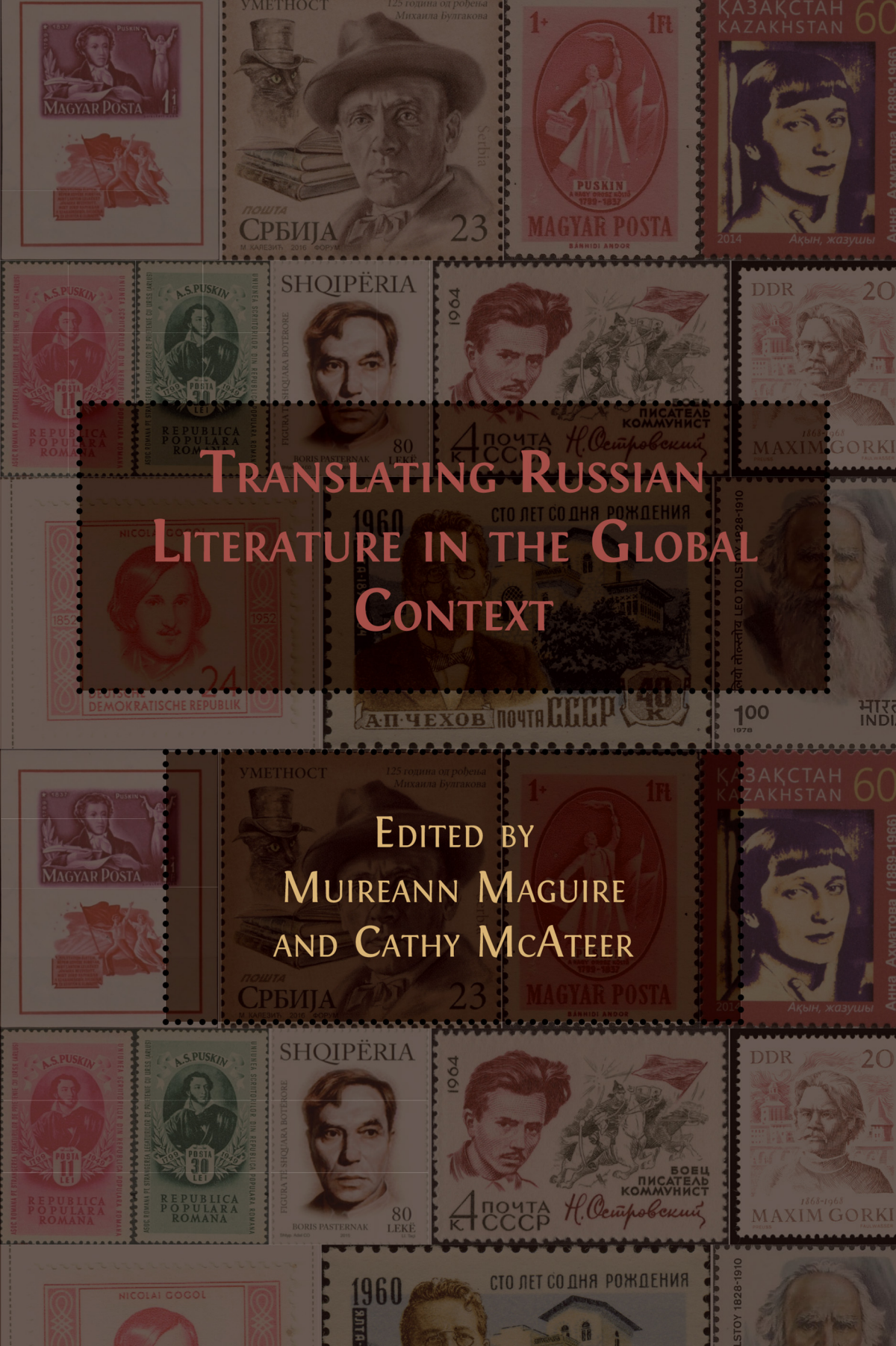

Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context

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Turkey

Traces of the Influence of Russian Literary Translations on Turkish Literature of the 1900s

