and Position of the Translator', p. 225

⁷⁴ As described by Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae'.

⁷⁵ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 95.

⁷⁶ Gouanvic, 'Ethos', p. 209.

⁷⁷ Parker, *Where Bears Roam the Streets*, p. 317.

and instructive nature, and hence as a reflection of Parker's *hexis*; a *hexis* that was then reflected in his translation decisions.

It is tempting to suggest that Parker's translatorial *hexis* is further exemplified by the choice of anti-Putin activist Navalny to consecrate the novel by writing its foreword.⁷⁸ According to interviews, however, it was Prilepin and not Parker who suggested Navalny. The team agreed because Navalny was a name familiar to Western observers.⁷⁹ Despite the fact it was not their initial idea, since Parker and his co-translators were in almost sole charge of the text, the content of Navalny's foreword, which praises Prilepin as a truth-teller and upstanding Russian, can be considered as concurring with their ethical stance towards the novel.⁸⁰

Andrea Rizzi, Birgit Lang and Anthony Pym consider that a translator might define their attitude towards a translation by their use of paratexts such as introductions, book blurbs and interviews.⁸¹ In the case of *Sankya* the translators' opinion of Prilepin at the time can be regarded as synchronous with Navalny's, and hence the introduction as a form of 'persuasion' for the reader.⁸² However, this is not a simple matter. At the time he wrote the foreword in 2013, Navalny had already expressed strong nationalist views of his own.⁸³ Selecting a nationalist politician, albeit an anti-Putin one, who endorsed the right to carry arms, and induced the public to 'squash immigrants like bugs', was a potentially risky decision.⁸⁴ As with Sutcliffe's introduction to *The Monastery*, an acknowledgement from the

⁷⁸ For a discussion of the foreword, and Prilepin's relationship with Navalny, see Chapter Four, p. 235.

⁷⁹ It is not clear how much the translators knew about Navalny's politics at the time the foreword was written in September 2013. At that point, he was widely championed as anti-Putin, and none of his nationalist beliefs had been noted in the press. For example; Miriam Elder, 'Trial of Corruption Crusader Alexei Navalny Divides Russia', *The Observer*, 13 April 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/13/alexei-navalny-trial-russia>> [accessed 17 May 2023].

⁸⁰ *Sankya*, p. 6.

⁸¹ Rizzi, Lang, and Pym, *What Is Translation History?*, p. 19. See also Chapter Four, p. 235.

⁸² Rizzi, Lang, and Pym, *What Is Translation History?*, p. 19.

⁸³ See *Naval'nyi: Stan' Natsionalistom!*, 2011

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVrAPFBSKnk>> [accessed 16 September 2022]. Also see Amnesty International's struggle to reconcile Navalny's nationalist statements in the mid-2000s with his status as prisoner of conscience in 2021, 'Statement on Alexei Navalny's Status as Prisoner of Conscience', *Amnesty International*, 2021 <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/05/statement-on-alexei-navalnys-status-as-prisoner-of-conscience/>> [accessed 16 September 2022].

⁸⁴ See *Naval'nyi za legalizatsiiu oruzhiia*, 2011

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8lXqIEEMg>> [accessed 16 September 2022].

translators of Prilepin's nationalist views might have mitigated, to some extent, the fact that they seem to be endorsing a problematic figure. I suggest that in 2023, this would be the best solution if Glagoslav and Dzanc wish to continue to sell *Sankya*. It is unethical that at the time of writing, while Russia is engaged in a war that Prilepin actively supports, the novel is still available on both Amazon and Glagoslav's website without any mention of the sanctions in place against the author. There is also no mention of Prilepin's politics, and no revocation of Navalny's endorsement.

The motivation to translate *Sank'ia*, expressed in part via Parker's translatorial *hexis*, is detectable in the published novel. Text-based tensions and discontinuities, which I will detail below, are indicative of the translators' struggles with Prilepin's politics as they evolved publicly from anti-Putin activist to pro-Putin anti-Semite between 2011-2014. The resulting translation of *Sank'ia* expresses this dilemma. Parker is caught between two Prilepins: the anti-Kremlin Prilepin who published *Sank'ia* in 2006 whom Parker chose to translate, and the unavoidably *krymnash* Prilepin of 2014, whom Parker does not want to be associated with, but who coincides with the completion of the translation.⁸⁵ The apotheosis of Parker's translatorial *hexis* is expressed in his refusal to promote the novel, and his extreme regret at being involved in consecrating Prilepin in the West.⁸⁶ This difficult situation strengthens my argument that translators lack agency, and the need for publisher as well as translator ethics.

2.3a Anti-Semitism and Obfuscation

The growing tension between the two 'versions' of Prilepin described above resulted in a clash of ideologies. This led Parker and his co-translators to create an English text that in some instances dilutes the anti-Semitic and racist elements of *Sankya*, and it is to these issues that I turn my attention now. These translation decisions might in part have been an unconscious process, as interviews and social media posts indicate, and I argue that they were the product of Parker's translatorial *hexis*.⁸⁷ While they could have been the result of simple translator

⁸⁵ Prilepin's belief that Crimea belongs to Russia existed prior to 2014, but it did not coincide with Russian government policy.

⁸⁶ Parker has not expressed this publicly, but it has become clear through various interviews I conducted.

⁸⁷ See below p. 292 for a discussion of social media posts related to *Sankya*.

error, the pattern of translator decisions, which I describe below, suggest that they represent the translators' attitude towards the text and its author, albeit that they may have been subconscious.

Whatever the cause of the discontinuities in *Sankya*, there were noticed by critic Ian Ross Singleton. In 2016 Singleton wrote one of the few critical appraisals of *Sankya*, comparing the novel with Ulitskaya's *BGT*, and Emmanuel Carrère's eponymous 'fictional biography' of Eduard Limonov.⁸⁸ In his article, Singleton raises questions about the political motivations behind the translation of these three texts and asks whether the anti-Semitism present in *Sankya* has been 'obscured' by its translators.⁸⁹ Singleton centres his argument on the translation of a pronoun in a specific passage, and expands this to his comments about the translation of the term 'Founding Fathers', which I will turn my attention to now.⁹⁰ Singleton reinforces his accusation of obfuscation by noting that Navalny's foreword also legitimises Prilepin's novel by obscuring Prilepin's true political views.

Singleton's first point focuses on a pronoun from a passage where *Sankya*'s hero Sasha is in hospital recovering from an assault by the local police. Sasha has an argument with a young Jewish man named Lev, who occupies the neighbouring hospital bed:

To, o chem my zagovorili, tema sovershenno nanosnaia, dazhe naviazannaia, — zdes' Sasha chut' ne skazal 'naviazannaia vami', — i o nei voobshche nado zabyt'.⁹¹

What we're speaking about is completely superficial, even forced — here Sasha almost said *forced by you* [the italics are in the English text] – and we should just forget about it.⁹²

⁸⁸ Ian Ross Singleton, 'Of Translation and Politics in Russian Literature', *Fiction Writers Review*, 22 February 2016 <<https://fictionwritersreview.com/essay/of-translation-and-politics-in-russian-literature/>> [accessed 27 November 2019]; Emmanuel Carrère, *Limonov*, trans. by John Lambert (New York: Picador, 2014).

⁸⁹ Singleton, 'Of Translation and Politics'.

⁹⁰ For an analysis of the paratexts linked to *Sankya* and their effect on marketing and reception, see Chapter Four, p. 254.

⁹¹ *San'kia*, p. 94.

⁹² *Sankya*, p. 181. Unless indicated otherwise, the English translations are all from Parker, Rybavolova and Gusev's translation.

Singleton's argument focuses on the English translation of 'naviazannaia vami', translated here as 'forced by you.' The Russian form of 'you' here could either indicate the use of the polite singular form, or the plural, and is a close equivalent of the French 'vous'.⁹³ Singleton poses that, rather than highlighting the use of the plural 'you', the translators ignore this possibility, and instead treat it as the polite form. This is despite the fact that the informal, singular you, 'ty', is used almost exclusively in the surrounding Russian text.

This translation solution obscures Sasha's anti-Semitic intention, Singleton argues, since it only addresses Lev, and not Jewish society as a whole.⁹⁴ The phrase 'Forced by you all' would have underlined Sasha's anti-Semitic inference, although arguably this could be inferred in part through the original use of italics. Although Sasha's anti-Semitism is clear throughout the novel and in the context of the rest of the scene, I agree with Singleton that the decision not to translate this term as plural is not a neutral one: Sasha's anti-Semitism is rendered less ardent, and the anti-Semitic sentiment in the novel is consequently lessened.⁹⁵

A series of Facebook posts from *Sankya's* translators in quick response to Singleton's article, however, make it clear that they had 'no intention of whitewashing [Sasha's] image' and that they understood the need to represent Prilepin fully. Ryabovolova stated that 'Sankya [sic] is a very controversial character, and that is the point.'⁹⁶ This suggests the possibility that the decisions were either subconscious (and hence a result of Parker's translatorial *hexis*), or the result of little to no editorial support, and therefore of translator error, although as I will show below, they appear to be part of a pattern.⁹⁷ Although this partially inaccurate translation of 'vy' could be regarded as an oversight on the part of the translators, it is not significant on its own. When Singleton's queries are tallied alongside a series of other translation decisions, it becomes one of many issues

⁹³ Interview with Ian Ross Singleton, 3 August 2021.

⁹⁴ Singleton, 'Of Translation and Politics'.

⁹⁵ Prilepin maintains that he is not an anti-Semite, despite his 2012 'Letter to Comrade Stalin' where he criticises Jewish culture and describes the number of people killed in the Holocaust as 'mere details'; Prilepin, 'Pis'mo tovarishchu Stalinu'. Defending himself from accusations of anti-Semitism, Prilepin claimed that lots of his best friends were Jewish; Prilepin, 'Stesniat'sia svoikh ottsov'.

⁹⁶ 'Alexander Cigale', *Facebook*, 25 February 2016

<<https://www.facebook.com/alexander.cigale>> [accessed 8 August 2022].

⁹⁷ Although it is true that most publishers do not employ Russian readers to verify a translation, incongruities in the English text may have been noted by an external editor.

that work to reduce the anti-Semitism of the novel. I will detail these in the pages that follow.

2.3b From the SS to 'Little Efficers'

Translation Studies scholar Ian Mason asserts that it would be unwise to use one example in order to determine the ideological position of the translator.⁹⁸ In his article, Singleton also questions the translation of the main protest movement in *Sankya*, the 'Founding Fathers'. In Russian, this is the '*Soiuz Sozidaiushchikh*' — literally the 'Union of Creators.' In *Sank'ia* (the Russian title of *Sankya*) this is shortened to 'SS', and so references the Nazi Schutzstaffel who were largely responsible for rounding up Jews in 1940s Germany. The translators, however, have domesticated '*Soiuz Sozidaiushchikh*' as 'Founding Fathers'. Although this retains some of the alliteration of the Russian, it alters the connotations to produce an equivalent that is far from functional.⁹⁹ This name carries a completely different set of associations from the SS of Nazi Germany, referencing instead the Founding Fathers of America, and implying a certain moral legitimacy, especially for the target American audience.¹⁰⁰

This translation decision, queried by Singleton, resonates throughout the rest of the text, where it dilutes further anti-Semitic markers. For example, in the Russian original, Sasha and his cohort are described as 'esesovtsy', or SS men.¹⁰¹ The first time this term is used in English, it is translated as 'Nazis', but subsequently the party members are simply described as 'these fucking FF'.¹⁰² Later in the book, the press refer to party members as 'Little Efficers', and a tabloid headline announcing that "“esesovets” sovershil napadenie na Santa-Klausa' (an SS man attacked Santa Claus) becomes 'an FF member attacked Santa Claus', reducing the impact (and Nazi allusion) of the headline in the source text.¹⁰³

The loss of these overt references to the SS removes much of the political movement's illocutionary power that is central to a full understanding of *Sankya's*

⁹⁸ Mason, 'Discourse', p. 92.

⁹⁹ Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden ; Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), p. 91; Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ Lassila and Huttunen note the theme of fatherlessness as an important one within the National Bolshevik Party, rendering this translation choice even less apt; Lassila and Huttunen, p. 149.

¹⁰¹ *San'kia*, p. 8

¹⁰² *Sankya*, p. 11 and p. 13.

¹⁰³ *San'kia* p. 102; *Sankya* p. 196.

politics.¹⁰⁴ A further reduction of this power is present in the translation of the word ‘zhid’ — a direct equivalent to the abusive term ‘Yid’ in English.¹⁰⁵ The first instance of ‘zhid’ appears in Russian on page eight, adjacent to the ‘esesovtsy’ discussed above, where it is translated as ‘Jew’. This reduces the anti-Semitism early on and ensures that the Western reader is not deterred from reading the novel by encountering such an offensive word in its first few pages.

2.3c Loss in Translation — Who is the Caucasian in the Crowd?

The translation strategy deployed throughout *Sankya* renders the text more accessible to the Anglophone reader, while simultaneously obscuring some of the problematic themes and rendering some political debates unintelligible. In this sense it can be seen as foreignising the characters by representing some of their prejudices, while domesticating them, or more specifically by Americanising them, in others.¹⁰⁶ In addition to Singleton’s points, the gap in understanding that this causes is notable from the first page, where a lack of shared context with the implied Russian reader leads to confusion over the translation of ‘chelovek s Kavkaza’, literally ‘a person from the Caucasus’.¹⁰⁷ As with the translation of ‘zhid’ above, this decision obscures the racist tone that is to follow:

A Caucasian man sipped lemonade and watched the protest from behind the backs of the policemen. Sasha accidentally met his eyes. The Caucasian man turned and walked away.¹⁰⁸

Here, ‘Chelovek s Kavkaza’ is translated as ‘A Caucasian man’ and further explanation is only offered in the novel’s glossary, which states that the term ‘refers to populations originating from the Southern Caucasus region.’¹⁰⁹ For the implied Russian reader, both the meaning and the racial tension is clear: many Russians have a xenophobic attitude towards people from the Caucasus, and

¹⁰⁴ André Lefevere, *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), p. 18.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Zhidy priveli! - povtorila ona eshche raz – Vot ty zhid! Zhid i “esesovets!”’, *San’kia*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ The use of terms such as ‘upperclassmen’ Americanises the novel, even if the spellings are British. *Sankya*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁷ Antoine Berman, ‘Translation and the Trials of the Foreign’, (London ; New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 247–206 (p. 251); Hermans, ‘Translator’s Voice in Translated Narrative’, p. 199.

¹⁰⁸ *Sankya* p. 6; *San’kia* p. 8; Chelovek s Kavkaza pil limonad, razgliadyvaia miting iz-za spin militsionerov. [...] Kavkazets otvernulsia i poshel proch’.

¹⁰⁹ *Sankya*, p. 340. See below p.287 below for a discussion of the glossary in *Sankya*.

Prilepin's inference would be immediately understood.¹¹⁰ For the Anglophone reader, however, this appearance of a Caucasian in the crowd (which a Western reader might understand more broadly from demographic categorisations as a white man) is simply confusing. My book group readers were generally perplexed at the term.¹¹¹ I suggest that a less opaque translation solution at the Western reader's first encounter of the word would have provided a gloss for the entire novel and alerted them to Sasha's inherent racism.

This scene foreshadows the fight with stallholders from the Caucasus in Chapter Three. Here they are still translated as 'Caucasians', but I will refer to them as *Kavkaztsy*, following general Russian practice. This is one of the most overtly racist passages in *Sankya*. Here the *Kavkaztsy* are described in racist terms: 'No one noticed when they appeared — about six of them, raven-haired, grinning with white teeth.'¹¹² As Sasha provokes the fight further, he notes one of the men's 'strange fingers, white but covered with thick black hair.'¹¹³ A little later on, Sasha comes across 'a Caucasian — a young one' and proceeds to mock him.¹¹⁴ Upon learning that they share the same first name, he tells him 'I'm Sasha too. Only you're not a real Sasha, probably a Sakha. An Alhu. An Aslahan. Yeah?'

The men are also referred to as 'our Southern brothers', and Sasha's comrade, nicknamed Negative, jokes that had he not intervened to help his friend, the men would have 'pecked you to death with their hooked noses.'¹¹⁵ Shortly after, a policeman refers to the *Kavkaztsy* as 'black-arsed worms'. This only offends Sasha because the policemen presume they must all be on the same side because they are against the police.¹¹⁶ At no point in the fight scene do the translators attempt to moderate the racism expressed by Sasha and his cohort. The decision to retain the racist language in this chapter, however, raises the

¹¹⁰ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.xii; Alexandra Assis Rosa, 'Defining Target Text Reader', in *Translation Studies at the Interface of Disciplines* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006), pp. 99–109.

¹¹¹ Book-group members used Google to search for the significance of the 'Caucasian', or simply guessed at its meaning.

¹¹² *Sankya*, p. 81; *San'kia* p. 42, 'Nikto ne primetil, kak oni poiavilis', skaliashchie belye zuby, cherniavye, chelovek shest'.

¹¹³ *Sankya* p. 82; *San'kia* p. 42, 'Sasha dazhe uspel zametit' ego stranno belye, no pokrytye gustymi chernymi volosami pal'tsy.

¹¹⁴ *Sankya* p. 84, *San'kia* p. 43, 'eto kavkazets – iunyi, pohti patsanenok.'

¹¹⁵ *Sankya* p. 88; *San'kia* p. 45, 'A to by tebia zaklevali gorbatymi nosami'

¹¹⁶ *Sankya* p. 88; *San'kia* p. 46, 'Ia by sam etikh chernozadykh gnid bil'

question over why it was obscured on the novel's first page, and whether the decision was made in order to prevent the Western reader from fully comprehending the racist nature of the novel from the outset.

These two opposing translation approaches, which on one hand lessen *Sankya's* anti-Semitism, and on the other, are faithful to the racist sentiment of the source text, are perhaps indicative of the translatorial struggle between the two Prilepins. While it might be preferable to reduce unpleasant elements of Prilpein's text within the first few pages in order not to deter a potential reader, it is, I suggest, unethical. In his study of translations from Bosnian, Milutinović suggests that the only loyalty a translator should have is to the source text, and equally importantly, 'the accuracy of the information she supplies about it.'¹¹⁷ This, he argues, is the only ethical approach to translating a challenging text. He argues that, 'even if the content is detestable, [the translator's] professional task is to present detestable contents to a wider audience accurately.'¹¹⁸ This, I suggest, is the approach that Parker and his co-translators take in the fight scene described above, and is the only ethically sound approach to *Sankya*, or indeed any other novels that present 'detestable' elements. I will return to this topic when I look at Bromfield's approach to *The Librarian* later in this chapter.¹¹⁹ However, as we shall see, there are further issues that interfere with a loyal translation of *Sankya*.

2.3d Discontinuities and Cognitive Dissonance

*'Don't Get Your Knickers in a Twist!'*¹²⁰

The conflict between translation approaches I have described above creates a lack of clarity, which I argue reduces readers' trust in the translation.¹²¹ What Theo Hermans refers to as the inevitable 'loose ends', or unresolved questions within a target text, are intrusive enough in *Sankya* to obscure some of the original meaning.¹²² Indeed, Singleton began comparing the translation with the original because he felt that something was amiss in the anti-Semitic passage discussed

¹¹⁷ Milutinović, 'Translators as Ambassadors and Gatekeepers', p. 42.

¹¹⁸ Milutinović, 'Translators as Ambassadors and Gatekeepers', p. 43.

¹¹⁹ See later this chapter, p. 322.

¹²⁰ *Sankya* p. 84.

¹²¹ Rizzi, Lang and Pym contend that the most important quality a translator has to exchange is their 'trustworthiness.'; *What is Translation History?*, p. 4.

¹²² Hermans, 'Translator's Voice', p. 210.

above and, as a Russian speaker, was in a position to investigate.¹²³ The translators' 'trustworthiness' is rebalanced through their literal treatment of the fight scene, and the use of a glossary, which explains terms such as 'Black Hundreds', 'OMON' and 'muzhik'. However, the glossary's position at the end of the eBook, which is the most commonly read edition of the novel, makes it impractical to use.¹²⁴ Book-group participants admitted they had been unaware of the glossary's existence until they finished the novel, while others had been relying on Google to search for vocabulary they did not understand. Indeed, this supports Batchelor's statement about paratexts, relevant to the glossary in this case, that you cannot presume any of them will be read.¹²⁵

Issues over the comprehensibility of the text also result in confusion over the presentation of political debates, which are crucial to a full understanding of Sasha's, and by extension, Prilepin's politics. For example, in Chapter Three, Bezletov, an old friend of Sasha's late father, explains his view of Russia to Sasha:

'Why can't you understand it, Sasha? This place is a vacuum of decency. What's here is empty space. There isn't even any soil left. Neither the tradition, not the kind the State might be interested in, in the geopolitical sense, as is now fashionable to say. And there is no State.'

'On this soil live the people,' Sasha said.¹²⁶

'Soil' here, 'pochva' in Russian, refers to the nineteenth-century political movement *Pochvennichestvo*, affiliated with the Slavophiles and of which Dostoevsky was a member. Prilepin has explicitly identified himself as a 'pochvennik', alongside other Village Prose authors such as Valentin Rasputin.¹²⁷ Without a gloss, or reference in the back of the book, indeed without the context

¹²³ Interview with Singleton.

¹²⁴ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p.70.

¹²⁵ Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, p. 143.

¹²⁶ *Sankya* p. 70, *San'kia* p. 36, Ty nikak ne poimesh', Sasha, – zdes' uzhe net nichego, chto moglo by ustraiivat'. Zdes' pustoe mesto. Zdes' net dazhe pochvy. Ni patriarkhal'noi, ni toi, v kotoroi gosudarstvo zainteresovano, kak modno seichas govorit', geopoliticheski. I gosudarstva net [...] 'Na etoi pochve zhivet narod...'

¹²⁷ See "Soska Rossiiu ne spaset': Kak v Kaliningrade proshla tvorcheskaia vstrecha Zakharom Prilepinym", n.d. <<http://rugrad.eu/afisha/news/soska-rossiyu-ne-spasyet-kak-v-kaliningrade-proshla-tvorcheskaya-vstrecha-s-zakharom-prilepinym/>> [accessed 11 June 2023].

that would be readily available to the original Russian audience, the allusion makes little sense.

Further issues are present in the translation of pronouns and register. As with the aforementioned question raised by Singleton over the translation of 'vy', personal pronouns cause difficulty when they switch between the formal/plural ('vy') and informal/singular ('ty'). The source of this difficulty is the lack of a direct equivalent in English. For example, during a discussion between Sasha and Bezletov, the latter attempts to condescend towards his young interlocutor, switching from 'vy' (polite) to 'ty' (informal):

A chto zhe ty, Sasha, nemedlenno nachinaesh' so slov 'ia Russkii'? 'Vot kak,
— snova podumal Sasha, — on so mnoi na 'ty', a la s nym...' ¹²⁸

The translators' solution here is to insert the word 'son' in order to signal the change in register:

'So why then, son, do you not start with these words. 'I'm Russian'? 'So that's
how it is, Sasha thought again — I'm a 'son' to him now...' ¹²⁹

This decision, while effective in demonstrating Bezletov's change in tone, also introduces the concept of Bezletov as a father figure. I suggest that this subsequently undermines the central theme of absent fathers. ¹³⁰

There are a number of further discontinuities in the translation, that I will list below, which work against the translators' domesticating strategy. It is perhaps ironic that by making translation decisions that render the characters more relatable to the Western audience, the translators disrupt the reading experience, and render Sasha and his cohort incongruous. This leads to a lack of trust in the text. ¹³¹ Attempts at what Venuti refers to as 'fluency', the aim of invisibility that he describes as most desired by the publishing industry, are lost through a series of

¹²⁸ *San'kia* p. 36. A literal translation would read: "So why then, Sasha, would you not start with the word 'I'm Russian'?" "So that's how it is, Sasha thought again – he's using 'ty' with me now". As above, 'ty' is the informal, singular form of 'you'.

¹²⁹ *Sankya* p, 69.

¹³⁰ One of Prilepin's recurring themes is that of fatherlessness. His own father died when he was seventeen, and fathers are a very clear absence in the majority of his work. Lipovetsky, 'Politicheskaia motorika Zakhara Prilepina'; Huttunen and Lassila, 'Zakhar Prilepin, the National Bolshevik Movement and Catachrestic Politics'.

¹³¹ Rizzi, Lang, Pym, *What is Translation History?*, p. 8.

incongruous textual-linguistic decisions.¹³² These ‘contextually overdetermined’ translations can only be accepted if the reader remains conscious that they are reading a translation.¹³³

For example, when Sasha and his friends are drinking with an Afghan war veteran just before they engage in the fight with the Kavkaz market stallholders, Sasha is described as ‘sil’no zakhmelel’, which might be most closely rendered as ‘hammered’ in English. The translators introduce a loss on the textual-linguistic level by describing Sasha as ‘tipsy’.¹³⁴ The textual-linguistic erosion continues



when Sasha comes across a young Kavkaz boy who is hiding. Sasha tells him ‘don’t get your knickers in a twist’.¹³⁵ The Russian is much ruder, ‘Ne ssy’, perhaps better translated as ‘Don’t piss yourself’.¹³⁶ The incongruous register of this choice is further demonstrated by the fact that this exact phrase was used in NBP recruitment posters. The translation here of ‘Don’t get your knickers in a twist’ is entirely out of keeping with its context. Although the translators may not have been aware of the reference, this poster demonstrates the intended force of the statement, and its distance from their solution.

