

TRANSLATING RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Vietnam

Translation of Russian Literature in North and South Vietnam during 1955–75: Two Ways of ‘Rewriting’ the History of Russian Literature in Vietnam

Trang Nguyen

Introduction

The two decades between 1955 and 1975 form an exceptional period in Vietnamese history. During this time, the North and South regions of Vietnam were divided into two different political regimes. When North Vietnam was building Socialism, following the political path of the Soviet Union, the South was occupied by the United States army. The Republic of Vietnam was built in the South under US influence. The Vietnam War between these entities raged for twenty years. The Vietnamese people in the North wanted to liberate the South, unify North and South Vietnam, and achieve national independence. Not until 1975, when the Communists defeated the Republic of Vietnam, were their aims achieved. The United States subsequently withdrew all its troops from South Vietnam. This unique historical context has, naturally, affected the reception of foreign literature, and particularly its translation. Foreign literature, including Russian, reached readers in North and South Vietnam primarily through translations. As leading theorists have argued, the connection between target texts and target cultures in translation can reveal criteria for a translation strategy as well as for understanding the history of the source literature. Any analysis of the translation picture at a given time therefore cannot ignore cultural or political contexts, power discourses, or the connection of translations to the target cultural

context.¹ This essay contends that while the translation of Russian literature in North Vietnam favoured works that were consistent with the Socialist discourse pursued by the latter, translation activity in the South constructed an alternative literary canon which reflected both the political biases and artistic tastes of South Vietnamese readers. Thus, the first part of this chapter will analyse the historical reception of Russian literature in North Vietnam, in the context of ideological flow. In the second part, I will delve into the factors governing the curation of translation in South Vietnam and how Russian literature was 're'-written there, as demonstrated by selected translations. Finally, I will conclude with a comparison of the history of Russian literature through translation in South and North Vietnam, referring to the unique context of the period 1955–75.

Translating Russian Literature in North Vietnam

In North Vietnam, no literature rivalled Russian in terms of either number of translations or influence over readers. Between 1955 and 1975, when North Vietnam was building Socialism and supporting the South against the United States, the Soviet Union provided material support. It is thus difficult to deny the influence of both Soviet ideology and Russian culture on North Vietnam. In 1957, North Vietnam and the USSR signed an agreement for cooperation in the field of cultural friendship. Cultural exchange between North Vietnam and the Soviet Union was continuous and efficient. Many North Vietnamese intellectuals were trained in the Soviet Union. For example, Phan Hong Giang (1941–2022), who translated Anton Chekhov's stories, Ivan Bunin's *The Life of Arsen'ev: Youth* (*Zhizn' Arsen'eva. Iunost'*, 1930), the Avar-language poet Rasul Gamzatov's *My Dagestan* (*Dir Dag''istan*, 1970) and many other works, studied in Moscow State University's Faculty of Philology from 1960 to 1964. Do Hong Chung (1934–91), who translated Aleksandr Pushkin's poetry and prose and Chekhov's short stories into Vietnamese, was a classmate of Phan Hong Giang at Moscow State University. Hoang Thuy Toan (b. 1936) graduated from the Moscow State V.I. Lenin Pedagogical Institute in 1961. He translated Sergei Esenin's poetry, Pushkin's plays, and Lev Tolstoy's short stories, and in 2012 he became the first director of the Vietnam-Russia Literature Fund, a bilateral organisation founded to promote mutual translation and co-operation between the two countries.² Hoang Ngoc Hien (1930–2011), a translator of Vladimir Maiakovskii's poetry and comedy, defended his doctoral thesis at Moscow State University in 1959.

1 See Maria Tymoczko, *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2007); Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, 2nd edn (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001).

2 For more on the Fund's activities, see 'Translated Works Bring Vietnamese, Russian Literature Closer', *Nhân Dân*, 26 July 2016, <https://en.nhandan.vn/translated-works-bring-vietnamese-russian-literature-closer-post43966.html>.

In addition, Doan Tu Huyen (1952–2020), who studied at Voronezh University, and Thai Ba Tan (b. 1950), a Moscow University of Foreign Languages alumnus, are present-day translators in North Vietnam. Their educated grasp of Russian culture and literature helped them to bring Russian intellectual culture closer to North Vietnamese readers.

During these two decades, approximately three hundred works of Russian literature were translated into Vietnamese in North Vietnam.³ Many Vietnamese readers sensed that the ‘Russian soul’ resonated with their own spiritual life. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Tu (1942–2013), the internationally prize-winning Vietnamese author, wrote: “I have never been to Russia, but Russia has come to me through books. Rivers, streets, landscapes, and people, typical characters of Russian life in the works of great authors such as Tolstoy, Gorky, Turgenev are so close that just by closing my eyes I could imagine them. In each work, each author gives me a new horizon and new rays of light as well as nourishing my soul”.⁴

However, when sketching literary translation from Russian in North Vietnam over a twenty-year period, it is important to emphasise the compatibility of translation and political ideology. North Vietnamese ideologues realised that Russian literature was inspirational for fulfilling the task of building Socialism and sustaining South Vietnam’s war of resistance against America. Thus, at the Fourth Congress of the Soviet Union of Writers on 25 May 1967, Nguyen Dinh Thi (1924–2003), a well-known poet and composer who served as General Secretary of the Vietnam Writers’ Association from 1958 to 1989, summed up: “‘At present, in the trenches, the underground classrooms, the factories or on the fields, that Soviet literature that the Vietnamese consider a wonderful creation of human talents has become the spiritual weapons of our Vietnamese people’”.⁵ In 1989, when recapitulating the history of translated literature in Vietnam, the celebrated translator Thuy Toan realised that “in just the past forty years, since the agreement on cultural cooperation between Vietnam and the Soviet Union was signed in 1957, the Literature Publishing House has published one hundred books by Russian and Soviet authors. Many works were reissued and retranslated.”⁶ The compatibility between the translation of Russian literature and political ideology and the discourse of power is evident from the texts that were selected for translation. Pushkin was the best-known Russian writer

3 See Thi Quynh Nga Tran, *Tiếp nhận văn xuôi Nga thế kỉ XIX ở Việt Nam (The Reception of 19th century Russian Prose in Vietnam)* (Hanoi: Vietnam Education Publishing House, 2010), p. 73. All translations from Vietnamese are my own unless otherwise indicated.