Hülya Arslan

The Nobel Prize-winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk once said in an interview:

> My main interest is not politics, but literature. When people talk about Europe, Russia and St Petersburg, Dostoevsky immediately comes to my mind. Dostoevsky first taught me how similar our worries, everyday life, sorrows, and joys are. This writer from Petersburg not only told me how close the Russians and Turks are, but he also taught me to be human and tolerant. […] [Dostoevsky] taught me to write.[1]

The Turkish novelist was a teenager, fond of literature and writing, when he first encountered Dostoevsky. In the same interview, he stated:

> I still clearly remember reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. I was eighteen years old, sitting alone in a room with windows facing the Bosporus. This was the first book that I read by Dostoevsky. Among the shelves of my father's library was a version of Dostoevsky's novel published in the 1940s that was translated into Turkish and another version of it that was translated into English by Constance Garnett. From the very first pages, I realised that I was not alone in this world, the reflections of the heroes seemed to echo my own thoughts. There were many acts and events that

1 Orhan Pamuk, 'Prorocheskii golos Dostoevskogo', *Gosudarstvennyi Ermitazh*, 24 (May 2017), 98–110, http://hermitage-magazine.ru/articles/orhan-pamuk-prorocheskiy-golos-dostoevskogo. All translations from Russian and Turkish are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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> shook me—as though they had all happened to me for the first time. I only felt this way when I read great books.[2]

Not only Orhan Pamuk, but many other modern Turkish writers claim to have learned much from Russian literature. Many academic studies conducted in the field of comparative literature prove the same point. The above quote is, of course, crucial: there is a special cachet when a Nobel laureate credits a Russian writer's influence for the development of his own artistic inclinations. However, I am interested in another aspect of Pamuk's recollection. The translated novel, which Pamuk describes as "published in the 1940s", is the elaborate work of a "translation bureau", which played a remarkable role in the development of Turkish literature. The Westernisation trend, begun during the Ottoman reforming period known as the Tanzimat Era (1839–76), had gained considerable momentum with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. As in many communities, fundamental changes in socio-cultural, economic, and political life occurred in Turkey through the translation of a diverse range of texts. The main reason behind this is undoubtedly a result of a series of translations: translation draws cultural values closer rather than merely transferring data from one language to another. Art, science, and schools of thought have been fed by translation throughout history. My aim in this essay is to explain in general terms the contribution of translations of Russian literary works to Turkish literary values, considered as a target culture. I use the concept of 'translation activity' to describe the entire process including the translator, the work, the translation decision, and the publication of the work.

Turkey has always favoured translation activities as a means to reinvent itself, like any other community on the verge of new discoveries. When educational reforms were needed, everyone's eyes turned to the West. Professor John Dewey, an American philosopher, social scientist, and educator, was invited to Turkey in 1924 to assess its education system. In his report, which was accepted as a reference on modernisation of schools and teacher training for years, Dewey emphasised how translations from foreign languages were essential for professional development in the field of education; he also added that the translations should meet students' expectations of good literature.[3] Dewey's emphasis on translation would prove significant for our topic. The first step towards establishing a new, secular national Turkish identity, able to take its place alongside world cultures, was the country's adoption of the Latin alphabet in 1928. In the first of many translation projects, a 'Delegation of Copyright and Translation,' appointed to translate books considered necessary for educational

2 Ibid.

3 Bahri Ata, '1924 Türk Basını Işığında Amerikalı Eğitimci John Dewey'nin Türkiye Seyahati', *Gazi Universitesi Gazi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 3:21 (2001), 193–207.

