

Sociopolitical Significance of the Publications in “Inostrannaya Literatura” (“Foreign Literature”) Magazine in 1990

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Abstract

This article considers the translation strategy of “Foreign Literature” magazine. It focuses on John Le Carré’s novel “Russia House” which was published in “Foreign Literature” in 1990. The publication was of great socio-political, cultural and historical significance, as it cast major discredit upon the existing totalitarian regime. However, according to the researcher, the value of the novel goes far beyond its criticism of socialism and totalitarianism. It provides a broad historical and cultural critique of civilization and mentality.

Keywords: magazine “Иностранная литература”, novel “The Russia House”, discredit, ideology, snobbery, totalitarianism, democracy

1. Introduction

Hardly anyone would dispute the significance of “Inostrannaya literature” magazine in the life of Soviet society. Throughout its existence, and even today, the magazine has a major influence on public tastes. It would be no exaggeration to say that “Inostranka” raised a few generations of Russian and Russian-speaking readers. At the same time, we should clearly understand the dependence of publications on the political situation prevailing in the country. The reason a totalitarian regime is totalitarian is that it keeps everything under its control. If a magazine had allowed itself an untimely publication, then the senior comrades responsible would have simply not let it through. As we well know, antagonism on an ideological basis often ended in the replacement of editors and even the closure of literary and art magazines. The wisdom of “Inostranka” was that it never pursued aggravation, but month after month, year after year enlightened its readership, convincing it of the priority of common human values over proletarian ones.

1990 was a special year in the history of the country, state and people. It was not just that everyone could sense the impending collapse of a great country. At the same time, everyone could sense a low point in the depressive mood. This total depression was matched by an equally total incomprehension of the reasons. Political scientists of all persuasions tried to prove themselves smart and guide the people, rationally explaining why things had not worked out yet again in history. This was of little interest to the people for the simple reason that they were suffering. They had suffered before the revolution, they had suffered during the revolution, civil war, repressions, World War Two, after the war and were still suffering. The short period when the people had the opportunity to catch their breath was then labelled the stagnation period. Whilst the period that started with the name of perestroika (reconstruction) sent the country hurtling to destruction.

In those conditions, the country and people divided into two irreconcilable camps. One of them, maybe provisionally but quite traditionally, was dubbed the camp of patriots, whilst the other just as provisionally and traditionally was dubbed pro-Western. If members of the former camp accused their enemies of all mortal sins, of envy, of selling retail and wholesale, of undermining the foundations, hating and scheming, then the latter were convinced of the need to reject all that was their own and start humbly learning from the West, since the people there, so to speak, had always lived like human beings, whereas we, in a sense, had always lived inhumanly. In this period of ultimate exacerbation of social relations, the publication of John Le Carré’s novel “Russia House” made a powerful impression. The Russian publication of the novel fundamentally discredited the existing system. Clearly, the artistic, aesthetic and educational role of the Russian translation took a back seat at the time. It was the sociopolitical and historical-cultural value of the publication that acquired incredible relevance.

2. Analysis

Assessments of the novel, its ideology and artistic significance as well as of the need for the Russian translation, or lack of it, may vary widely. In our view, both the novel itself and the need for a translation into Russian specifically in 1990 are ambiguous. The ambiguity of the novel is manifested first of all in the fact that Le Carré, seeking to provide an unbiased depiction of a world that is alien to him, does not shed any of his Western snobbery in the slightest. The novel is logocentric in the extreme. The hero of the novel is not Soviet reality on the eve of the country's collapse, but a Western person with his judgments. As to the judgments themselves, they seem to be structured on a scale humanity/inhumanity, whilst in actual fact the model of West/East antagonism is relevant. Let us look at some examples.