4 Thi Ngoc Tu Nguyen, ‘Kỉ niệm tháng Mười’ (‘Celebrating October’), *Tạp chí Văn học (Journal of Literary Studies)*, 5 (1977), 142–43 (p. 143).

5 Dinh Thi Nguyen, *Công việc của người viết tiểu thuyết (A Novelist’s Work)* (Hanoi: Literature Publishing House, 1969), p. 20.

6 Thuy Toàn, *Không phải của riêng ai: dịch văn học, văn học dịch (Not Anyone’s Own: Literary Translation, Translated Literature)* (Hanoi: Literature Publishing House, 1999), p. 49.

in North Vietnam. His work was most frequently translated during the two decades of the conflict. In the minds of Vietnamese readers, Pushkin is “our loyal friend in the cause of struggle for social and human renewal”.⁷ His novellas *The Captain's Daughter* (*Kapitanskaia dochka*, 1836) and *Dubrovskii* (*Dubrovskii*, 1841) particularly appealed to Northern Vietnamese readers, especially when land reform, collectivisation and agricultural cooperation were carried out in their country. In the words of one scholar, both novellas “explore many issues about the relationship between peasants and aristocratic landlords, the oppression and struggle, and consider the peasant movement as a high expression of the people's power”.⁸ On the relationship between the translation of Pushkin's work and political discourse, Nikolai Nikulin suggests that “the atmosphere of social reforms in Vietnam has strengthened Vietnamese readers' interest with Pushkin. They are especially interested in works expressing the desire to love freedom, containing the motif of protest against social domination and evil, [which are] showing sympathy for the oppressed”.⁹ Besides seeking a spiritual fulcrum for resistance against the Americans for national integrity and the foundation of a workers' state, Northern Vietnamese leaders and intellectuals enthusiastically welcomed the works of Lev Tolstoy and Nikolai Gogol. Gogol's ‘Taras Bulba’ (‘Taras Bul'ba’, 1835) and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (*Voina i mir*, 1869) reached Northern readers in both French and Russian versions. According to Tran Thi Quynh Nga, ‘Taras Bulba’ touched Vietnamese people because this work “praises the patriotic heroism and indomitable spirit of brave people in the cause of defending the country”.¹⁰ Le Son (1937–2020), a researcher and translator, commented favourably on Gogol's “very realistic description of life”.¹¹

In the 1960s, translators such as Cao Xuan Hao (1930–2007), Nhu Thanh (1925–2020), and Hoang Thieu Son (1920–2005) studied Chinese, English, and French versions of *War and Peace* in order to bring Tolstoy's novel to North Vietnamese readers, beginning with the first published version in 1961. It was not until 1979 that the Vietnamese version of this novel was published, in full,

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- 7 Lien Luu, ‘Thiên tài Pushkin và tiểu thuyết lịch sử Người con gái Viên Đại uý’ (‘The Genius Writer Pushkin and His Historical Novel *The Captain's Daughter*’), *Tạp chí Văn học* (*Journal of Literary Studies*), 6 (1994), 38–41 (p. 41).
 - 8 Thi Quynh Nga Tran, *Tiếp nhận văn xuôi Nga thế kỉ XIX ở Việt Nam* (*Reception of 19th Century Russian Prose in Vietnam*) (Hanoi: Vietnam Education Publishing House, 2010), p. 63.
 - 9 N. I Nikulin, ‘Tác phẩm của Pushkin ở Việt Nam’ (‘Pushkin's Works in Vietnam’), in *Văn học Việt Nam và giao lưu quốc tế* (*Vietnamese Literature and International Exchange*) (Hanoi: Vietnam Education Publishing House, 2010), pp. 701–10 (p. 707).
 - 10 Thi Quynh Nga Tran, *Tiếp nhận văn xuôi Nga thế kỉ XIX ở Việt Nam*, p. 65.
 - 11 Son Le, ‘Taras Bulba, tiểu thuyết lịch sử của Gogol’ (‘Taras Bulba, Gogol's Historical Novel’), *Tạp chí Văn học* (*Journal of Literary Studies*), 11 (1963), 24–28 (p. 27).

in four volumes (by Cao Xuan Hao).¹² *War and Peace* was especially significant to Northern Vietnamese people because what they read as its populist ideology chimed with the political ideal that their government pursued. When approaching *War and Peace* in Russian translation, the important North Vietnamese essayist Nguyen Tuan (1910–87) commented that “there has never been an indictment against a war of aggression which was longer, greater, or of superior artistic value”.¹³ In addition, in 1963 and 1964, Nhi Ca and Duong Tuong completed their joint translation of *Anna Karenina* (*Anna Karenina*, 1877) from French in a three-volume edition, using both the Russian and Chinese versions for comparison.¹⁴ In 1970, a team of translators including Phung Uong, Nguyen Nam, Ngoc An, and Moc Nghia translated Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* (*Phục sinh; Voskresenie*, 1899) from Russian. *Anna Karenina* had been presented to Northern Vietnamese readers as a work focusing on the issues of a new society, such as women’s liberation and marriage.¹⁵ *Resurrection* instilled belief in the rebirth of North Vietnam after suffering and wars. Explaining why Tolstoy’s works were admired by his compatriots, the novelist Nguyen Minh Chau (1930–89) claimed that Tolstoy had “reached the heights of national spiritual values, even touching the souls of ordinary people of other countries”.¹⁶ Nguyen Minh Chau also stated that during the 1968 Khe Sanh Communist campaign against the US army, one copy of *War and Peace* was passed around all the soldiers. They forgot injuries from bombs and bullets, distracted by discussing Tolstoy’s characters.¹⁷ On why *Anna Karenina* appeals, its translator Nhi Ca has commented that “many Vietnamese readers considered the picture of the past in *Anna Karenina* as an image of society similar to Vietnamese society before the August Revolution.