use, was assembled in 1924 by the government of the new Turkish Republic.[4] But since the simplification of the Turkish language (by disclaiming the influence of Arabic and Persian), as well as the reconstruction of the educational system in conformity with secularism took precedence, translation activities remained in the background. However, by analysing relevant archives of the Ministry of National Education and the National Library today, we discover contemporary reports that reinforced the importance of translation for the country's development. These documents show that translation contributed to the modernisation of the Turkish language. As a result, the First Publication Congress was convened between 2 and 5 May 1939 under the leadership of the Ministry of Education to plan publications of the Republican period. The expression "invitation to a translation campaign", which Hasan Âli Yücel emphasised in his speech at the opening of the congress, drew attention. The main emphasis of the invitation was the necessity of carrying out the planning and execution of translations "under one roof", which consequently led to the formation of the Translation Bureau. A year after the congress, in 1940, the Translation Bureau was officially up and running.[5] The primary objective of its translation activities, which were intended to be carried out systematically by the government alone, was to mature the worldview of literate Turks and share the cultural capital of foreign literary works. This official cultural policy, spearheaded by the then Minister of National Education, Hasan Âli Yücel (1897–1961), is also called 'Turkish Humanism'. The campaign sought to ensure that all translation works holistically reflected a humanist perspective on the wider community. Although the translation activities that took place during this period caused ideological divisions between intellectuals, they undoubtedly had an outstanding impact on the development of Turkish literature, as well as on the social lives of literate Turks. One of the most notable decisions made at the abovementioned congress was the recruitment of "eligible persons for the selection and printing of integral literary works, including world classics, to be translated into Turkish".[6] In addition, a journal called *Tercüme* was initiated, and would publish eighty-seven issues from 1940 until its closure in 1966. Along with translations, translation theory, and criticism, readers of the journal could find articles on Russian literature. Within the scope of this forward-looking plan, a list of 1120 separate literary works was chosen for translation, eighty-eight of which were Russian classics.

For us, the most important aspect of these translation activities carried out by the Ministry of National Education is that the most influential writers and translators of the period worked voluntarily in this programme. Pre-Republican translations—made mostly from French or English as writers and translators

4 Taceddin Kayaoglu, *Türkiye'de Tercüme Müesseleri* (Istanbul: Kitapevi yayınları, 1998), p. 201.

5 See *Vakit Gazetesi*, 3 May 1939, p. 1.

6 Kayaoğlu, *Türkiye'de Tercüme Müesseleri*, p. 284.

interested in Russian literature generally did not know Russian—were during this period replaced by translations made directly from Russian. Some of the translators of these works were Russian citizens who had left their countries after the October Revolution, and others had lived in Russia for educational purposes or as officers of Foreign Affairs during the formation of the Turkish Republic. For example, Erol Güney (born in 1914 in Odesa; died in 2009 in Tel Aviv), whose birth name was Mikhail Rootenberg, immigrated to Turkey with his family and received his education there. As a philosophy student at Istanbul University, he met the poet Orhan Veli. This acquaintance brought him into Turkish literary circles, and as a result, he was actively engaged in translation during the 1940s. Erol Güney translated the works of Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and Molière into Turkish. He worked as a translator and journalist until he was deported, and his Turkish citizenship revoked, over a newspaper article he wrote in 1955, in which he suggested the Soviets wished to improve relations with Turkey. After living in France for a while, he eventually settled in Israel in 1956. In his last decade, he received a Turkish visa and started visiting the country again.[7] Another important translator, Oğuz Peltek (1908–56), who translated Russian classics directly from the original language in the 1940s, was born in Bulgaria. He moved to Istanbul to attend high school, and continued to live there after graduating. Like Güney, he studied philosophy at Istanbul University. He also worked as a journalist in Bulgaria and his articles defended the rights of Turks residing in Bulgaria. Peltek translated the works of Tolstoy, Chekhov, Pushkin, and Turgenev into Turkish. Nihal Yalaza Taluy (1900–68), who would eventually work in the Russian section of the Translation Bureau, is an important female translator of the period. Taluy, who was born in the Caucasus and immigrated to Turkey with her family after completing her high-school education, married Hayrettin Ziya Taluy, a novelist. She was known for translating thirty separate volumes from the canon of Russian classical literature.