"A handful of the small *nomenclatura* of the Soviet cultural bureaucracy was gathering under the chandelier, the ladies in their beehive hairstyles and flowered frocks designed for slenderer frames, the gentlemen slimmed by the shiny French-tailored suits that signified access to the special clothing stores. Only their British hosts, in despondent shades of grey, observed the monotone of socialist austerity" (Le Carre, 2006).

This is not simply derogatory, Le Carré reveals spite. He has no mercy for either women or men. At the same time, the writer demonstrates and even vaunts his knowledge of routine Soviet life and the nuances of social relations.

Le Carré's retention of the Russian word "nomenclatura" and his use of italics for it needs to be interpreted. Italics have a double meaning in this case. They indicate that the word is exotic and at the same time convey derision.

The Russian expression "sredney ruki" (middling) is established and stylistically quite decent. It does not convey derision. The English original uses the adjective "small" with the potentially abased "nomenclatura" in this context. The point is that the word "nomenclatura" in Soviet society was pronounced in a respectful whisper, since it meant a multitude of privileges of which ordinary citizens were deprived. In other words, this term was stylistically embellished, it was characterized by a peculiar exaltation. Thus, by using the word "small" Le Carré creates an oxymoron, which is hardly perceived by a Western reader without the background knowledge. A comment is needed with serious historical and cultural interpretation. At the same time, a rather comic picture is formed, although only if the background information is present. The "small nomenclatura", which aspires to look just like, one assumes, the big nomenclatura, is ruthlessly ridiculed by the Western narrator who maliciously depicts even the bodies and the clothes they have been squeezed into.

In the original: "Incompetence, I suppose. They're no good at it. The Russkies. They're duff.' 'Duff at what?' 'The rockets. They make errors.' 'What sort of errors?' 'All sorts. Magnetic errors. Bias errors, whatever those are. I don't know. That's your job, isn't it?'" (Le Carre, 2006).

The text is generally read literally, but at the same time it has quite a significant subtext.

The key concept of the discourse is the term "incompetence". From the historical and cultural viewpoint, this is a terrible term—a Western person cannot grasp it or get their Western head around it. It is important to understand that the concept of "specialisation" is associated with a limited field of activity and the need to gain maximum capacity within this narrow field. Hence, "incompetence" is something terrifying, lethal, which may cause the degradation of both the individual human being and society. From the very beginning, Le Carré introduces this concept specifically to differentiate the Russians: incompetence.

The second sentence also has a discursive significance that requires no interpretation. The Russians are incompetent, they are "no good", they are "duff".

The attitude to the errors is also characteristic. A Western person is renowned for analytical thinking. It is not enough for him to hear that Russians are no good. He wants to know what errors they make in order to identify the way that Russian thought works. The answer is extremely typical too: "All sorts." The subtext is as follows: 'You want to know what errors the Russians make in order to have an understanding of them. It is impossible to get an understanding of the Russians as they make every sort of error imaginable'. Thus, the incompetence becomes the total quality.

In the original: "At lunchtime after shopping she would trade the tickets with the porter Morozov who had pledged her twenty-four bars of imported soap wrapped in decorative paper. With the fancy soap she would buy the bolt of green check cloth of pure wool that the manager of the clothing shop was keeping locked in his storeroom for her. Katya resolutely refused to wonder why. This afternoon after the Hungarian reception she would hand the cloth to Olga Stanislavsky who, in return for favours to be negotiated, would make two cowboy shirts on the East German sewing machine she had recently traded for her ancient family Singer, one for each

twin in time for their birthday. And there might even be enough cloth left over to squeeze them both a private check-up from the dentist” (Le Carre, 2006).

Certainly, Le Carré exaggerates the situation, but we all know it well. Indeed, we were always getting hold of things somewhere and swapping them. Only this extract is given, as it’s a good example of the whole. However, mockery of daily life is scattered throughout the novel.