12 *War and Peace* was translated as *Chiến tranh và hòa bình* by Cao Xuan Hao and several other translators (Hanoi: Literature Publishing House, 1976–79). A South Vietnamese version, also in four volumes with the same title, was published in Saigon (later Ho Chi Minh City) by the translator Nguyen Hien Le (1912–84) (Saigon: La Boi Publishing House, 1968).

13 Nguyen Tuan, ‘Tolstoy’, in *Nguyễn Tuấn toàn tập* (*Nguyen Tuan’s Collected Works*), ed. by Nguyen Dang Manh, 5 vols (Hanoi: Literature Publishing House, 2000), V (2000), pp. 661–85 (p. 676).

14 In 1944, the publisher Đời nay (*Today’s Life*) printed an incomplete translation of *Anna Karenina* by Vũ Ngọc Phan (1902–87) as *Anna Kha Lê Ninh* (a Chinese pronunciation of Anna Karenina with reference to Vietnamese phonetics). The Khai Trí (Mastermind) publishing house printed six volumes of *Anna Kha Lê Ninh* co-translated by Vu Ngọc Phan and Vu Minh Thieu in 1970.

15 Tiếng dân (*The Voice of the People*) Press published Hoa Trung’s translation of *Resurrection* (as *Phục Sinh*) on 9 July 1927.

16 Minh Chau Nguyen, ‘Tác dụng kì diệu của tác phẩm văn học’ (*‘The Magical Effects of Literary Works’*), *Tạp chí Văn nghệ quân đội* (*Military Arts and Culture Magazine*), 8 (1983), 134–39 (p. 134).

17 Minh Chau Nguyen, ‘Tác dụng kì diệu của tác phẩm văn học’, p. 135.

The novel helps readers identify the evil face of the old regime, believe in the new regime, in the nation's future, and in the future of humanity".¹⁸

Since their preference was for epic inspiration and revolutionary heroism, North Vietnamese translators did not attempt to translate Fedor Dostoevsky's fiction for another twenty years. Dostoevsky is arguably a more individualistic writer. Contradictory personalities like Raskolnikov were not what North Vietnamese readers were looking for at that time. Therefore, although Cao Xuan Hao completed his translation of *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866) in 1962, it was rejected, apparently on the grounds that Raskolnikov made a poor role model for Vietnamese youth. It appeared in print almost twenty years later. Cao Xuan Hao translated this work as *Tội ác và hình phạt*; nevertheless, when printing it, the publisher (Hanoi's Literature Publishing House (NXB Văn học)) changed this title to *Tội ác và trừng phạt*. *Hình phạt* in Vietnamese is a noun equivalent to 'punishment' (or indeed *nakazanie* in Russian). *Trừng phạt* in Vietnamese is a verb meaning 'to punish'. Moreover, *trừng phạt* in Vietnamese refers to the legal penalties meted out to criminals. The translator's preferred phrase, *hình phạt*, can mean both 'formal punishment suffered by the wrongdoer'; but also 'self-imposed, psychological suffering experienced by the perpetrator of the crime'. A subtle difference, but Cao Xuan Hao's formula evoked a psychological dimension of the concept of 'punishment' which Dostoevsky certainly intended to convey, and which his publisher chose to ignore. The furious translator called the title "a huge grammatical error" ("một lỗi ngữ pháp kịch xù"); fortunately, in 1985, soon after its publication, the wording was corrected.¹⁹

Northern intellectuals already recognised the artistic value of Dostoevsky's work, but the eligibility for translation seemed to be predetermined by the perceived need for national rather than personal inspiration. Nguyen Tuan rated Dostoevsky as a "creative genius" whose works "are profound utterances about love, happiness, justice and truth".²⁰ As we have seen, Cao Xuan Hao's translation could not be published in the 1960s due to the Soviet regime's existing prejudices against Dostoevsky, which in turn prejudiced its reception by intellectuals and the ruling elite in North Vietnam. As Marc Slonim commented, "radical and socialist intellectuals and critics never ceased quarrelling with

18 Nhi Ca, 'Lời giới thiệu Anna Karenina' ('Introduction to The Novel Anna Karenina'), in Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. by Nhi Ca and Duong Tuong (Hanoi: Literature Publishing House, 1978), pp. 3–33 (p. 20).

19 Cao Xuan Hao, 'Về người biên tập' ('About Editors'), *Lao Dong* online journal, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071109154315/http://www.laodong.com.vn/Utilities/PrintView.aspx?ID=3214>. Interestingly, as in the case of the simultaneous translation of *War and Peace* in North and South Vietnam, in 1973 Truong Dinh Cu produced the first South Vietnamese edition of the novel, as *Tội ác và hình phạt*.

20 Nguyen Tuan, 'Dostoevsky', in *Nguyễn Tuấn toàn tập* (Nguyen Tuan's Collected Works), ed. by Nguyen Dang Manh, 5 vols (Hanoi: Literature Publishing House, 2000), V (2000), pp. 499–519 (p. 516).

