

TRANSLATING RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Contemporary Russophone Literature of Ukraine in the Changing World of Russian Literature: Andrey Kurkov and Alexei Nikitin

Catherine O'Neil

Introduction

The present chapter was first completed in 2021, before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The discussion of the direction of Russophone Ukrainian literature is now more speculative than before, as it will only be possible to assess the issues raised in this chapter after the war is over. Nonetheless, eventually, the full-scale war that began in 2022 will be a milestone for changes in the reception of Russian-language literature in translation. Indeed, major changes in the choice of texts to translate and market demand are occurring as we speak. I have tried to preserve what is relevant in this analysis and have updated the rest in light of the ongoing war.

If 'classical' Russian literature of the nineteenth century retains its relevance and cultural authority in the rapidly changing world of publishing and the book market, contemporary Russian-language authors, or 'Russophone' authors, as they are now called, have a more complicated landscape to negotiate. The term 'Russophone', applied to Russian-language writers outside the territory of the Russian Federation, has come into circulation as a result of the efforts of several scholars.¹ The situation surrounding Russophone writers in Ukraine has been

1 See Kevin M. F. Platt, 'Introduction: Putting Russian Cultures in Place', in *Global Russian Cultures*, ed. by Kevin M. F. Platt (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), pp. 3–17; Maria Rubins, 'A Century of Russian Culture(s) "Abroad":

particularly dynamic since 2014, and has developed in a number of directions since the full-scale invasion. As the war continues and Russian speakers move all over the world, ‘Russophone’, not ‘Russian’, is becoming the most accurate way to describe this group of writers, including those who left Russia in 2022 and those who remained.²

The case of two contemporary Russophone writers from Ukraine, Andrey Kurkov (b. 1961) and Alexei Nikitin (b. 1967), reveals several factors at play. Firstly, the rapidly shifting linguistic situation in their home country regarding Ukrainian and Russian language usage has resulted in the domination of the native book market by Ukrainian-language writers and created a more precarious domestic position for Russophone writers. At the same time, the world’s attention on Ukraine as a result of the current war has led both to greater international interest in Ukraine and demand for Ukrainian literature and art. Since Russian remains the better known of the two languages in the West, the Russophone writers are more accessible for translation. In addition, the changing market for international authors in translation as a result of the globalisation of the book market has opened up opportunities for lesser-known literatures—for example Ukrainophone Ukrainian literature—to gain an English readership, and the small size of the market for literature in translation means Russian-language texts are competing with more languages for fewer print runs. The careers of Kurkov and Nikitin provide a useful contrast, as they are prominent prose writers with very different publication experiences both at home and abroad. The discussion will focus on their reception in the US—quite established, in Kurkov’s case, but just starting (or, perhaps, restarting) in Nikitin’s—against the background of Translation Studies and the history of book marketing in the United States.³ Both are Kyiv-based novelists who have, until recently, consistently written in Russian.

The Unfolding of Literary Geography’, in *Global Russian Cultures*, pp. 21–47; and Marco Puleri, *Ukrainian, Russophone, (Other) Russian. Hybrid Identities and Narratives in Post-Soviet Culture and Politics* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020).

- 2 Kevin Platt and Mark Lipovetsky have argued that the term ‘Russophone’ should apply to Russian citizens who have left Russia in response to recent events. Their repositioning is already proving controversial, at least in the short term, as it may cause Russian writers to enjoy disproportionate prominence before Western audiences, space that should now arguably be allotted to non-Russian writers, especially Ukrainian ones. See Platt and Lipovetsky, ‘The Russophone Literature of Resistance,’ *World Literature Today* (March–April 2023), 38–58.
- 3 Kurkov’s books sell steadily, more so in the UK than in the US, but he has a regular following in both countries. Since the war began, Kurkov’s novel *Grey Bees* has become a success in both the UK and the US. To date, only one of Nikitin’s novels has appeared in English, *Istemi*, translated by Anne Marie Jackson in 2013 and reissued as *Y.T.* in 2016. His most recent novel, *The Face of Fire* [*Ot litsa ognia*, 2021], translated by Dominique Hoffman and Catherine O’Neil, will be published by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI) in 2024.

The Book Market for Literary Translation in the US

The US book market has a well-established reputation for being at once massive and insular. In the sea of profits the industry makes, translation is an insignificant blip: for example, during 2009–10, “the US [bestseller] lists show a clear lack of translations, as well as of English-language literature from outside the country”.⁴ It may be hoped that this situation has altered since 2010, not least because of the rise of Amazon and its promotion of high-quality translations in its Amazon Crossing imprint.⁵ Given the sheer numbers of the US population and, consequently, the enormous size of its market, even a small segment of that market amounts to meaningful cultural significance for ‘niche’ literature, including Russian writing: in 2009–10 the number of books produced in the US was double that of any other national book market, including those of such famously “reading nations” as the UK and Russia.⁶ Of course, financial concerns govern the book market in the US, as they do so much else in American life: due to the “extreme liberalization” of the book market in the US, “cultural goods appear primarily as commercial products that must obey the law of profitability”.⁷

Yet even the US requires products with ‘symbolic’ rather than economic value. As Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro have argued (following Pierre Bourdieu), market data are not sufficient to determine the ‘value’ of cultural products, such as books; small presses, small print-runs and ‘cult’ authors

4 Ann Steiner, ‘World Literature and the Book Market’, in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, ed. by David Damrosch and others (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 316–24 (p. 321). Much of the global demand for translated books is from English into other languages: the low proportion of translated titles in UK and US book production (less than 4% in the early 1990s) can be contrasted with that of other countries: Germany and France (14–18%), Italy and Spain (24%), Greece (35–45%). See Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, ‘Outline for a Sociology of Translation. Current Issues and Future Prospects’, in *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*, ed. by Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: Benjamins Translation Library, 2007), pp. 93–107 (p. 96). Perhaps the situation has changed since the 1990s, but the influence of English books in foreign markets is likely still outsized compared to translation from other languages.