‘Don’t Piss Yourself [ne ssy] – Join the NBP!’

This translation decision is a fitting analogy for Parker and his colleagues’ translation strategy as a whole. As a result of the discontinuities introduced into the novel, Sasha and his comrades’ overall representation is softened. Phrases such as those mentioned above, or the description of the FF in the final chapter as feeling ‘jolly’ as they take over a police

¹³² Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, p. 1.

¹³³ Hermans, ‘Translator’s Voice’, p.194; Lawrence Venuti, ‘Translation as Cultural Politics’, in *Critical Readings in Translation Studies*, ed. by Mona Baker (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), pp. 65–79 (p.71).

¹³⁴ *Sankya* p. 77.

¹³⁵ *Sankya*, p. 84.

¹³⁶ *San’kia*, p. 43.

station, or Venka referring to Sasha as ‘my dove’, and use of the terms ‘lass’ and ‘chap’, all jar on the Anglophone reader.¹³⁷ The cumulative effect of these translational ‘loose ends’ is to erode trust in the translation.¹³⁸ It is no coincidence that my book group scrutinized the language of *Sankya* with exceptional attention, with discussion of unusual and inconsistent textual-linguistic translation decisions. This scrutiny, however, did not completely impede the group’s sympathy for the novel’s hero Sasha. Neither would it prevent them from recommending the novel to others as a source of understanding about contemporary Russia, just as its translators had originally intended before Prilepin’s decision to support Putin.

Ultimately, Parker did succeed in his aim of highlighting a portion of the Russian protest movement in the early 2000s. However, the fact that the novel was produced by a small publisher with no real editorial oversight resulted in a text that does not provide an entirely accurate representation of Prilepin’s xenophobic views. Perhaps this was a response to Prilepin’s growing notoriety during the time it took to complete the translation, or is a result of Parker’s translatorial *hexis*, and a subconscious desire not to present the full scale of Prilepin’s beliefs. I am satisfied that Parker acted ethically in translating the text because he could not have predicted the route that Prilepin, or the Russian government would take from 2014 onwards — in this sense, his actions agree with Pym’s second principle.¹³⁹ However, his decision has nevertheless resulted in his perceived loss of social capital, which is the opposite of the translator aspiration described by Sela-Sheffy.¹⁴⁰

In the light of Prilepin’s change of allegiance around the time the translation was published, however, the most ethical decision would have been for the publishers to supply a similar introduction as that which accompanies *The Monastery*.¹⁴¹ From an ethical point of view, the translators signed the contract in 2012 for a book that it was not possible for them to control once it was published in 2014.

¹³⁷ *Sankya*, p. 332; pp. 45, 87; pp. 54, 160, 187; pp. 41, 187, 211. The use of ‘chap’ is especially jarring. It is a translation for ‘patsan’ which is a macho term for ‘guy’ and forms part of Prilepin’s identity. For example, see *RICH - Zakhar Prilepin - Patsan*, 2016 <https://vk.com/video-61321563_171568559> [accessed 10 February 2023].

¹³⁸ Hermans, ‘Translator’s Voice’, p.210.

¹³⁹ For Pym’s ethical principles, see earlier this chapter, p. 276.

¹⁴⁰ Sela-Sheffy, ‘The Translators’ Personae’.

¹⁴¹ See Chapter Four, p. 236.

Although they could, as I suggested earlier in this chapter, have made some attempts to redress *Sankya*'s inaccurate paratextual framing. The same cannot be said for the publishers, Glagoslav and Disquiet. Neither firm has removed the novel from sale, despite Prilepin's actions in Donbas, and his arguably toxic political views, which have led to him being sanctioned in the West. The microhistory behind *Sankya* illustrates the need for a consistently ethical translatorial approach, while demonstrating that Pym's ethical principles for translators should also apply to publishers.

3 *Day of the Oprichnik*

As with *Sankya*, the translation of *Day of the Oprichnik* has also been critiqued through the prism of politics, this time by Russianist Kevin Platt.¹⁴² While translatorial obfuscation is Singleton's main charge against *Sankya*, Gambrell's translation of *Oprichnik*, published in 2011 by FSG, has been labelled by Platt as simplified in the 'pursuit of marketability and sales.'¹⁴³ In this next section, I will assess the extent to which Platt's charge of simplification, with a view to enhancing the book's Western appeal, is valid. I will examine the textual-linguistic difficulties that faced Gambrell and ask whether her alleged simplification of Sorokin's original text detracts from *Oprichnik*'s illocutionary power, since her translation decisions would arguably impact the target Anglophone audience's appreciation and understanding of the text.

Oprichnik presents a dystopian vision of Russia in 2028. It follows Komiaga, a personal guard to 'His Majesty', through twenty-four hours of raping, pillaging and drug-taking in a Russia that has sealed itself off from the West.¹⁴⁴ In light of contemporary developments in Russia, it is increasingly regarded by political commentators and critics as prophetic.¹⁴⁵ Sorokin stated that the novel is an exploration of one of Russia's possible futures, claiming, 'I had just wanted to show the situation: what would happen to Russia if she went into self-isolation.'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Kevin Platt, 'Dress-Up Games with Russian History', *Public Books*, 25 September 2012 <<https://www.publicbooks.org/dress-up-games-with-russian-history/>> [accessed 25 November 2019].

¹⁴³ Platt, 'Dress-Up Games'.

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter One, p. 81 for a description of the plot.

¹⁴⁵ For example, see: Nelson, 'His Majesty: On Vladimir Sorokin's "Day of the Oprichnik"; 'A Sorokin preduprezhdal!'.

¹⁴⁶ Anna Trefilova, 'Ten' Oprichnika', January 2012 <<https://srkn.ru/interview/ten-oprichnika.html>> [accessed 1 September 2022].

Possible futures aside, the novel is widely regarded as a satire of the presiding Russian government.¹⁴⁷

If *Oprichnik* was seen as prescient before 2022, it is in some ways being enacted in Russia today. In September 2022, Russian actor and director Ivan Okhlobystin took to the stage at a pro-war demonstration and began chanting *Goida!* a war cry associated with Russia's mythic past, and frequently used by the Oprichniki in Sorokin's novel.¹⁴⁸ In fact, the translation of the same term was the cause of much discussion between Sorokin's various language translators at a 2013 University of Bergen roundtable about his work.¹⁴⁹ For Danish translator Tine Roesen, *Goida!* became 'hep!', while for Gambrell it became 'Hail!'. Uffelmann, who translated *Oprichnik* into German, remarked that the German solution would be 'Heill!' but noted that the term would be decidedly problematic.

In keeping with the retrofuturistic world of *Oprichnik*, represented by a blend of old-fashioned clothes and traditional homes alongside modern devices such as mobile phones, and floating televisions known as 'news bubbles', the novel operates in a language that Platt refers to as 'Oldespeak'.¹⁵⁰ Lipovetsky goes as far as to describe the language as a character in itself.¹⁵¹ Roesen also argues for the central importance of the Oprichniks' language, and holds that Russia's reversion to the past in the novel is expressed in every facet of Sorokin's fictionalisation of Russian life. This includes the internal colonisation represented by the language the Oprichniks use.¹⁵² *Skaz*, defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as 'the oral narration of a narrator' is used by Sorokin to confirm his satire.¹⁵³ Sorokin's use of archaic *skaz* blends old Russian, street slang and Soviet terminology.¹⁵⁴ In combination with *skaz*, *Oprichnik* provides numerous challenges to the

¹⁴⁷ Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, p. 132.

¹⁴⁸ See *Ivan Okhlobystin - Goida*, 5 October 2022

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygbEqLKF2Q>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

¹⁴⁹ Vladimir Sorokin and others, 'Translating Sorokin/Translated Sorokin', in *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages*, Slavica Bergensia (Bergen: Dept. of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen, 2013), xi, 345–66 (p. 352)

¹⁵⁰ Platt, 'Dress-Up Games'.

¹⁵¹ Lipovetsky, *Postmodern Crises*, p. 101.

¹⁵² Tine Roesen, 'Drive of the Oprichnik: On Collectivity and Individuality in Day of the Oprichnik', in *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages* (Slavica Bergensia, 2013) 266–281 (p. 269); Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

¹⁵³ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse Typology in Prose', in *Readings in Russian Poetics* (Chicago, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2002), pp. 176–96 (p. 176).

¹⁵⁴ Aptekman, 'The Old New Russian', p. 286.

translator: a rich seam of literary and cultural references, and poetry in the form of songs as well as the epic Russian *bylina* — a poetic, folkloric form with nationalist connotations that is used here to celebrate the destruction of America.¹⁵⁵

3.1 *Oprichnik* — Politics or Art?

Unusually for a translation, publishers in eleven countries commissioned translations of *Oprichnik* within two years of its release.¹⁵⁶ This, Uffelmann suggests, was because of the impending and fateful Russian elections in 2008. Putin came to the end of his legal term as President, and Dmitrii Medvedev was elected in his stead. The day after he was confirmed as President, however, Medvedev announced Putin as his Prime Minister, prompting the Western liberal media to comment that Putin remained the de facto source of the country's power.¹⁵⁷ This consolidation of power, which was confirmed when Putin ran for President once more in 2012, likely informed comments about the political clairvoyancy of Sorokin's novel. That same year, Sorokin was asked during an interview to what extent he felt his novel had coincided with reality.¹⁵⁸ He answered:

When the book came out one of my friends, the historian Boris Sokolov, said 'it seems to me that you have written a magical spell against this happening in Russia.' I really liked that idea then. But I didn't really think any more about it. I had just wanted to show the situation: what would happen to Russia if she went into self-isolation. But years have passed, and he actually said to me a little sadly: 'You know, Volod', it seems to me it was actually a prophecy.'¹⁵⁹

Described by Gambrell as 'overtly political', *Oprichnik* was in fact a departure for Sorokin.¹⁶⁰ In an interview with *Der Spiegel* in 2007, Sorokin admitted that he had been apolitical up until he was fifty, and had written the novel because 'the citizen

¹⁵⁵ See below, p. 309.

¹⁵⁶ Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, p. 132.

¹⁵⁷ Luke Harding, 'Putin Sworn in as PM - and Russia's Real Ruler', *The Guardian*, 8 May 2008 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/08/russia1>> [accessed 2 September 2022].

¹⁵⁸ Trefilova, 'Ten' "Oprichnika".

¹⁵⁹ Trefilova, 'Ten' "Oprichnika".

¹⁶⁰ Cohen, 'A Strange and Endless Journey'.

in me has come to life.’¹⁶¹ Frank, who published Sorokin’s *Ice Trilogy* at NYRB Classics at the same time as FSG published *Oprichnik*, offered me a politicised perspective on the arrival of Sorokin’s novels in the West:

When Sorokin was published in the aughts and early teens [...] this was news from a front – Russia was corrupt, Russia was sort of weird, and who knows what Putin and his cronies were getting up to in terms of strange cultic observances and so on....¹⁶²

Sorokin claimed that he did not intend *Oprichnik* to be regarded as an exclusively political commentary, and indeed this would concur with his previously apolitical stance.¹⁶³ It is possible that Sorokin was responding to signs already present in wider Russian society. For example, critic Stephen Kotkin describes *Oprichnik* as a ‘diagnosis of a society in crisis.’¹⁶⁴ *Oprichnik*’s proximity to the truth is demonstrated by the fact that members of the Eurasian Youth Union even consider themselves ‘neo-Oprichniks’ and regard Sorokin’s novel non-ironically as a blueprint for an ideal society.¹⁶⁵ Sorokin’s subsequent translator Lawton meanwhile regards the novel as an elaborate joke.¹⁶⁶ He wondered how these ‘neo-Oprichniks’, if they approved of Sorokin’s view of a future Russia, felt about the homosexual orgy at the end?

Whatever Sorokin’s intention for *Oprichnik*, the novel appealed to editors in the West for the political portrait it painted of contemporary Russia, representing what Open Letter publisher Post might call ‘a novel about our enemy.’¹⁶⁷ It appears *Oprichnik* was commissioned in part because of the supposedly ‘clear and legible’

¹⁶¹ Martin Doerry, and Matthias Schepp, ‘Spiegel Interview with Author Vladimir Sorokin: “Russia Is Slipping Back into an Authoritarian Empire”’, trans. by Christopher Sultan, *Der Spiegel*, 2 February 2007 <<https://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-author-vladimir-sorokin-russia-is-slipping-back-into-an-authoritarian-empire-a-463860.html>> [accessed 23 February 2022].

¹⁶² Interview with Frank.

¹⁶³ Trefilova, ‘Ten’ “Oprichnika”. See Chapter Four, p. 260.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Vladimir Sorokin: Ideally, Prose Simply Happens’, *Work in Progress*, 14 April 2011 <<https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2011/04/14/vladimir-sorokin/>> [accessed 2 September 2022].

The idea of literature as a locus for the expression of social pressures and conflict points is explored by Project Cassandra, based in Tübingen Germany. See ‘Project Cassandra - Literature as an Early Warning System’ <<https://projekt-cassandra.net/>> [accessed 2 September 2022].

¹⁶⁵ ‘Vladimir Sorokin v Ukraine: Ia zhivu v gorode, razdevlennom vertikal’iu vlasti’, n.d. <<https://srkn.ru/interview/vladimir-sorokin-v-ukraine-ya-zhivu-v-gorode-razda.html>> [accessed 1 September 2022]. The Eurasian Youth Union are part of the Eurasia Party led by Aleksandr Dugin.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Lawton, 23 October 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Interview Chad Post.

political messaging, that would appeal to the Western reader.¹⁶⁸ This demand-driven political role in the target culture was identified for *Oprichnik* from the moment it was signed by FSG in 2008.¹⁶⁹ The commission was celebrated with an article titled ‘After Years of Patience, FSG Finds a Vladimir Sorokin Book They Want to Publish in English’ where Lorin Stein, then chief editor at FSG, stated that he had always wanted to publish Sorokin, but had never been able to find a book that would be easily translated into English.¹⁷⁰ Stein added that Sorokin was not well known in the West because he was hard to translate, noting, ‘I think this is the book that can change that.’ Crucially, Stein also pointed out, ‘[*Oprichnik* is] also very topical – it’s obviously an affront to the Putin-Medvedev junta.’¹⁷¹ This, I suggest, is pure marketing, and indicative of the real reason FSG published Sorokin. Because of the textual-linguistic issues I will discuss below, *Oprichnik* is instead actually one of Sorokin’s most complex novels to translate into English. Stein’s comments also indicate that FSG aimed to market *Oprichnik* because of its political controversy, rather than to promote Pym’s ethical aim of cultural understanding.¹⁷²

3.2 Jamey Gambrell and *Oprichnik*.

‘*Translation is impossible, but translation exists.*’¹⁷³

Despite Stein’s assertion, it is unlikely that *Oprichnik* was commissioned by FSG because it was easy to translate. Gambrell, considered by *Oprichnik*’s editor Krotov as a ‘remarkable’ translator, spoke about the complexities of the text in an interview for the *LARB*.¹⁷⁴ She compared *Oprichnik* with Sorokin’s later novel, *The Blizzard (Metel’*, 2010), which she also translated:

I was kind of lulled into thinking, ‘Oh! This is going to be so much easier to translate than the previous books, where you may have 10, 15 different styles of writing going on at the same time, or within the same book.’ For example,

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Krotov.

¹⁶⁹ This is similar to Vimr’s description; Vimr, ‘Supply-Driven Translation’.

¹⁷⁰ Stein made this statement despite his lack of Russian. Neyfakh, ‘After Years of Patience’.

¹⁷¹ Neyfakh, ‘After Years of Patience’. For further discussion of the marketing and reception of *Oprichnik*, see Chapter Four, p. 260.

¹⁷² See the introduction to this chapter for a discussion of Pym’s ethical principles, p. 263.

¹⁷³ Vladimir Sorokin and others, ‘Translating Sorokin/Translated Sorokin’, in *Vladimir Sorokin’s Languages*, Slavica Bergensia (Bergen: Dept. of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen, 2013), xi, 345–66 (p. 349).

¹⁷⁴ Cohen, ‘A Strange and Endless Journey’; Interview with Krotov.

Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* is a kind of political satire (although it's not so funny if you know what's really going on in Russia), written in this mixture of old Russian and some Soviet sorts of language. There's a lot of swearing and slang and made-up words because it's Russia in the future, though the country has launched itself back into the past. The church has taken over. People have cell phones, but they live as though they're in the 15th and 16th centuries, in a lot of ways.¹⁷⁵

Bassnett and Lefevere propose that in order to achieve 'functional equivalence' in a target text, a translator might have to make substantial changes to the original.¹⁷⁶ However, in *Oprichnik* where the language itself is integral to the message, the task is made more challenging by the difficulties Gambrell identifies. In his detailed study of Sorokin's work, Uffelman addresses the nature of the language used in *Oprichnik*.¹⁷⁷ He views language as key to the novel's description of the dystopian Russia of 2028 and defines *Oprichnik* as a 'case-study in political-linguistic psychology.'¹⁷⁸ Uffelman, as well as Marina Aptekman in her 2009 comparison between *Oprichnik* and Pyotr Krasnov's *Behind the Thistle*, notes that it is possible to read *Oprichnik* solely as a political satire, or 'social pamphlet'.¹⁷⁹ Uffelman considers this approach to be an 'aesthetically insensitive' reading of the novel. Instead, he considers what he terms the 'meta-linguistic features' of the text as central to its understanding, and advocates reading *Oprichnik* as a 'meta-dystopian' novel, alluding to totalitarian regimes in general, rather than a predominantly political novel.¹⁸⁰

Aptekman's and Uffelman's focus on language highlights the importance to this study of analysing the translation strategies used in *Oprichnik*, especially since the novel has been marketed in the West chiefly through a political prism.¹⁸¹ To that end, I will evaluate both the translations of the *skaz* form of the novel and its pseudo-folkloric language. I will also consider Platt's critique that Gambrell made the English text 'too accessible' to Anglophone readers and offer evidence that

¹⁷⁵ Cohen, 'A Strange and Endless Journey'.

¹⁷⁶ Bassnett and Lefevere, *Translation, History*, p. 8.

¹⁷⁷ Uffelman, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*.

¹⁷⁸ Uffelman, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, p. 141.

¹⁷⁹ See Chapter One, p. 83. Uffelman, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, p. 132.; Aptekman, 'Forward to the Past'.

¹⁸⁰ Uffelman, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, p. 133.

¹⁸¹ For a discussion of marketing, see Chapter Four p. 260.

the text of the novel appeared exactly in the way that Gambrell had intended — with little editorial intervention.¹⁸²

3.2a *Skaz* as Linguistic *Stiob*

Per-Arne Bodin regards Sorokin's tone in *Oprichnik* as one of 'linguistic *stiob*', a form of irony achieved through over identification with its subject.¹⁸³ This satire is embedded in language used by *Oprichnik*'s protagonist Komiaga and conveyed through the *skaz* style of the novel. Aptekman holds that Sorokin's use of *skaz* allows us to 'see the protagonist not as an individual but as a social class, a representative of the collective subconscious "we"'.¹⁸⁴ This gives him the opportunity for social criticism and parody.¹⁸⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin defines *skaz* as a 'technique or mode of narration that imitates the oral speech of an individualised narrator'.¹⁸⁶ In *Oprichnik*, however, the *skaz* form allows Sorokin to critique the society Komiaga inhabits without obvious author intervention. Language is thus central to both Komiaga's characterisation, and to Sorokin's authorial intentions. The vehicle of *skaz* allows Sorokin to reveal his retrofuturistic Russia in all its violence without turning the novel into what Aptekman refers to as a 'social pamphlet'.¹⁸⁷

What Uffelmann and Aptekman describe as this 'doubleness' of Sorokin's language, can also be described as 'double directed' *skaz*, where the author of the novel and the narrator are not in agreement.¹⁸⁸ However it is important that the reader is able to recognise what Sorokin is trying to achieve in order to take part in the game. Bakhtin holds that if *skaz* is in play, but the reader cannot recognise when the discourse proceeds in what he calls a 'twofold direction', then 'stylization will be taken for style, parody for simply a poor work of art'.¹⁸⁹ Allowing Komiaga to speak for himself enables him to express his society's values without judgement. It is therefore crucial to the translation that Komiaga's own particular

¹⁸² Platt, 'Dress-Up Games'.

¹⁸³ *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia*, p. 216. See Chapter One, p. 68 for a discussion of *stiob*.

¹⁸⁴ Aptekman, 'Forward to The Past', p. 257.

¹⁸⁵ Aptekman, 'Forward to The Past', p. 257.

¹⁸⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. by Caryl Emerson, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.8.

¹⁸⁷ Aptekman, 'Forward to The Past', p.290. Sorokin talks about violence and humour being at the heart of Russian culture, and as inspiration for *Oprichnik* in his interview, Vladimir Sorokin, 'Vladimir Sorokin v Ukraine'.

¹⁸⁸ Bakhtin, 'Discourse Typology in Prose', p. 176.

¹⁸⁹ Bakhtin, 'Discourse Typology in Prose', p. 186.

idiolect be accurately presented, while making it clear that the language is itself a form of *stiob*, and not to be taken at face value. Representing this ‘double directed *skaz*’ is one of the principal obstacles to achieving dynamic equivalence in translation, and casts doubt on FSG’s claims that the book would be easy to translate.¹⁹⁰

In her essay on *Oprichnik*, Roesen argues that Komiaga’s role as an important member of society is confirmed by his reinforcement of the relatively new State’s language norms.¹⁹¹ The norms set by ‘His Majesty’ (Gosudar’ in Russian – literally the ‘Ruler’) reveal the political and cultural values of the State. Komiaga’s need to remind his fellow Oprichniks not to use obscenities following the gang rape of an enemy’s wife. This not only indicates that the State’s control of language is not yet absolute, but also clarifies that while incorrect language is not permitted, violent crime is.¹⁹² Komiaga’s desire to enforce the new language hints at its importance within the novel and confirms the importance of a faithful translation.

Aptekman, who describes the ‘oldespeak’ of *Oprichnik* as ‘grotesque’, adopts Bakhtin’s definition that a grotesque is formed when languages that ‘represent two world views’ intersect.¹⁹³ Problems arise for the translator as this grotesque State-imposed language meets English and requires translation not only at a textual-linguistic but also cultural level. It is not possible for Gambrell to consistently create functional equivalence, and even if she could, it would only be effective for the most culturally aware reader. Hence the novel is reduced to the lowest common denominator, and the most relatable of its thematic elements — that of political commentary.¹⁹⁴ I would argue that this reduction of a complex text to this basic message is indicative of FSG’s marketing approach and is a common issue in the reception of contemporary Russian fiction. In the following sections I will analyse the extent of loss in terms of meaning and lexis in *Oprichnik*, and how this limits the Western reader’s reception of Sorokin’s text.

¹⁹⁰ Nida and Taber, *Theory and Practice*, p.14.

¹⁹¹ Roesen, ‘Drive of the Oprichnik’, p. 269.

¹⁹² See below p. 312 for a discussion of the translation of this scene.

¹⁹³ Aptekman, ‘Forward to the Past’, p. 285.

¹⁹⁴ For a discussion of how this view affects reception and marketing, see Chapter Four.

3.2b *Bylina*

One of the many challenges present in *Oprichnik* is the translation of a chapter written as a *bylina* — a historical form of ‘Russian folk epic poetry’ which Alex Alexander describes as infused with patriotic meaning.¹⁹⁵ *Oprichnik’s bylina* is an epic poem about the seven-headed dragon Gorynych and can be considered the apotheosis of Komiaga’s linguistic style.¹⁹⁶ Komiaga and his six colleagues experience a collective dream under the influence of the narcotic golden fish they have injected into their veins. During the dream, which Komiaga narrates as an obscene poem, each Oprichnik is the head of the Gorynych. They fly to the US, attack buildings, and commit rape.¹⁹⁷ For Aptekman, this scene is at the heart of the message of *Oprichnik*, embodying not only its themes, but emblematic of the spoken style of the text.¹⁹⁸ A *bylina’s* inherent patriotism, inferred by Alexander’s study, means that it is entirely fitting for the loyal Komiaga to describe his dream about attacking America in this form. The role of Gorynych references the tradition of the *bylina* but turns the trope of dragon as the enemy around. Instead, Gorynych represents the collective will and latent violence of the Oprichniki in their fight against the West. It also continues the theme of sexual violence and machismo that readers in the book group found so difficult to accept.

Since the poem’s *bylina* form is intrinsic to the novel’s message, it is important for the reader to understand its significance. In the roundtable discussion at the University of Bergen (2013), Gambrell admitted that this was difficult, and that success on her part depended first on achieving a strong understanding of the original:

For example, in *Day of the Oprichnik*, there are a great many very different poems, almost all of which allude to a specific Russian writer. These writers are not known to the reader, unless he is a Slavist. In every instance it must be rendered in an appropriate way, and it’s very difficult to formulate a general approach. For me it was especially challenging to translate the narcotic trip of the Oprichniks, the dragon Gorynych, since it is written as a

¹⁹⁵ Alex Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale: The Origins of Russian Heroic Poetry, Bylina and Fairy Tale* (The Hague: Paris: De Gruyter Mouton, 1973) p. 13 and p. 97.