Dostoevsky. They did not deny his artistic genius, yet they could not accept his political and religious views, and this contradiction led to all sorts of conflicts and discussion".²¹ Cao Xuan Hao himself, an academic linguist as well as a translator, had a successful career as Professor of Linguistics at Hanoi University.

When searching for works suitable for political discourse about the nation, Northern Vietnamese readers were drawn to officially promoted Soviet literature. According to statistics compiled in 2005 by the scholar Vu Hong Loan, the four most widely translated Russian authors in North Vietnam were Maksim Gorky, Il'ia Ehrenburg, Boris Polevoi, and Mikhail Sholokhov. Twenty-two of Gorky's works were published, and were continuously re-translated.²² His novel *Mother* (*Mat'*, 1906), was retranslated and (re)published six times: in 1946 by the Women's Publishing House, again in 1955 by the People's Publishing House, thirdly in 1966 by the Education Publishing House, and then three more times up to 1984 by the Literary Publishing House.²³ Its translators were To Huu, Hoang Quang Gi, Ngo Vinh, Nhi Mai, Do Xuan Ha, and Phan Thao. Among them, To Huu was simultaneously a poet and a politician, in charge of crucial functions in the Vietnamese political system.

In North Vietnam, writers of underground/censored literature, like Boris Pasternak or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, were barely translated at all. Fiction about private life, or clandestinely published texts with negative perspectives on the Soviet regime, were also almost completely excluded. Thanks to its selective content, Russian literature became a spiritual pillar for its Northern Vietnamese readers, affirming their belief in the Socialist regime and their determination to fight the US army for the unification of North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The following statement by Pavel Korchagin, the hero of Nikolai Ostrovskii's *How the Steel Was Tempered* (*Kak zakalialas' stal'*, 1934) became a motto for North Vietnamese youth for many decades:

Man's dearest possession is life, and it is given to him to live but once. He must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for years without purpose, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so to live that, dying, he can say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world—the fight for the Liberation of Mankind.²⁴

The admiration felt by Vietnamese youth generally—and by North Vietnamese young people in particular—for Korchagin's testament is mentioned in a diary

21 Marc Slonim, 'Dostoevsky under the Soviets', *The Russian Review*, 10 (1951), 118–30 (p. 118).

22 Hong Loan Vu, 'Văn học Việt Nam tiếp nhận Văn học Xô viết' ('The Influence of Soviet Literature on Vietnamese Literature') (unpublished doctoral thesis, HCMC University of Education, 2005), p. 44

23 See Hong Loan Vu, 'Văn học Việt Nam', p.44.

24 Nikolai Ostrovskii, *How the Steel Was Tempered*, trans. by R. Prokofieva, 2 vols (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952), II (1952), p. 105.

by Nguyen Van Thac (1952–72), who, like many students in North Vietnam, volunteered to fight in the Southern battlefield and died aged just twenty:

His [Pavel Korchagin's] life was a continuous springtime. That was the life of a young Party member, the life of a Red Army soldier. I want to live like that. I wish to devote my whole life to the Party and the class and live firmly against the storms of revolution and private life.²⁵

Dang Thuy Tram, a Hanoi doctor who also died in the war of resistance against the US, wrote in her own diary that soldiers under fire were still discussing Pavel Korchagin.²⁶ Now I shall turn to the South Vietnamese reception of Russian literature, which was also significantly politically inflected, if in a different direction.

Translating Russian Literature in South Vietnam

From 1955–75, from the seventeenth parallel inward (that is, from the provisional military demarcation line between North Vietnam and South Vietnam established by the Geneva Accords (1954)), the government of the Republic of Vietnam was established under Ngo Dinh Diem's presidency with support from the United States. This government was politically opposed to that of North Vietnam. This historical and political context greatly influenced the South Vietnamese translation of foreign literature in general and Russian literature in particular. First, due to the presence of the US Army, South Vietnamese culture was deeply influenced by America and the West. Thus, for these two decades, South Vietnam was receptive to foreign literary works, including Russian. In addition, Western-educated South Vietnamese intellectuals who were fluent in foreign languages selected their own canon of commercially distributed world literature to develop the reading tastes of the South Vietnamese public. Among them, Nguyen Hien Le (1912–84), mentioned above as a translator of *War and Peace*, was a translator, writer, and researcher in philosophy and history. Do Khanh Hoan (b. 1934) was educated at the Universities of Saigon, Sydney, and Columbia (New York), becoming Head of the English department at Saigon University before emigrating to Canada after reunification. He is perhaps best

25 Van Thac Nguyen, *Mãi mãi tuổi hai mươi (Twenties Forever)* (Hanoi: Youth Publishing House, 2005), p. 119.

26 Thuy Tram Dang, *Nhật ký Đặng Thuỳ Trâm (Dang Thuy Tram's Diary)* (Hanoi: Vietnam Writers Association Publishing House, 2005), p. 115 and p. 136. Interestingly, this diary was translated into Russian as the result of another bilateral Russian-Vietnamese friendship initiative and published in Moscow in July 2012 under the auspices of the Russian Academy of Sciences. See 'Dang Thuy Tram diary to be published in Russia', *Saigon Online*, 26 August 2011, <https://www.sggpnews.org.vn/dang-thuy-tram-diary-to-be-published-in-russia-post59866.html>.

known for translating Homer into Vietnamese, but also translated Russian and Western literature. Nguyen Huu Hieu (b. 1940) was a lawyer and translator credited by some scholars with introducing Russian literature to South Vietnam, particularly through his translations of Pasternak and Dostoevsky (via French).²⁷