5 Regarding Amazon Crossing, see Ed Nawotka, ‘Translations Pay Off for Amazon,’ *Publishers Weekly*, 8 November 2019, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/81707-translations-pay-off-for-amazon.html>. By 2016, Amazon Crossing, like a ‘whale [jumping into] a koi pond’ had taken up to 10% of all translation projects. See Angel Gonzales, ‘Amazon’s Turning Foreign Fiction into English, Irking Literary World,’ *The Seattle Times*, 23 April 2017, <https://www.freep.com/story/tech/2017/04/23/amazon-expands-its-literary-horizons-translations/100750020/>.

6 Steiner, ‘World Literature and the Book Market’, p. 318.

7 Heilbron and Sapiro, ‘Outline for a Sociology of Translation’, p. 98.

influence literary reception as much as—if not more than—bestsellers.⁸ Thus, even in the profit-driven US market, an academic and cultural elite promotes other value systems to counteract economic ones: “a sizeable share in the import process of foreign literatures arise[s] from the specific cultural logic which prevails in the area of small-scale circulation seeking for peer recognition rather than commercial success”.⁹ Academic publishers and small, independent presses, although struggling commercially, still seek highbrow books of sophisticated literary quality to supplement the bestsellers in their lists. The problem is more about promoting the books to the target readership. Readers in the US are perceived as predominantly monolingual and easily put off by intrusive and challenging foreign language names and allusions. The “invisible [that is, unrecognized] translator” in Lawrence Venuti’s famous formulation is a by-product of this demand to suppress the ‘foreign’: “A fluent translation is written in English that is current (‘modern’) instead of archaic, that is widely used instead of specialized (‘jargonization’), and that is standard instead of colloquial (‘slangy’)”.¹⁰ Venuti goes so far as to describe the resultant Anglo-American-centred subject, lulled into self-satisfied comfort by the “givenness” of English as the norm, as a psychologically impaired human being:

the financial benefits of successfully imposing Anglo-American cultural values on a vast foreign readership [produce] cultures in the United Kingdom and the United States that are aggressively monolingual, unreceptive to the foreign, accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language values and provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other.¹¹

The lamentable situation of current book markets and readerships is something US scholars, teachers, writers, and translators have been addressing for decades—long before the rise of Amazon and the devastation of the Covid pandemic, which I will discuss below. In this sense, the uphill battle waged on behalf of ‘symbolic’ capital rather than profit-based capitalism is one in which Americans have been wearily engaged for years. Nearly twenty years ago, US scholar Kevin Platt addressed the Russian academic community in North America with his article: ‘Will the Study of Russian Literature Survive the Coming Century? (A

8 Books, and art in general, can be thought of as ‘symbolic capital’ whose value is separate from its economic impact. See *ibid.*, p. 95.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

10 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 4. Venuti here describes the translator’s invisibility as “a weird self-annihilation, a way of conceiving and practicing translation that undoubtedly reinforces its marginal status in Anglo-American culture”.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Provocation').¹² Among other topics, Platt addresses the increasing difficulties in justifying—to university officials and potential students alike—the study of national literatures in isolation: “the kind of nationalist particularist ideology that supports the ideal of a separate and unique ‘Russian’ tradition is not only poorly based in reality, but often pernicious as well—a key weapon in the mobilizational arsenal of oppressive and repugnant political movements”.¹³ A similar analysis informs David Damrosch’s account of the shift in the demands and subjects of the field of Comparative Literature: despite the apparent decline of traditional humanities, comparative studies, he claims, are thriving, due to “an expanding set of equally compelling needs, from the crises of migration and of the environment to the worldwide rise of inequality, together with violent conflicts that have the United States involved in an Orwellian state of perpetual war”.¹⁴

The situation with Russian literature in the US is characterised by an additional feature beyond both the ‘symbolic’ value of ‘great literature’ and the economic value of bestsellers. The political priorities of Cold War agendas simultaneously privileged and funded the study of Russian while separating the field of ‘Slavic Studies’ (however conceptualised) from other national literature or comparative literature departments. However strong the humanities bent of the student of Russian and the programme in which they were studying, chances are high that some part of their education was funded by the government interested in ‘winning’ the Cold War.¹⁵ The need to be politically relevant and a ‘hot topic’ in geopolitical entanglements still affects the marketing and publication in the US of literature from that part of the world.¹⁶

Meanwhile the Anglophone market for contemporary Russian-language books is often influenced by the reception of those books in Europe. German literary agent Thomas Wiedling owns a small business which is vitally engaged

12 Kevin M. F. Platt, ‘Will the Study of Russian Literature Survive the Coming Century? (A Provocation)’, *Slavic and East European Journal*, 50:1 (2006), 204–12. It is significant that Platt’s more recent work focuses on Russian-language literature produced outside of Russia; he is one of the first theorists of the idea of Global Russian and Russophone Russian literature (see his *Global Russian Cultures*, 2019).

13 Platt, ‘Will the Study’, p. 206.

14 David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 4. Note that both Platt and Damrosch use political arguments to legitimise the study of literature, an inevitable feature of promoting classes, majors and disciplines in US universities.

15 See Chapter 5, ‘Politics’, in Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, an excellent history of US governmental influence on education, including prioritising languages beyond those of Western Europe: “Though in principle the Title VI funding should have been well suited for comparative literature, its emphasis was on languages and regions far from the discipline’s purview in that era” (pp. 86–87).

