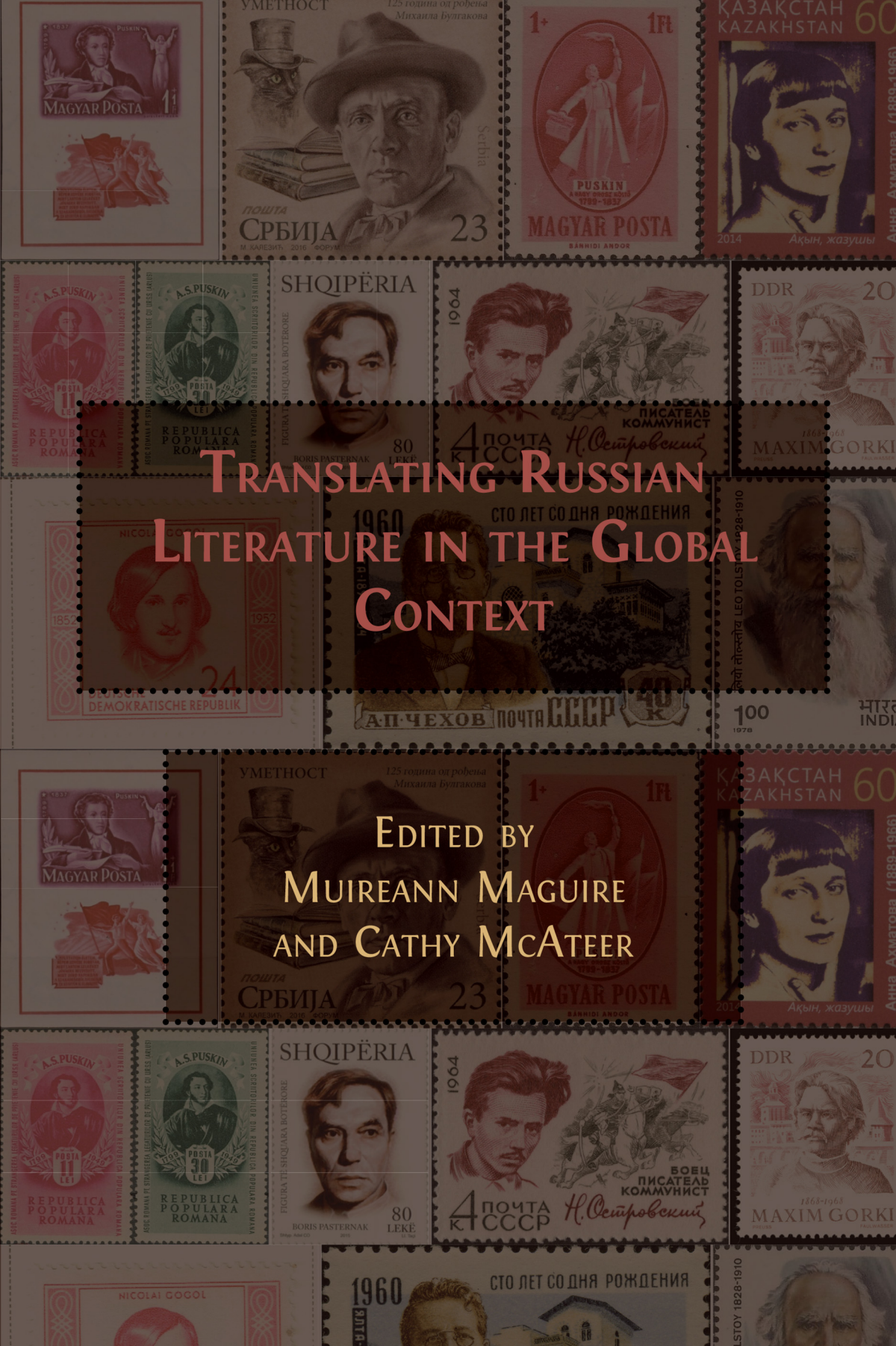

Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context

Edited by
Muireann Maguire
and Cathy McAteer

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The Translation of Russian Literature into Hindi

Guzel' Strelkova

As one of the most widespread Northern Indian languages, with more than six hundred million speakers, Hindi plays a crucial role not only in the reception of translated foreign literature, but in its mediation for other Indian languages and cultures. The translation of Russian literature into Hindi was facilitated by one of the founders of modern Hindi and Urdu prose, Munshi Premchand (the pen name of Dhanpat Rai Srivastava (1880–1936), and author of over three hundred original short stories and fourteen novels in Hindi and Urdu). Premchand was also a noted translator of Tolstoy. As we have seen in the previous section, other Hindi writers like Bhisham Sahni and Rajendra Yadav also contributed. Their translations remain popular today, and are constantly updated by new generations of translators.