A second historical factor was the war itself, which plunged Southern, like Northern, society into turmoil between 1955 and 1975. Consequently, Southern Vietnamese readers were inclined towards philosophical fiction, exploring literary pathos in the hope of finding humanist explanations for suffering. Nguyen Hien Le, when reading Dostoevsky, discovered “extraordinarily intense emotions, terrifyingly honest souls, and the entangled problems of an indescribable interior”.²⁸ Southern Vietnamese readers also empathised with “the experience of living with the true values of life on the metaphysical and social philosophical level” that Pasternak described.²⁹ And a third, political factor manifested in the Republic of Vietnam’s sharp opposition to the Socialist regime in North Vietnam. Therefore, when approaching Russian literature, some Southern readers tried to choose censored literature that ‘lifted the veil’ on the Socialist regime. Dissident writers such as Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, Vladimir Dudintsev, Andrei Siniavskii, and even Andrei Sakharov were of particular interest to readers and critics. Nguyen Nam Chau (1929–2005), a professor at Hue University, a writer, researcher in literature and philosophy, and translator, considered Dudintsev and Pasternak as “plaintiff[s] who sided with the humanists against materialistic communism.”³⁰ Regarding Pasternak, the political thinker Hoang Van Chi (1913–88) explained that “[u]ntil now, there has been no reliable book describing the October Revolution and the living situation of the Russian people correctly and objectively. Today, the world can learn many more valuable things from *Doctor Zhivago*.”³¹ When reading Solzhenitsyn’s *An Incident at Krechetovka Station* (*Sluchai na stantsii Krechetovka*, 1963), some readers shared that “after reading the book, one can feel more poignantly than ever,

27 For more on Nguyen Huu Hieu’s cultural importance, see Thanh Duc Hong Ha, ‘Nguyễn Hữu Hiệu Reads Dostoyevsky’, in *Practice Oriented Science UAE-Russia-India: Materials of International University Scientific Forum October 12, 2022* (UAE, 2022), pp. 38–46, <http://ran-nauka.ru/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Practice-Oriented-Science-October-12.pdf#page=31>. Nguyen Huu Hieu wrote interpretative introductions for his own translations.

28 Hien Le Nguyen, ‘Dostoievski, một kẻ suốt đời chịu đau khổ để viết’ (‘Dostoevsky, a Man who Suffered All his Life to Write’), *Bách khoa Journal*, 82 (1960), 41–49 (p. 42).

29 Dinh Luu Vu, ‘Thân thế và sự nghiệp Pasternak’ (‘Pasternak’s Background and Career’), *Journal of Literature*, 83 (1967), 21–28 (p. 27).

30 Nam Chau Nguyen, ‘Pasternak và Sholokhov hai chứng nhân, một thế giới’ (‘Pasternak and Sholokhov, Two Witnesses, One World’), *Asian Culture Magazine*, 19 (1959), 17–24 (p. 19).

31 Van Chi Hoang, ‘Nhận định về vụ Pasternak và tác phẩm Bác sĩ Zhivago’ (‘Comments on the Pasternak Case and *Doctor Zhivago*’), *Asian Culture Magazine*, 10 (1959), 17–23 (p. 22).

when thinking about the prisoner status of every individual human being—whether favoured or persecuted—in the Soviet regime”.³²

Thus a combination of American influence, Vietnam’s recent history, and complicated international politics largely shaped the South Vietnamese reception of Russian literature, which focused on its political, artistic, and philosophical aspects.³³ According to Tran Trong Dang Dan’s statistics, over the twenty years until July 1976, translated fiction in South Vietnam included 57 titles from German literature, 58 from Italian, 71 from Japanese, 97 from British English and 273 from American English, 499 translated from French, 358 from Taiwanese or Hong Kong authors, 120 books from Russian literature, and 381 translated from other languages.³⁴ This demonstrates the comparatively important position occupied by Russian literature within South Vietnam’s literary translation system. However, most translations from Russian were made via English and French versions. In South Vietnam, almost no intellectuals during the period were fluent in Russian; moreover, most considered Russian literature as a subgroup of Western literature. It is therefore unsurprising that they discovered Russian literature via indirect translations from Western languages. In the following section, I shall discuss the Southern Vietnamese reception of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and both Communist and dissident Soviet writers of the twentieth century. Where relevant, I will contrast this reception with attitudes to the same writers in North Vietnam.

In combination, these criteria of artistic value and Western influence on the reading tastes of Southern Vietnamese audiences ensured that the profile of nineteenth-century Russian literature in translation differed from that which was available in North Vietnam. While the latter selected Pushkin and Gogol for translation, seeking fiction that would reflect their national spirit and epic inspiration, South Vietnam translated more books by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. The selection of texts in North Vietnam reveals a characteristic of translation that Maria Tymoczko has emphasised in her suggestion that translators unearth “the embodied and situated knowledge related to cultural configurations and practices, a kind of habitus, of both the source and the target texts and cultures, before embarking on a translation task to establish

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- 32 Thanh Binh Nguyen, ‘Vài nét về Solzhenitsyn và tác phẩm *Bất ngờ tại ga Krestetovka*’ [‘About Solzhenitsyn and *An Incident at Krestetovka Station*’], in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Bất ngờ tại ga Krestetovka* [*An Incident at Krestetovka Station*], trans. by Le Vu (Saigon: Journey Publishing House, 1973), pp. 57–58 (p. 58).
- 33 Thi Phuong Pham, *Văn học Nga tại đô thị miền Nam 1954–1975* [*Russian Literature in the Southern Urban during 1954–1975*] (Ho Chi Minh City: Publishing House of HCMC University of Education, 2010), p. 22.
- 34 These figures are derived from statistics compiled by Trong Dang Dan Tran, *Văn hoá, văn nghệ nam Việt Nam, 1954–1975* [*Culture and Art in South Vietnam during 1954–1975*] (Hanoi: Culture and Information Publishing House, 2000), p. 427.