16 The politicised nature of academic funding for Russian-language and ‘area studies’ is under increasing scrutiny, as the scholarly field tries to grapple with its own complicity in the current war that will certainly reshape ideas about ‘Russian’ culture for generations. However, this is a topic for a different study.

with our topic: he represents many important contemporary Russian authors and Ukrainian Russophone authors, including Alexei Nikitin, and has helped to get them published in Germany, France and other countries, thereby facilitating their access to the English-reading public.¹⁷ Wiedling observes that UK publishers will not usually consider non-English titles unless they have received acclaim in their home countries and/or been published in other European languages first. As for the US, Wiedling notes that a US publisher will not usually evaluate a work translated from another language unless it has already appeared in English in the UK. Discussions involving two of the best-selling contemporary Russian-language authors in the US, the Ukrainian Andrey Kurkov and the Georgian-Russian “publishing phenomenon” Boris Akunin (b. 1956), confirm Wiedling’s views: both authors were able to penetrate the US market only after being published in English translation in the UK.¹⁸

Translation of the Classics and the Changing Field of Literary Studies

If contemporary authors such as Nikitin and the others represented by Wiedling’s agency are struggling to find their English-language publishers, the tradition of Russian nineteenth-century literary classics seems, on the whole, to be alive and well in the North American book market and in academic programmes. Successful translators of Russian literature—that is, those who enjoy steady sales and are regularly offered contracts by publishers—typically translate nineteenth- or early twentieth-century works that are regularly taught, serialised, bought for book groups, or filmed. For example, most of the impressive number of books Marian Schwartz has translated are titles from the mid-twentieth

17 The list of authors Wiedling represents is impressive: besides Nikitin, it includes well-known authors such as Alexei Ivanov, Anna Starobinets and Leonid Yuzefovich (<https://topseller.wiedling-litag.com>). The discussion that follows is based on email correspondence and a Zoom conversation between myself, Nikitin and Wiedling in August 2021. The website’s current page features Ukrainian Russophone writers and Russian-language literature against the war (<https://wiedling-litag.com>).

18 Kurkov has commented on his publication experiences in English in several places; most recently in a personal Zoom call with myself and his translator, Boris Dralyuk (20 August 2021). He made similar points in his keynote talk at the online ICCEES conference (5 August 2021) and his discussion with Boris Dralyuk about the translation of his 2018 novel *Grey Bees* [*Serye pchely*] (‘Grey Bees,’ online discussion with translator Boris Dralyuk, 24 February 2021). Stephen Norris similarly describes the path of Akunin via the UK publishers to the display table at his local Barnes & Noble—a place Norris had never seen a Russian writer before (Roundtable on ‘The Akunin Project’, ICCEES conference, 7 August 2021). I add more on Dralyuk later.

century or earlier.¹⁹ A similarly prolific translating duo, the husband-and-wife team Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, have translated or, more often, re-translated, over forty classic Russian novels. Their translations remain in print and thus dominate the academic market, despite their uneven critical reception.²⁰ Even so, the changing world of readership forces promoters of these ‘timeless classics’—primarily university professors—to shift their focus: a chronological survey of Russian (or any) literature will not attract the students it once did. The need to address literature by contexts and themes, beyond country or language of origin, has driven publishers and professors alike to select the works they promote in other ways than ‘Russian literature’, or ‘New Voices from Russia’.²¹

The shift away from national literatures as historical and aesthetic canonical ‘givens’ has resulted in growing interest in a broader range of texts being published, promoted, and taught in languages other than Russian from the post-Soviet space and in reduced attention to texts from Russia itself. It also affects the development of ‘less commonly taught’ language-learning in North America: more scholars and writers need to learn languages other than Russian to access these texts and, eventually, translate them. As noted above, the US government generously supports a wide range of languages *so long as they are considered strategic*, which since the rise of Vladimir Putin includes Russian and

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- 19 See Marian Schwartz’s list on Amazon Crossing, in Dennis Abrams, ‘Two of the Season’s Top Translators: On Russian Gangsters and a “Convincing Voice”’, *Publishing Perspectives*, 15 September 2017, <https://publishingperspectives.com/2017/09/translators-on-russian-gangsters-convincing-voice/>. Her complete list of translations is huge and, in fact, does include quite a few titles of contemporary authors. (See: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aab07c78f513028aeeb545f/t/5f8eed9b4f171b204e3111ac/1603202459552/publicationsmaster+20oct20.pdf>). However, it is her translations of Russian classics that get the steadiest sales for university courses.
 - 20 For example, Frank Guan refers to their “decades-long, kudzu-esque campaign to choke out every field of Russian literature” (‘Lost in the Fatherland. Dostoevsky’s Russia as Curiously Modern After School Project’, *The Baffler* [May-June 2019], 80–88 [p. 85])—yet he still cites them in his piece on Dostoevsky. However, in a recent survey on the (mostly) academic Slavic Studies listserv SEELANGS, a number of professors defended the Pevear/Volokhonsky translations, particularly of Tolstoy: “In particular, when Tolstoy repeats the same word and does not use a synonym, Pevear and Volokhonsky do the same thing” (Donna Orwin, SEELANGS post, 21 October 2021).
 - 21 At the beginning of the 2021 academic year, a professor of nineteenth-century Russian literature at New York University sent out a plea to her friends on Facebook: “The updated version of Freud’s question is: what do undergraduates want? Since I’m not qualified to teach any real favorites (vampires, sex), what is to be done? I’m soliciting advice from those who know the mysteries of the undergraduate mind: what 19th-c Russian lit class might students be likely to sign up for in spring 2022?” She adds: “I personally would love to teach a class on Turgenev and Goncharov, but it would have an enrollment of precisely zero”. Post from August 2021. Quoted with permission.

other languages of the post-Soviet space. Of course, this is not primarily in the interest of literature. The trends that reduce the relevance of national literature departments and the sheer breadth and rapid development of literature produced in the regions and groups included in the field of Global Studies should be good news, ironically, for translators into English: if we cannot expect students to focus on one or two national literatures, more and more readers will rely on books in translation.²²

In addition, for some languages in the post-Soviet region, Russian remains a bridge (or pivot) language for translation into English. This creates a situation necessitating either working with the Russian translator of a text or, to some extent, treating the Russian translation of the work as an original.²³ The trend to widen the definition of 'Russian' literature beyond the borders of the Russian Federation promotes inclusion of works produced by the Russophone diaspora: former Soviet states, the US or Canada, Israel. For languages other than Russian in these locales that have been gaining interest among readers, the need for good translators has grown, thus motivating translators from Russian to improve their knowledge of other languages and, more and more commonly, to work in collaboration with a native speaker.