The translator Hasan Ali Ediz (1905–72) was partly trained in Russia. After his Turkish university expelled him in 1923 for participating in political demonstrations (he was a medical student), Ediz went to the Soviet Union to receive an education there and to better understand the Socialist order. Many translators, writers, authors, and publishers of the same generation with an interest in Russian literature also had ideological aspirations. The same tendency is seen amongst intellectuals of the 1968–78 generation who were sympathetic to Socialism. Ediz was arrested when he returned to Turkey in 1929, but continued to work as a journalist and translator after his imprisonment. His translations of Gogol, Gorky, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Ehrenburg were among the most successful Turkish publications of this period. Zeki Baştımar (1905–73), who had pursued his education in the USSR just like Ediz, studying social sciences at Moscow State University, started working in the Translation

7 See *Vakit Gazetesi*, 3 May 1939, p. 1.

Bureau after returning home. An active member of the undercover Communist Party of Turkey in 1947, he was arrested in 1951. After more than ten years in prison, he began to publish his work. Among his many translations, those of works by Tolstoy and Pushkin are the most widely read. Both Hasan Ali Ediz and Zeki Baştımar made innovative efforts to provide extra information about the authors whose works they were translating, in their paratextual synopses.[8] The oft-repeated catchphrase common to intellectuals born before the 1980s, roughly rendered as "we are a generation that grew up with Russian literature", was not just empty words. Besides the Russian works mentioned above, the growing list of translations also included Greek and Latin classics and works by German, Italian, Spanish, English, American, and French writers. As a result of all these studies, between 1940 and 1966 the Translation Bureau translated into Turkish 308 French texts, 113 German, 94 Greek, and 80 English (in addition to the 88 Russian texts mentioned above). The most-translated individual authors were Plato (with 30 works), Molière (27), Balzac (22), Shakespeare (22), Dostoevsky (14), Goethe (10), and Tolstoy (9). Introducing the World's Classics Series, in which these translations were printed, Hasan Âli Yücel emphasised the importance of translation in intercultural interactions and the exclusive role of Russian fiction in the development of Turkish literature:

> The first step in contemplating and perceiving the essence of humanism is internalising works of art, which are the foremost palpable interpretations of human existence. Of all the branches of art, literature is the richest in terms of expressing our voice and ideas. When a nation can reiterate other nations' works of literature in its native tongue, in other words, in its own mindset, that nation enlivens, enhances, and re-creates its own mentality and perception at an equal rate to those works of art. This explains why we deem translation activities significant and consider them effective assets for our cause of civilisation. Letters, the indelible tools to express ideas, and literature, their ultimate architecture, have such a deep impact that touches the very soul in all the nations that could turn thoroughly to every sort of such works of art. The fact that such an impact on both the individual and the community are identical, is, in fact, an indicator of robustness and scope transcending its immediate time and place.[9]

We should note that the statements commonly found in the first editions of this translation campaign (which was a direct intervention by the government

8 Altan Aykut, 'Türkiye'de Rus Dili ve Edebiyatı Çalışmaları Rus Edebiyatından Çeviriler 1884–1940 ve Rusça Öğrenimi 1883–2006', *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, 46:2 (2006), p. 17.