And other highly typical text for the novel. In the original: “The ladies went on haranguing each other. Katya stared at them with no expression on her face. Suddenly to Barley’s astonishment she drew out her red pass and snarled—there was no other word for it—with the result that one of them detached herself from her companions long enough to yank two cups from a rack and slap them viciously on two saucers as if she were breech-loading an old rifle. Still furious, she filled a huge kettle. And having with further signs of rage unearthed a modern box of matches, she turned up a gas ring and dumped the kettle on it before returning to her comrades” (Le Carre, 2006).

The details of Soviet, or more specifically Russian, daily life are depicted with fantastic accuracy. Yes, rudeness characterized the entire service industry of the whole country, not only in Russia. It is important to understand something else. Throughout the years of the Soviet regime, there was a need to visit Moscow, the centre. At the same time, everyone encountered the sheer churlishness of the Muscovites. It wasn’t the done thing to talk about it and certainly not to write about it. It is not clear how often Le Carré faced Russian churlishness, but he paints a typical picture. This typical picture had its reasons, which were of course economic. In the Soviet years rudeness in the service industry was universal, but in the Caucasus it was slightly alleviated by the local hospitality and traditions.

The moral undertone of the novel makes the hero distance himself from the Americans too, as Americans are also associated with coarseness and barbarity: “He asked if you were American. You said. “No, thank God, British.” (Le Carre, 2006).

The realities of the new age. “In Russia we may go exactly where our fancy takes us, provided we do not trespass into the estates of our millionaires or government officials” (1, 317). As though in America people cannot go where they like for fear they might encroach on private property. The point is to note the presence of private property in the Soviet Union.

Le Carré does not forget to nod in the direction of high-ranking people such as Katya. After all, he is a true democrat and, as noted above, more of a hippy than a yuppy. So he doesn’t fully embrace bourgeois morality, though he does say that in the Soviet Union people dress to meet bourgeois demands. Boris Pasternak once wrote that under the influence of the socialist revolution in Russia even the children of rich Americans had become more humane; they realised that in a decent society their parents’ money should not earn them respect. Le Carré puts in the mouth of his not very realistic heroine a very real monologue about humanism.

“But as she listened to the different voices clamouring for her soul—Deutsche Welle, Voice of America, Radio Liberty, Voice of Israel, Voice of God knew whom, each one so cosy, so superior, so compelling—an angry confusion came over her. I’m a Russian! She wanted to shout back at them. Even in tragedy, I dream of a better world than yours!” (Le Carre, 2006).

This type of text can serve several purposes. Le Carré might give his heroine such a passionate monologue with one aim in mind: to show that Katya is not a traitor but a patriot of her Motherland. She is working for the West through conviction.

The second purpose is connected to the Russian soul. Le Carré had heard a lot about the Russian soul and its age-old desires. Since Katya, despite her cooperation with English intelligence, is still a patriot, this should be seen above all in her embrace of the Russian idea. First, the collapse of the country is still a tragedy for her. Second, even during the culmination of the tragedy, she dreams of a world better than yours. Third, she is proud to be Russian. Fourth, her dreams of a better world, according to Le Carré, are directly linked with her being Russian. In other words, her dreams are better because she is Russian. It is not clear if Le Carré is being ironic or if he really does believe his own knowledge of the Russian soul.

It is also not clear whether the English author is being ironic or displaying his thorough knowledge of Russia when he says: “We are not alcoholics like you Westerners. We do not drink without food.” (Le Carre, 2006).

“When will they start repressing us again to make us comfortable? If our past’s a lie, who’s to say our future isn’t a lie as well?” (Le Carre, 2006).

This text is also ambiguous both from the artistic and historico-cultural points of view. In the artistic respect, it is

too hackneyed and discursive. The idea presented here did the rounds endlessly before the revolution too. All the Russian thinkers from Chaadayev have insisted that Russia is a country of slaves. The Bolsheviks accused the 1860s generation of Russian democrats of lying. The rejection of the 1860s democrats was largely linked to the attitude towards the intelligentsia as essentially weak and deceitful. In other words, a member of the intelligentsia could not but lie. A member of the intelligentsia was considered to be a worker who used his mind. If an ordinary worker sells his physical strength, a member of the intelligentsia sells his mind and knowledge, thereby putting his intellect at the service of capitalism. Later, after the revolution, many contemptuous epithets emerged, the most widespread of which was “lousy egghead”.