Contemporary Ukrainian Literature

Within the broadening post-Soviet linguistic world, Ukrainian literature in particular is a blossoming field, drawing the interest of numerous scholars, students and translators. After decades languishing in isolation within Russian and Slavic Departments, the lone professors of Ukrainian literature and language now have a growing number of colleagues and students, as well as regular

22 Both Platt and Damrosch describe the decreasing focus on actual language proficiency in the new academy that rejects national literatures in favour of global studies: "language instruction begins to seem like a separate, speciali[s]ed function and is likely to wind up ghettoid[s]ed in a speciali[s]ed sub-department" (Platt, 'The Study of Russian Literature', p. 208). Damrosch similarly notes that the beleaguered graduate students in comparative studies, who traditionally needed to master three or four languages, now "feel increasing pressure to cut back intellectually": "Maybe there isn't time—or funding—to master that third language, still less to start a fourth?" (*Comparing the Literatures*, p. 6). The implications of the reduction in language experts for the business of translation have yet to be analysed.

23 This affects, among others, Kazakh writers, for whom Russian-speaking Kazakhs remain an intermediary. Yuriy Serebriarsky, a Russophone Kazakhstani writer, described this phenomenon in a discussion of Russophone writers on Facebook (Naomi Caffee, moderator, 'Russophone Voices: A Conversation with Andrey Kurkov and Yuriy Serebriarsky' [21 January 2021]). Note also Shelley Fairweather-Vega's work in this region, and the rise of a new translation network ('Turkoslavia') focused on Central Asian languages.

engagement with colleagues and literary circles in Ukraine. Since 2014, the book market in Ukraine has become more propitious for Ukrainian-language writers, a situation that is likely to continue after the war. Within the literary community of Ukraine, a number of major writers stand out, whose influence dominates both the domestic literary scene and the burgeoning academic field of Ukrainian Studies in the UK and North America: Oksana Zabuzhko (b. 1960), Iurii Andrukhovych (b. 1982), Sofia Andrukhovych (b. 1960) and Serhiy Zhadan (b. 1974), to name the most prominent. None of these towering figures in Ukrainian letters writes in Russian, and many writers whose first language was Russian and who originally wrote in Russian have been switching to Ukrainian for their literary work.²⁴

This trend began in the aftermath of the Maidan protests in 2013–14 and the war with Russia that began in spring 2014 after Russian troops annexed Crimea and began the separatist war in Eastern Ukraine, the Donbas. Since the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the contention over language seems likely to become more acute. In the transitional time for the Ukrainian nation and its languages, Ukraine-based Russophone writers have lost their largest market—readers in the Russian Federation—and thus they need to find ways to be read both at home and abroad. Many Ukrainian readers remain bilingual in both languages but show a strong preference for reading in Ukrainian. Thus, the last ten years or so have seen an increased production of Ukrainian translations of Russian texts—something that was not considered necessary in the past as bilingualism among Ukrainians was taken as a given.²⁵

After Maidan and the first stage of the Russian invasion in 2014, there was a danger that literature in Russian was on the way out of the Ukrainian literary scene. Indeed, in 2015 that seemed a possible outcome to the language wars that accompanied the political and military war. However, the two communities for the most part began to work more closely together: “[n]either attempts to build a high culture in Ukraine’s territory exclusively in the language of the former imperial/colonial power [i.e., Russian] nor the spirited attempts to create a robust postcolonial Ukrainian culture that does not incorporate non-Ukrainophone cultural production would ultimately be successful”.²⁶ In a 2020 article on the subject, Canadian Slavist Myroslav Shkandrij claims the “conversion trope”—where writers switch from Russian to Ukrainian as an act of patriotism—is losing ground to peaceful and mutual co-existence between the two language communities: “[t]his respectful interaction between citizens,

24 For example, Volodymyr Rafeenko and Olena Stiazhkina, both Russophone writers from Donetsk who relocated to Kyiv in 2015, now write entirely in Ukrainian.

25 On the Ukrainian reception of Russian literature, see the chapter by Lada Kolomiyets and Oleksandr Kalnychenko in this volume.

26 Vitaly Chernetsky, ‘Russophone Writing in Ukraine: Historical Contexts and Post-Euromaidan Changes’, in Platt, ed., *Global Russian Cultures*, pp. 48–68 (p. 58).

who speak whichever of the two languages they feel comfortable using, is an attractive phenomenon conveying that a single Ukrainian community exists with diverse constituents who understand each other, no matter what the language of preference".²⁷ In the academic English-speaking world, scholars are translating, analysing and teaching texts from both languages in political science, history, and literature courses.

Russophone Ukrainian writers will prove to be extremely important to the development of Ukrainian society; not only do they have access to more readers worldwide but they are codifying a new, specifically Ukrainian Russian that promises to develop into its own literary language.²⁸ Although there is still a divide about the status of Russian in Ukraine, the acceptance of Russophone Ukrainians is more likely to foster the development of civic society in Ukraine: "unlike the ethnic Ukrainians speaking Ukrainian who could readily fit into the ethnonationalist paradigm, Russophone Ukrainians had to look for other ways to conceptualize their relationship with the Ukrainian state and, thus, were in a more productive position to arrive at envisioning civic values as the core of the Ukrainian society".²⁹

Kurkov and Nikitin, both Kyiv-based writers, are prominent in very different ways, but they share features that make comparison of their careers useful for discussion of Ukrainian literature written in Russian. (Odesa-based writers also include prominent Russophone writers, reflecting the predominance of Russian culture in that city's history.) Both are fluent in Ukrainian; but until 2022, they insisted that Russian was the only language in which they could write fiction. The full effect of the war still remains to be seen, but as of March 2023, Kurkov has risen to new prominence with awards and acclaim, and Nikitin has been included in the publishing list of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI), which previously only published books originally written in Ukrainian.

Andrey Kurkov: Non-Establishment Leader of the Literary Establishment

Kurkov was the first contemporary writer from newly-independent Ukraine in the 1990s to gain a wide readership abroad and to identify himself as Ukrainian, despite the fact that he writes in Russian: "since his earliest publications in the

27 Myroslav Shkandrij, 'Channel Switching: Language Change and the Conversion Trope in Modern Ukrainian Literature', *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, 23 (2020), 39–58 (p. 54).