9 Hasan Âli Yücel, 'Onsoz', in *Dünya Klasikleri Dizisi* (Ankara: MEB Yayinlari), 23 June 1941, p. 1.

between 1940 and 1966) chime with Itamar Even-Zohar's 1990 article, which states: "[t]o say that translated literature maintains a central position in the literary polysystem means that it participates actively in shaping the centre of the polysystem. In such a situation it is by and large an integral part of innovatory forces, and as such likely to be identified with major events in literary history while these are taking place".[10] The truth of Even-Zohar's words had already been realised in Turkish society. Pascale Casanova explains the historical development of world literature similarly: "[f]or an impoverished target language, which is to say a language on the periphery that looks to import major works of literature, translation is a way of gathering literary resources, of acquiring universal texts and thereby enriching an underfunded literature—in short, a way of diverting literary assets".[11] Translation activities enormously enriched Turkish literature, as well as fostering artistic values in wider Turkish society. The development of short fiction changed the course of Turkish literature. Memduh Şevket Esendal (1883–1952), sent to Baku in 1920 as a representative of the first parliament, was a well-educated young man with a literary bent, and an author of short stories. He learned Russian during his four-year stay in Baku. He first encountered Chekhov's stories in the *Yeni Gazete*, which was published in Turkey and translated by the Turkologist Vladimir A. Gordlevskii (1876–1956).[12] Esendal's own stories, written in 1912 and published under a pseudonym, differed from the then-prevailing Turkish storytelling style. His laconic prose reveals his aptitude for observation, and researchers who have studied the emergence of this new style of Turkish short story have observed the aesthetic affinity between Esendal and Chekhov:

> We should note this: the works of most of our authors before Esendal, or of other contemporary literary movements, were under the influence of Western literature [...]. Although these works mentioned Turkey and its people, they conveyed a style, manner, and pattern of expression as if they had merely been translated or their authors had not belonged to this community. Esendal, who was content with adapting storytelling techniques from the West, did not convey any non-local touches in his works. These were the products of national literature, which described our own environment, our people, in our native language, and did not feel as if they had been translated.[13]

10 Itamar Even-Zohar, 'The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem', *Polysystem Studies*, 11 (1990), 45–51 (p. 46).

11 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by Malcolm DeBevoise (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999; 2nd edn, 2007), p. 134.

12 Hülya Arslan, 'Chehov v Turtsii', in *Dialog Kultur* (Kazan: Izdatel'stvo Yaz, 2012), pp. 50–52.

13 Cevdet Kudret, *Türk Edebiyatında Hikaye ve Roman—Meşrutiyetten Cumhuriyete Kadar*, 2 vols (Istanbul: Inkilap, 1967), p. 349.

Esendal did indeed create original literary works imbued with his own national values and cultural codes, but only by adapting techniques and inspiration learned from Chekhov. Esendal, known as 'our own Chekhov' in Turkey today, commented on his new aesthetic of storytelling and discussed the influence of Russian authors in a 1934 letter to his son:

> The writings I publish are not even among the ones I have endeavoured to write. I stumble upon new ideas written in this style for humanity. I work hard day and night to write a piece of original work, and I keep writing so much that I could write books with all that writing yet I tear them up in the end, while reading others' writings. [...] I do not remember when I felt like writing for the first time. I find myself reading carefully through some books to learn from them. And I read them several times over. I read Guy de Maupassant's *Une Vie* maybe ten times. Then I really liked Tolstoy. And I cannot let go of Doctor Chekhov recently. If one wants to tread the path to write in some way, they must absorb all the classics starting from the very first ones. In fact, you should still read them even if you do not wish to start writing. These books reveal new horizons every time you look at the world.[14]

Another of his letters from 1938 reveals, '"[t]he literary feelings within me awakened as I read the Russians [...]".[15] Although Chekhov claimed that he wrote in a cheerful manner, the concept of 'Chekhov's gloom' is often mentioned in Turkish letters today. Selim İleri (b. 1949), a contemporary author whose name is often mentioned in conjunction with Chekhov, exhibits traces of the latter's influence in his stories and novels. He even praises himself for having partially plagiarised his novel *This Summer Will Be the First Summer since the Split* (*Bu yaz ayrılığın ilk yazı olacak*, 2001) from Chekhov; in 2002 it won the prestigious Orhan Kemal Novel Award. İleri feels so close to Chekhov's style, in that he has borrowed the Russian author's famous gloomy evenings, unbearably sorrowful separations, and feuds with the past; even a character based on the faithful butler Firs from *The Cherry Orchard* (*Vishnevyi sad*, 1904) was integrated into his writing.[16] On the other hand, the film director Nuri Bilge Ceylan (b. 1959), the winner of the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival in 2014, officially informed his audience that he was inspired by Chekhov's stories in the making of both *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (*Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da*, 2011) and *Winter Sleep* (*Kıs uykusu*, 2014). Ceylan comments: "[h]owever much we write about