Premchand was born in a small village near Benares into a Hindu family, and received his early education in a madrasa (a school of Islamic theory and law), a term with multiple origins including Urdu. As a result, he wrote in both Urdu and Hindi, although scholars today regard him as the founder of modern Hindi literature. His realist style and focus in his own fiction, which represented the everyday life of ordinary people, was revelatory for his contemporaries. His translation of twenty-one stories, published under the title *Stories by Tolstoy* (*Taalstay kee kahaaniyaan*, 1923), was probably mediated via English as a bridging language as Premchand did not know Russian, and was immediately popular on its release.[1] Some of the stories were partly adapted to an Indian context: for example, the action was transferred from Russia to India and some characters received Indian names. Premchand's choice to translate Lev Tolstoy was probably inspired by the Russian sage's correspondence with the widely venerated Mahatma Gandhi. This example encouraged other writers to experiment with a more Realist style.

1 See Donatella Dolchini, 'Premchand's Encounter with Tolstoy', *Cracow Indological Studies*, XVII (2015), 164–65, https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.17.2015.17.09.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0340.25

Jainendra Kumar (1905–88), Premchand's admirer and younger contemporary, was also impressed by the talents of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky; some of the female characters in his fiction resemble Dostoevsky's heroines. Perhaps this similarity is one reason why Jainendra Kumar is considered a leading author of psychological prose in Hindi. But he also translated Tolstoy, notably the 1957 collection *God is with Love: A Collection of Stories by Tolstoy* (Hindu title *Prem men Bhagvaan. Tolstoy Granthaavalee*). The title was based on Tolstoy's short story 'Where Love Is, There God Is Also' ('Gde Bog, tam i liubov'', 1884). This anthology was published in New Delhi by the significantly named 'Society of Cheap Literature' (Sastaa saahitya manDal) in 1957, the term 'cheap' referring to affordability rather than quality. Jainendra Kumar, a follower of Jainism who was at this time undergoing a deep, spiritual crisis provoked by the recent war and India's complex political situation, had published nothing between 1938 and 1952, so this anthology marked a personal revival for him. As a Jain, Kumar rejected all violence; Tolstoy's pacifism would therefore have resonated with him.

Other nineteenth-century Russian writers and playwrights like Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, and Anton Chekhov were also very popular in India, most probably because of adaptations of their work on the Indian stage, such as Gogol's *Inspector General* (*Revizor*, 1836), which was performed in the state of Maharashtra as *Amaldar*. It was a *roopaantar* performance (adapted to local characters and conditions), written by the very popular Marathi playwright P. L. Deshpande.[2] Later, the play was also translated into Hindi; it continues to be staged today.

Many prominent contemporary Hindi writers, like Krishna Baldev Vaid (1927–2020), Mridula Garg (b. 1938), and Kunwar Narain (1927–2017), have described how Russian literature influenced their work. For example, K. B. Vaid sometimes jokingly called himself "Krishna Oblomov", after the titular protagonist of Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* (1859); while Mridula Garg has claimed that everyone in her family read the Russian classics in translation.[3] The well-known poet Kunwar Narain, who visited Eastern Europe and crossed the Soviet Union by train in 1955, was familiar with Russian literature, especially poetry; he particularly admired Arsenii Tarkovskii, Osip Mandel'shtam, Anna Akhmatova, and Marina Tsvetaeva. Both the works of the most quintessential Soviet author, Maksim Gorky, and Mikhail Bulgakov's parody of Soviet culture *Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*, 1967) have been translated into Hindi—the latter novel twice, in 2010 and again in 2016 (the second time with the financial support of Russia's Institute for Literary Translation).

2 *A Poetics of Modernity Indian Theatre Theory, 1850 to the Present*, ed. by Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

3 Private conversation on 8 March 2023 between Garg and Strelkova (in the latter's capacity as Garg's translator from Hindi into Russian of her third novel *Cobra of My Mind* (*Chittakobara*, 1979)).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the USSR's Foreign Languages Publishing House (founded in 1946) became active. In 1963 it was subdivided into two firms, 'Progress' and 'Mir'; in 1982 'Progress' created its own subdivision, the 'Raduga' ('Rainbow') Publishing House. Each had its own specialisation: Progress was dedicated to social and political literature and popular science, Mir was for academic literature, while Raduga published translations of Russian literature into many foreign languages, including several Indian languages. These translations were undertaken by skilled professionals, many of whom were novelists or poets themselves, like the prominent Hindi writer Bhisham Sahni (1915–2003). Sahni is often considered to be Premchand's successor in realist Hindi prose (and as a translator of Tolstoy). Of his various writings, his novel *Darkness* (*Tamas*, 1974) is considered one of the most significant Hindi novels of the twentieth century. Sahni lived and worked in Moscow between 1957 and 1963 as a translator for the Foreign Languages Publishing House. He translated Tolstoy's *Resurrection* as *PunaruThaan* (Hindi for 'New Life') for Raduga in 1974. He was the General Secretary of the Progressive Writers' Association of India (1975–85). Translations such as these—including Rajendra Yadav's translations of Chekhov and Lermontov—were popularised in programmes produced by Radio Moscow's World Service Indian department, which up to the 2010s broadcast in twelve Indian languages.[4] These broadcasts were popular with Indian listeners. The majority of Indian translators employed by Radio Moscow also worked for Soviet publishing houses, translating Russian literature into their native languages. Those Russian editors who worked with Indian translators on these projects had an excellent knowledge of Hindi or other Indian languages, which enabled them to edit and improve the translations (primarily made via English as an intermediary language).