28 It is "literature that can show us the path to undertake even while turning the gaze to the *other* 'Russian World'—and to the diversity of its *local* historical and cultural experiences" (Puleri, *Ukrainian, Russophone, (Other) Russia*, p. 22).

29 Anna Vozna, 'Towards World Russians? How Ukrainian Russophones Construct Boundaries from the Russian Federation', *eSamizdat*, XIV (2021), 121–36 (p. 125), <https://www.esamizdat.it/ojs/index.php/eS/issue/view/26/24>.

1990s [Kurkov] insisted that he considered himself a Ukrainian writer writing in Russian as opposed to a Russian writer living in Ukraine".³⁰ After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of Ukraine's independence in 1991, Kurkov became well-known for his darkly humorous 'Penguin' novels, *Death and the Penguin* (*Piknik na l'du*, 1995) and *Penguin Lost* (*Zakon ulitki*, 2002), as well as his other sardonic portrayals of former Soviet society in this very confusing period.

Kurkov has spoken and published widely about his writing and the development of his work.³¹ In the 'Russophone Voices' talk, in which he and Russophone Kazakhstani writer Yuriy Serebriansky (b. 1975) discussed the changing landscape of Russian-language writing, Kurkov notes that when he began writing in the late 1980s, "Soviet Ukrainian literature was already dead" and "post-Soviet Ukrainian literature was not yet born". He describes a sea-change in the situation in contemporary Ukraine, where it seems people read more in Ukrainian now than in Russian. Not surprisingly, he pinpoints 2014 as the year when books in Russian lost a substantial number of readers in Ukraine because Russian was labelled the "language of the enemy". Although Kurkov speaks positively of the development of Ukrainian-language literature and clearly supports newer and younger writers of both languages, he also alludes in this discussion to a greater vitality and energy in Ukrainian-language literature and, by implication, a comparatively stagnant scene on the part of Russophone literature—with some notable exceptions, such as the vibrant Russian-language poetry scene in Odesa. His own contribution, he suggests, is his access to audiences and readers in the West, and he is justifiably proud of the dogged persistence that gained him his following in other languages. In 2020, he even stated, when describing the lower sales of Russophone-Ukrainian writers compared to Ukrainian-language writers in Ukraine: "[i]f I were not published abroad, I would be puzzled to answer the question 'for whom do I write?'". This comment suggests a strong feeling of disconnection from his homeland or home readership, despite his authority and prestige in Ukrainian literary society.

Since 2022, however, he has been one of the major international spokespersons for Ukraine. He is a tireless advocate for Ukrainian culture in all languages and is recognised as such by his countrymen. In spring 2019, he was commissioned to write a version of his novel *Grey Bees* for the acclaimed Theatre in Podil in Kyiv, where it has been performed several times, winning an award in 2020 for 'Best Play of the Year 2019'. His prominence in the Western press after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the tremendous success of *Grey Bees* in Ukraine and abroad has reinvested his work as a Ukrainian writer.

30 Chernetsky, 'Russophone Writing', p. 58.

31 In this discussion I draw primarily on Kurkov's comments made during a live panel discussion hosted by Facebook, 'Russophone Voices' (21 January 2021), and the 'Cabaret' he performed in London: 'Cabaret Extraordinaire. An Hour with Andrey Kurkov', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znofkoT0hNg>.

Kurkov's novels *The Bickford Fuse* (2017) (*Bikfordov mir* (Kyiv: Kometko, 1993)) and *Grey Bees* (2019) (*Serye pchely* (Kyiv: Folio, 2018)), both translated into English by Boris Dralyuk, are more ambitious stylistically and serious in content than those of his novels to appear in English in the early 2000s, from *Death and the Penguin* to *The President's Last Love* (*Posledniaia liubov' prezidenta*, 2008). By his own admission, his first major influence was linguistically innovative Russian prose authors such as Boris Pil'niak and Andrei Platonov. *The Bickford Fuse* is his first novel, written in the 1980s, but was only translated into English in 2017, after the critical and financial success of his 'Penguin' novels. It is only in recent years that Kurkov has returned to a more serious style, a departure from the outlandish and comic, as evidenced in *Grey Bees*. He accepts that this move to more serious prose will change and possibly reduce his readership. It is striking that only in recent years has he staked his claim to a place in the Russian literary canon, whereas the books that gained him readership abroad were not, to all appearances, the product of distinct literary predecessors; rather they were pitched as absurd or comical, like some work by Franz Kafka or Nikolai Gogol. His current translator, Boris Dralyuk, is a staunch ally in Kurkov's current literary endeavours: Dralyuk discovered *The Bickford Fuse* after reading an academic article on it. By tackling this complex and prescient text about 'Soviet Man', Dralyuk broadened Kurkov's readership among more 'serious' readers of English. Their translation of *Grey Bees* won the 2022 National Critic Book Circle,³² and his 2006 novel *Jimi Hendrix Live in Lviv* was listed on the longlist for the 2023 International Booker Prize.³³ Since the war began, Kurkov has completed a memoir in English, *Diary of an Invasion*, that has appeared in a number of European languages.³⁴

Both Kurkov and Dralyuk have changed gears as a result of the war. Dralyuk has published several statements against the war; suspended the journal of Russophone literary translations, *Cardinal Points* (which he had co-edited with poet Irina Mashinski);³⁵ and focused more attention on promoting Ukrainian writers in the West. Originally from Odesa, Dralyuk has identified himself as a "Russophone Ukrainian"; he will likely continue to translate from both

32 Alexandra Alter and Elizabeth A. Harris, 'Ukrainian Author Andrey Kurkov among National Book Critics Circle Award Winners', *The New York Times*, 23 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/23/books/national-book-critics-circle-award-2023.html>.

33 Translated by Reuben Woolley (London: MacLehose Press, 2022), <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/prize-years/international/2023>.

34 Andrey Kurkov, *Diary of an Invasion*, trans. by Boris Dralyuk (London: Mountain Leopard, 2022). (The US Edition was produced by Deep Vellum Press in April 2023.)