¹⁹⁶ Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik* (FSG edition), pp. 77-83.

¹⁹⁷ *Oprichnik*, p. 83.

¹⁹⁸ Aptekman, ‘Forward to the Past’, p. 255.

bylina, a genre which does not exist in English. In every instance the translator has, first of all, to get a very good grasp of the original.¹⁹⁹

Gambrell retains the form of the *bylina*, recreating rhymes and metre, and retaining the repetitious nature of the text. Although the target reader is unlikely to be able to name the exact device of the passage, it is clear that this is a folkloric, epic poem of some kind. Without footnotes or context, however, the patriotic nature of the *bylina* described by Alexander is at risk of being overlooked by the target audience.²⁰⁰

3.2c The Impossible Quest for Functional Equivalence

At the same roundtable discussion with Uffelmann and Sorokin, Gambrell spoke about the difficulty of attaining functional equivalence.²⁰¹ In particular, she registered the challenge of translating humour and cultural context. Indeed, since the English edition of *Oprichnik* is not footnoted, much of the novel's cultural context, and subsequently the aim of Sorokin's satire, is lost.²⁰² Without any cultural background, or guidance from the translator (or indeed the publisher), the allusion to Eurasianist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, 'Duga the Devil' grunting 'Eur-gasia!' is easily missed, as is the fact that Komiaga travels to the Far East to visit a fortune teller named Praskov'ia, who happens to share her name with the wife of the advisor to the last Tsars, Grigori Rasputin.²⁰³ Similarly, the use of old Russian, and the quasi-folkloric vocabulary that Sorokin creates do not carry the same connotations for the Western reader.²⁰⁴ For example, the translation of 'mobilo' with its old Russian ending of 'o' as the English 'mobilov' does nothing to connote Sorokin's archaic word play, but instead appears to the Anglophone reader as a parody of a Russian word.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁹ 'Translating Sorokin/Translated Sorokin', p.351.

²⁰⁰ Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, p. 13.

²⁰¹ Alexander, *Bylina and Fairy Tale*, p. 358.

²⁰² Lawton was reluctant to include footnotes for Sorokin; Interviews with Lawton. A similar issue was experienced by members of the book group when reading *Sankya*, though this was due instead to their failure to notice the novel's glossary. See earlier this chapter, p. 283.

²⁰³ *Oprichnik*, pp. 146 and 113. Aleksandr Dugin is a little better known in the West since the war began, and his daughter was killed. See Masha Gessen, 'The Mysterious Murder of Darya Dugina', *The New Yorker*, 26 August 2022 <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-mysterious-murder-of-darya-dugina>> [accessed 10 February 2023].

²⁰⁴ Aptekman, 'The Old New Russian', p. 285.

²⁰⁵ Aptekman, 'The Old New Russian', p. 249.

Bona fide old Russian words appear throughout the novel but remain unmarked in the English. Aptekman lists archaic references such as ‘terem’ (women’s chamber), which in the first appearance is translated simply as the unmarked ‘house.’²⁰⁶ When discussing money, ‘tselkovyi’ is used in the original, denoting an old silver rouble coin, whereas in the English it is simply a rouble, or other obsolete coin, where perhaps a groat might have been more appropriate.²⁰⁷ Other terms include the historic term ‘tsiriulnik’ translated with the neutral word ‘barber’ where no direct equivalent in English exists — like the older English profession it implies an element of surgery, or medical care.²⁰⁸ Likewise, some of the archaic terms within Sorokin’s old-Russian neologisms are translated without the same old-language references. ‘Khladoognennykh’ becomes ‘cold-firing ray guns’ rather than the literal translation ‘cold flammers’, while the ‘vestniki’, literally ‘messengers’ that await the Oprichniks after they have burned down the home of a nobleman are translated with the neutral word ‘reporters’, omitting the old-fashioned reference altogether.²⁰⁹

As Uffelmann highlights, another of Sorokin’s linguistic strategies is to render everyday Russian words ‘archaic’. For example, the contemporary ‘tol’ko’ (only) is replaced by ‘tokmo’ (solely).²¹⁰ Uffelmann also highlights the use of ‘nadobno’, or ‘to need to’.²¹¹ In Gambrell’s translation, these are either translated in the modern idiom or ignored. In some cases, she compensates for the loss of these terms in the rest of the sentence. For example, ‘Tokmo zakryta ona za nenadobnost’iu’ becomes ‘It stands empty for want of use.’²¹² Also, ‘Tokmo angelu, padshemu s Prestola Gospodnia, moglo v um priiti takoe’ becomes, ‘Such a thing could be considered only by angels falling from the Lord’s throne.’²¹³

By contrast, my interviews with Lawton revealed an alternative approach to translating such vocabulary, and demonstrated how some editors react to old-

²⁰⁶ Aptekman, ‘The Old New Russian’, p. 285; *Oprichnik*, p. 18, *Den’ Oprichnika*, p. 26.

²⁰⁷ *Oprichnik*, p. 91, *Den’ Oprichnika*, p. 114

²⁰⁸ *Oprichnik*, p. 6, *Den’ Oprichnika*, p. 9.

²⁰⁹ *Oprichnik*, p. 15, *Den’ Oprichnika*, p. 22; . *Oprichnik*, p. 28, *Den’ Oprichnika*, p. 39. Uffelmann highlights the choice of ‘vestnik’ in Russian but does not comment on the translation solution; Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin’s Discourses*, p. 142.

²¹⁰ *Oprichnik*, p. 40.

²¹¹ Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin’s Discourses*, p. 143.

²¹² *Oprichnik*, p. 72, *Den’ Oprichnika*, p.92. The Russian reads ‘Only closed it is for not-needed-ness’.

²¹³ *Oprichnik*, p. 72, *Den’ Oprichnika*, p.93. In Russian this reads ‘Only angels falling from the throne of the Lord, could into their head come such a thing.’

fashioned language in translation. Lawton has recently translated Sorokin's *Sakharnyi Kreml'* (*Sugar Kremlin*) which will be published by NYRB Classics in 2024, and which takes place in a universe related to *Oprichnik*.²¹⁴ In the final chapter of *Sakharnyi Kreml'*, *Oprichnik's* Komiaga makes an appearance. For Lawton, whose translation approach is not to 'unweird' Sorokin, but to follow the author's approach to his own texts, translating these terms is vital:

I do the old language [...]. So when Sorokin says *nadobno*, I say *must needs*, I don't just act as if it were *nada* (nothing — Spanish).²¹⁵

He also explains why this can be challenging for editors. When Lawton submitted his first draft, Frank apparently queried his rendering of 'antiquated words':

I said [to Frank] they are meant to sound a bit weird. Because it's like everyone is playing a new medieval game [...] where you say *nadobno* [must needs] it's like you're playing a certain game. *Mne nadobno tuda idti*. It doesn't sound exactly good in Russian, so I told him it was meant to sound a bit off. He was relieved and said there are almost no changes.²¹⁶

Other decisions alter the way a text is read. Aptekman describes Sorokin's clever neologism of 'krugovukha' for example, which can be most closely translated as 'gang rape'.²¹⁷ Aptekman explains that this term is made by combining criminal slang for gang rape, 'postavit' na krug' (literally 'to put in a circle') with the youth slang for the same term 'gruppovukha'.²¹⁸ She argues that by creating such terms, he 'empowers everyday words with ritualised meanings.' Gambrell's translation of this term sidesteps this issue, and uses the colloquial, ironic, and much less threatening 'roll in the hay' which almost implies consent on behalf of the victim.²¹⁹ This also fails to signal the ritual nature of the gang rape to the reader, although it does not lessen the violence, which in some sense becomes more shocking because of the victim's implied consent, and the casual attitude of the Oprichniks.

²¹⁴ Sorokin, *Sakharnyi Kreml'*. See Chapter One, p. 82 for more details on this novel.

²¹⁵ Interview with Lawton, December 2021.

²¹⁶ Interview with Lawton, December 2021.

²¹⁷ Aptekman, 'The Old New Russian', p. 286.

²¹⁸ Aptekman, 'The Old New Russian', p. 286.

²¹⁹ *Oprichnik*, p. 26, *Den' Oprichnika*, p. 34.

Another issue that escapes translation, and which has the most notable effect of making the text easier to read, is the treatment of word order. Aptekman points out that Komiaga often places predicates ahead of subjects and after nouns — a stylistic trait that is not reflected in the English text.²²⁰ Take for example, ‘Krestimsia my i klaniaemsia’, which word-for-word translates as ‘cross ourselves we and bow’. In Gambrell’s version this appears as ‘We cross ourselves and bow’, losing both the complexity and the archaic linguistic markers.²²¹ Despite the fact that this would be difficult to sell in English, and that it might be rendered comical by its similarities with the idiolect of *Star War’s* Yoda, another solution could have been found, rather than the decision to leave it in modern syntax.²²² Any difficult decisions, such as those taken by Lawton in his later translations of Sorokin, might have been signalled in a translator’s note or glossary — both of which are absent from both FSG and PRH’s editions.

The importance of translating Komiaga’s language accurately, and the almost impossible task of creating a dynamic equivalent to the original, is the source of Platt’s criticism of Gambrell’s translation.²²³ In his article for *Public Books*, Platt gives an example of Gambrell’s work, followed by a rendering of his own, which he feels is more faithful to the tone of the Russian text:

Jamey Gambrell: These people are like unto vile worms that feed and nourish themselves on carrion. Spineless, twisted, insatiable, blind—that’s why they are kindred with the despicable worm. Liberals differ from the lowly worm only in their mesmerizing, witch-brewed speechifying. Like venom and reeking puss they spew it all about, poisoning humans and God’s very world, defiling its holy purity and simplicity, befouling it as far as the very bluest horizon of the heavenly vault with the reptilian drool of their mockery, jeers,

²²⁰ Aptekman, ‘The Old New Russian’, p. 290.

²²¹ *Oprichnik*, p. 30, *Den’ Oprichnika*, p. 41.

²²² An alternative approach to translating similar language was demonstrated by Lisa Hayden in Vodolazkin’s *Laurus*. The novel also relies on a mix of archaisms, slang and dialect. Hayden solves some of these problems by retaining archaic words and detailing them in a glossary that accompanies the book. Meanwhile, in the translator’s note that acts as an introduction to the novel, she describes her efforts to recreate the same effect of Vodolazkin’s language for her Anglophone readers by researching and combining words led chiefly by her intuition. Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2016).

²²³ Platt, ‘Dress-Up Games’.

derision, contempt, double-dealing, disbelief, distrust, envy, spite, and shamelessness.²²⁴

Kevin Platt: Vile are they, like unto the wirme, nourishing itself on carrion-offal. Flabbiness, sinuosity, gluttony, blindness—by all this they are rendered kindred to the despised wirme. From suchlike they may be distinguished onely by the eloquencie that they splatter about themselves like venom and odious pus, poisoning not onely peple, but God’s world itself, befouling, besmattering its holy purity and simplicity to the blue orizont, to the very spehare of heaven’s vault with the serpent spittle of their mockery, derysion, double-dealing, doubt, suspicion, envy, rage and lewdness.²²⁵

Unlike Gambrell, Platt has not reduced the sentence length in his translation, and he relies on a pseudo-antiquated form of spelling. This is in keeping with the pseudo-old-Russian elements of Sorokin’s text. It is clear that Platt’s rendering, though closer to the Russian in a literal sense, might present issues for the Anglophone reader. His *skopos* of remaining utterly faithful to the author creates a text that is less likely to appeal to a wider audience; the focus is firmly placed on the language rather and thus to some extent obscures the message of the text. While some publishers such as Open Letter might have readers who openly prefer novels that are ‘complex and difficult’, it is clear from my interview with Shishkin that complexity is often a barrier to mainstream publication.²²⁶ Platt is suspicious of the reasons for what he sees as a ‘mainstreaming’ of the language in *Oprichnik*, and while he correctly surmises that FSG published the novel because of its topical nature, he questions whether they have made Sorokin more legible to make the text more accessible to a wider audience.²²⁷

²²⁴ Vladimir Sorokin, trans. by Jamey Gambrell, *Day of the Oprichnik*, p. 22.

²²⁵ Platt, ‘Dress-Up Games’. The original Russian text reads: ‘Gnusny oni, iako chervie, stervoi-padal’iu sebia propitaiushchee. Miagkotelost’, izvilistost’, nenasytnost’, slepota—vot chto rodnit ikh s cherviem prezrennym. Ot onogo otlichny liberaly nashi tokmo vel’mirechivost’iu, koei, iako iadom i gnoem smerdiashchim, bryzhut oni vokrug sebia, otravliaia ne tokmo chelovekov, no i sam mir Bozhii, zagazhivaia, zabryzgivaia ego sviatuyiu chistotu i prostotu do samogo golubogo okoema, do oshariiia svoda nebesnogo zmeinoiu slyunoiu svoego glumleniia, nasmekhatel’stva, prezreniia, dvurushnichestva, somneniia, nedoveriia, zavisti, zloby i besstydstva.’ *Den’ Oprichnika*, p.26.

²²⁶ See Chapter Three, p. 204.

²²⁷ Platt, ‘Dress-Up Games’.

3.3 The Editing Process

In comparison to *Sankya*, the editing process that *Oprichnik* underwent at FSG was rigorous and resulted in a text that is coherent. Incidentally, this novel did not arouse any feelings of mistrust in my book group. Rather, it produced comments of admiration for Gambrell's herculean task. However, the novel's editor Krotov agreed that some elements of the text were simplified. This simplification did not occur, Krotov stated, because of either Gambrell's or Sorokin's political stances:

I definitely don't think that was conscious on Jamey's part in any way. She had strong political opinions certainly, and about Putin's Russia, but I don't think that would be a pretext for legibility or anything.²²⁸

It is also possible that as a young editor working on his first Russian book, Krotov felt unable to question Gambrell's choices because they were presented as author endorsed.²²⁹ Despite the political positioning of *Oprichnik* from the time of its signing onwards, Krotov maintained that none of the simplification of language was required by himself or FSG. Crucially, Krotov believes that there is no direct correlation between the politics of a publisher, and the work of a translator:

I think translators of course internalise any number of ideologies, but I actually think that the rhetoric or ideology of publishing is in some sense quite distinct from the work of a translator — they're not really operating in any kind of unified way except that the industry commissions the translator.²³⁰

Krotov was also clear that he did not view any simplification as a conscious choice on Gambrell's part. He explained that 'given the choice between a certain kind of legibility, and a degree of 'accurate inscrutability' I think she would have chosen the former.'²³¹

Despite the difference in size and resources between publishers, interviews suggest that neither *Sankya* nor *Oprichnik* were translated in accordance with strict direction from their editors. Instead, both English texts appear to have been produced in accordance with their translators' wishes – and, I argue, are largely

²²⁸ Interview with Krotov.

²²⁹ Interview with Krotov.

²³⁰ Interview with Krotov.

²³¹ Interview with Krotov.

a result of their translatorial *hexis* (in the case of *Sankya*), and the desire to create an accessible text on the part of Gambrell. These translator decisions over vocabulary and syntax appear to be orientated towards the needs of the Anglophone reader — although as discussed, this leads to partial loss of contextualisation and understanding. While translator error is always a possible explanation for these textual-linguistic and cultural losses, I would argue that the pattern of “decisions” in each text are indicative of an overall pattern in the translation strategy. The question only remains over the extent to which the *skopos* of each translator was conscious rather unconscious.

The control that translators have over the target text then, suggests that Pym is correct when he asserts that responsibility for the final text belongs to the translator. An ethical approach is less evident in publishers’ consequent decisions to position both of these novels politically in order to make the maximum sales. This meant that *Sankya* was endorsed by Putin’s rival Navalny, and Sorokin was marketed primarily as a dissident author, his novel a ‘diagnosis’ of Russia’s problems. The reactions of my book group suggest, however, that many of these translation issues are overlooked in favour of a good, informative story. *Sankya*, by this criteria, is more acceptable than *Oprichnik*. The interest that Prilepin’s novel held for readers, even once they were aware of his politics, underlines the need for publishers to take responsibility for accurately contextualising the novels they publish.

4 Politics in translation

Although they do not account for the entire reception of a novel, translator decisions are key to the final tone and message of a text. As discussed above, translators’ decisions can be influenced by political bias, moral judgements and translatorial *hexis*, or as with Gambrell’s approach, a quest for clarity and the needs of the target audience. However, both of these approaches betray a bias of one kind or another. This contradicts the approach advocated by Milutinović, who holds that no intentional bias should be used, especially in regard to politically sensitive texts.²³² This remains the case even when translators might

²³² Milutinović, ‘Translators as Ambassadors and Gatekeepers’.

believe they are acting ethically, or for good reason, such as Gambrell's quest for clarity, or Parker's overall aim to highlight the protest movement in Russia.

The sixteen Russian-to-English translators I have interviewed in the course of my research described various approaches to morally difficult language and authorial stances. Among these, Bromfield agrees with Milutinović, and commits to faithfully representing Elizarov's *The Librarian*, despite the fact that he does not agree with his politics.²³³ In this way Bromfield demonstrates Milutinović's theory that 'Agreeing to translate a text with which one disagrees does not imply complicity' — a proposition that Parker might consider.²³⁴ I will also analyse Schwartz's translatorial decisions in *Maidenhair*, and demonstrate that she takes her implied reader into account when she translates some of the questionable vocabulary so as not to cloud Shishkin's overall liberal message.²³⁵ This, I suggest, is a less clear-cut example of translator bias since Schwartz acts as a cultural intermediary, translating cultural as well as textual-linguistic differences in order to translate cultural references.

Alongside a consideration of Bromfield's approach to *The Librarian*, and Schwartz's decisions around *Maidenhair*, I will also discuss the strategies translators employ when faced with challenging language and themes. These most commonly appear as expressions of xenophobic attitudes, as in *The Librarian* and *Maidenhair*. I will consider how translators make their decisions about what they can and cannot translate, and the fact that it is often considered safer to translate dead rather than living authors.²³⁶ I will also assess the value and importance of the translator-author relationship, and how this differs between "nationalist" and "liberal" writers.²³⁷

4.1 When to Translate

I have mentioned the ethical dilemmas faced by translators around what they should translate above. In Chapter Two, I described the types of Russian texts publishers are willing to commission, and how they make decisions about what

²³³ See p. 320 below.

²³⁴ Milutinović, 'Translators as Ambassadors', p. 43.

²³⁵ See p. 325 below.

²³⁶ It is interesting to consider whether this might be one of the reasons that less contemporary Russian writers are translated than classics.

²³⁷ Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, p. 31.

is, and is not acceptable for publication. In Chapter Three, I detailed the central role that translators play in the commissioning of Russian authors. I showed that although translators are reliant on editors to make final commissioning decisions, they initiate the consecrating process by pitching novels to publishers. As I have established, “nationalist” writers such as Prilepin are less likely to be commissioned by Anglophone publishers because of the reputational risk they incur. For individual translators, the issue of reputation is equally important. Parker’s reaction to Prilepin’s increasing unacceptability is a pertinent illustration of the personal involvement and responsibility some translators feel about their authors, regardless of the fact that Pym deems this sense of accountability unnecessary.²³⁸

In order to create a point of reference, I asked each of the translators I interviewed whether they would translate Prilepin, and almost without exception, they stated that they would not. Their reasons varied, however. Lawton admitted that he would not translate Prilepin because his books were not well written and were ‘pure politics’ (an opinion that my book group did not corroborate).²³⁹ Curiously, Elizarov’s anti-Ukrainian, homophobic, and misogynist politics had not put him out of consideration for Lawton at least prior to 2022. The translator noted that he was creating a reputation for himself of working with ‘problematic’ writers.²⁴⁰ I would also question whether translating authors who generate controversy forms part of Lawton’s translatorial identity (only provided they are also relatively highbrow, and more fundamentally, transgressive). This is exemplified by Lawton’s translation of *Their Four Hearts* in particular, but also applies to his work on Céline and Littell. While Prilepin has abhorrent views, none are perhaps presented in a shocking enough way to contribute to Lawton’s brand.

While Prilepin remains out of the question for most, it appears to be acceptable, to translate problematic authors once they have passed away.²⁴¹ Bryan Karetnyk

²³⁸ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 166.

²³⁹ Interviews with Lawton

²⁴⁰ Interviews with Lawton. At the time of writing, Lawton was translating two Jonathon Littell novels, was attempting to commission Eduard Limonov, and had been contacted to translate Nazi sympathiser Céline. Sorokin’s *Their Four Hearts* is hardly without controversy either. See Chapter One, p.73 for more on this. Elizarov has been accused of homophobia and xenophobia; see Chapter One, p. 109.

²⁴¹ As discussed in Chapter One, Glagoslav published Prilepin’s *The Monastery* since his notorious interview in 2019.

was among a number of translators and editors who felt that Limonov (1943-2020) could now be published in English.²⁴² Limonov began his writing career with *It's Me, Eddie (Eto ia – Edichka)* in 1976, and became highly controversial in 1992 when he was filmed in a BBC documentary alongside Radovan Karadzic, apparently indiscriminately firing weapons towards the city of Sarajevo.²⁴³ Like Prilepin after him, Limonov evolved from being a merely questionable to an indisputably unacceptable author.²⁴⁴ His death, however, has meant that it is now safe, in some people's minds, to consider translating him.²⁴⁵ For Karetnyk, translating Limonov's early publications, written before the author's involvement in the Serbian war, feels permissible — he believes that a novel and its author's politics should be separate entities.²⁴⁶ Lawton concurred, stating that although he disagreed with many of the authors he was slated to translate, he was willing to consider their politics and their novels as separate entities.²⁴⁷ I suggest that this is an increasingly challenging proposition when authors are actively engaged in politics, and political (extratextual) action that bring actual harm, as is the case for those authors who support the war against Ukraine.

Lawton's slight reluctance in late 2021 to translate Elizarov, despite his comments that he was happy to do this in 2020, might well have been precipitated by Russia's increasingly unpopular geopolitical position.²⁴⁸ By late 2021 Lawton felt that bringing Elizarov to a larger Western audience would increase the author's standing in Russia, which might anger 'some people.'²⁴⁹ This reveals Lawton's concerns over his own reputation in relation to the texts he chooses to translate. As Pym's ethical principles emphasize, a translator is responsible for the decision over whether to translate or not.²⁵⁰ In comparison to Parker, who decided to

²⁴² Interview with Karetnyk.

²⁴³ Eduard Limonov, *It's Me, Eddie: A Fictional Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1983). The footage is available here; *Russian Writer Shooting at Sarajevo* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tH_v6aL1D84&feature=youtu.be> [accessed 18 March 2020].

²⁴⁴ Marc Bennetts, 'Eduard Limonov Interview: Political Rebel and Vladimir Putin's Worst Nightmare', *The Observer*, 12 December 2010 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/12/eduard-limonov-interview-putin-nightmare>> [accessed 17 September 2022]. Fedor, 'Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars', p. 23.

²⁴⁵ Interview with Lawton.

²⁴⁶ Interview with Karetnyk.

²⁴⁷ Interview with Lawton.

²⁴⁸ See Chapter Three, p. 319.

²⁴⁹ Interview with Lawton, November 2021.

²⁵⁰ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 166.

consecrate Prilepin before it was clear the path he would take, Lawton is able to predict with some certainty that a translation of Elizarov's *Zemlia* would, for the moment at least, be a professional misstep.

In contrast, Bromfield was not concerned with this issue when he translated Elizarov's *The Librarian* for Pushkin Press.²⁵¹ He regarded his task as simply to translate the text, while remaining faithful to the author's intentions.²⁵² Another independent publisher described the difficulties of finding a translator into Dutch for Elizarov, since the 'liberal' person they approached refused the work on account of the author's politics.²⁵³ Other translators have a clear sense of where the line is for them, such as Schwartz's decision to stop translating an anti-Semitic text.²⁵⁴ She also felt that she could not translate Prilepin because his position was 'way over the line'.²⁵⁵ Deep Vellum's Evans expressed the same opinion, though stressed that it was not Prilepin's fiction, but rather his extratextual position that made him impossible to support.²⁵⁶

It is safer to translate questionable language, or to publish out-of-date views, then, if an author is no longer alive. Pushkin Press queried some of Karenyk's terminology in his translations of Gaito Gazdanov, an émigré Russian writing at the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁵⁷ Gazdanov referred to the 'yellow races' for example, in reference to people from eastern Asia.²⁵⁸ However, Karenyk defended his decision to retain the term, regarding the removal of phrases such as this as a form of censorship.²⁵⁹ He questioned where such censorship would end, such as removing the anti-Semitism from Dostoevsky, or the homophobia and misogyny from Nabokov.²⁶⁰ He argued that texts should not be censored in order to make them acceptable to modern readers.²⁶¹ If the author is living, and

²⁵¹ Interview with Bromfield.

²⁵² Interview with Bromfield

²⁵³ Interviewee #4.