a translation strategy".³⁵ According to Southern Vietnamese readers, these works represented the pinnacle of Russian literary art recognised by the West. When establishing parameters for literary excellence, the celebrated writer (and translator of *Wuthering Heights* into Vietnamese) Nhat Linh (1906–63) invoked Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Chekhov. He classified the latter as, like Shakespeare, Western literary talents.³⁶ This reflects how "the process of [cultural] enrichment operates by diverting a central patrimony in various ways, through the importation of canonized texts and literary techniques".³⁷

Dostoevsky was the most translated writer in South Vietnam. This is in contrast with North Vietnam, where he was not translated at all. In the 1960s, translations of *Notes from Underground* (*Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, 1864), *The Gambler* (*Igrok*, 1866), *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866), and *The Eternal Husband* (*Vechnyi muzh*, 1870) appeared, and remained in print throughout the 1970s. *Crime and Punishment* was translated by Truong Dinh Cu (1920s-) and published in 1973 by Khai Trí (Mastermind) Publishing House. Khai Trí was a large book-selling business active in Saigon from 1952 to 1975. In 1973, Ly Quoc Sinh published another translation of this novel, as *Tội ác và hình phạt*, with Nguon Sang (Source of Light) Publishing House. *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat'ia Karamazovy*, 1881) reached Southern readers through two versions with the same Vietnamese title (*Anh em nhà Karamazov*) in the same year (1972): one by Truong Dinh Cu, published by An Tiem Publishing House, and the other by Vu Dinh Luu (1914–80), from Nguon Sang. Thus, although translation in North Vietnam did not focus on Dostoevsky (as we have seen, Cao Xuan Hao's translation of *Crime and Punishment*, although completed in 1962, could not be published until 1982), in the South his novels constituted not only a literary pinnacle, but a philosophical authority. For Southern Vietnamese readers, "[Dostoevsky] lived and wrote about the great problems of our time. The world he described was [also] chaotic, including full of signs of revolution and messianism," as Ngoc Minh Nguyen wrote in his 1972 introduction to *Demons* (*Besy*, 1872; *Lũ người quỷ ám*).³⁸ Moreover, Southern translators credited Dostoevsky as the originator of the *nouveau roman*. Vu Dinh Luu commented that "the *nouveau roman* [...] was formed from techniques signalled by Dostoyevsky, then Kafka and Malraux."³⁹ Pham Thi Phuong argued that the *nouveau roman* greatly influenced the writing style of Southern writers such as Duong Nghiem

35 Tymoczko, *Enlarging Translation*, p. 227.

36 Nhat Linh, 'Độc và viết tiểu thuyết' ('Reading and Writing Novels'), *Văn hoá ngày nay* (*Journal of Today's Culture*), 3 (1961), 8–10 (p. 9).

37 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by Malcolm DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 223.

38 Ngoc Minh Nguyen, 'Lũ người quỷ ám trong con mắt người Việt Nam (thay Lời giới thiệu *Lũ người quỷ ám*)' ('*Demons in Vietnamese Eyes* (Introduction)'), in Dostoevskii, *Demons*, trans. by Nguyen Ngoc Minh (Saigon: Nguon Sang, 1972), pp. vii–xiv (pp. ix–x).

39 Dinh Luu Vu, *Thảm kịch văn hoá* (*Cultural Tragedy*) (Saigon: An Tiem, 1966), p. 50.

Mau, Nha Ca, The Uyen, Duy Lam, and Thao Truong.⁴⁰ It motivated writers to go beyond the stereotype when describing the (in)coherence of a character's psychology. For example, a character in the renowned novel *Tuổi nước độc* (*The Age of the Poisonous Water*) by Duong Nghiem Mau (1936–2016), Ngac, exists in a state of overwhelming post-traumatic mental strain, gradually losing hope and becoming estranged from reality. In short stories such as *Trong lòng bàn tay* (*In One's Palm*), *Một giấc mơ* (*A Dream*), the same writer describes his characters as suffused with pangs of conscience, inhabiting a world strewn with insecurity and absurdity. The parallels with Dostoevsky's novels are obvious. Dostoevsky's oppositional dyads (freedom and violence, the individual and society) aroused particular interest among Southern readers in their quest for solutions to contemporary problems. Huu Hieu Nguyen realised the connection between Dostoevsky and Buddhism and Existentialism, which made Dostoevsky a vastly influential pillar for Southern writers.⁴¹ Christians identified with Dostoevsky in his desire to believe in the Messiah, love, and forgiveness. Buddhists welcomed Dostoevsky's project of abandoning the rational and civilised West for the gentle Eastern home. The translator Nguyen Huu Hieu identified the tolerant Buddha with the positive characters in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima and Alesha.⁴² Scholar Pham Thi Phuong concluded that the Southern intellectuals and writers "can see in the ideologist Dostoyevsky [sic] problems that they seek to investigate, such as (i) the tragedy-afflicted status of humans, requiring succour through affection inflected by religion, promoting anti-violence and friendly beliefs or ideologies; (ii) beliefs or ideologies about returning to one's roots, including the roots of national identity".⁴³

Works by Tolstoy that were translated in South Vietnam include *The Kreutzer Sonata* (*Kreitserova sonata*, 1889), 'The Death of Ivan Il'ich' ('*Smert' Ivana Il'icha*', 1886), and *War and Peace*. Many translations of *War and Peace* (*Chiến tranh và hoà bình*) have appeared in Saigon, such as the 1969 version by Nguyen Dan Tam (Southern Publishing House) or Nguyen Hien Le's 1968 version from La Boi (Buddhist Scriptures) Publishing House. These same works by Tolstoy, as we saw above, appealed to Northern Vietnamese readers for their "positive attitudes and military focus", consistent with Communist political discourse. Meanwhile, Southern readers welcomed Tolstoy's prose rather for aesthetic reasons. Translator Nhat Linh called *Anna Karenina* "the novel of the century",

40 Pham Thi Phuong, *Văn học Nga tại đô thị miền Nam 1954–1975*, p. 95.

41 See Thanh Duc Hong Ha, 'Nguyễn Hữu Hiệu Reads Dostoyevsky'.

42 Huu Hieu Nguyen, 'Dostoevsky', in Dostoevskii, *Anh em nhà Karamazov* (*Brothers Karamazov*), trans. by Vu Dinh Luu (Saigon: Nguon Sang, 1972), pp. i–iii (p. ii).