35 *Cardinal Points* was produced and funded since its foundation in 2010 by the Slavic Department at Brown University. Its archive may be viewed here: <http://www.stosvet.net/cardinalpoints.html>.

languages.³⁶ Among his current projects is a new journal of Russian-language anti-war literature, *The Fifth Wave*, edited by Russian writer Maxim Osipov, whose work Dralyuk has previously translated for the New York Review of Books Classics series.

Kurkov is a paradoxical figure: he is both a part of Ukrainian literary society and an outsider within it. He did not begin his career as a member of the rigid Soviet literary establishment; by his own account, his road to literary acclaim is a tale of stubbornness and determination. In a literary 'Cabaret' filmed at King's Place, London, Kurkov recounts his career to 2011 with generous doses of self-deprecating humour and musical interludes.³⁷ In his playful narration, Kurkov tells how he fulfilled all the roles in the book industry when beginning his career—that is, he was author, translator, agent, editor, and printing press all in one. Firstly, Kurkov sent hundreds of letters and chapter samples to publishers outside the Soviet Union; then he successfully raised funds to get his books published in Ukraine. In addition, he had to personally pay for and then physically unload the paper for the books (which had to be delivered from Kazakhstan). Finally, Kurkov oversaw the book production at a print shop in Kyiv. This summary does not do justice to the wealth of anecdotal detail recounting the deals he had to make, the not-quite-legal workarounds he both carried out and fell victim to, the complications he encountered, or the good-natured humour with which he tells this rather harrowing story. The main point of the story is that Kurkov was an outlier in the literary world even then, a self-made man, who launched his own career under extremely unpropitious circumstances.

Equally revealing in 'Cabaret' is Kurkov's account of his first publication in English, the novel *Death and the Penguin*. He sent a cover letter, synopsis, his CV and two chapters in English to thirty publishers in the UK and US. He received thirty refusals, including a memorable one he cites in full: "Dear Mr Kurkov, Thank you for your submission. Unfortunately, we only publish high-quality literature. We wish you good luck elsewhere". The letter in question came from Harvill Secker, who has since become his exclusive publisher in the UK. By his account, after spending two or three hours a day on this type of correspondence

36 For a lucid and concise statement of Dralyuk's views, see his recent series of tweets (17 May 2023) in response to a call by Ukrainian PEN for the separation of Russian and Ukrainian writers at public events: <https://twitter.com/BorisDralyuk/status/1658870729956560896>. PEN Ukraine's Executive Board statement 'We Respond to Our People' (17 May 2023) may be accessed here: <https://pen.org.ua/en/my-vidpovidayemo-pered-svoym-narodom-zayava-vykonavchoyi-rady-ukrayinskoho-pen>.

37 'Cabaret Extraordinaire. An Hour with Andrey Kurkov'. There is no date on this film, but it must be between 2011 and 2013, as Kurkov states that the English translation of *Milkman in the Night* has recently come out [*Nochnoi molochnik*, 2011] and that *The Gardener from Ochakov* [*Sadovnik iz Ochakova*, 2013] is soon to be released.

for eighteen years, he finally signed a contract with a German press based in Zurich, Diogenes Verlag. Christa Vogel's translation of *Death and the Penguin* (*Picknick auf dem Eis*, 2000) became a bestseller in Switzerland, and then in Austria and Germany. From then on, Kurkov was able to sell the world rights to his books and publish them in multiple languages, including English.

Kurkov's earliest translator into English was George Bird, the father of one of his friends. Bird was a former MI5 linguist and very knowledgeable about Russia and the Soviet Union. He "interfered" with Kurkov's texts by shortening them and making them more palatable for a British reader; it had been common for British publishers to ask for cuts from Russian novels since the 1950s, in an attempt to "domesticate" them for the British public.³⁸ Subsequent translators of Kurkov's works, Amanda Love Darragh and Boris Dralyuk, have been contracted by the publisher rather than the author, following usual publishing practice in Europe. (In the US, it is frequently the translator who seeks the publisher and acts as an unpaid agent for the author.) Given Kurkov's excellent English, he is able to work with them effectively. In particular, his working relationship with Dralyuk has become a friendship.

While charismatic and popular, Kurkov does not quite fit either with the academic literary community or with readers of 'classical' Russian literature. Instead, by his own admission he is favoured by political scientists, historians, and journalists, who enjoy reading about current events through the filter of his novels. He has commented that his novels have different appeal for different national audiences: his path to Western readerships began with German translations of his books, popular among students first, and then "middle-class *belletristi* [writers and readers of fiction]". The French appreciated his "ironic philosophy", while his US fans are mostly in "political clubs, not book clubs".³⁹ His fame extends well beyond the West, with major fan bases in Japan and India. He is aware that he is a kind of 'ambassador' for Ukraine to other countries and is used to being called upon to explain his adoptive country to the world. As Ukraine takes an increasingly prominent place in world events and interest in the country grows, more Ukrainian writers are working in English or being translated into English, thus helping to relieve him of this rather lonely burden.⁴⁰

38 Kurkov remembers Bird telling him about this practice himself. Personal call with author, August 2021.

39 Kurkov, 'Russophone Voices'.

40 Kurkov has spoken of this in private conversation and also in interviews. He pointed to the publication of three articles in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* by contemporary Ukrainian poets on different aspects of Ukrainian identity as a welcome addition to journalism about Ukraine. See Olesya Khromeychuk, 'How to Love Your Homeland Properly', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 21 August 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/ukraine-at-30-part-i-how-to-love-your-homeland-properly/>; Sasha Dovzhyk, 'An Abundance of Emptiness' *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 August 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/ukraine-at-30-part-ii-an-abundance-of-emptiness/>; Iryna Shuvalova, 'The "Mova" I Live