²⁵⁴ Interview with Schwartz.

²⁵⁵ Interview with Schwartz.

²⁵⁶ Interview with Evans. I return to the question of publisher responsibility in the conclusion to this chapter, p. 329.

²⁵⁷ Interview with Karenyk.

²⁵⁸ Interview with Karenyk.

²⁵⁹ Interview with Karenyk.

²⁶⁰ Interview with Karenyk.

²⁶¹ Interview with Karenyk.

actively supports an ongoing conflict, however, the task is more fraught.²⁶² The question of censoring early twentieth-century texts, and the fact that they can be more or less safely translated because of their vintage and status, bears little resemblance to publishing the controversial views and politics of a modern, living author whose actions and pronouncements might have real world consequences.

There is an inconsistency among publishers in their refusal to publish a novel by an author like Prilepin where the text itself does not represent anything transgressive per se, but who decide to translate other questionable texts. For example, Deep Vellum published Dmitri Lipskerov's *The Tool and the Butterflies* (*O nem i o babochKax*, 2016) in 2020 which contains a racist passage that references Mike Tyson.²⁶³ Likewise, Dalkey Archive published Sorokin's *Their Four Hearts* which contains graphic scenes of paedophilia and deeply disturbing sexual violence.²⁶⁴ What renders Prilepin unacceptable in much of the West is the fact that his extratextual transgressions have directly affected real people. In 2017, he admitted to killing Ukrainian soldiers, and in 2023 he continued to take part in the war in Ukraine, despite the attempt on his life.²⁶⁵ In comparison, Sorokin's descriptions of paedophilia and sexual violence appear to be permissible because his work is framed paratextually as containing an anti-Putin political message and as offering context about contemporary Russia.²⁶⁶ Again, the question of ethics here is also one for publishers who commission and print these novels rather than translators.

²⁶² Consider the reactions to the Dzanc book that was criticised because it was perceived as anti-Muslim. See Chapter Three, p. 202. Also, the furore around the Nobel Prize winner Peter Handke; Alison Flood, 'Nobel Prize for Literature Tipped to Make Safe Pick after Years of Scandal', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/05/nobel-prize-for-literature-tipped-to-make-safe-pick-after-years-of-scandal>> [accessed 8 June 2022].

²⁶³ Lipskerov, *The Tool and the Butterflies*, p. 45. Although this has escaped censure, it is largely because the novel was hardly reviewed in the press at all. Only one lengthy review appeared here: 'Lipskerov: The Tool and the Butterflies', *The Modern Novel* <<https://www.themodernnovel.org/europe/europe/russia/dmitri-lipskerov/the-tool-and-the-butterflies/>> [accessed 16 September 2022].

²⁶⁴ Sorokin, *Their Four Hearts*.

²⁶⁵ Prilepin first enrolled to fight in January 2023, and announced plans to return to military service in August 2023. See: 'Prilepin podpisal kontrakt s rosgvardiei i otpravilsia v zonu spetsoperatsii', *RIA Novosti*, 26 January 2023 <<https://ria.ru/20230126/prilepin-1847652911.html>> [accessed 1 February 2023]; Aleksei Krasovskii, 'Zakhar Prilepin stanet politrukcom novogo polka osobogo naznacheniiia Rosgvardii na baze batal'ona "Oplot"', *Daily Storm*, 1 August 2023 <<https://dailystorm.ru/news/pisatel-zahar-prilepin-stanet-politrukcom-novogo-polka-osobogo-naznacheniya-rosgvardii-na-baze-batalona-oplot/>> [accessed 1 August 2023].

²⁶⁶ For example, see Ben Hooyman, 'Russia's Finest Metaphysician'.

4.2 Translation Strategies and Politics

*'The translator's loyalty is to the author and to his text, whether he likes the author or not.'*²⁶⁷

Once a translator has accepted a commission, they are, Pym states, responsible for the effects of their translations, but not for the 'matter translated.'²⁶⁸ Through interviews it is clear that translators perceive differently the effects that morally difficult language will have in translation. Lawton is wedded to recreating Sorokin faithfully in English, and Bromfield takes a similar approach. This is not because Bromfield is in thrall to his authors, as Lawton appears to be, but through a sense of duty to faithfully represent a text.²⁶⁹ In the following section, therefore, I will analyse Bromfield's approach to translating Elizarov and question the ethical roles of the translator and publisher when working with authors whose views are relevant to ongoing, and dangerous geopolitical situations such as the war against Ukraine.

When I asked Bromfield about translating offensive vocabulary in *The Librarian*, he was very clear about his loyalty to the author. He selected direct equivalents for the words used by Elizarov. What Bromfield termed his 'theory of translation' is summarised here:

...the translator attempts to express in the target language everything that the author wrote in the original language, on the assumption that the author wrote what he wanted to write. And I don't assume that I have the right to act as a second author, or as an internal editor of his text. That's what he wrote, that is what he wanted to write — that's what I assume.²⁷⁰

This is clear in the following passage from *The Librarian*, where Bromfield preserves the word 'khach', which is a derogatory term for a person from Armenia, replacing it with 'wog' which maintains the offensiveness of the term:

²⁶⁷ Interview with Bromfield.

²⁶⁸ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 166.

²⁶⁹ Interview with Bromfield.

²⁷⁰ Interview with Bromfield.

Once there were four friends who live a life of fun,
Chasing women, drinking vodka, beating up the wogs...²⁷¹

‘Khach’ appears again in a chapter titled ‘Uglies’, in a direct transliteration from the Russian ‘Ugly’, which refers to a gang of Chechens who run a protection racket in the local town. Here Bromfield translates the derogatory ‘churok’ as ‘wog’, in a passage that is already overtly racist. He thus confirms his duty to his author, however unpalatable the language or ideas may be.²⁷² Likewise, Bromfield makes no attempt to conceal the anti-Semitism in *The Librarian*, retaining the description of Tsofin, the ‘only Jew in his reading group’, and translating ‘zhid’ with the equally offensive ‘yid.’²⁷³ This is in direct opposition to the approach taken by the translators of *Sankya*, who, as discussed above, preferred the much more neutral ‘Jew’.

Because of his belief that the publisher, rather than the translator, is responsible for their writers’ politics, Bromfield did not research Elizarov’s political stance.²⁷⁴ When we discussed Elizarov’s views during our interview, Bromfield was not surprised to learn that Elizarov was a *krymnash* — he felt that there had been hints of this in the text.²⁷⁵ Re-reading *The Librarian* in 2022 after Russia intensified its war against Ukraine, Elizarov’s anti-Ukrainian sentiment is even more easily identified. The novel’s main hero Alexei travels from Ukraine to Russia and comments on how he feels about Ukraine’s desire for independence. His stance can be directly linked to Elizarov’s own politics, which the author expresses in his interviews and songs, as discussed in Chapter One:

I was delighted to see the Russian letter “y” at the end of so many Russian shop-name signs “Produkty” (“Groceries”), “Soki, Vody” (“Juices, Waters”), “Sigarety” (“Cigarettes”). In my native parts, where Ukrainian *nezalezhnyst* (“independence”) had been raging for almost nine years, this letter had disappeared completely.²⁷⁶

²⁷¹ *The Librarian*, p. 389, *Bibliotekar*, p. 354. ‘Zhili-byli ne tyzhili chetvero dryzei! Bab snimali, vodu pili, pizdili khachei!’

²⁷² *The Librarian*, p. 229.

²⁷³ *The Librarian*, p. 206, *Bibliotekar*, p. 196; *The Librarian*, p. 344, *Bibliotekar*, p. 322.

²⁷⁴ Interview with Bromfield.

²⁷⁵ Interview with Bromfield.

²⁷⁶ *The Librarian*, p. 84, *Bibliotekar*, p. 81 ‘Ochen’ radovola menia bukva ‘y’, vstrechaiushchiasia v nazvaniakh magazinov ‘Produkty’, ‘Soki. Vody’, ‘Sigarety’. V moikh

Bromfield's attempt at direct equivalence here is laudable, and in keeping with Milutinović's recommendation for fidelity.²⁷⁷ However, without any further contextualisation, the significance of these comments is likely to be lost on the pre-2022 Anglophone reader. Since the original text is in Russian, the Ukrainian word 'nezalezhnyst' (independence) makes an impact on the reader when it appears. Bromfield has highlighted this by transliterating rather than translating the word, but it is not possible to create an equivalent effect on the Western reader in this way.²⁷⁸ The significance of Alexei's statement and what it reveals about Elizarov's own attitudes towards Ukraine risks being lost to all but the most culturally aware target reader.

A reading of the following passage, taken from the concluding pages of *The Librarian*, seems prophetic to today's reader considering Putin's statements about Ukraine in 2022:

The union knew how to make Ukraine a motherland. But without the union Ukraine has not managed to remain one... The country in which both of my childhoods – the genuine and the fictitious – were simultaneously located was my genuine, unique Motherland, which I could never deny.²⁷⁹

Here Alexei expresses the paradox that he experiences. He was born in Soviet Ukraine as part of the Soviet Union, and now finds himself a stranger in his true Motherland, which he considers to be Russia. Although it has been represented in a faithful translation, it is possible to miss the significance of Elizarov's anti-Ukrainian sentiment here without any paratextual contextualisation.²⁸⁰

kraiiakh, gde deviatii god svirepstvovala 'nezalazhnist' [Ukrainian word], etoi bukvy sovsem ne ostalos'.'

²⁷⁷ Milutinović, 'Translators as Ambassadors', p. 43.

²⁷⁸ Translator Marian Schwartz encountered similar obstacles in translating Vodolazkin's novel *Brisbane*. She solved the issue by translating Ukrainian words into English and highlighting them with italics. See; Marian Schwartz, 'How the Russian and Ukrainian Languages Intersect in Eugene Vodolazkin's *Brisbane*', *Literary Hub*, 29 April 2022 <<https://lithub.com/how-the-russian-and-ukrainian-languages-intersect-in-eugene-vodolazkins-brisbane/>> [accessed 24 June 2023]. Eugene Vodolazkin, *Brisbane*, trans. by Marian Schwartz (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2022).

²⁷⁹ *The Librarian*, p. 405, *Bibliotekar*, p. 377, 'Soiuz znal, kak sdelat' iz Ukrainy Rodinu. A vot Ukraina bez Soiuza tak i ne smogla eiu ostat'sia... Strana, v kotoroi nakhodilis' odnovremennno dva moikh detstva – podlinnoe i vymyshlennoe, - byla edinstvennoi nastoiashchei Rodinoi, kotori ia ne mog otkazat'.'

²⁸⁰ See Chapter Four, p. 251 for a discussion of paratexts around *The Librarian*, specifically the epitextual response.

It is questionable whether Pushkin Press would have proceeded with the translation had they understood the nature of Elizarov's political beliefs when they were pitched the novel.²⁸¹ Unlike larger publishers such as NYRB Classics, it would have been a reputational risk to knowingly publish a homophobic, misogynistic *krymnash* author.²⁸² *The Librarian* would not, I believe, be commissioned in the current geopolitical climate, whether funding was available or not. Elizarov's politics, however, have not changed, and the same ethical question around publishing such an author exists today as it did when the novel was published in 2015. The difference is that the stakes for the publisher are now much higher because of the war. I would argue, as above, that translation decisions such as these highlight the need for publishers to apply an ethical approach to their commissions, as well as translators. While Bromfield might not have acted ethically by declining to raise his suspicions about Elizarov's politics, the publishers should likewise have done a small amount of research into their author's background. The accusations of fascism around *The Librarian* should have been simple to uncover with the aid of a Russian speaker.

4.3 *Maidenhair* and Translating for the Target Reader

As I will explore in this section, by examining Schwartz's translation of *Maidenhair*, other translators take a different approach. Whereas the xenophobia expressed in *The Librarian* is part of the writer's world view, and something Bromfield felt it unethical to exclude, Schwartz has orientated her translation of *Maidenhair* towards the Western reader by altering some problematic language.²⁸³ This was not, however, in an effort to conceal any unsavoury politics, as I will show, and instead Schwartz should be regarded as one of Pym's cultural intermediaries.²⁸⁴ When *Maidenhair*'s hero describes his interpreting work in the refugee-processing centre, he writes about the different races of people he sees in the yard:

²⁸¹ My interviews have not revealed who pitched Elizarov to Pushkin, but it appears to have been his agent, Goumen & Smirnova, since no translators were attached to the project before it was commissioned.

²⁸² For evidence of Elizarov's homophobia, see 'Orskaia', as discussed in Chapter One, p. 114.

²⁸³ Shishkin, *Maidenhair*.

²⁸⁴ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 165.

V okno viden dvor, tam kakoi-to negr pod pri-smotromv drugom okne drugoi dvor, tozhe sneg, i negritiata igraiut v snezhki. No eti negritiata ved' tol'ko chto igrali v snezhki, ili uzhe god proletel?²⁸⁵

This translates literally as:

In the courtyard visible from the window, there is some negro under supervision [...] in another window in another courtyard, and negro children are having a snowball fight. But weren't these the same negro children just having a snowball fight, or has a year already flown by?

Schwartz translates the passage, transforming the black children (negritiata) in the yard into 'little Indians', and the black person (negr) into an African:

Some African there is shovelling snow from the path [...] In another window, another courtyard, more snow, and the little Indians are having a snowball fight. But weren't these the same little Indians just having a snowball fight, or has a year flown by?²⁸⁶

Schwartz continues using 'Indian' rather than 'negro' throughout the first half of the novel. Where there is talk of an Indian island, the offensive term 'negritenok' is translated again as 'Little Indian'.²⁸⁷ However, this decision was not based on a desire to avoid problematic language, but on the fact that Shishkin was referencing an Agatha Christie novel which in English is now titled *And Then There Were None*.²⁸⁸ This book was originally titled *Ten Little Niggers* when it was first published in 1939 and was subsequently revised to *Ten Little Indians* in 1964.²⁸⁹ In Russia the book retains its original name, *Desiat' negritiat*. If translations are indeed a fact of the receiving culture, as Bassnett and Lefevere state, then it is clear that Schwartz deemed these descriptions more acceptable to the Western reader than a literal translation in this instance.²⁹⁰ Here the translator's decision to alter the race of the black children playing in the snow can be read as her anticipation of the Western reader's reaction to a different cultural

²⁸⁵ Shishkin, *Venerin Volos*, p. 14.

²⁸⁶ Shishkin, *Maidenhair*, p. 25.

²⁸⁷ *Maidenhair*, pp. 50-51; *Venerin Volos* p. 25.

²⁸⁸ Interview with Schwartz.

²⁸⁹ Agatha Christie, *Ten Little Niggers* (London: Collins Crime Club, 1939); Agatha Christie, *Ten Little Indians* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964).

²⁹⁰ Bassnett and Lefevere, *Translation, History*, p.8.

context, rather than an attempt to cover up any controversial beliefs Shishkin might have.

4.4 Author Cooperation: Across the Liberal/Nationalist Divide

*'[The translator] becomes my voice in a foreign language. They have to do the most important thing – create my reader in their own literary space.'*²⁹¹

Translation decisions, although often based on the translator's own politics and moral stance, take on enhanced significance when the translator works closely with the author. I will demonstrate this below by focussing on “liberal” authors Sorokin, Shishkin and Ulitskaya, who unlike their “nationalist” counterparts, worked relatively closely with their translators. Lawton, who stated that he works almost in tandem with Sorokin, commented that having the author available to give approval made him feel able to take risks and be bold in his translation decisions.²⁹² Lawton has also played a key role in promoting Sorokin in the West, in many ways acting as his agent, and often appears alongside Sorokin at events and in articles about his work.²⁹³ This has simultaneously boosted Lawton's own reputation as a translator, as outlined in Chapter Two.²⁹⁴

Just as Sorokin has been closely involved in the most recent translations of his work, as well as Gambrell's translations *Oprichnik* and *Ice*, so Shishkin takes a close interest in the translations of his novels. In our interview, Schwartz discussed the difficulties of translating such a complex book as *Maidenhair*. She regularly corresponded with Shishkin, who is a translator himself.²⁹⁵ Shishkin is also keenly aware of the importance of having a close relationship with his sixteen other translators.²⁹⁶ He regards them as part of his extended family, specifically because they work in such an intimate way with their author.²⁹⁷ As such, he was

²⁹¹ Interview with Shishkin.

²⁹² Interview with Lawton, October 2020.

²⁹³ Lawton often acts as interpreter for interviews with Sorokin. For example, see Alter, 'He Envisioned a Nightmarish, Dystopian Russia'.

²⁹⁴ See Chapter Two, p. 147.

²⁹⁵ Interview with Schwartz.

²⁹⁶ Interview with Shishkin. Schwartz recounted an anecdote about discussing her translation of *Oblomov* with Shishkin while making dinner at home. He disagreed with the American interpretation of *Oblomov*, and as a result, while Schwartz wrote the introduction to the new translation outlining the American view, Shishkin wrote the afterword, expressing the Russian interpretation; Interview with Schwartz. Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov*, trans. by Marian Schwartz (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2010).

²⁹⁷ Interview with Shishkin.

not only available to answer Schwartz's questions but provided her with a fifty-page document listing all of the questions previous translators had sent to him, along with his responses. Schwartz explained that without this document she might not have understood, for example, that the Russian towards the end of the novel was actually all in palindromes.²⁹⁸

As I described in Chapter Two, Polly Gannon did not have a close working relationship with Ulitskaya, but instead relied on the guidance of Ulitskaya's Russian editor and agent, Alexander Klimin.²⁹⁹ Gannon described the work on her first draft of *BGT* as a dialogue with Klimin and regarded him as Ulitskaya's spokesperson. This arrangement is unique among the translators I have spoken with. I have not found any other evidence of close collaboration between the editors of the original Russian and the translator, or indeed close involvement of any agent. As discussed above, the influence of Klimin led to the rejection of Shayevich's translation.³⁰⁰ His intervention is indicative of the status Ulitskaya held in Russia at the time, but expecting to transfer the same status into English can lead to disappointment. As Krotov pointed out:

Literary agents and writers from abroad really don't understand how tough the English-language market is. You know they think that because Ulitskaya is the biggest writer in Russian, or one of the biggest, that that means anything. It just inherently does not. Simply you are starting from zero every time.³⁰¹

While all three "liberal" writers were involved in the translation of their novels, either directly or through a trusted intermediary, the "nationalist" writers were not. As discussed above, Prilepin claimed to take no interest in the translation of his work, and Parker confirmed that Prilepin was not involved in the process. Translator Nicholas Kotar was allegedly unaware of Prilepin's politics when he translated *The Monastery*.³⁰² This echoes Bromfield's experience with Elizarov

²⁹⁸ Interview with Schwartz. These appear in Schwartz's translation on p. 453. She recreates the palindrome, but not the meaning of the Russian. For example, 'Drawn, I sit: serene rest is inward [...] Won't lovers revolt now? O stone, be not so.'

²⁹⁹ See Chapter Three, p. 190.

³⁰⁰ See Chapter Three, p. 190.

³⁰¹ Interview with Krotov.

³⁰² Interviewee #7. This is difficult to believe considering the introduction discussed briefly above, and also p. 236.

and is repeated in Arch Tait's translation of Roman Senchin's *Minus*.³⁰³ Apparent authorial unwillingness to engage with the West extended in part to my own research. Of the three "nationalist" authors, Prilepin responded to my questions via email after a deal of persuasion. His eventual acquiescence perhaps reflects his general readiness to promote his own celebrity status in Russia. Attempts to contact Elizarov and Senchin were met with no reply. By contrast, in line with his general willingness to engage with the West, Shishkin was very forthcoming, and provided over 13,000 words in response to my questions. Ulitskaya replied briefly by email, and Sorokin agreed in principle to an interview, mediated by Lawton, although at the time of writing this has yet to come to fruition.

5 Conclusion

The issues around commissioning, translating, and editing Russian novels by writers with views unacceptable in the West, or in grappling with differences in cultural attitudes towards issues such as race, require a careful, ethical response from researchers, readers, translators, and editors. For some translators the decision not to work with controversial writers such as Prilepin is the clearest ethical stance they can take. Where such writers or their views are translated, an ethical approach remains important to ensure that no additional meanings or political bias are contributed during the translation process. In this sense, Bromfield's commitment to faithfully represent Elizarov's text, and the belief that ethical issues are the preserve of the publisher, concurs with Pym's principles.³⁰⁴ Other translators such as Schwartz reinforce Bassnett and Lefevere's theory that translations are a fact of their receiving culture by subtly altering the target text in order to perform a cultural rather than solely textual-linguistic translation. In the example above, this also had the effect of rendering the text more acceptable, and understandable, to the Western reader. While I do not agree that this is an ethical principal in general, in line with Milutinović's call for impartiality, in this case Schwartz's decisions were fully in line with Shishkin's intentions.³⁰⁵

The translator's ethical dilemma in relation to authors and their politics is exemplified by Parker's translation of Prilepin. The incompatibility of Parker's

³⁰³ Tait showed me his email correspondence, that chiefly consisted of a thank you from Senchin at the beginning of the process; Interview with Tait.

³⁰⁴ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*.

³⁰⁵ Milutinović, 'Translators as Ambassadors and Gatekeepers', p. 43.

hexis as a socially conscious Western translator, consecrating a writer with whom he could no longer agree, rendered a faithful translation of *Sankya* impossible. Translation decisions over racial slurs, deliberate pronoun usage, racist vocabulary, and in contextualising political debates produced a text that partially obscures the anti-Semitic, and generally racist tone of Prilepin's novel. These decisions may also have been as a result of self-censorship and an awareness of the unacceptability of these views with their target audience in the US.³⁰⁶ Interviews indicate that this was not the conscious *skopos* of the translation, however, and that the translators had no deliberate intention of obscuring Prilepin's politics.³⁰⁷

Ethics are not the only concern of translators and editors. Krotov argues that Gambrell's translation of *Oprichnik* was oriented towards her target audience in an attempt to deliver 'legibility' over 'accurate inscrutability' and not to emphasise *Oprichnik's* position as a political novel.³⁰⁸ Platt might be correct in presuming that a more faithful translation of *Oprichnik* would have harmed sales; though since the UK total sales between 2011-2019 amount to only 1208, a simplified translation arguably has not had a hugely beneficial effect on its saleability.³⁰⁹ Whether the language was simplified or not, my book-group readers were more perturbed by the novel's graphic sexual violence than by its translator's textual-linguistic choices.

Rather than being directed by editors with politicised agendas, text-based decisions are often left to the translators themselves, and it is rare that an editor might intervene for political or moral reasons. Lawton spoke about this in relation to his translation of Sorokin's *Telluria*.³¹⁰ He is aware that since most editors don't have access to the original text, they are unable to judge the final translation, and so have to trust their translator.³¹¹ In fact, Lawton commented that Frank only had about five or six queries concerning his translation of the 331-page *Telluria* which,

³⁰⁶ Hermans discusses this phenomenon in 'The Translator's Voice in Translated Narrative', p. 149

³⁰⁷ Christiane Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, p. 26.

³⁰⁸ Interview with Krotov.

³⁰⁹ Figures provided by Nielsen BookData for the UK between 2001 and 2019. Compare this with sales figures for Russian genre fiction, or sales of Russian classics; see Chapter Two, p. 125.

³¹⁰ Sorokin, *Telluria*.

³¹¹ Interview with Lawton, November 2021; Rizzi, Lang and Pym, *What is Translation History?*, p. 4.

like *Their Four Hearts*, contains elements of paedophilia and graphic violence.³¹² The question remains, however, over whether readers unfamiliar with Sorokin, or with Russian culture, will be prepared to read a text that is heavily foreignised.³¹³

According to Mark Polizzotti, Venuti's proposition that texts should be foreignised in order to remain as loyal as possible to their author — as Platt proposes for *Oprichnik* — is an unworkable approach that does not take into account the need to sell novels once they have been translated.³¹⁴ Marketability is also highlighted by Bassnett and Lefevere, when they state that publishers have to bow to economic pressures, and will not be able to publish books indefinitely if what they produce does not sell.³¹⁵ As Lawton's translations of Sorokin are beginning to be published at the time of writing, it is valid to question how many copies will sell, and how they will be received in the press, and ultimately how they will be judged by the reader. If we consider the low sales for *Oprichnik*, and the fact that Evans was surprised to hear of the small numbers the novel sold when I presented them in our interview in 2021, it is not clear whether Lawton's faithful translations will make it easier to sell Sorokin to the West.³¹⁶

Although, as I have shown in Chapter Four, Russian novels tend to be marketed and received as political texts, there is no evidence of editorial tampering with the fabric of the translations in order to enhance or reduce their political messaging. An editor's role is to create a credible English text rather than to concern themselves with the accuracies of the translation itself. As Krotov said, referring to Ulitskaya, 'my feeling is that I don't really care about inaccuracies that much as long as the language is good.'³¹⁷ What changes have been made can usually be traced to individual translators' sensibilities and judgement rather than editorial policy. In the case of *Sankya*, these decisions were guided by Parker's translatorial *hexis*, while Gambrell and Schwartz directed their translations

³¹² See for example, *Telluria*, Chapter One, p. 82.

³¹³ Venuti, *Invisibility*, p.5 . Lawton described his approach of 'not unweirding' Sorokin; Interview with Lawton.