43 Pham Thi Phuong, 'Sự "trùng dụng" tư tưởng F. Dostoevsky của văn nghệ đô thị miền Nam 1954–1975' ('The "utili[s]ation" of F. Dostoevsky's Thought in South Vietnamese Urban Literature 1954–1975'), *Tạp chí Khoa học ĐHSP TP Hồ Chí Minh/ Ho Chi Minh City University of Education: Journal of Science*, 10 (2015), 118–28 (p. 124).

revealing the “mysterious life of the soul”.⁴⁴ Editor and translator Tran Phong Giao (1932–2005) pointed out that Tolstoy’s interest in Asian characters and thought evoked the spirit of charity and nonviolence.⁴⁵ Chekhov also appealed to Southern readers principally for his short stories. His plays, however, were not translated since audiences preferred *Cai luong* (traditional Vietnamese folk opera). Soviet critics similarly neglected Chekhov, although Westerners praised him.⁴⁶ In the 1960s and 1970s, several of Chekhov’s short stories were translated and published in various journals and anthologies.⁴⁷ Chekhov was highly appreciated by Saigon readers for his ability to “subtly observe life”, as one translator summarised the Russian author’s skill.⁴⁸ The translator and scholar Do Khanh Hoan (b. 1934) commented that Chekhov was “the single most important influence on the development of the modern short story”.⁴⁹

For Southern Vietnamese readers, the major twentieth-century authors of Russian literature were three Nobel Prize-winning writers: Boris Pasternak, Mikhail Sholokhov, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. They particularly valued Pasternak, whose works were censored and could not be translated in North Vietnam. There were three Southern Vietnamese editions of the translation of *Doctor Zhivago* (*Doktor Zhivago*, 1957).⁵⁰ The rapid, repeated translation of Pasternak’s work has proved Saigon culture could react to global world literary events despite the war. On 23 October 1958, Pasternak was offered the Nobel Prize.

44 Nhat Linh, ‘Độc và viết tiểu thuyết’, p. 10.

45 Phong Giao Tran, ‘Vài cảm nghĩ xuôi dòng’ (‘Some Streams of Thought’), *Tạp chí Văn/ Journal of Literature*, 128 (1969), 79–84 (p. 80).

46 This is how Pham Thi Phuong explains the contrast between Chekhov’s absence from North Vietnam and his presence, at least, as a writer of short fiction, in South Vietnam. See Pham Thi Phuong, *Văn học Nga tại đô thị miền Nam 1954–1975* (*Russian Literature in Urban South Vietnam, 1954–1975*) (Ho Chi Minh City: Publishing House of HCMC University of Education, 2010), pp. 106–07.

47 These journals included *Tạp chí Bách Khoa* (*The Encyclopedia Journal*), *Nguyệt san Văn hoa* (*Monthly Journal of Culture*), and a special issue devoted to Chekhov in *Tạp chí Văn* (*Journal of Literature*), 53 (1966). In the 1970s, translations of Chekhov’s short stories continued to appear in *Tạp chí Văn* and also *Tạp chí Chan hưng Kinh tế* (*Journal of Economic Revival*), including a collection of fourteen short stories translated and introduced by Do Khanh Hoan. The same collection by Do Khanh Hoan was published as a separate volume by Ba Vi Publishing House in 1973, and reprinted in 1974 with a circulation of 2,000 copies.

48 Do Khanh Hoan, ‘Lời giới thiệu Truyện ngắn Chekhov’ (‘Introduction to Chekhov’s Short Stories’), in *Collection of Chekhov’s Short Stories* (Saigon: Ba Vi Publishing House, 1973), pp. i–iv (p. iii).

49 Do Khanh Hoan, ‘Lời giới thiệu Truyện ngắn Chekhov’, p. ii.

50 These were Van Tu and Mau Hai’s 1957 co-translation of the novel, published by Mat tran bao ve tu do van hoa (Frontline of Cultural Freedom Protection Publisher); and a 1974 version by Nguyen Huu Hieu published as *Vĩnh biệt tình em* (*Goodbye my love*) by To hop Gio (The Winds) Press. In 1975, this was reissued as *Bác sĩ Zhivago* (*Doctor Zhivago*) from Hoang Hac (Flamingo) Press.

In the Saigon media, an article about the Russian author appeared immediately.⁵¹ In it, Luu Nguyen analysed for Saigon readers Pasternak's reluctance to refuse the Nobel Prize, the hostility of the Soviet regime towards him, the plot of *Doctor Zhivago*, Pasternak's biography, and his novel's enthusiastic reception in the West. Luu Nguyen's review also introduced the concept of the 'free world', as a global unity which supported and contended for Pasternak, in contrast to the prohibitions and very harsh political judgments imposed by the Soviet government. He cited the opinions and arguments of famous European scholars, and public excitement (especially in Sweden) about the power and significance of *Doctor Zhivago*. Of Pasternak, Luu Nguyen wrote, "[t]his writer [...] voiced that which made people on the other side of the Iron Curtain understand the deep feeling of a Russian under Lenin's regime".⁵² In the same year, two of Pasternak's poems were translated from the original Russian.⁵³ In the following years, articles about Pasternak and his work continued to appear.⁵⁴