Alexei Nikitin: Ukrainian-Russophone Literature in the Aftermath of Euromaidan

The other prominent Russophone-Ukrainian writer under discussion, Alexei Nikitin, has been as affected by Russian geopolitics as Kurkov, but in a dramatically different way. When Nikitin began writing and publishing in the late 1990s, he sought and received a sizeable readership and critical acclaim in the market best suited for his novels: the Russian Federation. Until 2014, a solid critical reception in the Russian market was the sign of success for Russophone writers in Ukraine, who had reason to believe very few people in their native Ukraine bought and read their books. Polina Lavrova, editor-in-chief of the Kyiv publishing house Laurus, mentioned Nikitin in an interview in 2015 in the context of how difficult it is to convince quality Russophone writers in Ukraine to sign on with Ukrainian presses. Since it was more prestigious and profitable to publish in Russia, Nikitin chose to go with the Moscow publisher.⁴¹

Nikitin made extraordinary inroads into the difficult realm of the Russian market, becoming an acknowledged and awarded literary newcomer on a scene crowded with great writers, both classic and contemporary. Before 2014, he was mostly read in Russia while less known in his native Ukraine. Nikitin typically answers the question about his readers very modestly. For example, when one interviewer asks: “Who are your readers? Where are you read more—in Russia or in Ukraine? Or maybe abroad [in the Russian diaspora]?” Nikitin answers:

In', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 24 August 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/ukraine-at-30-part-iii-the-mova-i-live-in/>. The articles appeared in the *LARB* on the occasion of Ukraine's thirty years of Independence.

- 41 Polina Lavrova, 'The situation with the book market is not merely dire—it's practically hopeless' ['Situatsiia na knizhnom rynke ne prosto tiazhelaia—ona prakticheski beznadezhnaia'], in *The Price of a Question. 27 Interviews with Evhenii Stasinevych* [*Tsina pytannia. 27 interv'iu Yevheniiu Stasivychu*] (Kyiv: Laurus, 2016), pp. 75–82 (p.79). (Original in Russian; translation mine.) Six years after this interview, in 2021, Lavrova has a substantial catalogue of acclaimed books by both Ukrainian and Russian writers, including two by Nikitin (*Victory Park* and *The Face of Fire*). The problem for Ukrainian publishers remains, as in 2015, one of distribution: readers need to order directly from the publisher or from online Ukrainian megastores—which in turn requires a mechanism to find out about the book. So authors and publishers use Facebook and other social media for promotion. Annual book fairs such as the Kyiv Book Arsenal, as well as smaller fairs in L'viv and other regional centres, also help promote books—but here the pandemic did significant damage, both by shutting down the fairs in 2020 and by impacting the economy and reducing readers' budgets. The problem with Russian-language books is exacerbated by the fact that digital versions are pirated and authors and publishers rarely see profits from their sales. (From personal conversations with Lavrova, Nikitin and several members of the literary community in Kyiv.)

I can't even give you an approximate answer. Probably, my publishers know more about this than I do, though I don't think even they have exact numbers. My Russian books practically don't end up in Ukraine at all. True, my Russian sales are not that huge either. Sales of foreign publishers are not much larger than Russian ones, but the English edition of *Istemi* sells in approximately 40 countries and you can find it in libraries around the world—from Canada to Australia. I would venture to say that most of my readers are on the Internet—but who are they? It's a mystery shrouded in fog.⁴²

Nikitin's wry account of the ephemeral world of book sales reveals how little you can tell about the interrelation of acclaim with sales. The particular genius of Internet piracy in Russia is a separate topic, but it is generally known to be easy to lift Russian-language books online without paying either the author or the publisher.

Nikitin is and always has been a Ukrainian writer as far as the content and context of his fiction goes: all his works are set in Kyiv and all address central issues in contemporary Ukraine through the lens of history. Familiarity with Kyiv—indeed, an awareness of the city's centrality as the 'origin' of Rus—among Russian readers worldwide made his novels accessible and appealing to readers in the Russian Federation. Although each of his novels that came out in Russia was awarded or at least nominated for prestigious literary prizes, only one, *Istemi*, has appeared in English, first translated by Anne Marie Jackson in 2013 and reissued in 2016 under the title *Y.T.*. This is largely because of the timing of the release of his subsequent novels—just before Ukrainian and Russian cultural relations all but froze. The height of Nikitin's international recognition occurred in 2013–14, coinciding with the Maidan events. Three of his novels were published in Moscow and well-reviewed in the Russian-language press—*Istemi* (2011), *Mahjong* (*Madzhong*, 2012) and *Victory Park* (2013, the original title is in English)—and *Victory Park* received the prestigious 'Russian Prize' for 2014. The publication date of *Victory Park*, 2014, is somewhat deceptive, since the novel was circulated in manuscript to journals, newspapers, and prize-review boards. Thus, its reception and acclaim actually began in 2013, before the events of Maidan, the invasion of Crimea and the war in Donbas.

After 2014, many Ukrainian writers were dropped by Russian publishers. Via his Russian publisher, Ad Marginem, Nikitin was picked up by Thomas Wiedling's agency, most of whose authors (pre-invasion, at least) live in Russia. This in turn eventually helped to get *Istemi* and *Victory Park* published in other languages. *Istemi* (the title is the name of the protagonist's avatar in a strategy game), Nikitin's earliest full novel, came out with Ad Marginem in Russia in

42 My translation. 'Alexei Nikitin: I mythologize Kyiv and I do so consciously' ['Alekssei Nikitin: Ia mifologiziruiu Kiev, i delaiu eto soznatel'no'], interview with Elena Serebriakova, *Russkaia Premiia*, 19 May 2014.