At the same time, of course, no-one stopped to think that it was amongst the intelligentsia that ideas that shook the state foundations were always born. Marx and Engels were members of the intelligentsia. So were Lenin and those of his ilk. Even the SR terrorists were from the intelligentsia.

As for the direct link between social comfort and a strong state, this idea is not new. It is also of Western origin, although for some reason it is accepted in Russia to think that the Russian people like to be subordinate to a strong power. In this regard, it is usually said that serfdom was abolished in Russia only recently. Trading in human beings was commonplace in Russia 150 years ago. When the October revolution happened, just half a century had passed since the abolition of serfdom.

The Bolsheviks convinced the people that they had always been deceived. An anti-Bolshevik discourse emerged in parallel. In other words, the same lousy eggheads accused the Bolsheviks of deceiving the people and not wanting to build a new society where those who were last would be first.

Finally, the people believed that they were always being cheated by everyone. For Russia the situation is aggravated by the people's cherished belief in the subversive actions of foreigners. As for the government, it is either made up of Jews or has sold out to the Jews. A slogan current at all times in Russia is “Beat the Yids, save Russia”. Today the Internet is peppered with revelations about cheating and Russia-wide betrayal. Russian TV has a strand “Russia-Wide Cheating”. Its programmes cover a wide range, from unmasking government officials to the sale of sausages made of soya.

The discourse of lies in Russia is topical today too. No-one believes in the transparency of elections, no-one believes in the sincerity of deputies to the State Duma, no-one believes anything at all. So it is very easy for a Russian reader to believe an English author when he says that the Russian future is also less than honest. Le Carré tortures his readers with Russian fears, while the translators torture the Russian reader with the thought that the future holds nothing good for them either.

The original: “He had put on such a skin of English silliness.” (Le Carre, 2006).

The translation reads: Он облачился в такую шкуру английской чудаковатости» (Le Carre, 1990).

or to translate it back, “He had put on such a skin of English eccentricity.”

The original uses the word “silliness”, which is rendered in Russian by the words “glupost” or “slaboumiye”. The translators, maybe from a sense of delicacy, use the word “chudakovatost”, meaning oddness, strangeness or eccentricity.

Le Carré might well be making use of European associations when he talks about English silliness. However, we cannot make use of the background information. We know the English as snobs, prim, arrogant and so on, but we don't know them as stupid. For example, in Eastern Europe Germans are considered hidebound, as that makes it easier to justify one's own lack of organisation.

The divergence between the translation and the original is wholly a matter of preconceptions. For example, standard Russian preconceptions of Englishmen date to the end of the 18th century and are linked with the image of Onegin, who was eccentric in the English manner, reticent, depressed, closed off from those around him. So, clearly, a specific preconception can be understood by English silliness. It is quite possible that this preconception itself shapes not only the world view of Europeans, but the English mentality too. They are well aware of it and use it to good effect.

The original: “They have not stolen her children, ransacked her flat, thrown Matvey in the madhouse or displayed any of the delicacy traditionally reserved for Russian ladies playing courier to Soviet defence physicists who have decided to entrust their nation's secrets to a derelict Western publisher.” (Le Carre, 2006).

The relationship is again expressed discursively. The picture is not drawn, it is created verbally. The author indulges in some irony—“displayed any of the delicacy traditionally reserved” etc.

There is more to come. The discursive inflation of expressions gathers force: ““Barley, pay attention to me!

Communism is not a threat! It's a parasite industry that lives off the mistakes of all you stupid assholes in the West!" (Le Carre, 2006).