³¹⁴ Mark Polizzotti, *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), p. 68.

³¹⁵ Bassnett and Lefevere, *Translation, History*, p.6.

³¹⁶ It is possible that sales of all Russian novels will be negatively affected by the War; see Conclusion, p. 338. For a discussion of Sorokin's reception, see Chapter Four, p. 260. After learning of the sales figures for Sorokin in the UK, Evans responded, 'Well, maybe I should revise my sales projections then.'; Interview with Evans.

³¹⁷ Interview with Krotov.

towards their Anglophone audience. Bromfield, meanwhile, remained faithful to the controversial elements of *The Librarian*, preserving the author's xenophobia for the target reader.

Finally, in order to consider the role of publishers, it is worth returning to Pym's *On Translator Ethics*. Pym's fifth translator principle suggests that,

translators, insofar as they are more than simple messengers, are responsible for the capacity of their work to contribute to longer-term, stable, cross-cultural cooperation. – trust, mutual respect, minimise communicational suffering.³¹⁸

This appears to be the general approach of the translators considered here — whether they achieve this by simplifying a text, making it more palatable to the target reader, or by faithfully translating an author's intentions. What is clear from both my findings in this Chapter, and in Chapter Four, however, is the extent to which the positioning of contemporary Russian novels is the responsibility of the publisher. Regardless of the decisions made by Parker and his co-translators, *Sankya* is still sold as a novel by a Russian dissident. Despite Sorokin's or Gambrell's intentions, *Oprichnik* remains an anti-Putin satire over all else. Likewise, Ulitskaya's *BGT* is a book about dissidents, while *Minus* and *The Librarian* remain largely unpoliticised, despite their content and author beliefs. I suggest that the largely ethical approach adopted by translators as cultural intermediaries should also be embraced by publishers when they market authors whose political beliefs and actions might have real-world consequences, whether or not this affects their overall sales. At the very least, the only ethical option at the time of writing is to represent authors such as Prilepin and Elizarov entirely faithfully while Russia wages a war that these authors fully support.

³¹⁸ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 167.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

*'Russian translation is inherently political. Just like everything about Russia is inherently political.'*¹

To reflect the trajectory of my research between September 2019 and July 2023, which spanned both the time before and after the escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, this concluding chapter will consist of two parts. In the first, I will describe the Russian literary scene since February 2022, focussing on the implications of the war for translated fiction from Russian to English. I will also detail calls to decolonise Russian Studies in the West, with a particular focus on the potential role of literature and translation in this endeavour. In the second part, I will summarise my study of the Russian-English translated fiction field, as it stood up until early 2022. I will evaluate my methodology and highlight issues uncovered in this thesis which relate to the wider field of translated fiction and World Literature. I will then identify the main points of confluence between politics and contemporary translated Russian fiction in the UK and US.

1 Russian Literature and War. After 24 February 2022

After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it became almost impossible to read contemporary Russian novels apolitically. Once the attack began, articles circulated at first in blogs and then in the mainstream press in the Anglophone West about the need to cancel Russian culture.² Some critics such as Kevin Platt, argued for the opposite. Writers and cultural figures began to question the role of Russian literature in the war. British author Will Self proposed that the West might have expected the Russian

¹ Interview with Shayeich.

² See for example: Conor Humphries, 'Putin Says Russian Culture Being "cancelled" like J.K. Rowling', *Reuters*, 25 March 2022 <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-west-trying-cancel-russian-culture-including-tchaikovsky-2022-03-25/>> [accessed 18 May 2023]; Gary Saul Morson, 'The Cancellation of Russian Culture', *First Things*, 14 March 2022; Kevin Platt, 'The Profound Irony of Cancelling Everything Russian', *The New York Times*, 22 April 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/opinion/russian-artists-culture-boycotts.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; Pjotr Sauer, 'Putin Says West Treating Russian Culture like "Cancelled" JK Rowling', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/25/putin-says-west-treating-russian-culture-like-cancelled-jk-rowling>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

government's actions, had anyone been reading contemporary authors such as Sorokin.³ Ukrainian author Oksana Zabuzhko wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* that classic Russian literature 'wove the camouflage net for Russia's tanks', as they rolled into Ukraine.⁴ As in the case of Felsen's *Deceit*, publishers repositioned new translations from Russian in relation to the invasion, as if to justify their commission.⁵

When people began to leave Russia because they opposed the war, this confirmed the "liberal"/"nationalist" divide: a large number of "liberal" authors and cultural figures left as soon as they could.⁶ Sorokin left for Berlin in the days before the invasion, and Ulitskaya was sent to her Berlin apartment by her sons in a bid to keep her safe.⁷ Among others who left were director Kirill Serebrennikov, actor Chulpan Khamatova (who received death threats when she starred in the TV adaptation of Yakhina's *Zuleikha*), talk-show presenter and journalist Ivan Urgant, popstar Zemfira, dissident author Dmitry Glukhovsky, and liberal literary critic Galina Yuzefovich.⁸

Others did not leave but appear to oppose the war by saying nothing to support it. Many such public figures were placed on GRAD's blacklist, which concentrated on prominent figures in the arts. As mentioned above, this includes Senchin, but the list runs to 142 names in total.⁹ Politician and GRAD member Dmitrii Kuznetsov made a note that of the one hundred members of the jury that decides

³ Will Self, 'Found in Translation', *The New European*, 3 June 2022 <<https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/found-in-translation/>> [accessed 9 June 2022]. Will Self provides the introduction to the collection of Sorokin's short stories to be published in February 2024; Vladimir Sorokin, *Red Pyramid and Other Stories*, trans. by Max Lawton, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2024).

⁴ Oksana Zabuzhko, 'Reading Russian Literature after the Bucha Massacre', trans. by Uilleam Blacker, *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 April 2022 <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/russian-literature-bucha-massacre-essay-oksana-zabuzhko/>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

⁵ See more on the paratextual positioning of Felsen's *Deceit* in Chapter Four, p. 228.

⁶ Anastasia Boutsko, 'Who Are the Russians Leaving Their Country?' *Dw.Com*, 4 May 2022 <<https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-the-russians-leaving-their-country/a-61364390>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

⁷ Alter, 'He Envisioned a Nightmarish, Dystopian Russia'; Sabine Kiseselbach, 'Russian Author Ulitskaya Warns of "terrible" Consequences of War', *DW.COM*, 1 April 2022 <<https://www.dw.com/en/russian-author-ulitskaya-warns-of-terrible-consequences-of-war/a-61326678>> [accessed 9 October 2022]. Shishkin did not leave, because he already lived in Switzerland.

⁸ See also, 'Skandal s serialom Zuleikha', *TIA*, 2020 <<https://tvernews.ru/news/257706/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]. Chulpan Khamatova continues her opposition from the Baltics. In December she released a protest song in collaboration with group Nogu Svelo; *S Novym Godom, Synok!*, dir. by Nogu Sveló!, 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-W8w527oU4>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

⁹ See chapter One, p. 102 for more about GRAD.

the Bol'shaia Kniga Prize, ten were against the 'special military operation', and the rest of them were 'silent' on the matter.¹⁰ Other names on GRAD's list include film director Petr Buslov, actors Nikolai Kulikov, Danila Kozlovsky, author and critic Pavel Basinskii (who accused *The Librarian* of representing fascist ideas), and writer Boris Tarasov. The list also includes translator Lisa Hayden (who lives in the US) and editor Elena Shubina, whose imprint of Russian publisher AST focuses largely on contemporary Russian fiction.¹¹

Meanwhile, by early March 2022, five hundred writers, actors, and directors, as well as other figures working in the creative arts, had signed a letter in support of the 'special military operation'.¹² Perhaps predictably, support for the war also came from Prilepin and Elizarov. Prilepin responded to the intensification of the war by asking Russians to be merciful and not to gloat. For him, the war is a continuation of the conflict that began in 2014 'with the silent agreement of the whole world.'¹³ Elizarov did not say anything publicly, but his song *Orkskaia* was linked to the conflict by pro-war Russian author German Sadulaev.¹⁴ In March 2022 Sadulaev wrote that he regards the song as a way to reclaim the term given to the Russians by Ukraine, and states that everyone knows it and sings it at Elizarov's many concerts.¹⁵

1.1 The Literary Scene in Russia from February 2022

From February 2022, numerous Western companies ceased trading with Russia. This included PRH, Simon & Schuster and book distributor Gardners.¹⁶ Russia was uninvited from international book fairs such as London and Frankfurt. John Mitchinson of crowdfunded publisher Unbound described the reasons the

¹⁰ See Viktoriia Kataeva, 'Urgant, Bondarchuk, Ernst popali v chernye spiski Gosdumy na uvol'enie', *NEWS.ru*, 5 August 2022 <<https://news.ru/culture/urgant-bondarchuk-ernst-popali-v-chernye-spiski-gosdumy-na-uvolnenie/>> [accessed 9 August 2023].

¹¹ For more details about the imprint, see 'Redaktsiia Eleny Shubinoi, Isdatel'stvo AST' <<https://ast.ru/redactions/redaktsiya-eleny-shubinoy/>> [accessed 9 August 2023].

¹² 'Kto khochet zhertv?', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 23 February 2022 <<https://www.lgz.ru/article/-8-6822-23-02-2022/kto-khochet-zhertv/>> [accessed 9 August 2023].

¹³ 'Literatory o voennoi spetsoperatsii na Ukraine', *Sovremennaia Literatura*, 26 February 2022 <<https://sovlit.ru/tpost/ru72yo6sb1-literatori-o-voennoi-spetsoperatsii-na-u>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

¹⁴ This is not unusual – Elizarov does not typically use social media and rarely gives interviews, see Chapter One, p. 102. For more on *Orkskaia*, see Chapter One, p. 114. German Sadulaev, 'Novye pesni nashei pobedy', *Vsghiad.ru*, 9 March 2022 <<https://vz.ru/opinions/2022/5/9/1156835.html>> [accessed 15 June 2023].

¹⁵ See Chapter One, p. 107 for more on Elizarov's songs.

¹⁶ Comerford, 'PRH, S&S and Gardners'.

publishing industry in particular felt compelled to dissociate themselves from Russia:

This is the cultural frontline – as an industry we should stand for freedom and democracy in the face of propaganda and coercion and show our unambiguous solidarity with the writers, publishers and readers under direct threat in Ukraine.¹⁷

In an interview with popular Russian magazine *Snob* in August 2022, Russian publisher Ramil' Faskhutdinov spoke about the effects the war was having on the domestic publishing scene.¹⁸ Faskhutdinov revealed that copyright holders were freezing their contracts until they could be sure how long the war might last. Galina Yuzefovich also registered this concern in March 2022.¹⁹ She claimed that the contracts already signed by Russian publishers were valid, but that within six months to a year these would run out and would severely impact the availability of foreign literature in Russia.

Faskhutdinov listed the practical challenges Russian publishers were facing, such as having to buy poor quality printer ink from South Korea instead of Germany. He also worried about his ability to source the machinery for printing in the future. Another concern he expressed was importing books. For fiction, he argued, this could be overcome, but for non-fiction this was more problematic. What if Russia did not have the equivalent of Stephen Hawking for example, and they were unable to buy the rights to the book?²⁰ There was, however, a resurgence in the interest of what he termed 'classics'; he gave the somewhat tongue-in-cheek example of a rise in popularity of George

¹⁷ Comerford, 'PRH, S&S and Gardners'.

¹⁸ For more on this, see: Kristina Borovikova, 'Chto proiskhodit na knizhnom rynke priamo seichas: Interv'iu s glavnyim redaktorom izdatel'stva «Bombora» Ramilem Faskhutdinovym', *Snob*, 31 August 2022 <<https://snob.ru/money/chto-proishodit-na-knizhnom-rynke-priamo-seichas-intervyu-s-glavnyim-redaktorom-izdatelstva-bombora-ramilem-fashutdinovym/>> [accessed 15 February 2023]; 'Izdatel'stvo Bombora, *Bombora* <<https://bombora.ru/>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

¹⁹ Galina Yuzefovich, 'Publish or Perish. Literary Critic Galina Yuzefovich on How Sanctions Are Affecting the Future of Russia's Book Industry', *Meduza*, 22 March 2022 <<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/03/22/publish-or-perish>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

²⁰ In early 2023 Russian publishers found a solution to this issue when they began selling 'book summaries' of popular Anglophone novels online. See Valeriia Lebedeva, 'Bestseller blizko k tekstu', *Kommersant*, 15 February 2023 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5826266>> [accessed 22 February 2023].

Orwell's dystopian *1984*.²¹ He also acknowledged the role of TikTok in book sales, before noting that Russians can no longer upload videos to the site without a VPN, and that this also affected his ability to advertise.²²

Since the invasion, writers' extratextual activities and statements have become progressively more likely to have consequences both in Russia and abroad. In an increasingly totalitarian Russia, novels by 'foreign agents' are being discouraged in Moscow's central bookshops.²³ These include books by authors such as Glukhovskiy, Akunin and Bykov. At the time of writing such books are sold wrapped in brown paper and labelled 'inoagent' (foreign agent).²⁴ Online bookshops now alert users that the authors are foreign agents but continue to sell their books.²⁵

Other threats to the Russian publishing industry come from the Russian State Duma and can be regarded as a product of Russia's increasing state-led conservatism.²⁶ In November 2022 for example, *Publishing Perspectives* carried an article about Russia's new law against 'gay propaganda', a topic I touched on in Chapter Two.²⁷ The article discussed the possibility that around

²¹ George Orwell, *1984*, trans. by Viktor Golyishev (Moscow: FTM, 2014). In June 2022, an online article addressed the increased popularity of *1984* from 2015 onwards; Andrei Grigor'ev, 'Strana 101 : kak Rossiia vnov' sdelala antiutopiiu Oruella byl'iu', *Idel/Realii*, 26 June 2022 <<https://www.idelreal.org/a/31913850.html>> [accessed 9 August 2023]. Meanwhile, deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council Dmitrii Medvedev used a quote from Orwell's novel to defend Russia from criticism by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg; "The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth."; Dar'ia Dmitrova, 'Medvedev otvetil na slova Stoltenberga o postavkakh oruzhiia Kievu tsitatoy is romana Oruella', *Gazeta.ru*, 5 January 2023 <<https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2023/01/05/19424191.shtml>> [accessed 9 August 2023].

²² Yuzefovich also registered the reduced access to social media as an obstacle; Yuzefovich.

²³ For more on foreign agents, see Chapter Three, p. 199.

²⁴ See, 'V knizhnom na Tverskoi proizvedeniia inoagentov upakovali v neprozrachnuiu oblozhku', *Moskvich Mag*, 4 December 2022 <<https://moskvichmag.ru/gorod/v-knizhnom-na-tverskoj-proizvedeniya-inoagentov-upakovali-v-neprozrachnuyu-oblozhku/>> [accessed 20 January 2023].

²⁵ 'Na Saite «Labirinta» Pushkina, Marshaka i Tolstogo Zapisali v «inoagency». Knizhnyi Magazin Zaiavil o Tekhnicheskome Sboe — Meduza', *Meduza*, 3 February 2023 <<https://meduza.io/news/2023/02/03/na-sajte-labirinta-pushkina-marshaka-i-tolstogo-zapisali-v-inoagency-knizhnyi-magazin-zayavil-o-tehnicheskome-sboe>> [accessed 17 February 2023]. A current, and regularly updated list of foreign agents can be found here; 'Reestr inostrannykh agentov v Rossii: polnyi spisok na 10 dekabria 2022 goda', GOGOV <<https://gogov.ru/articles/inagency-21apr22>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

²⁶ For more on this, see also; McGlynn, *Memory Makers*; Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*.

²⁷ See Chapter Two, p. 174. Porter Anderson, 'IPA Joins Criticism of Russia's Anti-LGBTQ Bill', *Publishing Perspectives*, 29 November 2022 <<https://publishingperspectives.com/2022/11/ipa-joins-criticism-of-russias-anti-lgbtq-bill/>> [accessed 15 February 2023]. This topic was also discussed in liberal, banned news outlet Meduza; 'Vse, "gei-propaganda" (chto by eto ni znachilo) teper' v Rossii pod pol'nym zapretom.', *Meduza*, 25 October 2022

fifty per cent of Russian literature could be affected by the rule, including ‘the entire work of [60-year-old novelist] Victor Pelevin, and even a biography of Tchaikovsky, who happens to have been homosexual.’ In January 2023, *The Moscow Times* reported that although the new law was in place, there was little to no guidance to booksellers as to which books it affected, leaving them to police their own stock, or comply with lists provided by publishers.²⁸

The same article reported that some foreign authors had been banned from Russian libraries, including Haruki Murakami and Stephen Fry, whilst others such as Stephen King and Neil Gaiman had made the decision themselves to withdraw their books from sale in Russia.²⁹ This has exacerbated the difficulties already imposed on bookshops to disguise the covers of novels written by ‘foreign agents’, although as Faskhutdinov noted, covering such books is only likely to make them more popular.³⁰ The emphasis placed on ‘traditional family values’, starting with a received interpretation at the state level of the typical Russian nuclear family, can be linked to the war. This emphasis on tradition provides a counter-narrative to liberal Western values, and is a symptom of the conservative turn taken by the government, which has led it, in part, to launch its attack on Ukraine.³¹

1.2 Russian Authors React to the War

On 5 March 2022, seventeen Russophone writers signed an open letter against the war, in direct opposition to the pro-war letter described above.³² Signatories to the letter were Dmitry Glukhovsky, Victor Shenderovich, Maria Stepanova, Alexander Ilichevsky, Maxim Osipov, Sergei Lebedev, Alisa Ganieva, Boris Akunin, Liza Alexandrovna-Zorina, Viktor Martinovich, Alexander Genis, Lev Rubinstein, Shishkin, Sorokin, Ulitskaya and Belarusians Svetlana Alexievich and

<<https://meduza.io/cards/v-rossii-polnostyu-zapretyat-propagandu-gomoseksualnosti-i-pedofiliia-detyam-nelzya-budet-dazhe-rasskazyvat-ob-lgbt-lyudyah-chto-esche-popadet-pod-zapret>> [accessed 9 January 2023].

²⁸ Samantha Berkhead and Oleg Smirnov, ‘Choices Narrow in Russian Bookstores Amid Anti-LGBT Law, Wartime Restrictions’, *The Moscow Times*, 10 January 2023

<<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/09/choices-narrow-in-russian-bookstores-amid-anti-lgbt-law-wartime-restrictions-a79776>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

²⁹ Yuzefovich, ‘Publish or Perish’.

³⁰ Borovikova, ‘Chto proiskhodit’.

³¹ For more on this, see: Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*; Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*.

³² Harriet Sherwood, ‘Eminent Writers Urge Russian Speakers to Tell Truth of War in Ukraine’, *The Guardian*, 5 March 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/05/eminent-writers-urge-russian-speakers-to-tell-truth-of-war-in-ukraine>> [accessed 9 October 2022].

Sasha Filipenko. They appealed to Russian speakers abroad to challenge the propaganda the Russian population were being fed by their government, and asked them to contact Russian-speaking relatives to counter this propaganda through emails, phone calls, letters and social media.³³ In an echo of Shishkin's concerns about the Russian language, the letter-writers regarded the role of the Russian language as central to this propaganda, stating: 'the Russian language is being used by the Russian state to ignite hatred and justify the shameful war against Ukraine'.³⁴

Many authors also published individual responses to the war in the Western media or online, often with the help of their translators. These statements and essays all centred around the recurring themes of disbelief, shame, grief and fear about the war Putin had unleashed. In early March 2022, Glukhovsky wrote a number of articles in the Western press.³⁵ He deplored the resurgence of the worst aspects of the Soviet Union which he states the population are now watching unfold on live television. He regards a lack of understanding of the Soviet past as one of the reasons that this history appears to be repeating itself. In a later article the author hoped Russians would learn the truth faster than last time and predicted that the return of 'boys in zinc coffins' will awaken Russians from the spell of propaganda to the reality of the 'special military operation' in Ukraine.³⁶

³³ Sergei Lebedev lives in Berlin, and his novels have long been anti-Putin. In 2020 He published *Untraceable*, which unusually for a Russian novel was instantly translated into English. The novel is about the use of Novichok, and the Russian state's reliance on the poison to eliminate its enemies. This was inspired by the Skripal poisoning in the UK in 2020. See: Tobias Grey, 'Raised on Le Carré, He Wrote a Thriller Dipped in Poison', *The New York Times*, 21 January 2021 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/books/sergei-lebedev-untraceable.html>> [accessed 15 February 2023]; Sergei Lebedev, *Untraceable*, trans. by Antonia W Bouis (London: Head of Zeus, 2021).

³⁴ Sherwood, 'Eminent Writers'.

³⁵ See: Dmitry Glukhovsky, 'Now We Know: Russia's Horrific Past Could Become Our Future under Putin', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/07/russias-past-future-under-putin-soviet-repression>> [accessed 8 March 2022].

Dmitry Glukhovsky, 'Author Dmitry Glukhovsky On Putin's Propaganda And Russia', trans. by Marian Schwartz, *Deadline*, 23 March 2022 <https://deadline.com/2022/03/dmitry-glukhovsky-column-putin-propaganda-ukraine-war-impact-1234983065/#recipient_hashed=7453ee81fdc25773db7eef3055ad0be47c42a7a3ee7a419167342cc24e755f07> [accessed 9 October 2022].

³⁶ See: Dmitry Glukhovsky, 'Ordinary Russians Did Not Want This War, but Putin Is Trying to Make Us All Complicit', trans. by Eugenia Ellanskaya and Catherine Mullier, 14 March 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/14/ordinary-russians-war-putin-complicit>> [accessed 9 October 2022]. Glukhovsky was sentenced in absentia to eight years in

Maxim Osipov, whose two short-story collections have been published by NYRB Classics, also left Russia.³⁷ Boris Dralyuk translated Osipov's essay for *The Atlantic* (May 2022) expressing both the author's shame over leaving Russia, and the regret that his departure was ultimately a relief.³⁸ Poet and author Maria Stepanova, who has been recognised in the West for her novel *In Memory of Memory*, wrote an article for the UK's *Financial Times* (March 2022), where she condemned the war, and confronted the difficulties of writing in Russian when the country is carrying out 'evil'.³⁹ Stepanova also equates the Russian government with fascism, quoting an anonymous post on social media to illustrate her opinion of the country launching a war: 'I dreamt we were occupied by Nazis, and that those Nazis were us.'⁴⁰

Yakhina, author of *Zuleikha*, wrote a short piece 'The Banality of Good', which was translated by Lisa Hayden and briefly appeared on her US publisher Oneworld's website. She was horrified that the 'vaccination of pacifism' that she felt she had received via her Soviet childhood had not been able to guard the country against war.⁴¹ She wished for peace and noted that although she was speaking only for herself, all of her acquaintances agreed with her.⁴² Author Anna Starobinets describes herself as torn between leaving Russia and staying in her home.⁴³ She worried that if she stayed in Russia and protested, her children could be left without a mother, and she decided to leave. The Dagestani author Alisa Ganieva was quick to respond to the conflict in her fiction. Although written before

prison on 7 August 2023 for criticising both Putin and the war. He remains abroad. See 'Sud prigovoril pisatel'ia Dmitriia Glukhovskogo k 8 godam zaochno', *Radio Svoboda*, 7 August 2023 <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/prokuror-zaprosil-9-letniy-srok-dlya-pisatelya-dmitriya-gluhovskogo/32537848.html>> [accessed 9 August 2023].

³⁷ Osipov, *Rock, Paper, Scissors and Other Stories*; Osipov, *Kilometer 101*.

³⁸ Osipov, 'Cold, Ashamed, Relieved: On Leaving Russia'.

³⁹ Maria Stepanova, 'Maria Stepanova: The War of Putin's Imagination', trans. by Sasha Dugdale, *Financial Times*, 18 March 2022 <<https://www.ft.com/content/c2797437-5d3f-466a-bc63-2a1725aa57a5>>; Maria Stepanova, *In Memory of Memory: A Romance*, trans. by Sasha Dugdale (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2021).

⁴⁰ Stepanova, 'The War of Putin's Imagination'.

⁴¹ Lisa Hayden [@LizoksBooks], 'I Know That Many Who Follow Me Have Read Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha*, Which I translated @oneworldnews. Guzel wrote this piece on Russia's invasion/war in Ukraine. Transl by Me. It's the only way I (child in Vietnam War era, drawer of peace signs all over) can find words right now', *Twitter*, 2022 <<https://twitter.com/LizoksBooks/status/1497995503623151617>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

⁴² The local government banned the stage adaptation of *Zuleikha* in Bashkirskey theatre after this. See 'Bashirskii teatr snial s repertuara spektakl' "Zuleikha"', *Meduza*, 14 November 2022 <<https://meduza.io/news/2022/11/14/bashkirskiy-teatr-snyal-s-repertuara-spektakl-zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza-iz-za-antivoennyh-zayavleniy-guzel-yahinoy>> [accessed 23 November 2022].