Some Indian translators spent their lives in the USSR. One such translator was the prolific Madan Lal Madhu (1925–2014), who translated into Hindi more than one hundred works of Russian prose and poetry, including Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (*Yudhh aur Shanti* in Hindi), published in 1988, *Anna Karenina* in 1981, and Aleksandr Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin* in 1999. Having spent several years in the Soviet Union, Madhu was probably one of the first of very few translators who could translate directly from Russian without an English intermediary. This made his version of *Anna Karenina* more literally correct than S. N. Agarwal's 1955 translation into Hindi of the same novel. In all, Madhu translated more than a hundred works of fiction, including prose by Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, poems by Pushkin, and children's literature by Kornei Chukovskii and Samuil Marshak. In 2012, Madhu published his memoirs, *Foggy-Bright Faces of Memories* (*Yadoon ke Dhundle Ujale Chehre*), in two volumes. The first volume describes his childhood up to 1956 when Madhu, then teaching in a college, received an official invitation on behalf of the USSR's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to work in

4 Rajendra Yadav, *Kathaa shikhara* (New Delhi: Pravin Prakashan, 1994).

Moscow as a translator and editor. This occurred after the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Soviet Union in 1955. The second volume carries the sub-heading 'Fifty-Five Years in Moscow' ('Masko men pachpan varsh') and offers a vivid overview of relations between India and Russia. It focuses on Madhu's literary and translation networks and activities from the 1950s up to the early twenty-first century. One of the most interesting sections throws light on the work of the Indian department at Moscow's Foreign Languages Publishing House, directed by Petr Vasilevich Gladyshev, a committed Stalinist and head of the Hindi section from 1957 to 1976. Brajesh Singh, a close relative of the Indian Foreign Minister, was appointed to this department, possibly because of nepotism as (according to Madhu) he was not very skilled.[5] He did, however, catch the eye of Svetlana Allilueva, Stalin's daughter, and the couple were married (Madhu's own wife Tatiana was also an editor in the department). Although Madhu's memoir is entertaining and illuminating on the processes and relationships within this department, he does not give any details about translation or his own philosophy of translation.

Relations between Russia and India were at their closest and most productive between the 1950s and 1980s, when Russian classics were not only widely translated, but in many cases re-translated. For example, Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (*Voskresenie*, 1899) was translated twice. As we have seen, Bhisham Sahni's full-length version appeared in 1974; but an abridged version by Shitala Sahay had previously appeared in the early 1950s (the specific year of publication is not stated) as *Punarjeevan* (*Regeneration*). Sahay's version contained errors, including mistranscriptions of personal names into the Devanagari alphabet, so that Nekhliudov became "NekhleeDoo" and Maslennikova became "Mesleneekaf". *Anna Karenina* also appeared in two Hindi versions. The first, as mentioned above, was Suraj Narayan Agarwal's 1955 translation, abridged and essentially retold by the translator, unlike Madan Lal Madhu's more literal version, published sometime in the 1950s (again, the exact year is not given). Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* (*Kazaki*) was also published twice by different Soviet publishing houses, in versions by different translators.[6] Later and contemporary generations of Indian translators have sought out less officially approved Russian authors for translation, from authors of the 'Village Prose' movement such as Vasilii Shukshin or Viktor Astaf'ev, to the poetry of Osip Mandel'shtam and Boris Pasternak, or the fantastic realism of Mikhail Bulgakov and Evgenii Vodolazkin.

5 Madan Lal Madhu, *Yadoon ke Dhundhle Ujale Chehre* (Delhi: Medha Books, 2012), pp. 188–89.

6 The first version was translated by Narayan Das Khanna (for whom, sadly, there are no available biographical details). It was published by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in 1959 in their series 'Library of the Best Works in Russian Literature' ('Sarvottam roosee pustakmaalaa'). The prominent Russian graphic artist and painter Dmitri Bisti illustrated it. In 1979, Raduga produced a second version translated by Yogendra Nagpal (1948–2020) who had worked there for many years and translated many works of Russian literature into Hindi.