This introduces a new concept—"parasite". Until this time not a single line had been written about this quality of communism. It was called every name under the sun but since there was nothing good, there was no need to say that the Russians could master anything at all. We may remember that it was said once that in any contact with the West Russia gains more than it loses. A cognitive criterion "parasitism/parasite" drives a wooden stake into the grave of Russian communism.

However, these arguments could also have a historico-cultural undertone, touched upon in one way or another and for a different reason in Le Carré's novel. For example, one of the passages about physicist Popov says that Russians have a fixed idea about the superiority of their inventions. There is also background information here too, but this time of Western origin. The West has always thought that Russians steal everything—they steal ideas, they steal models, designs etc. Their rockets are developed from the ideas of Western rocket engineers. Their cars are slightly reworked Mercedes. Their pistols and assault rifles are German weapons. They learnt to produce revolvers and Mausers but they had never had their own. True, there was the Kalashnikov assault rifle but who knows what the basis of its design was. So the argument about antecedence continues throughout the novel, but here acquires a deep ideological basis. It is claimed that it is communism that is a parasitical form of social organization; consequently, the country's misfortunes are not caused by the Russian mentality or the mythical Russian soul but by communism.

A historico-cultural briefing paper might want to make clear that communism was not actually achieved in Russia. At best we can talk about socialism, which was also pretty relative, at least after Stalin.

By communism Le Carré might understand not the social system, nor the economic structure but simple communalization. This was an old bogey for the West, which was convinced that even wives in Russia were common property. It was this social system when everything is taken from you, and all your personal achievements become public achievements, that really frightened and frightens people. The Soviet Union did not have the socialism that Marx talked about. Suffice it to remember that Marxist socialism did not differ at all from capitalism; rather it was its offspring, according to the founding father of scientific communism. The only difference was that the capitalist could not appropriate added value. In other words, according to Marx, under socialism a capitalist cannot rob a worker.

Le Carré talks about one-party socialism as though he supported it: "One-party Socialism is a disaster, Barley. It has broken our hearts. Keep your British variety. You will publish my new novel?" (Le Carre, 2006).

Here we encounter the latest ideas about Russian socialism. The one-party system was one of the theories that explained the socialist fiasco. It was an entirely logical explanation. A one-party system lacks a healthy opposition. If there is just one party, then basically it doesn't exist. It defends the interests of all the people and, consequently, destroys itself.

As for the British variety, this is much more complicated. He is talking not about socialism, but about civil society. The idea of civil society correlates with the idea of socialism, but with a very major difference. In civil society one voluntarily gives up benefits for the common good, for the flourishing of society. Therefore, civil society requires civil consciousness. "Freedom" is the most important cognitive criterion of civil society, as free citizens make a free choice in favour of public welfare.

Socialism was an example of a totalitarian state, as citizens do not make a free choice but are subordinate to the authorities. The punitive law-enforcement apparatus strictly controls the behaviour of citizens.

The British variety is a very serious signal, behind which lies a mass of background information. All the history of England is the history of freedom and the immunity of the individual, and also the history of civil society, i.e. a society of conscious citizens who build this kind of state.

The history of Russian socialism turned out to be the history of totalitarianism. This is why the hero of the novel prefers the British variety of the development of social consciousness.

The following example can be taken as humorous, aimed at raising a smile, but also has a very serious background. "I am sure you are very brave, like all English." (Le Carre, 2006).

Historically, the Russian subconscious has imitated Europeans. "Enlightenment" and "education" were of course amongst the most important cognitive criteria for the concept of "Europeans". There is no doubt about the importance of these criteria. Russians, since Peter the Great, have strived to be as enlightened and educated as Europeans. But at the same time Europeans have served as an example of human daring in claiming the world

around them. The ancients said that the inhabitants of islands are usually sailors. This is an important psychological style of behaviour as a whole for the English. The words of the anthem "Rule, Britannia, Britannia rules the waves!" are no surprise. These ideas about the English are still spread today in Russian schools (Rudnev, 2001).