14 Memduh Şevket Esendal, *Oğullarıma Mektuplar* (Istanbul: Bilgi Yayınevi Bütün Eserleri -18, 2003), p. 73.

15 Ibid.

16 Hülya Arslan, 'Türk Yazın Dizgesinde Anton Pavloviç Çehov'un İzleri: Selim İleri', in *Prof. Dr. Altan Aykut'a Armağan: Rus Dili ve Edebiyatının İzinde*, ed. by Ayla Kaşoğlu (Istanbul: Çeviribilim yayınları, 2016), pp. 51–62.

Chekhov, we cannot feel him enough. He has contributed to almost all my films and he even taught me how to live beyond that".[17]

The influence of literary translations from Russian, which began in the early 1940s as a state-supported cultural repertoire to spread the understanding of 'humanism', was not limited to Chekhov. Dostoevsky's spiritual interrogations, Tolstoy's didactic prose, and Gogol's irony began to manifest themselves in contemporary Turkish literature during the following years as educational and social conditions improved. But translations from Russian literature did not merely influence literary genres. The purpose of such translation was not only to foster the development of new themes or new styles, but also to mature the broader outlook of Turkish artists and readers. In this context, Cemal Süreya (1931–90), one of the pioneers of modern Turkish poetry, claimed in an interview broadcast on television in 1986: "I was born in 1931. My mother died in 1937. I read Dostoevsky in 1944. I have had no peace since that day. That completes my biography". These translated texts reached more readers since they were completed after the alphabet reform of 1928. This is why I have focused here on the influence of Russian literary works translated into Turkish in the 1940s. Yet I would also like to note that the first book translated from Russian to Turkish in 1824 was Aleksandr Griboedov's *Woe from Wit* (*Gore ot uma*, 1833), by Mizancı Mehmet Murat, who emigrated from Russia to Turkey in 1873.[18] Between 1887 and 1900, at least twenty-seven poems were translated, including lyric poetry by Mikhail Lermontov and Aleksandr Pushkin.[19] In the early 1900s, Ol'ga Sergeevna Lebedeva (1854–19??) translated Pushkin and Tolstoy.[20] Tolstoy was increasingly translated into Turkish during this period, therefore enjoying greater influence, and is still one of the most-read Russian authors in Turkey today. *What Men Live by* (*Chem liudi zhivy*, 1885) is highly popular among twenty-first-century Turkish youth. Many countries' publishing policies are closely related to their national ideologies. A society's level of relative enlightenment is thus proportional to the framework through which culture is viewed, interpreted, and internalised. During the polarised global politics of the 1950s, officially approved Soviet literary figures such as Mikhail Sholokhov, Vladimir Maiakovskii, and Konstantin Simonov continued to be translated into Turkish and to inspire literary circles, although from an ideological standpoint, Turkey's politics were remote from those of the USSR. The Russian literary archetype of

17 Nuri Bilge, 'Kıs Uykusu Üzerine', *Altyazi*, 215 (2014), https://altyazi.net/soylesiler/nuri-bilge-ceylanla-kis-uykusu-uzerine.

18 Ismail Habib, *Avrupa Edebiyatı ve Biz* (Istanbul: Remzi Kitapevi, 1941), p. 267.

19 Altan Yakut, 'Turkiye'de Rus Dili Ve Edebiyatı Çalışmaları Rus Edebiyatından Çeviriler (1884–1940) Ve Rusça Öğrenimi (1883–2006)', *The Journal of the Faculty of Languages and History-Geography* (Ankara University), 46:2 (2006), 18–27, https://dspace.ankara.edu.tr/xmlui/handle/20.500.12575/65903.