⁴³ Katherine Young, 'Anna Starobinets', *Katherine E. Young, Poet*, n.d. <<https://katherine-young-poet.com/anna-starobinets/>> [accessed 9 October 2022].

the war, her most recent novel to be translated into English, *Offended Sensibilities* [*Oskorblonnye chuvstva*, 2018] is a stinging attack on the social mores of contemporary Russia.⁴⁴ Ganieva also responded directly to the war in one of her short stories, 'A Village Fest', which was published on translated fiction website *Words Without Borders* in January 2023.⁴⁵ In addition, the day after the war began, Ganieva issued a short statement online.⁴⁶ She confirmed that she had been opposed to the war in Ukraine since 2014 and was keen to point out that many in Russia feel the same way. She regards the invasion as the beginning of the end for Russia. Later, in July 2023, Ludmila Petrushevskaya announced on Telegram that she would no longer write at all, in protest against the war.⁴⁷ She referred to Russia as a nation of 'soldier-thieves, rapists robbers' and reminded her readers that as long ago as 1977 she predicted an epidemic in 2022, and a civil war in 2024.⁴⁸

The three "liberal" authors included in my research all made statements against the war in the Western media. In April 2022, Ulitskaya was interviewed for German paper *Deutsche Welle* in her Berlin apartment.⁴⁹ She described the war as a 'catastrophe' and described the powerlessness of Russia's intelligentsia to make any impact on it. She also made a statement in *Novaya Gazeta* in which she expressed shame, pain, fear and responsibility for the terrible decisions her government was making.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, France's *Le Monde* reissued a 2014

⁴⁴ Deep Vellum published the novel in 2022; Alisa Ganieva, *Offended Sensibilities*, trans. by Carol Apollonio (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2022).; Alisa Ganieva, *Oskorblonnye Chuvstva* (Moscow: AST, 2018).

⁴⁵ Alisa Ganieva, 'A Village Fest', trans. by Will Firth, *Words Without Borders*, 13 February 2023 <<https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2023-02/a-village-fest-alisa-ganieva-will-firth/>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

⁴⁶ See: Alisa Ganieva, "'I Am Ashamed of Being Part of Russian Society That Nurtured Putin'", *Open*, 25 February 2022 <<https://openthemagazine.com/feature/i-ashamed-part-russian-society-nurtured-putin/>> [accessed 9 October 2022]; Ganieva, 'A Village Fest'.

⁴⁷ Kirill Zykov, 'War Made Lyudmila Petrushevskaya Put Down Her Pen', *The Moscow Times*, 1 August 2023, section news <<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/08/01/war-made-lyudmila-petrushevskaya-put-down-her-pen-a82025>> [accessed 1 August 2023].

⁴⁸ Petrushevskaya writes about an epidemic in her short story 'Hygiene' ('Gigena', 1990), which appears in English translation as part of a collection; Ludmila Petrushevskaya, *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour's Baby: Scary Fairy Tales*, trans. by Keith Gessen and Anna Summers (New York: Penguin Books, 2009). Petrushevskaya's predictions appear similar to Ulitskaya's warning about a third world war being precipitated by Russia. See Chapter One, p. 88.

⁴⁹ Kiseselbach, 'Russian Author Ulitskaya Warns'.

⁵⁰ The original statement is no longer available but was posted on the Australian PEN website in early March 2022; 'A Statement by Pre-Eminent Contemporary Russian Writer, Ludmila Ulitskaya', *PEN Melbourne*, 2 March 2022 <<https://penmelbourne.org/a-statement-by-pre-eminent-contemporary-russian-writer-ludmila-ulitskaya-published-in-novaya-gazeta-and->

interview with Ulitskaya (May 2022).⁵¹ In it, she states that ‘Russia has beaten the world record for lying.’ Immediately after the war began, Sorokin published an article in *The Guardian* (translated by Lawton), ‘Vladimir Putin sits atop a crumbling pyramid of power.’⁵² He wasted no time in labelling Putin a ‘monster’ who is exercising ‘imperial aggression.’ He also built on the imagery of his short story ‘Red Pyramid’ (September 2021), where he portrayed Russia as a pyramid of power built by Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century. Sorokin thus raises the spectre of his novel *Oprichnik* and himself makes it relevant to contemporary politics.⁵³ In an interview for the *New York Times* (April 2022), Sorokin is clear that he opposes the war, regarding this conflict as ‘a semantic fight against the truth.’⁵⁴ As a writer, he perceives his job to combat the propaganda that Russia is spreading: ‘A Russian writer has two options: Either you are afraid, or you write [...] I write.’⁵⁵

Although Shishkin is fundamentally opposed to the war, he has provoked controversy in some quarters by hoping that Russia will lose — not for the sake of Ukrainians primarily, but for the sake of Russians.⁵⁶ Similarly, following his essay ‘Don’t Blame Dostoevsky’ (*The Atlantic*, July 2022) he was accused of complaining about the fate of Russian poets while Ukrainians were dying.⁵⁷ Shishkin’s ethnocentric view provoked a strong reaction online.⁵⁸ In a less

translated-by-subhash-jaireth/?fbclid=IwAR3r3AwAPjoOhMOBXrBldeldhDViOVAmXjSWP9mxqlyFYcYQxhf3eq7mvhA > [accessed 8 March 2022].

⁵¹ Marie Jégo, ‘Lyudmila Ulitskaya: “Russia Has Beaten the World Record for Lying”’, *Le Monde.Fr*, 2 May 2022 <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/books/article/2022/05/02/lyudmila-ulitskaya-russia-has-beaten-the-world-record-for-lying_5982246_33.html> [accessed 8 June 2022].

⁵² Sorokin, ‘Vladimir Putin Sits atop a Crumbling Pyramid of Power’.

⁵³ Vladimir Sorokin, ‘Red Pyramid’, trans. by Max Lawton, *The New Yorker*, 27 September 2021 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/04/red-pyramid>> [accessed 27 September 2021]. This story will be included in the collection of the same name, published by NYRB Classics in 2024.

⁵⁴ Alter, ‘He Envisioned a Nightmarish, Dystopian Russia’.

⁵⁵ Alter, ‘He Envisioned a Nightmarish, Dystopian Russia’.

⁵⁶ Frankfurt Book Fair and Ukraine: Hoping for Putin’s Fall’, *News in Germany*, 22 October 2022 <<https://newsinGermany.com/frankfurt-book-fair-and-ukraine-hoping-for-putins-fall/>> [accessed 27 October 2022].

⁵⁷ Mikhail Shishkin, ‘Don’t Blame Dostoyevsky’, *The Atlantic*, 24 July 2022 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/russian-literature-books-ukraine-war-dostoyevsky-nabokov/670928/>> [accessed 9 October 2022]. See the response here; Bohdana Neborak [@BohdanaNeborak], ‘Some Words about Mikhail Shishkin’s Essay for @TheAtlantic Which Is a Vivid Example of a New Russian Approach to Narrating Themselves. Look at This Mediocre Text Which Expresses the Maximum Courage of Ruskiy Mir with a Human Face. <https://t.co/KdwjYoaBmm>’, *Twitter*, 2022

<<https://twitter.com/BohdanaNeborak/status/1551270629768306689>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

⁵⁸ Neborak, ‘Some words’.

controversial article for *The Guardian* (March 2022) he wrote about the failure of democracy in Russia. He states that Russia needs to acknowledge its guilt in order to move on — a ‘ground zero’ similar to that experienced by the Germans after World War Two.⁵⁹ This was then followed by the publication of his book, *My Russia, War or Peace?* and impassioned statements about the fascist nature of the Russian State, as I discussed in detail in Chapter Four.⁶⁰

Other writers well-known in the West have reacted differently to the war. Eugene Vodolazkin, whose novel *Laurus* (*Lavr*, 2012) was one of the best-selling Russian novels in the UK in 2013, has not taken a clear stance against it.⁶¹ Like Shishkin, he is concerned with the preservation of Russian culture. At a conference in Belgrade in June 2022, called ‘The Golden Age of Russian Realism; Reading Experience’ Vodolazkin condemned the cancellation of Russian culture abroad.⁶² In a later interview he also described Kyiv, where he was born, as his hometown, and hoped that Ukrainians might feel warmer towards Russians soon.⁶³ Tatiana Tolstaya, who is published in the US by NYRB Classics, supports the war.⁶⁴ In a Facebook post in May 2022, she criticised those who went abroad or denounced the attack on Ukraine.⁶⁵ This has not provoked any reaction to date from her US

⁵⁹ See: Mikhail Shishkin, ‘My Dear Russians – the Ukrainians Are Fighting Putin’s Army for Their Freedom, and Ours’, *The Guardian*, 7 March 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/07/russians-ukrainians-putin-army-freedom-mikhail-shishkin?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other> [accessed 8 March 2022]; Mikhail Shishkin, ‘Neither Nato nor Ukraine Can De-Putinise Russia. We Russians Must Do It Ourselves’, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/28/nato-ukraine-vladimir-putin-russia-democratic-national-guilt>> [accessed 9 October 2022].

⁶⁰ See Chapter Four, p. 246. Shishkin, *My Russia*.

⁶¹ Vodolazkin, *Laurus*. The novel made Nielsen’s top-fifty list in 2016 when it sold 2360 copies in the UK.

⁶² See: Elena Arnol’dova, ‘Pisatel’ Vodolazkin vyskazalsia ob «otmene» russkoi kul’tury’, *Gazeta.ru*, 29 June 2022 <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2022/06/29/n_18028556.shtml> [accessed 16 February 2023]; German Orlov, ‘Yevgenii Vodolazkin: «Net nikakoi kul’tury otmeny, est’ tol’ko otmena kul’tury»’, *kp.ru*, 30 June 2022 <<https://www.kp.ru/daily/27412/4611131/>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

⁶³ Vodolazkin is quoted as saying: ‘Now Kyiv and Moscow are further from each other than ever before – this causes me immense pain. All the same, I hope for better times, when ourselves and Ukrainians can experience the same closeness and warmth of feeling that we did before.’ Anastasia Medvedtskaia, ‘Eto moi gorod: pisatel’ Evgenii Vodolazkin’, *Moskvich Mag*, 15 December 2022 <<https://moskvichmag.ru/lyudi/eto-moj-gorod-pisatel-evgenij-vodolazkin/>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

⁶⁴ Her translated novels are: Tatiana Tolstaya, *Aetherial Worlds*, trans. by Anya Migdal (London: Daunt Books, 2018); Tatiana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2003); Tatiana Tolstaya, *White Walls: Collected Stories*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell and Antonina W. Bouis (New York: New York Review Books, 2007).

⁶⁵ Anna Dmitrieva, ‘Stradaiut, no sazhaiut tsvety’, *Medialeaks*, 12 May 2022 <<https://medialeaks.ru/1205aad-str-tatyana-tolstaya/>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

publisher.

1.3 Publishers and Translators in the Anglophone West

Amid such polarisation and societal upheaval it is perhaps not surprising that it is becoming increasingly challenging for Russian authors to find a publisher in the UK or US. This is due in large part to ethical considerations. Pym's principles suggest that the best decision a translator could make when they are unsure of the benefit of translating a text — either culturally or financially — is to not translate at all.⁶⁶ Indeed, as I outlined above, calls for the cancellation of Russian culture make the Russian-English translated fiction market a potentially hostile environment. But since publishing is a business first and foremost, this reluctance to publish Russian works is also a result of financial practicalities. International sanctions mean that it is not easy to accept money from Russia. Even if a publisher were prepared to accept funding from Transcript or IP, this would require considerable organisation. Furthermore, on a moral level, accepting Russian money would be equally difficult to justify. The result is that many projects have been left unfunded and therefore in limbo.

One interviewee, who wished to remain anonymous, explained that prior to February 2022 they had been commissioned to translate a contemporary Russian author with an independent British press.⁶⁷ Although funding was not formally in place, it was more or less agreed that the project would go ahead with support from IP. When the war began, however, the UK publishers chose not to proceed with Russian money, and since there was no other source available, the project was cancelled. In April 2022, Edwin Frank declined the funding he had in place from IP for Nicolas Pasternak Slater's new translation of Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Children* (published in August 2022).⁶⁸ Instead, he decided to proceed without outside financial support. His reason was the war. He noted that he had also secured funding from IP for a title by Konstantin Vaginov (1899-1934) early in 2022, to be translated by Ainsley Morse (the same Vaginov that he learned from Peter Kaufman was very likely to receive IP funding as discussed in

⁶⁶ Pym, *On Translator Ethics*, p. 103.

⁶⁷ Interviewee #10.

⁶⁸ Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Children*, trans. by Nicolas Pasternak Slater and Maya Slater, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2022). Interview with Frank.

Chapter Two).⁶⁹ At the time of writing it is unclear whether the project is going ahead since the novel has not been listed on NYRB's website. It seems that while publishing contemporary Russian fiction is usually a financial risk, as discussed in Chapter Two, publishing Russian literature during the war is an even greater challenge.

Other publishers have been in a state of flux. Since February 2022 the Russian Library at the University of Columbia published two books (that were already contracted before the war).⁷⁰ However, at the time of writing in August 2023, the university press's website has been redesigned, and all traces of the Russian Library have been removed.⁷¹ Meanwhile, Glagoslav, who as discussed in Chapter Two rely almost solely on IP funding for Russian translations, appear to be continuing as usual. As a result of Glagoslav's and IP's relationship, it is possible that they are still accepting funding as before, although this has not been possible to verify.⁷² Interviews in 2020 indicated that without IP funding Glagoslav would not be able to publish translations from Russian.

Some projects are being funded by non-Russian sources, however. PEN Translates announced their grant winners in January 2023, which included two Russian titles (*The Gospel According to...*, and *The Incredible Events in Women's Cell no. Three*), and one Russophone from Belarus (*Zekameron*), as detailed in Chapter Two.⁷³ All three of the selected novels resist the categories of 'exoticism' as defined by Lipovetsky and are instead highly political, in line with PEN's literary mission.⁷⁴ PEN's choices demonstrate the power that subsidisers have in influencing what novels reach publication. This example also clarifies the role that translators and publishers can play in amplifying

⁶⁹ See Chapter Three, p. 214.

⁷⁰ Boris Poplavsky, *Homeward from Heaven*, trans. by Bryan Karetnyk (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, *Stravaging 'Strange'*, trans. by Joanne Turnbull (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

⁷¹ Shortly after the war began, Columbia published a statement on their website where they announced they would no longer accept money from Russia to fund their Russian Library project; 'Russian Library', *Columbia University Press* <<https://cup.columbia.edu/russian-library>> [accessed 18 March 2022]. However, at the time of writing in June 2023, this was no longer available. In fact, there is no trace of The Russian Library on Columbia's website at all.

⁷² See Chapter Two, p. 165.

⁷³ Lauren Brown, 'English PEN Announces PEN Translates Winners', *The Bookseller*, 31 January 2023 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/english-pen-announces-pen-translates-winners>> [accessed 2 February 2023].

⁷⁴ See p. 134 for Lipovetsky's definition. For more details on PEN's mission, see Chapter Two, p. 162.

minority voices, such as Woolley's work with gay rights activist Khassov-Kassia, as discussed in Chapter Two.⁷⁵ The actions of translators and publishers, I will argue in the next section, are essential in the drive towards decolonisation of the Russophone literary space.

1.4 Decolonising Russophone Literature in the Anglophone West

Since February 2022, the debate over whether and how to decolonise Russian studies in the West has proceeded in earnest. The growing importance of this debate is the reason that ASEEEES, the US-based Association for Slavic, Eastern European and Eurasian Studies, has named decolonisation as the theme of its 2023 conferences (online and in-person). The organisation states that:

Decolonization is a profoundly political act of re-evaluating long-established and often internalized hierarchies, of relinquishing and taking back power. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to widespread calls for the reassessment and transformation of Russo-centric relationships of power and hierarchy both in the region and in how we study it. The 2023 ASEEEES convention invites scholars to explore the theme of decolonization across time, place, field, and institutional setting.⁷⁶

Since February 2022, a series of articles, meetings and conversations have begun around why decolonisation is needed, and how this should be carried out. The example of Shishkin's attitude towards Russian culture as a sacred artefact reveals the need for such a move, but as the conversations are only just gathering pace, it can be difficult to know exactly how to proceed. Indeed, my project is itself rooted in a Russo-centric view of Eastern Europe, having focussed on Russian literature over translated fiction from other languages or countries. As I outlined in my methodology, my decision to exclude Russophone writers who are not Russian from this study is my attempt to combat the lack of clarity that can occur over what is, and what is not Russian literature, as well as a similar lack of clarity in how to define the limits of the field of Russian-English translated fiction.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ There were no Ukrainian books accepted (possibly because they are currently have more funding options), though it is not possible to know which books applied for the grant. Znak, *The Zekameron*.

⁷⁶ '2023 Aseees Convention Theme' <<https://www.aseees.org/convention/2023-aseees-convention-theme>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

⁷⁷ For more, see my Methodology, p. 56.

In February 2023, legal specialist Artem Shaipov and advisor to the Ukrainian government Yuliia Shaipova published 'It's High Time to Decolonize Western Russia Studies' in *Foreign Policy Magazine*.⁷⁸ Their article outlines steps to refocus Eastern European studies, moving them from a Russia-centred position to an outlook more representative of the diverse post-Soviet space. Shaipov and Shaipova propose that in order to achieve this, Western universities should regularly offer courses in languages such as Georgian, Armenian and Ukrainian alongside Russian. Their article proposes that more academic attention should be paid to the diverse ethnic groups that live within Russia. In concurrence with Zabuzhko's views, the article regards nineteenth-century Russian literature as a vehicle for 'transporting Moscow's Imperial ideology'.⁷⁹

Calls for decolonisation are countered by essays and articles in defence of Russian literature and culture. US author and former Russian literature major Elif Batuman argues in *The New Yorker* for a considered reading of the Russian 'classics'.⁸⁰ Likewise, Platt attempts to persuade his readers of the continued and indeed increasing relevance of Russian literature, and the Russian arts in general, in *The New York Times*.⁸¹ UK author Will Self also regards the reading of Russian literature as central to creating an understanding of Russia in the West.⁸² This, combined with the fact that some Russian novels are still being published — the *Sorokinaissance* for example, with prestigious Dalkey Archive and NYRB Classics — indicates that although Russian literature holds less cultural capital than before 2022, it has not entirely dissipated.

It is possible, of course, that these latter articles are also examples of colonised thinking that need to be challenged. The argument for continuing to read Russian literature is brought into relief by a comparison with essays from Ukrainian

⁷⁸ Artem Shaipov and Yuliia Shaipova, 'It's High Time to Decolonize Western Russia Studies', *Foreign Policy*, 11 February 2023 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/11/russia-studies-war-ukraine-decolonize-imperialism-western-academics-soviet-empire-eurasia-eastern-europe-university/>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

⁷⁹ Shaipov and Shaipova, 'It's High Time to Decolonize'. This is in line with Oksana Zabuzhko's comments above that Russian literature 'wove the camouflage net for Russia's tanks' as they rolled into Ukraine'. See p. 321 earlier this chapter.

⁸⁰ Elif Batuman, 'Rereading Russian Classics in the Shadow of the Ukraine War', *The New Yorker*, 30 January 2023 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/30/rereading-russian-classics-in-the-shadow-of-the-ukraine-war>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

⁸¹ Platt, 'The Profound Irony of Cancelling Everything Russian'.

⁸² Will Self, 'Multicultural Man: On Russian Literature', *The New European*, 3 March 2022 <<https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/will-self-on-russian-literature/>> [accessed 9 October 2022].

authors, which demonstrate a stark difference in thinking. Ukrainian author Oksana Zabuzhko, as noted above, regards Russian literature as part of the colonial apparatus, responsible for the education of the soldiers who tortured Ukrainians in Bucha.⁸³ Meanwhile, in March 2022, Ukrainian author Andrey Kurkov celebrated that Ukraine had banned Russian books from sale, and noted that he had been criticised for signing a letter calling for a boycott of all things Russian.⁸⁴ In a later tweet he admitted that perhaps he had been hasty, and reneged in part to say that it is acceptable to read Russians that are against Putin, 'but above all read Ukrainian authors to understand Ukraine and Ukrainians.'⁸⁵

The number of articles in the Western media which argue for the importance of continuing to read classic Russian literature, as amplified by publisher preference for such titles, hint that Kurkov's call to read Ukrainian authors instead of Russians may not be widely adopted in the near future. I suggest that Western publishers might need to revise their overwhelming preference for classic Russian novels, and instead commission more literature belonging to former-Soviet countries in order to make an impact on the decolonisation of Russian studies in the West. However, since the majority of publishing decisions are subordinate to money, as I have demonstrated, such an endeavour might fail through a lack of funding.⁸⁶

For many scholars and cultural commentators, literature has the potential to play an important role in the decolonisation of Russian studies in the West. The role of literature in colonisation is clear to Dana Kanafina, a Kazakh author and journalist. She writes from Kazakhstan, which she describes as a post-Soviet

⁸³ Zabuzhko, 'Reading Russian Literature after the Bucha Massacre'.

⁸⁴ Andrey Kurkov, 'Putin's Bombs and Missiles Rain down, but He Will Never Destroy Ukraine's Culture', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/25/putin-bombs-missiles-culture-ukraine-russia-war>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁸⁵ The reception of Kurkov's work in the West is instructive here. His novels were included in Nielsen's top-fifty Russian translations list for the UK, and some of his translations were funded by Transcript; Kurkov, 'I Am Being Criticized for Signing a Call to Boycott All Russian Cultural Products.'

⁸⁶ There is increased funding for Ukrainian literature, but the funding picture across all former Soviet states is not an equal one; many countries do not have a funding body dedicated to translation. Publisher decisions will also be influenced by comparative titles, and as described in Chapter Two, nineteenth-century Russian novels are the only genre that sell reliably. For examples of funding opportunities from Ukrainian literature see 'Grant Programme Translate Ukraine' <<https://ubi.org.ua/en/activity/programa-pidtrimki-perekladiv>> [accessed 9 August 2023].

colony.⁸⁷ She admires the anti-Russian movement in Ukraine in her review of *Voices of Freedom: Contemporary Writing from Ukraine*.⁸⁸ Kanafina regards the literature in the volume as anti-Russian, and therefore as representing a step towards decolonisation. She cites Kenyan author and translation activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's plea that people should be free to think of themselves as not colonised, and that this is what this collection represents. Indeed, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes colonisation as not only manifesting physically with the invasion of armies, and the imposition of rule of law but as taking hold of and existing in the minds of the colonised.⁸⁹ It follows then, that in order to regain a sense of identity, and reconnect with the culture of pre-colonial times — to re-balance this inequality between cultures — language must also be reclaimed. Just as language can play a large role in the colonisation process, so literature, then, plays a role in decolonisation: the act of translation can be an avenue of resistance.⁹⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's ideas resonate with the ideas that Shishkin expresses in his various essays, as well as in his approach to *Maidenhair*.⁹¹

Concrete steps towards the task of decolonisation are in progress. English PEN's judicious choices for their grant awards in 2023 have helped to foreground literature written by oppressed groups within Russia, and in this way challenge the homogeneity of Russophone literature as it is represented in the Western publishing world, as I noted in Chapter Two.⁹² Publishers such as Deep Vellum, Oneworld and Tilted Axis have translated novelists from Dagestan (2015 onwards), Armenia (2020) and Uzbekistan (2014 onwards), albeit sometimes through the filter of Russian as a source language. This reliance on Russian as a pivot language should, I argue, be recognised and noted and by doing so, could provide another step towards decolonisation.

⁸⁷ Dana Kanafina, 'More Reasons Why the War Affects Us All, Though Still Not Enough: Contemporary Ukrainian Literature', *The Alma Review*, 21 December 2022 <<https://thealmareview.wordpress.com/2022/12/21/more-reasons-why-the-war-affects-us-all-though-still-not-enough-contemporary-ukrainian-literature/>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

⁸⁸ *Voices of Freedom: Contemporary Writing from Ukraine*, ed. by Kateryna Kazimirova and Daryna Anastasieva (Winston-Salem, NC: 8th & Atlas Publishing, 2022).

⁸⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Portsmouth, N.H: J. Currey; Heinemann, 1986). Etkind writes about this in relation to the post-Soviet world. See Etkind, *Internal Colonisation*.

⁹⁰ For more on translation and resistance, see; *Violent Phenomena*, ed. by Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang (London: Tilted Axis Press, 2022); *Translation, Resistance, Activism*, ed. by Maria Tymoczko (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

⁹¹ See Chapter One, p. 96.

⁹² See Chapter Two, p. 163.

Meanwhile, the projects supported by my supervisors' research group RusTrans, at the University of Exeter, via PUBLISH! encompass Russophone authors from across the post-Soviet world, with Kazakh writers Nadezhda Chernova and Asel Omar, Estonia-born Sana Valiulina, whose parents are Tatar, and Armenian Narine Abgaryan.⁹³ Michele Berdy has been translating Tasha Karliuka, who was born in Kyiv and lives in Israel. Translator Shelley Fairweather-Vega also champions Uzbek literature and works regularly with Uzbek author Hamid Ismailov.⁹⁴ The PUBLISH! texts were selected in 2020, before the intensification of the war and for calls to decolonize Eastern European literature.