It is not surprising either that England created several Englands around the world: North America, or as it was known, New England, Australia and New Zealand. Only a nation of brave and enterprising people could claim the world in this way. Therefore, the English really are fearless; fearlessness can be considered a national characteristic of the English. Though it cannot be ruled out that this excerpt has its fair share of humour.

"We are talking after all of torture, of the foulest methods, and registers of agony from which even the return is unimaginable hell. The Russians might be improving their image, but nobody seriously supposed that they were going to abandon overnight methods that had stood them in good stead for thousands of years." (Le Carre, 2006).

Le Carré moves from criticism of the Russian mentality to accusations of total inhumanity against communism. In other words, either Russians or communism are to blame for all the ills of humanity. This excerpt again concerns Russian norms. The factor of thousands of years is introduced this time too. Thousands of years, not just one thousand. So for thousands of years Russians fought dirty but these methods stood them in good stead.

Every statement expands its idea in several directions. It is open to interpretation. Indeed, Russians are unlikely to give up methods which have been so useful for them over millennia. The usefulness of this country is directly linked with "unimaginable hell". Le Carré dots the i's, as it were, stripping his readers of their last illusions. The romance with Katya, for whom Barley stays in Russia, also loses any point. Of course, the future of this country will be false too. And Russia will not give up the foulest methods that have stood it in such good stead over thousands of years. East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet. The West does not accept the East.

"And Barley—as he had told Henziger and Wicklow at dinner—had never met a Russian yet who could give his solemn word and walk away from it. He was not talking of politics, of course—just business." (Le Carre, 2006).

Such minor compliments do not change the whole. The novel presents the basic position of the West towards Russia. The moral conclusion is clear: "It's better not to deal with the Russians and to kick them in the balls twenty-four hours a day" as one of Le Carré's characters says.

In conclusion, a tragi-comic phrase about the notorious Russian bureaucracy as though there was none in the West. "But something inside the mountainous bureaucratic Russian belly would heave and give birth to a mouse of compassion." (Le Carre, 2006).

In this context, though we might not like it, the concept of "bureaucracy" acquires majesty. Bureaucracy, it turns out, is the powers that be, so the superficial allusion to the usual form of the saying "a mountain gave birth to a mouse" doesn't work here. The mountain of bureaucracy does not give birth to a mouse. It's simply of no interest to it. It is not cruel, it's indifferent, it doesn't notice you.

3. Conclusion

This analysis reveals very clearly the totality of the negative connotations in John Le Carré's novel "The Russia House". It is also important to note the difference between the Russian name for the novel and the original. In translation the novel is called "The Russian Department" while in the original it is the "The Russia House" or even "The House Called Russia"

Le Carré seeks to create a fundamental work of fiction about Russia, to include the national mentality and norms and history and culture, past and present. Russia comes across as a self-contained, self-sufficient and independent world. That is why the English name is very exact and expressive. It talks about Russia as a separate house, inhabited by strange people, unlike anyone else.

The West's dislike of Russia is the main theme of the novel. It is multi-layered as it is expressed at very different levels of content. We are dealing with a work of literature, in which the depiction of reality is not restricted at all. The ideal literary text should be appropriately superimposed upon depicted reality. The content of the novel covers a broad spectrum of Russian life from the domestic living conditions of ordinary Soviet citizens to the life of the elite, from the smell of Russian petrol to the scent of the perfumes worn by Soviet women, from members of the intelligentsia to waitresses in restaurants. In this novel the English writer is a writer of daily life and a writer of human character.

There's a huge number of similar examples throughout the novel. They show that the historico-cultural content of the novel is much deeper than its political undertone. Its publication in 1990 in "Inostranke" was strategically

important both for the journal and for the so-called democratic forces.

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