20 Hülya Arslan, 'Kültürlerarası İletişimde Örnek Bir Çevirmen Kimliği: Olga Lebedeva' *Littera*, 16 (June 2005), 133–39. See also Sabri Gürses's essay in this volume for more on O. S. Lebedeva's translation career.

the 'little man', familiar from Gogol and Pushkin, influenced Turkish authors to begin creating (under the umbrella of Realism) portraits of characters oppressed by the political system; intellectuals, estranged from their communities, were targeted and criticised in Turkish society at that time, as illustrated by the attacks on Erol Güney after he published his article. Just as Maksim Gorky's *Mother* (*Mat'*, 1906) had inspired the Socialist youth of an earlier era, would-be revolutionaries in 1950s and 1960s Turkey read Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* (*Tikhii Don*, 1933). During this period, Turkish authors like Yaşar Kemal, Orhan Kemal, and Aziz Nesin visited the USSR at the special invitation of the Soviet Writers' Union, thus creating a direct cultural bridge between the two nations. The temporary stagnation in Russian literature after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 briefly affected translations into Turkish. As it became more difficult to contact post-Soviet authors in order to acquire the rights to translate their works, publishers turned instead to authors banned during the Soviet era, with fiction by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Mikhail Bulgakov commissioned by Turkish firms. Among the first modern Russian authors to be translated into Turkish in the late 1990s were Liudmila Ulitskaia, Viktor Pelevin, and Liudmila Petrushevskaia. Turkish translators who successfully translated classics as well as those authors mentioned above include Mehmet Özgül (b. 1936), who used to teach Russian at military schools; Ataol Behramoğlu (b. 1942), one of Turkey's most important poets, who also translated poems from Russian and has won many international literary awards; Ergin Altay (b. 1937); the poet Azer Yaran (1949–2005); Mazlum Beyhan (b. 1948); and Kayhan Yükseler (b. 1947). Since 2012, Russia's Institute for Literary Translation (Institut Perevoda), founded to promote the global translation of Russian literature, has begun to invite literary translators from Turkey to a biannual translation assembly in Moscow. This has brought a new dimension to Turkish literary translations from the Russian language. Turkish publishers and translators have been incentivised to produce new translations, and experienced greater recognition for doing so. My own direct translation of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) from Russian into Turkish was shortlisted in 2016 for the Institute's Read Russia Award. Moreover, it is a remarkable success that Sabri Gürses and Uğur Büke, the leading Turkish-language translators of contemporary Russian literature, jointly received the Literary Institute's 2020 Read Russia award for their *Complete Works of Tolstoy*, first published in 2019 in eighteen volumes. Since the 2010s, the impact on Turkish social life of Russian literary works translated into Turkish has reached a different dimension. As we analyse the communication tools of the twenty-first century, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc., there are many Turkish social media accounts with names like Raskol'nikov, Svidrigailov, Rasputin, Doctor Zhivago, Woland, Lara, Onegin, and even Karenin—all borrowed from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian classics. Even this trivial illustration shows the relationship between the modernisation of Turkey and the growth of literary translation there. Translations from Russian and Western literature

introduce new ideologies, philosophical ideas, and political trends. Influenced by literary translations from world languages, the margins of Turkish literature's cultural and linguistic formation expand. Damrosch states in his *What Is World Literature* that "[u]nderstanding world literature as writing that gains in translation can help us to embrace this fact of contemporary intellectual life and to use translations well, with a productively critical engagement". This statement allows us to conclude that translations have exceeded the limits of literary pleasure and revealed a richer world, both in terms of linguistics and of culture.[21] In this regard, although Russian literary works only began to be translated into Turkish a quarter of a century later than certain other languages, the influence of Russian fiction on the formation of a Turkish national literature has been both multifaceted and far-reaching.

21 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 291.