Initiatives such as the online journal *Turkoslavia* are also important to the decolonisation process.⁹⁵ The first edition was released in Autumn 2022, with a selection of translations from Croatian, Turkish, Bosnian, Russian (stories from Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan), Macedonian, Polish, and Uzbek. To amplify understanding, each translation is accompanied by a translator's note, and biographical information about the author, as well as the source text. This allows the Anglophone reader to contextualise each of the translations, and in this way assists in raising awareness, while resisting Russian as the language of a colonising power.

Despite all of these efforts, I would suggest that there is a long road to travel before any of these projects have any significant impact on the general public's understanding of the literary scene in post-Soviet countries. Likewise, the domestic process of decolonisation inside Russia for all of these smaller languages will be a lengthy one. This is because there is a central paradox at the heart of the process. By promoting the translation of Russophone texts that have been written in former Soviet states, as has been the predominant model to date, publishers perpetuate the reliance on Russian. This reliance exists in part because there are more translators from Russian than from the smaller

⁹³ Shelley Fairweather-Vega's translations of Omar and Chernova have been published; *Amanat: Women's Writing from Kazakhstan*, trans. by Zaura Batayeva and Shelley Fairweather-Vega (New York: Gaudy Boy Translates, 2022).

⁹⁴ Hamid Ismailov, *Gaia, Queen of Ants*, trans. by Shelley Fairweather-Vega, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2020); Hamid Ismailov, *Of Strangers and Bees: A Hayy Ibn Yaqzan Tale*, trans. by Shelley Fairweather-Vega (London: Tilted Axis Press, 2019). Fairweather-Vega has also translated from Kazakhstan; Talasbek Asemkulov, *A Life at Noon*, trans. by Shelley Fairweather-Vega (Bloomington, Indiana: Three String Books, 2019).

⁹⁵ 'Turkoslavia', *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation* <<https://exchanges.uiowa.edu/turkoslavia/>> [accessed 17 February 2023].

languages of former-Soviet states. A publisher in Kyrgyzstan, for example, might be more likely to commission a book written in Russian, because it will be easier to sell the rights for the translation than if it were written in Kyrgyz. Of course, this is also an issue related to finances, and so extends to the question of funding. If Russia's IP isn't funding translations in the West, then who will? Likewise, without the publishing infrastructure of relatively developed countries like Russia, how will these books from smaller languages reach a new audience?

I believe that the answer lies in the hands of translators. As I discussed in Chapter Two, although editors hold a key decision-making position in the literary market, they can do nothing without the advice of translators. I suggest that decolonisation could be nudged along by training more translators in these minority languages. However, there are a number of obstacles to this strategy. With limited interest even in the Russian language in the West, there is little chance of this being successful, or more importantly, economically viable. *Turkoslavia* is making a good attempt at raising awareness and hopefully creating a demand for texts written in the indigenous languages of former-Soviet states, but the project is still in its infancy. The fact that even with seed funding, few of the RusTrans projects have been commissioned, demonstrates that gaining entry to the literary market is especially difficult even for Russophone writing. Finally, there remains the issue that the translators who will likely be tempted towards these smaller languages will be from a similar demographic to those described in Chapter Three — a demographic consisting of academics, and those relying on second jobs which risks skewing the market as outlined in Chapter Two.⁹⁶ However, this would at least represent a partial step towards the decolonisation of post-Soviet studies in the West.

1.5 After 24 February 2022

As I have demonstrated above, Russia's war against Ukraine, especially since February 2022, has had a large and potentially lasting impact both on the Russian domestic publishing scene and, consequently, on the Russian-English translated fiction market. Not only the war, but Russia's increasing conservatism directly affects the kinds of novels that are published and thus available for translation.

⁹⁶ See Chapter Two, p. 141.

Meanwhile, as indicated by several of the interviews with translators and publishers previously mentioned, without the support of IP the possibilities for translating and publishing new Russian fiction in the West is greatly reduced.⁹⁷ While some projects continue — authors such as Sorokin, Osipov, Ulitskaya, Vodolazkin, and Ganieva continue to be published — it is not clear how long this can continue without access to external funding. As I stated in Chapter Four, this inevitable reduction in the number of titles being published from Russian is a direct expression of the influence of politics on the Russian-English translated fiction market.⁹⁸

2 Publishing and Politics — A Conclusion

The principal aim of this research has been to discover how political bias, exercised by individuals, publishing firms and national institutions, might influence the translation of contemporary Russian fiction into English. My analysis has encompassed the entire publishing process, from commission through to the act of translation, editing, marketing and (to a lesser extent) reader reception. As such, this is the first study to represent an overview of the contemporary Russian-to-English literary translation scene. Moreover, my work contributes to academic research of the six authors that form its focus: Sorokin, Ulitskaya, Shishkin, Prilepin, Senchin and Elizarov.

By unfortunate coincidence, my research has taken place at a crucial moment in geopolitical relations between Russia and the West. As I have demonstrated, the intensification of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022 has had, among many other outcomes, immediate consequences for the Russian-English literary translation field. As a result, my research spans two periods. The majority of my interviews took place before Russia's 2022 invasion, and to a large extent describe a translation field that at the time of writing has altered greatly. My research therefore reveals the effect that Russia's illegal war against Ukraine has had on the translation of contemporary Russian fiction into English and confirms my hypothesis that political concerns can influence literary translation. In the current extreme geopolitical situation, Russia's war has come close to bringing

⁹⁷ This concern was voiced by Karenyk. See Chapter Two, p. 161.

⁹⁸ In 2023 the Three Percent database registers nine titles from Russia — though these were likely all in progress before the war began.

the translation of contemporary Russian fiction to a halt. It has certainly made the prospect of publishing an apolitical Russian author in the UK or US very difficult.⁹⁹

While my research has been targeted specifically at the Russian-English language combination, many of my findings are relevant to the wider academic field of Translation Studies and contribute to an understanding of the networks and constraints that are present within World Literature, or indeed which might constitute a barrier against entry to it. In the sections that follow, I will first evaluate my methodology, and then turn my attention to issues that affect the transfer of literature within the global literary market as a whole. Finally, I will summarize the field of Russian-English translated fiction. Here, I return to my research question, and detail specifically where, and how personal and institutional political bias interferes with the translation of contemporary Russian novels into English.

2.1 Methodological Approach

As outlined in my introduction, my research was based on a series of microhistories which I created around six novels. While selecting “liberal” authors was largely straightforward, given the market preference for translating their novels into English as described in Chapter Two, it was challenging to select three “nationalists”. In retrospect, however, I am satisfied that the authors I identified largely represent “liberal” and “nationalist” viewpoints. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has resulted in the polarisation of Russian society and has confirmed which side of the political spectrum each author occupies, as evidenced in my discussion above. The war has also revealed a shift in position of one of my three “nationalist” authors during the course of my research. While Senchin appears to have moved from a pro-war to agnostic position since 2022, all of the other authors have become more entrenched in their respective “liberal” or “nationalist” positions.

Using interviews as my principal source of data was both a rewarding and frustrating process. Julie McDonough Dolmaya advocates for collecting and

⁹⁹ For example, in 2024 translations of novels by Sorokin and Ulitskaya - both “liberal” authors – are planned. Other texts from Russian published in late 2023 include Oskana Vasyakina’s LGBTQ novel *Wound*, and Elean Kostyuchenko’s damning collection of reportage from Putin’s Russia published by an imprint of PRH; Elena Kostyuchenko, *I Love Russia*, trans. by Bela Shayevich and Ilona Chavasse (London: Bodley Head); Oskana Vasyakina, *Wound*, trans. by Elina Alter (London: MacLehose Press, 2023).

preserving interview transcripts in her article about the use of oral history in translation studies.¹⁰⁰ She argues that the contextualising nature of interview-based research offers a rich source of information that cannot be gleaned from articles, or translator papers alone. At the same time, she acknowledges practical concerns over using interviews as a major source of data, specifically the onerous process of transcription, which was a major hurdle in my own research, as well as the challenges of storing transcripts and documents. To balance the lengthy task of transcription, and keeping Dolmaya's argument in mind, it might be possible, with the correct permissions, to make use of these thirty-eight transcripts in the future since they represent a significant contribution to the field of translation studies.¹⁰¹

Inspired by Buzelin and her approach of 'following the actors', I am satisfied that my methodology allowed me to discover a maximal amount of data, while simultaneously exploring and mapping the publishing networks that enable the transfer of contemporary Russian fiction into English. Analysing paratexts allowed me to assess the extent to which publishers emphasise "dissident" politics in order to market contemporary Russian fiction in the Anglophone West. My decision to run an online book group in 2020-22 enabled me to assess reader reception directly. As I showed in Chapter Four, I was able to conclude that an author's politics was not necessarily more important than the content of a novel. For the readers in the group, Sorokin's "liberal", anti-Putin stance did not excuse *Oprichnik's* scenes of sexual violence.

Likewise, my use of textual analysis to assess *Sankya*, *Oprichnik*, *Maidenhair*, and *The Librarian*, enabled me to identify in what ways personal translator bias, and indeed *hexis*, influences micro-textual translation decisions. By combining these analyses with translator, editor, agent, and some author interviews, I ascertained that issues such as the lessening of anti-Semitism in *Sankya*, or the simplification of *Oprichnik*, were neither required by a publisher nor consciously rooted in a translator's politics. Instead, such decisions are a product of translatorial *hexis*, and a quest for 'legibility'. To summarise, this combined

¹⁰⁰ McDonough Dolmaya, 'A Place for Oral History', p. 200.

¹⁰¹ The RusTrans project is obliged to delete all transcripts within five years of the project's end, and so it was not practical to include entire transcripts here, especially as they amount to over 400,000 words.

approach of interviews, textual and paratextual analysis has enabled me to locate the specific areas where personal or institutional political bias affects the transfer of contemporary Russian fiction into English, as I will illustrate below. In addition to these, my research has uncovered a number of issues that affect the literary translation field as a whole. I outline these global issues and assess the findings of my research in relation to Bourdieu below.

2.2 The Global Field of Translated Fiction

Whilst seeking to identify areas in the Russian-English literary translation field that are influenced by political bias, my research revealed numerous practices and constraints that appear to be common across the field of translated fiction as a whole. Many of these issues affect the likelihood of a novel or its author being consecrated as World Literature. I suggest that further, targeted research into literary translations between different languages might build a comprehensive picture of the global literary system. Below I outline the main issues as they affect the translation of fiction into English, focussing on issues around commissioning, independent and commercial publishers, the role of translators, and the continuing relevance of Bourdieu's assessment of the French publishing field.

2.2a Commissioning Translations

Works of fiction are translated into English thanks to a network of gatekeepers which include translators, editors and literary agents. Franssen and Kuipers rightly place editors at the heart of these publishing networks.¹⁰² However, I have found that the majority of editors would be unable to make informed decisions about which books to commission without external advice. Editors rely on both literary agents and, in some national fields, to an even greater extent on translators, to pitch them new books rather than implementing a proactive acquisitions policy. This is especially the case where a source language is not commonly spoken.¹⁰³ It appears that while publishers might have a French, Italian or Spanish speaker on their editorial team, the chances of having speakers of other languages to advise them dwindles along with the size of a nation's literary capital.

¹⁰² Franssen and Kuipers, p. 70.

¹⁰³ See the comments from a commercial publisher in Chapter Two, p. 151.

Editor reliance on translators and literary agents to find new foreign novels is one reason for the somewhat haphazard way that most translations come to be commissioned, as evidenced by the translation histories detailed in the preceding chapters. The element of chance inherent in this approach is exacerbated by a number of other issues. Importantly, many publishers have to make commission decisions with access to very little data. There is no formal way to track the publication of translations into English, or to discover what rights have already been sold. This is further complicated by the fact that it is very difficult to access accurate information about translation sales. As I described in Chapter Two, such information is only available to those companies able to pay a considerable annual fee, and even then, the data is not fully accurate.¹⁰⁴ As a result, larger firms have sales figures at their fingertips, while independent publishers have to guess at how much success their foreign authors, or novels of a similar genre, have had in the past in order to make commissioning decisions.¹⁰⁵

The ability to access sales information is closely linked with the practice of compiling comparative titles, or “comps” which I described in Chapter Two.¹⁰⁶ Larger firms’ access to sales data enables them to make informed choices around commissions: they can locate similar published titles and access information about their sales. This skews the comps system in favour of the Big Five, who might to some extent protect their economic capital by avoiding an author who is unlikely to sell. This advantage is compounded by the fact that these commercial firms have more efficient distribution systems, not to mention brand recognition, and are therefore likely to sell more copies of the books they publish. This in turn affects the commissioning decisions of independent publishers.

When these smaller firms have to create their own comps, they have no choice but to compare their titles with those of the Big Five because these tend to have both greater visibility and distribution – although, as described in Chapter Two, this does not always result in better sales. Aside from comparative titles, there are various other factors that impact an editor’s decision over whether to commission a novel for translation. As we have seen in the examples in Chapters Two and Five, an editor will be influenced by their habitus, and often publish from

¹⁰⁴ For more on this, see Chapter Two, p. 124.

¹⁰⁵ See Will Evans’ comments of surprise over the low sales of Sorokin; Chapter Five, p. 331.

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter Two, p. 156.

a culture or language that they know. I found this to be the case, for example, in Chad Post's preference for Spanish titles, or Will Evans and Mark Krotov's tendency to work with Russian authors.¹⁰⁷

A further key element in the commissioning process, and a solution to the dearth of language skills among Anglophone editors, is the sample translation.¹⁰⁸ These short excerpts are not only helpful for editors based in the UK and US, but as Wiedling pointed out in our interview, a sample in English will help to sell a novel for translation into other languages.¹⁰⁹ This is because English acts as a *lingua franca* among publishers. Even if a sample translation does not result in a commission into English, it might sell the book to a foreign market that produces higher numbers of translations than the Anglophone publishing field. Sample translations are, however, costly to produce, and so their numbers remain limited. This is despite various recent schemes to fund sample translations, as I discuss in Chapter Two.¹¹⁰

Regarding the question of politically biased publishing decisions, there appears to be a difference in approach between commercial and independent firms. Interviewees from large or commercial publishers claimed that they would be prepared to translate 'right-wing' authors, while the smaller independents felt that commissioning such authors would be a PR disaster.¹¹¹ The principal reason given by commercial publishers for not publishing right-wing authors is the fear that sales would be low, rather than any moral concerns. This question was less problematic, however, once an author has passed away.¹¹²

The final, and perhaps most important element in the commissioning process is the question of funding. Due to the inherent costs of producing a novel in translation as I described in Chapter Two, most smaller firms are unable to publish translations without some form of external financial support. The entire literary translation market's reliance on external funding indicates that it is not only Russian fiction that risks the influence of soft power. A commercial publisher

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter Two, p. 152.

¹⁰⁸ For more on Sample Translations, see Chapter Two, p. 153.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Wiedling.

¹¹⁰ See Chapter Two, p. 162.

¹¹¹ See Chapter Two, p. 211.

¹¹² See Chapter Five, p. 317.

noted that they were often wary of accepting money from government organisations because it might come with ‘strings attached’.¹¹³ However, it remains the case that the majority of publishers rely on source-culture funding, as well as on organisations such as English PEN and PEN/Heim to support their work.

2.2b Translators

As noted above, editors would be ill-placed to discover or commission foreign novels without the advice of translators. Translators’ influential role within the publishing ecosystem, however, neither imbues them with power, nor ensures that they are properly paid, or that their work is sufficiently recognised. Despite the fact a translator has the gatekeeping power to suggest new novels to publishers, and, if commissioned, to shape the fabric of the English text, the decisions, from commission, to editing, to creating paratextual material and marketing the finished novel, remain for the most part with the editor.

This lack of agency is compounded by the fact that many translators are expected to carry out some of their work for free. It is frequently the case that translators might speculatively produce translation samples and pitches for editors without payment. Even though there are some schemes in place to fund this process, there is not enough funding for everyone.¹¹⁴ In 2021, a translator from Turkish, Nick Glastonbury, began a Twitter thread that decried the difficulties of pitching translation projects to publishers, citing the amount of time translators are required to invest pro bono in creating a package to interest publishers.¹¹⁵ Glastonbury described his subsequent frustration at not hearing back from editors. Similar to the experience of Robin Munby, he highlighted the fact that the translation industry favoured translators who were able to create work for free. The thread garnered hundreds of retweets and comments, and eventually grew

¹¹³ Interviewee # 1.

¹¹⁴ See Chapter Two, p. 154 for examples of these.

¹¹⁵ nick glastonbury [@nsglastonbury], ‘Why I Am On The Verge Of Quitting Translation (a Thread): Over the Past Year I’ve Sent Approximately 25 Pitches to Editors at over a Dozen Presses. Three of the Editors Responded with Rejections, While the Rest Never Responded, Even after Two or Three Follow-up Emails.’, *Twitter*, 2021 <<https://twitter.com/nsglastonbury/status/1381343949764358145>> [accessed 19 December 2022]. See also, Anton Hur, ‘Translating the World Undone: An Interview with Translator Nicholas Glastonbury’, *Words Without Borders*, 25 May 2021 <<https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2021-05/translating-the-world-undone-interview-with-nicholas-glastonbury-anton-hur/>> [accessed 19 December 2022].

to articles, and an interview between Glastonbury and Korean-to-English translator Anton Hur.¹¹⁶

As I discussed in Chapter Two, the expectation that translators work at times for free, combined with the relatively low pay once a translation is commissioned, and the subsequent need to have supplementary forms of income, can act as a barrier to many.¹¹⁷ Translators who have caring responsibilities, who come from poorer backgrounds, or who do not have another source of income, are regularly prevented from entering the profession. These issues are further exacerbated by the fact that translators often need to be part of the translator network to find work, as my examples in Chapter Two demonstrate. Emerging translators who are not part of such networks, or who have no free time to spend translating samples and pitching editors, will find it difficult to join the profession.¹¹⁸

Translators have varying strategies to cope with some of their lack of agency and control. In recent years there have been attempts by translators such as Jenny Croft, Anton Hur among others to improve literary translators' standing. Campaigns such as #namethetranslator are having some effect on raising the visibility of translators, but my research suggests that there is much work to be done in both supporting the translators already at work, and in enabling translators from diverse backgrounds to join the profession.

2.2c Bourdieu: Capital, Consecration, and the Rise of Independent Publishers

This survey of the field of Russian-English translated fiction has uncovered points of both similarity and divergence from the French publishing field as depicted in Bourdieu's 'Conservative Revolution'.¹¹⁹ Many of these comparisons apply to the field of Anglophone translated fiction as a whole. As I have demonstrated throughout my thesis, the translation of contemporary Russian novels into English relies on the exchange of personal, cultural, and symbolic capital. This capital is accrued by individual editors and translators and is central to the

¹¹⁶ Hur, 'Translating the World Undone'.

¹¹⁷ See Chapter Two, p. 149.

¹¹⁸ See my discussion in Chapter Two of some of the principal barriers to translation. Chapter Two, p. 149.

¹¹⁹ Bourdieu, 'A Conservative Revolution'.

discovery and translation of new titles. The publishing networks that enable this exchange are, as I showed in Chapter Two, relatively ad-hoc, and operate on two levels. On one, even prolific translators regularly commissioned to translate commercially successful and/or well-regarded literary authors such as Bromfield (Akunin's translator) and Schwartz (who is currently translating Solzhenitsyn) rarely have their own suggestions for new translations accepted by editors. On the other, a group of 'celebrity' translators such as Chandler, Dralyuk, and increasingly Lawton, appear to hold much more influence over what gets commissioned. This discrepancy arises from an uneven distribution of personal capital through connections within the publishing industry and cultural journalism.

As described by Bourdieu, independent publishers remain essential to the field, and find themselves on the cutting-edge of innovation.¹²⁰ In this position they commission foreign authors who are little-known in the West in order to create capital for themselves. They might also, as with Evans and Dalkey Archive, deliberately set out to emulate, or work with, other larger independents by forming alliances with them.¹²¹ However, today's independents such as Deep Vellum and Open Letter appear to be in a more advantageous position than their 1990s French predecessors, in part due to the existence of social media. Following the example of Post, who is credited with sparking renewed interest in translations into English, publishers regard the field of translation increasingly as one of opportunity. In the face of adversity, independent publishers capitalise on their peripheral position by fostering small reading communities and responding to these communities' linguistic and cultural interests. In this way, these smaller publishing firms can accrue cultural and symbolic capital while promoting diversity among their authors. In the case of Russian literature at least, prior to 2022 this approach enabled independents to publish contemporary Russian fiction that was unknown in the Anglophone West.

The relative buoyancy of independent presses compared to those described by Bourdieu in the 1990s is the result of a number of factors. Chief among them is access to grants.¹²² Whether these originate from source or target culture funds,

¹²⁰ Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 150.

¹²¹ This takes place much in the same way as smaller publishers in Quebec form alliances with larger, commercial publishers in France; Buzelin, 'Independent Publisher', p.161.

¹²² Bourdieu states that in the 1990s France state funding was more likely to be awarded to the largest, most prestigious publishers; Bourdieu, 'Conservative Revolution', p. 151.

grants allow independent publishers to stay afloat financially while pursuing their artistic missions in bringing the world into conversation.¹²³ This allows them to grow their reputation, and curate an image much like that described by Sela-Sheffy in her assessment of the translator's persona.¹²⁴ In fact, today's independent translation publishers instrumentalise this need to curate self-image, using the reputation of well-known translators to both consecrate their authors and themselves.¹²⁵ A further structural shift is the use of technology and particularly social media. Bourdieu's small publishers were not able to create symbolic and cultural capital in the same ways as today's independents. Twenty-first century publishing is not a conservative revolution, then, but a digital one that is reflected in the continuing success of translations published by independent firms.

2.3 The Russian-English Literary Translation Field

My research into the Russian-English literary translation field has revealed that while it shares a number of issues with the field of translated fiction as a whole, there are some elements peculiar to the act of translating contemporary Russian fiction into English. In common with translations from other languages, Russian fiction is published in the UK and US thanks to a series of translator and publisher networks. As each of the microhistories I present above reveals, novels tend to be commissioned as a direct result of these networks; often a translator or agent pitches their novel to the right person at the right time, rather than the result of a publisher's targeted commissioning strategy. This in turn means that the majority of translation commissions are unplanned, and usually take place thanks to luck. This ad hoc approach is perhaps not surprising, given the small amount of contemporary Russian literature published in the UK and US, and the small economic returns, if any, these novels bring.

The purpose of my study has been to understand where and when personal, and institutional political bias interferes with the transfer of contemporary Russian fiction into English. By comparing the commission, translation, and marketing strategies around authors who occupy different ends of Russia's political

¹²³ See comments made by Evans and Post in Chapter Two, p. 133.

¹²⁴ Sela-Sheffy, 'The Translators' Personae'.

¹²⁵ Heilbron and Sapiro, 'Outline for a Sociology of Translation', p. 103.

spectrum, I have discovered key areas where personal and institutional political bias affect the publishing process. While the influence of political bias is perhaps not always conscious on the part of translators or publishers, I suggest that it is a result of the increasingly polarised political rhetoric around Russia in the Anglophone West. It is, then, inevitable that political bias might influence the publishing journeys of contemporary Russian novels. Below, I will discuss the exact loci of these expressions of political bias, which include editorial decisions, funding, paratexts, commissioning practices, the act of translation, and the role of publishers. I end with a summary of the translator and publisher ethics that are embedded in translation field that is becoming increasingly ethically and politically complex.

2.3a Loci of Political Subordination #1 — The Editor's Desk

The commissioning process, while often guided by a love of literature, nevertheless takes place within a geopolitical context. It is guided both by the economic constraints of the publishing market, and by publishers' and editors' political bias. Because of the reliance on comps detailed in Chapter Two, and publishers' general need to make sensible economic decisions, editors tend to select contemporary Russian novels of similar types. These are either novels that fit into the preferred paradigm of Lipovetsky's Russian Exotic, or which can be marketed as written by "dissidents". This preference can be seen in the commissioning choices of the commercial presses which tend to operate without the constraints of external funding. For example, as discussed in Chapter Two, PRH accounted for 72% of the Russian-English translated fiction market in 2019, and yet all of the contemporary novels they have published are in some way marketed using an agenda that contains political bias – all of their novels are written by "liberal" authors presented as "dissident". This politicised commissioning tendency is also reflected in their non-fiction about Russia.¹²⁶

The second issue, highlighted by Wiedling, and hinted at by Lipovetsky, is the nature of the Russian literature that is being offered to publishers in the West. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, publishers might decline to commission Russian novels because they are often retrograde in their societal attitudes.¹²⁷ The fact

¹²⁶ See Chapter Four, p. 224.

¹²⁷ Interview with Wiedling.

that most Russian literature takes place beyond the scope of the #metoo movement, for example, is a challenge for the Western publisher. Indeed, as I noted in Chapter Four, the common theme of sexual violence against women, coupled with women's often marginal roles in contemporary Russian fiction, is problematic.¹²⁸ Even the more progressive recent author choices of Deep Vellum such as young female writers like Ganieva, Gorbunova and Meshchaninova cannot disguise the fact that these women are writing from a country where sexual violence and sexism are normalised.¹²⁹ As Wiedling surmised, and as both sales data and book-group responses show, this type of literature is not easy to market in the UK or US.