2011; it was published in 2013 in Italian and English (the latter with Peter Owen publishers in Chicago).⁴³ *Mahjong* and *Victory Park* can be seen as a 'set': both are Kyiv novels, of about the same size (approximately 350 pages), and mix humour, tragedy and historical reflection about the city. However, *Mahjong* has not been translated into any language besides Ukrainian; instead, it became a runaway Internet seller the likes of which neither Nikitin nor his editors had seen before. There are hardly any paper copies of the novel in circulation anymore, but it continues to be available in digital form.⁴⁴ *Victory Park* appeared in French translation in Switzerland in 2017 and Italian translation in 2019.⁴⁵ The Swiss press, Noir sur Blanc, was founded by a Polish-Swiss couple who specialise in books from Eastern Europe. The Italian publisher Volland likewise (as the name suggests) specialises in Russian texts: Nikitin's novels appeared in the series 'Sirin'—that is, in the same press and by the same translator, Laura Pagliara, who had completed *Istemi* in 2013. *Victory Park* appeared in Ukrainian in 2016 (in the same Kyiv press that had published *Mahjong*, Fabula Publishers); however, a Russian edition only appeared in Ukraine in 2019, when Nikitin was able to publish it with Laurus Press. The international success of Nikitin's books is belatedly impacting his readership at home: he is becoming known in Ukraine, as it were, by arriving from abroad. For a self-professed homebody who only rarely bestirs himself to leave Kyiv even for a few days, Nikitin's situation is quite paradoxical.

After *Victory Park*, Nikitin wrote a novel that culminates with the violent events of 2013–14 themselves: *The Orderly from Institutskaia Street* (*Sanitar s Institutskoi*, 2016). This was his first novel to be published in Russian in Ukraine; significantly, it was published by a press that does not usually publish Russian-language works. Ukrainian literary scholar Vitaly Chernetsky notes that the

43 Nikitin, *Istemi*, Italian translator Laura Pagliara (Rome: Volland, 2013); English translator Anne Marie Jackson's version was reissued as Y.T. in 2016 (New York: Melville House).

44 Nikitin is at a loss to explain the very high sales of the digital version of *Mahjong* when it came out—in a typically self-deprecating joke, he supposed people bought it 'by mistake', thinking they were buying the actual game 'Mahjong'. Both *Istemi* and *Madzhong* were available in digital form on Amazon Kindle in 2011 and 2012. Soon after this, however, Amazon stopped publishing ebooks in Cyrillic. In addition, the Russian press Ad Marginem was not very forthcoming with Nikitin about the actual print run and how many copies were sold of the paperback. The topic of Russian language eBooks, their pirated distribution and sales, is beyond the scope of this paper. It is to be hoped that someone with greater digital savvy than this author possesses can investigate this further in the future. The Ukrainian translation of *Mahjong*, a hardcover edition, can still be found in Ukrainian bookstores, as can the Ukrainian translation of *Victory Park*. Oleksiy Nikitin, *Madzhong*, Ukrainian translation by Elena Yakimenko (Kyiv: Fabula, 2017).

45 *Victory Park*, French translation by Anne-Marie Tatsis-Botton (Lausanne: Noir sur Blanc, 2017); *Victory Park*, Italian translation by Laura Pagliara (Rome: Volland, 2019). I am currently working on an English translation of *Victory Park*.

response to the events of 2014 was a pivotal moment in the development of Ukrainian-Russophone literature, and that Russophone writers responded to these events mostly with nonfiction. Nikitin's *Orderly* was an exception to this, as it is fiction, so it is all the more important that it was the only Russian-language literary response to the events included in the five-year retrospective of political developments. In many ways, the novel is a significant moment in the movement of Ukraine's writers of both languages. His most recent novel, *The Face of Fire* (*Ot litsa ognia*, 2021), seems likely to become (and is already becoming) another major step in forging a 'horizontal comradeship' in the Ukrainian literary community: the Russian and Ukrainian editions appeared at almost the same time, and were presented together at the Kyiv Arsenal Book Fair in June 2021. The readership of this novel seems equally divided between Ukrainian and Russian speakers in Ukraine. It is currently being translated into English by myself and Dominique Hoffman and discussed in academic circles. Certainly, the English translations of both *Victory Park* and *The Face of Fire* will get an academic readership, but both books have the potential to appeal to much broader readerships. Since February 2022, Nikitin has been writing and participating in Ukrainian events centred on the war, but not as extensively as Kurkov and other writers with strong English skills. The publication of *The Face of Fire* in HURI's list in the US is an important event for clarifying the status of Ukrainian writers as Ukrainian first, no matter the language they write in.

Prospects for Future Translation Projects from Ukraine

On the whole, it is difficult and probably ill-advised to be optimistic about the future of the book market and the small place within it occupied by literary translation at this particular juncture.⁴⁶ Yet current trends—collaboration between translators and their authors, co-translation of texts, workshops and mentoring—invite an examination of what seems to be a large aspect of literary endeavours in general and Translation Studies in particular: a cluster of "imagined communities" of the type described by Benedict Anderson.⁴⁷ Venuti's lonely, "invisible" translator who attempts to create a work equal to and independent of the original is not gone, but (s)he is becoming rarer. Mentoring and collaboration in the field of literary translation helps to offset the difficulty caused by conflicting demands from the wider field, which requires translations from more and less known languages: native speakers of English can consult

46 For example, see the RusTrans interview with Marian Schwartz on 19 June 2020: <http://rustrans.exeter.ac.uk/2020/06/19/how-can-literature-in-translation-survive-without-bookstores-the-coronavirus-crisis-blog-vii/>.

47 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

and creatively pair with native speakers of the language being translated. Venues for workshops and professional advice, such as the University of Bristol programme in translation ('Bristol Translates') and the Association of Literary Translators in America (ALTA), offer platforms for discussing one's work.

Paradoxically, the devastating pandemic has broadened the already popular phenomenon of book groups and writer and translator workshops by forcing them online, thereby creating affordable and geographically inclusive venues. All of this produces more community-based readers, writers, and translators. Despite the obvious drawbacks of holding scholarly conferences online, the attendance of lectures and panels has shown, at least in some cases, that a larger-than-normal audience was reached and able to participate. Facebook itself—arguably more an 'imaginary' community than an 'imagined' one, given the self-replicating algorithms and targeted ads that keep one engaged mainly with like-minded people—is a forum for sharing and discussion of vital intellectual topics. In Ukraine, for example, Facebook is the main way to inform readers about publications and publish substantial reviews and commentaries. The data, of course, are not in yet, but there is reason to hope that literature as a 'symbolic' cultural product will not lose its value completely and English-language translation will continue its modest but essential work.