Like Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn also intrigued South Vietnamese readers and critics for his artistic achievements, especially the Nobel Prize, as well as for his opposition to the Soviet government. His works reached Saigon even before he received the Nobel Prize. In 1963–64 excerpts from *Matryona's Place* (*Matrenin dvor*, 1963) and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (*Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*, 1962) appeared in two South Vietnamese literary journals.⁵⁵ Between 1969 and 1973, his work continued to feature in many journals. Most of his works (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *Matryona's Place*, *For the Good of the Cause* (*Dlia pol'zy dela*, 1963), *The First Circle* (*V krughe pervom*, 1968), *Cancer Ward* (*Rakovyi korpus*, 1966), *The Gulag Archipelago* (*Arkhipelag GULAG*, 1973), and *An Incident at Krechetovka Station*) were translated into Vietnamese in multiple editions. At that time, there were two different translations of *The First Circle*.⁵⁶ The translation of *The Gulag Archipelago* was published in 1974 in two of the largest journals in Saigon, namely *Tap chi Song Than* (*Journal of The Tsunami*) and *Tap chi Dan chu* (*Journal of Democracy*), the latter edited by Nguyen Van Thieu, who served as President of the Republic of Vietnam from 31 October 1967 to 21 April 1975. These two journals simultaneously published *The Gulag Archipelago* with two main motivations: boycotting bribery of the authorities and the military, and attacking the Communist system. *The Gulag Archipelago* was the most impressive and influential of Solzhenitsyn's works in South Vietnam, such

51 Luu Nguyen, 'Pasternak', *Bach Khoa Journal*, 46 (1958), 48–58.

52 Ibid., p. 55.

53 They were published in *Tap chi Pho thong* (*Journal of General Knowledge*) 5 (1958).

54 In journals including *Van* (*Literature*), 83 (1967), *Van hoa A Chau* (*Asian Culture*), 10 (1959), *Que huong* (*Homeland*), 12 (1960).

55 *Tap chi Bach Khoa* (*The Encyclopedia Journal*) and *Tap chi Van* (*Journal of Literature*).

56 These were Hai Trieu's 1973 version, *Tầng đầu địa ngục* (*The First Circle of Hell*), published by *Dat moi* (*New Land*); and Vu Minh Thieu's 1971 *Vòng đầu* (*The First Circle*) from *Ngan khoi* (*Distant Offshore*) press.

that Southern readers used the word 'Gulag' to describe everything related to slavery and suffering. One of his translators, Nguyen Van Son, commented that "Solzhenitsyn is a witness who honestly narrated what he saw, heard, and lived in the ostensible Communist paradise."⁵⁷

Compared with Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn, the conservative Socialist Realist author Mikhail Sholokhov was less widely translated in South Vietnam. Discussions on Sholokhov in South Vietnam often concentrated on his political bias. One 1959 article indicted Sholokhov as an advocate of a barbaric policy opposed to life, dignity, and love for humanity (i.e. as a writer loyal to the Soviet regime).⁵⁸ The debate continued even after Sholokhov was awarded the 1965 Nobel Prize for Literature. As a result, Southern readers became curious about this writer. *Virgin Soil Upturned* (*Podniataia tselina*, 1932) was translated in 1963 and reissued in 1964 and 1967. The novel *They Fought for Their Country* (*Oni srazhalis' za Rodinu*, 1975) and two collections of short stories by Sholokhov were also translated. However, no South Vietnamese publisher commissioned a translation of Sholokhov's best-known novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* (*Tikhii Don*, 1928–40). This could be explained by the opposition of the Southern government to North Vietnam's Socialist regime, Sholokhov's association with Socialist Realism, and Southern Vietnamese identification of Sholokhov's novel with its author's personal politics.

Conclusion

Translation history shows how North and South Vietnam formed their own impressions of Russian literature. The political context, cultural influences, and ideology during a very complicated historical period determined the respective translation orientation of North and South Vietnam. For twenty years, Russian literary works chosen for translation and introduction served as a spiritual pivot, inspiring people in North Vietnam to believe in and admire the cause of Socialist construction. Any approach to literary history dominated by political discourse is necessarily somewhat one-sided. The South Vietnam translation programme revealed Russian literature as a sub-canon of Western literature, principally valuable for its aesthetic and philosophical models amid turmoil. Contemporary Russian literature, especially prose by Soviet dissidents, appealed to the Southerners since it revealed the secrets of a political regime which the Republic of Vietnam considered as an enemy. On the contrary, in North Vietnam Soviet Socialist Realist texts by Ostrovskii and Sholokhov—reviled in

57 Van Son Nguyen, 'Lời người dịch' ('Translator's Foreword'), in Solzhenitsyn, *Ngôi nhà của Matrona* (*Matrena's Place*) (Saigon: Youth Publishing House, 1974), pp. 7–8 (p. 7).

58 Nam Chau Nguyen, 'Pasternak and Sholokhov—Two Witnesses to One World', *Journal of Asian Culture*, 19 (1959), 61–73 (p. 63).

the South—were foci for ideological sentiment and political patriotism; North Vietnamese readers viewed even nineteenth-century Russian literature through the same political lens. Both the translator and the text are ontologically bound in specific cultural and political contexts that to a large extent determine, implicitly or explicitly, translation processes. The canons of Russian literature, reflected through translation in North and South Vietnam respectively, shows that “writing the history of literature is a paradoxical activity that consists in placing it in historical time and then showing how literature gradually tears itself away from this temporality, creating in turn its own temporality, one that has gone unperceived until the present day”.⁵⁹ This essay has shown how several important Vietnamese translators served to canonise Russian literature in their nation.

59 Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 350.