Russia's increasingly negative image on the world political stage also discourages readers from buying Russian literature. Former editor for Pushkin Press Ipsen described the change in attitudes towards Russian literature in the West during Putin's incumbency. It was her opinion that although up until the end of the 1990s Anglophone readers were excited about getting to know Russia again, Putin (who has been in power since 2000) had damaged this positive image.¹³⁰ In our interview, Ipsen recalled a comment from a colleague in the publishing industry:

...modern Russian literature was tacitly endorsed by the Russian government and therefore politically not the sort of thing you would want to publish here because 'we don't like Putin'.¹³¹

Meanwhile, although the Russian-language skills and Russophile interests of editors such as Evans are demonstrated by their targeted, informed commissioning strategies, they can only be successful to a point. As discussed

¹²⁸ See for example, Galina Yuzefovich's opinion of Sorokin's attitude to women: Galina Yuzefovich, 'Vladimir Sorokin i problemy russkogo feminizma: chto mne ne nraivitsia v publichnom vyskazyvanii pisatel'ia o zhenshchinakh', *Dzen*, 21 October 2021 <<https://dzen.ru/a/YXEnEL-ly2gguv8b>> [accessed 14 February 2023]. During book group discussions, Narine Abgaryan's novel *Three Apples Fell from the Sky* was celebrated since it was only one among the many books we read which did not involve sexual assault; Narine Abgaryan, *Three Apples Fell from the Sky*, trans. by Lisa Hayden (London: Oneworld, 2020).

¹²⁹ Russian law does little to protect women from domestic abuse. For example, see: 'Dekriminalizatsii domashnego nasiliia – piat' let', *Meduza*, 7 February 2022 <<https://meduza.io/feature/2022/02/07/s-dekriminalizatsii-domashnego-nasiliya-proshlo-pyat-let-za-eto-vremya-vse-stalo-tolko-huzhe-zhertvam-teper-slozhnee-poluchit-pomosch-a-agressorov-voobsche-nakazyvayut>> [accessed 28 June 2023].

¹³⁰ Interview with Ipsen.

¹³¹ Interview with Ipsen.

both earlier in this chapter, and in Chapter Three, novels in the original Russian that address gender identity, or LGBTQ+ characters, or which are anti-war, are scarce because of strict ‘anti-gay propaganda’ laws in Russia, and the fear of being labelled as a ‘foreign agent’. The publication of such novels now relies largely on translators sourcing titles via unofficial channels. However, as demonstrated by Woolley’s experience with trying to publish *The Gospel According to...*, a lack of funding from Russia leads to a lack of publication in the UK.¹³²

2.3b Loci of Political Subordination #2 — Funding Bodies

As I described in Chapter Two, funding bodies are essential in the translation of most contemporary Russian novels because the majority are published by small independent presses who require some degree of financial support. Prior to 2022, it was integral to the commissioning process to access such funding from English PEN, PEN/Heim, and Russia-based Transcript and IP. However, as I have shown, political bias guides these funding bodies in different ways. For example, the decisions taken by English PEN rely on applying the filter of bibliodiversity to their selections. Although previously this resulted in only very few translations from Russian being funded, in early 2023 English PEN announced that they had awarded money to three Russophone texts, all of which, as outlined in Chapter Two, can be regarded as highly political.¹³³ These are novels written by a gay rights activist, Navalny’s press secretary, and a Belarussian political prisoner respectively. This aptly demonstrates the political agenda of such funding bodies in reaction to geopolitical events and indicates that translations of Russian literary fiction are one of the many areas where opposition to Russia’s war in Ukraine is being expressed in the West.

Meanwhile, according to well-placed interviewees, the funding decisions taken by IP prior to 2022 were equally rooted in political manoeuvres. As I addressed in Chapter Two, the awards that IP make allegedly require the approval of Deputy Minister of Culture, Vladimir Grigoriev. IP tend to overlook novels or authors that represent Russia in a negative light, or which counter the government’s narrative,

¹³² At the time of writing, despite receiving a PEN grant, Woolley had not raised enough money to fund the entire publication of *Gospel*; Interview with Woolley.

¹³³ See Chapter Two, p. 163.

as confirmed by the events around Shishkin and BookExpo America.¹³⁴ The control that IP has over the flow of contemporary fiction from Russia to the West then, is innately biased, although as one interviewee stated, it is impossible to prove this completely.¹³⁵ This politically inflected intervention over what can and cannot appear in English (and indeed in other languages) is one of the starkest examples of the influence of politics on the Russian-to-English translated fiction market.

The influence of funding bodies has changed since February 2022. As noted above, since the intensification of the war, it has been almost impossible for publishers to accept funding from Russia-based Transcript and IP. This is both for ethical reasons and a result of practical concerns, such as the difficulties of accepting money from Russia due to sanctions. In this sense, the politically biased decisions taken by IP especially, are now reflected in Western publishers' decision to refuse their money. These funding bodies' sudden absence from the translated fiction market is also a stark indicator of the reliance of Anglophone publishers on their money to translate contemporary Russian fiction.¹³⁶ Their sudden unacceptability to Western publishers is a clear demonstration of the influence of geopolitical situations on the translated fiction scene.

2.3c Loci of Political Subordination #3 — Paratexts

As I outlined in Chapter Four, the source culture context that a Russian novel loses when it is translated, is created afresh for the target Anglophone audience, and is frequently political in nature. As I have shown, even when Russophone novels and their authors are not overtly “dissident” in either their content or stated opinions, they are nevertheless marketed as such to the target reader. This positioning takes place via the publisher-produced peritexts that accompany a novel when it reaches bookshops. Blurbs, titles, book covers and accompanying peritextual material such as introductions or author interviews all work to package Russian novels as dissident, or ‘anti-Putin’ in order to increase their appeal. As I

¹³⁴ See Introduction, p. 13.

¹³⁵ Interview with Perova.

¹³⁶ Not everyone is so principled. In June 2022, *The Observer* reported that Russian publishers were targeting specific British authors in attempt to buy the rights to their novels. See Vanessa Thorpe, ‘Dilemma for UK Authors as Russia Offers Huge Sums for Escapist Fiction’, *The Observer*, 11 June 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jun/11/dilemma-for-uk-authors-as-russia-offers-huge-sums-for-escapist-fiction>> [accessed 27 June 2023].

demonstrated in Chapter Four, this peritextual framing has a direct effect on the epitextual reception of a novel, most notably in the form of book reviews.

Whether or not publishers take any note of an author's extratextual activities and statements appears to depend on whether these phenomena will be helpful in marketing the novel, and of course their accessibility to a non-Russian speaker. As publisher Chad Post joked, publishers' approach to marketing contemporary Russian novels relies on the trope that "it's not just [about putting out] a good book, but [putting out] a good book about your enemy".¹³⁷ I conclude that this use of paratexts, and insistence on dissidence as a marketing tool, reveals the role of political bias in the commission and reception of contemporary Russian fiction in the Anglophone West.

2.3d Loci of Political Subordination #4 — Political Bias and “Liberal” and “Nationalist” Authors

A fundamental question remains over which authors merit translation. By creating and comparing microhistories around “liberal” and “nationalist” writers, I have been able to assess the influence that an author's politics has on the translation process. This includes the relative likelihood of being commissioned for translation into English, the size and prestige of the publishing house involved, the agents, editors and translators attached to the project, and these novels' critical reception in the West. Although the UK data I presented in Chapter Two indicates that sales figures are usually low, they are still a factor in measuring the success of a contemporary Russian novel, and hence of determining the impact of an author's “dissidence”, or otherwise, on their commercial success.¹³⁸ For example, there is a marked difference between selling 1208 copies of Sorokin's *Oprichnik*, and fifty copies of Senchin's *Minus*, or indeed twelve of Ulitskaya's *Jacob's Ladder*.

The ethical question around translating authors whose worldviews are deemed problematic or even unacceptable in the West is integral to this study, and discussed at length in Chapter Five. Indeed, an author's politics can be deemed dangerous enough to prevent translation, evident in the fact that hardly any

¹³⁷ Interview with Post.

¹³⁸ See Chapter Two, p. 132.

“nationalist” Russian authors are commissioned. Senchin, for example, was published by Glas, and championed by Perova, as providing an ‘ethnographic’ window on Russia.¹³⁹ Since his politics are by far the mildest and humanitarian, he only just fits the category of “nationalist” — and indeed this classification has been tested by his position against the 2022 escalation against Ukraine. Elizarov was published despite his anti-Ukrainian views. Some of these views are present in *The Librarian* but they were overlooked by Pushkin Press and not highlighted by his translator. Despite interviews with Ipsen and Bromfield, it is impossible to assess whether this ignorance was wilful or otherwise.

Meanwhile, Prilepin’s *Sankya* was commissioned for translation when he was an anti-Putin National Bolshevik activist. His journey to becoming a pro-Putin *krymnash* and even a participant in the Ukrainian war both in 2017 and 2023 was not obvious in 2008 when Parker selected the book as a window on Russia in the 2000s. Glagoslav’s decision to publish Prilepin’s *The Monastery* even after his admission of killing soldiers in Ukraine, however, is somewhat mystifying. Although Prilepin’s actions are confronted by Sutcliffe’s introduction to the novel where he explains the author’s controversial politics, I argue in Chapter Four that this was likely because there was very little choice but to acknowledge Prilepin’s actions. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a faithful, unbiased account of the author’s extratextual activity remains, I believe, the only ethical option if Prilepin is to be published in English at all.

Publishers’ treatment of “liberal” writers contrasts strongly with the presentation of “nationalists”, whose inconvenient politics are either glossed over, or whose novels are simply not translated. In my interviews I did not encounter any ethical concerns about publishing pro-Western, anti-war Russian authors in the West, regardless of the content of their novels. Shishkin’s popularity in the West grew when he took a stance against Russia in 2013.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, although Ulitskaya does not regard herself as a dissident, her status as such is constantly reaffirmed through interviews, articles in the press, and the paratextual presentation of her novels.¹⁴¹ The recent publication of *Just the Plague* entrenched her in the Western mind as an outspoken anti-Putin dissident. She, however, states that

¹³⁹ Senchin, *Minus*.

¹⁴⁰ See Chapter Four, pp. 239-51.

¹⁴¹ See Chapter Four, p. 230 and p. 257.

she is in fact ‘anti-political’.¹⁴² While Shishkin is sincere in his position with his consistent political message in both prose and non-fiction, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four, questions arise about the sincerity of Sorokin. He is consistently pitched as a “dissident” writer in the West, even though he is the least politically active of the three “liberal” writers. When the *Sorokinaissance* launched in late 2021, the author was briefly referred to as an ‘artist’ rather than a dissident in the blurbs on his books, but with the intensification of Russia’s war against Ukraine, he was morally obliged to resume his politicised role.

Regardless of authors’ individual motivations, it remains the case that “dissident” writers are more likely to be commissioned. I find that the majority of contemporary Russian fiction published in the UK and US is written by “liberal” authors who can be marketed as holding “dissident” views. I suggest that this is the result of translators’ ethical stance towards their authors, and perhaps also a desire not to risk any of their own symbolic capital through association with a politically dubious (read “nationalist”) author.

This is especially true in 2023, when it is almost impossible to publish any new Russian writer in the West. For “nationalists”, meanwhile, if they are commissioned for translation at all, little is made of their politics — even before 2022, it would be particularly challenging to sell pro-Putin authors in the West. It is intriguing that both Ulitskaya and Sorokin deny the importance of their political views and actions. Perhaps this is because they are less concerned with their image abroad than their publishers are.¹⁴³ As I discussed in Chapter One, for Ulitskaya this attempt at apoliticism stems from her abiding hatred of politics. Sorokin’s professed apoliticism appears to have been a habit he acquired under Communism. But, as he stated in an interview with for *The New York Times* (2011) at the age of fifty, in response to Putin’s presidency, the ‘citizen in [him] came to life.’¹⁴⁴ It would appear that because of Putin’s governance, and subsequently Russia’s war, Ulitskaya and Sorokin find themselves in a position where they have no choice but to be dissident.

¹⁴² See Chapter One, p. 89.

¹⁴³ In her email, Ulitskaya claimed that she did not have any expectations about being published abroad; Interview with Ulitskaya.

¹⁴⁴ Barry, ‘The Russian Novelist’.

2.3e Loci of Political Subordination #5 — Publishers in The Russian-English Translated Fiction Field

An author's political orientation also determines the size and prestige of publishing firm that they are signed to. Evans recognised that at Deep Vellum publishing someone like Prilepin could be disastrous — this is despite his publication of the contentious, though “liberal”, Sorokin, as I note in Chapter Four. Although the larger presses claim that they would be sufficiently well placed to publish a controversial, “nationalist” author such as Limonov, they have not yet done so (though this might in part be because of the current war). Instead, small, Russia-based Glas signed Senchin, and Pushkin Press signed Elizarov because, as I argue in Chapter Three, the publisher was unaware of his political views.

Prilepin, however, was only considered by Disquiet because of the imprint's link with Parker, as well as Glagoslav, who are largely subsidised by IP.¹⁴⁵ As I outlined in Chapter Two, IP are partly sponsored by Russian propaganda outlet Russia Today and are overseen by government official Grigoriev. Glagoslav's small reach and lower editorial standards perhaps reduce the potential reach of Prilepin in the West, but his existence in English might also help to legitimise him in other international markets. Wiedling revealed that he sometimes agrees to sell a book's rights to Glagoslav because in essence this provides a large translation sample which might then lead to selling rights to other countries.¹⁴⁶

In contrast, when writers are published by prestigious independents such as Deep Vellum, Open Letter or Pushkin Press, they are more likely to be reviewed in the literary press, and therefore to accrue symbolic capital, as I observed in Chapter Four. In addition, when authors are signed to commercial publishers, their books are more likely to be sold in high street book shops. This is important because, as described earlier, commercial publishers are more likely to select “dissident” authors, and therefore the novels of these writers are the most visible in the target culture.

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter Three, p. 207.

¹⁴⁶ Although this was Wiedling's strategy, when he checked his figures, this method had only been successful on two occasions; Conversation with Wiedling, February 2023.

The relegation of “nationalist” writers to smaller, less prestigious publishers can mean that they are, in comparison, more or less silenced and ignored. The difference a publisher can make to the epitextual reception of a novel can be seen in relation to *The Librarian*. In comparison to novels published by Glas and Glagoslav, Pushkin Press’s endorsement of Elizarov saw him reviewed relatively widely in the British press.¹⁴⁷ The ability of a publisher to consecrate an author such as Elizarov without fully understanding, or acknowledging his controversial political views, confirms my call for Pym’s translator ethics to be applied to publishers, as outlined in Chapter Five.

2.3f Loci of Political Subordination #6 — The Act of Translation?

Kevin Platt, as we have seen, alleged that the translation of Sorokin’s *Oprichnik* had been simplified in order to sell more copies. While it is true that Jamey Gambrell reduced some of the complexities of the language, this, as I argue in Chapter Five, was a quest for legibility rather than an attempt to render the novel more marketable. *Oprichnik*’s editor Krotov was clear that these suggestions came from Gambrell, who worked closely with Sorokin. Krotov felt sure that Gambrell would prefer clarity over all else — her *skopos* for the novel was one of intelligibility rather than obfuscation.¹⁴⁸ Although Gambrell’s decisions made the novel more accessible in some ways, the translation did not render *Oprichnik* more obviously political. Gambrell did not choose to explain any of the allusions to contemporary political figures in Russia, leading Post to complain that the novel was not as incendiary as he had expected — he guessed that perhaps he was missing the cultural context that would have made the novel more understandable.¹⁴⁹ Instead, as I suggest in Chapter Five, the novel was framed as “dissident” by publisher-produced peritexts, which were subsequently relied upon by literary critics.

The text of *Sankya* also suffered accusations of manipulation from one critic: in this instance the reduction of the anti-Semitism which worked to make Prilepin marginally more acceptable. As outlined in Chapter Five, the translators denied that this was their *skopos*. I suggest instead that the decisions taken by Parker

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter Four, p. 253.

¹⁴⁸ See Chapter Five, p. 315.

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter Four, p. 262.

were a result of his translatorial *hexis*.¹⁵⁰ In the case of *Sankya*, this *hexis* was formed by Parker's social concerns, his ensuing belief that Prilepin was worth listening to, and his consequent resistance to Prilepin's anti-Semitism. This was compounded by an incoherent approach to the translation as a result of minimal editorial support.

The other novels' translations did not suffer accusations of tampering for ideological or sales reasons, although their translators still had to face challenging decisions. As detailed in Chapter Five, Schwartz's decision to lose the reference to 'negritenok' in *Maidenhair* complemented her faithful approach to a cultural as well as textual-linguistic translation of the novel.¹⁵¹ Gannon's translation decisions were guided in large part by Ulitskaya's Russian editor Klimin, but this was only after he rejected the first translation of the text from Shayevich.¹⁵² Tait's Senchin translation underwent little editing, but he, like Bromfield, aimed for equivalence in the translation of problematic language. Bromfield, meanwhile, noted his absolute fidelity to Elizarov. I argue in Chapter Five that this approach represents the most ethical translatorial response to working with ideologically challenging writers — once a translator accepts to work on a project they should not manipulate the tone of the text in order to make the author more morally acceptable to the target reader. The semantic and textual-linguistic choices made by translators and editors do not, then, represent evidence of deliberate politicisation, but instead reflect the individual *hexis* and ethical approach of their translators.

2.3g Political Bias and Ethics

The question of ethics is raised by allegations of ideologically motivated translation decisions. As discussed in Chapter Five, it appears that Bromfield's approach, of faithfully translating an author regardless of his own position, is the most ethical approach to take. Bromfield's ethics also raise the question over who should, and who should not be translated into English. By applying Pym's five translator principles, I argue that it is only ethical to translate authors such as Prilepin and Elizarov during Russia's war against Ukraine if they are accurately

¹⁵⁰ See Chapter Five, p. 287. From my understanding of the translation process, of the three translators, Parker had the greatest control of the final English text; Interviewee #9.

¹⁵¹ See Chapter Five, p. 326.

¹⁵² See Chapter Three, p. 190.

contextualised. This comes, however, with the caveat that I do not believe that such authors should be translated at all whilst Russia continues its assault. This is largely because, on a personal level, it is unethical to amplify voices that actively support and encourage an illegal war. This is compounded by the fact that, as I have shown, publishers do not always exercise sufficient diligence in researching their authors, and that therefore the books risk being framed without accurate paratextual information. This might be compounded by the fact that, as Batchelor points out, it is possible to ignore paratexts.

Accordingly, I argue that Pym's translator ethics should also apply to publishers. Since, as I have shown, translators can only control the fabric of the text, and not its presentation on the literary market, the majority of the responsibility for a novel's presentation lies with the publishing house. It is for them to present a novel in such a way so as not to misrepresent an author's politics. A case in point here is *Sankya*, which is still framed as the work of a "dissident" author by Navalny's foreword. The novel is still available via Glagoslav's print-on-demand system although Prilepin has been targeted for sanctions by the UK and US governments.

While I find that translators generally work in line with Pym's fifth principle, which encourages translation in the name of improving intercultural relations, this is ineffective if it does not also apply to publishers. I hold that publishers of contemporary Russian fiction make largely dissident-focussed, and therefore politicised commissioning and marketing decisions. These concur with Post's suggestion that contemporary Russian fiction is 'about your enemy'.¹⁵³ I thus conclude that some publishers deliberately exploit geopolitical tensions between Russia and the UK and US in order to market their books and make sales. Controversy may increase sales at least marginally, but creating it is seldom ethical.

3 A Final Word

The tendency to regard contemporary Russian novels as politically instructive is not new. As is evident from the case studies presented here, politicised marketing strategies were regularly present in the peritextual materials that accompanied

¹⁵³ Interview with Post.

contemporary Russian novels long before 2022. As can be seen in the microhistories I have created around Elizarov, Prilepin, Senchin, Shishkin, Sorokin, and Ulitskaya, the political angle used to market novels often impacts their reception and subsequent success. Whether this is morally acceptable or not, it appears to be an intractable approach. Indeed, in 2011 Edwin Frank of publisher NYRB Classics suggested that there is more impetus to read Russian novels when they are about an enemy; ‘Once we don’t have that story about Russia as a competitor, or an enemy, it [is] much less clear to us what we should be interested in.’¹⁵⁴

In light of the evidence I have uncovered here, and now as a result of Russia’s war, the continued politicisation of contemporary Russian fiction in the West appears inevitable. In April 2022, a translator from Russian and Ukrainian, Isaac Stackhouse-Wheeler, made a plea to decouple Eastern European literature from politics.¹⁵⁵ Both because of the war, and because of the myriad loci of political subordination I have identified, I believe that this will be very difficult to accomplish in the near future. It is possible that the next step to achieving this separation of literature and politics involves the decolonisation of Russian studies in the West – which, in itself, is a political act.

¹⁵⁴ Barry, ‘The Russian Novelist’.

¹⁵⁵ *Translating Ukrainian Literature at a Time of Crisis: Reilly Costigan-Humes and Isaac Wheeler Speak*, dir. by University of Exeter, 2022
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZ2vjsNbN8o>> [accessed 9 September 2022].

Appendix A

Interviewees

For clarity, I have indicated which authors (relevant to this thesis) each individual has translated. Dates given are for interviews, most of which took place online.

1. **Fiona Bell.** Translator of Natalia Meshchaninova. 13 March 2022.
2. **Andrew Bromfield.** Translator of Boris Akunin, Mikhail Elizarov, Dmitry Glukhovsky, Sergey Lukyanenko, Viktor Pelevin, Mikhail Shishkin. 10 December 2021.
3. **Allan Cameron.** Publisher at Vagabond Voices, Scotland. 6 October 2021
4. **Robert Chandler.** Translator of Vasily Grossman, Andrey Platonov, Teffi. Email correspondence, 19 May 2021.
5. **Boris Dralyuk.** Translator of Isaac Babel, Andrey Kurkov. 2 October 2021.
6. **Will Evans.** Publisher at Deep Vellum and Dalkey Archive. Translator of Oleg Kashin. 15 February 2021.
7. **Edwin Frank.** Publisher at NYRB Classics. Interview in person at the London Book Fair, 5 April 2022.
8. **Polly Gannon.** Translator of Ludmila Ulitskaya. 15 October 2020.
9. **Lisa Hayden,** Translator of Narine Abgaryan, Eugene Vodolazkin, Guzel Yakhina. 21 January 2021 and 19 October 2021.
10. **Markus Hoffman.** Literary Agent at Regal, Hoffmann & Associates, New York. 27 October 2021.
11. **Gesche Ipsen,** Freelance Editor (Pushkin Press) and Translator from German. Translator of Mikhail Shishkin (from German). 18 June 2021.
12. **Daniel Kalder.** Literary Critic and Author. 22 February 2021.

13. **Bryan Karetnyk** Translator from Russian and Japanese. Translator of Yuri Felsen, Gaito Gazdanov. 25 May 2021.
14. **Mark Krotov**. Editor at *n+1*, and formerly FSG. 3 and 18 December 2020.
15. **Max Lawton**. Translator from Turkish, French, Russian and German. Translator of Vladimir Sorokin. 23 October 2020, 3 November 2021.
16. **Robin Munby**. Translator from Russian and Spanish. 7 May 2021.
17. **Natasha Perova**. Publisher at Glas, Literary Agent, Russia. 11 October 2021.
18. **Chad Post**. Publisher at Open Letter, US. 11 February 2021.
19. **Zakhar Prilepin**. Author, Russia. 5 May 2021.
20. **Maddie Rogers**. Translator from French, Publishing Industry, UK. Interview in person at the London Book Fair, 5 April 2022.
21. **Marian Schwartz**. Translator of Ludmila Petrushevskaya, Mikhail Shishkin, Olga Slavnikova, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. 18 January 2021.
22. **Bela Shayevich**. Translator of Svetlana Alexievich, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Ludmila Ulitskaya, Evgenii Zamiatin. 11 November 2020.
23. **Mikhail Shishkin**. Author, Russian but Switzerland-based. 13 September 2021 (via email), and email correspondence 17 May, 2023.
24. **Ian Ross Singleton**. Literary Critic, Author. 3 August 2021.
25. **Arch Tait**. Translator of Svetlana Alexievich, Anna Politkovskaya, Roman Senchin, Ludmila Ulitskaya, Kira Yarmysh. 28 September 2021.
26. **Ludmila Ulitskaya**. Author, Russia (now Berlin). 12 November 2021.
27. **Thomas Wiedling**. Literary Agent, Germany. 2 November 2020 and 9 February 2023.
28. **Reuben Woolley**. Translator of Sergei Khazov-Kassia, Andrey Kurkov. 28 April 2023.

Anonymous Interviews

I have not provided exact dates for all of these interviews, in order to protect anonymity.

1. Interviewee #1, July 2021

2. Interviewee #2 July 2021

3. Interviewee #3, 2021.

4. Interviewee #4, August 2020.

5. Interviewee #5, July 2021

6. Interviewee #6 December 2020.

7. Interviewee #7, August 2020.

8. Interviewee #8, 2020.

9. Interviewee #9, 2020.

10. Interviewee #10, April 2023.

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