1 Introduction

Translation and interpreting have been objects of research for a very long time. Over that time, Translation Studies has developed into a discipline investigating translation as a situated practice (e.g. Risku 2010), as a cultural-political practice (e.g. Venuti 1995), or as a socially regulated activity (e.g. Wolf and Fukari 2007). Earlier theories developed in the 1960s/1970s which defined translation as an “interlinguistic transfer procedure” (Delisle, Lee-Jahnke, and Cormier 1999, 188) hardly reflected on the role of the translator beyond that of an invisible transcoder of meanings. More recent theories focus on translators as visible and engaged interventionists and as responsible social agents in the translational field, respectively. Perceptions of the role of translators are therefore different depending on the theoretical approach and the conceptualization of translation informing them. Role perceptions are closely linked to aspects of professionalism and to ethics. In this chapter, we will illustrate how the ethics of the translator’s role was conceived in socialist or socialist-informed theories of translation, focusing mainly on scholarly publications from Eastern Europe from the founding of the Soviet state in 1917 to the end of the Cold War around 1990, in particular, from the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic. After contextualizing socialist translation theories in their historical and political contexts, we will provide a brief overview of the emergence of a socialist translation ethics. The next section will discuss some core issues and topics, in particular, Marxism/Leninism as the basis of translation theory, the ethical profile of a socialist translator/interpreter, and the consequences of this particular view of translation ethics for translator training and translation practice. It will conclude with a reflection on some new, emerging issues and their implications for the discipline of Translation Studies.

2 Researching socialist translation ethics

In order to fully understand what role ethics played in socialist translation theories, these theories need to be contextualized in their historical and political environment. In the Soviet Union, translation assumed a very visible place in cultural politics shortly after the October Revolution, with the first theoretical writings on translation appearing already in 1919.
Ethics in socialist translation theories

(Chukovskii and Gumilev 1919) and continuing throughout the Soviet period. Those theories were shaped by a political system that was increasingly centralized and top-down and that saw translation as an important component of the regime’s domestic and foreign policy. That centralization is evident in the promotion of Socialist Realism as the dominant approach in all fields of Soviet culture and in the establishment in 1934 of the Soviet Union of Writers, in which translators were full members from the very beginning.

In Soviet culture, translation was seen as a symbol of communist internationalism and as a vehicle of soft diplomacy. It also had a role to play internally, fostering cultural understanding among the various Soviet peoples and supporting state-sponsored efforts to promote literacy. The importance of translation was reflected in an enormous investment of capital and labour, beginning in 1918 with the founding of the publishing house World Literature, dedicated to producing high-quality translations of the great works of world literature for Soviet readers. The ambitious publishing goals set by World Literature, however, faced an immediate problem: where to find a sufficient number of translators to achieve their goals and how to turn people with the necessary language proficiency into professional translators. And so, the founder of World Literature, the writer Maxim Gorky, instructed the translator Kornei Chukovsky “to provide professional development to these ‘gray masses,’ to raise their literary and intellectual level and to instil in them a heightened sense of responsibility” (Chukovskii 1967, 137).

This led to the creation of what is perhaps the first modern work of translation theory, Принципы художественного перевода [Principles of Literary Translation] (1919), co-authored by Chukovsky and the poet Lev Gumilev. (An expanded edition appeared in 1920, with a third co-author, Fiodor Batiushkov, who wrote about the translation of drama and introduced the term адекватность, or “complete correspondence.”) Therefore, before any explicit discussion of ethics, let alone the formulation of a code of ethics, there were attempts to “professionalize” the work of translators and articulate a notion of the translator’s rights and responsibilities. In Principles, Chukovsky argues that translators should only accept to translate the work of authors with whom they are stylistically compatible. At the same time, Chukovsky describes the task of the translator as highly creative, and places the translator on an equal footing with the source text author, presenting the translator as the “co-creator of the artistic work of the author he is translating” (Chukovskii 1919, 7).

Granting such creative freedom to the translator would become increasingly suspect as Stalin consolidated power toward the end of the 1920s and attempted to control artistic production through the doctrine of Socialist Realism. And so, in his 1930 Искусство перевода [The Art of Translation], co-authored with Andrei Fedorov, Chukovsky, who was under increasing suspicion from the regime, would rein in his notion of the translator’s creative freedom, making the translator clearly subordinate to the source text author. The translator, Chukovsky writes, must work toward “the diminishing [умаление] of his talent, the reduction of his личност’ [creative personality or identity]” in order to do justice to the source text (Chukovskii 1930, 24). Failure to do so, Chukovsky argues, results in grotesque and politically suspect distortions, which he describes in a chapter provocatively titled “The Translator as Enemy.”

Chukovsky’s single-authored Искусство перевода [The Art of Translation] of 1936 reflected the new orientation in Soviet culture toward domestic policy as consolidated in the notion of “friendship of peoples.” Chukovsky acknowledged this reorientation by focusing more attention on translations of the literatures of the various Soviet peoples and by insisting on the enormous importance of translation in Soviet society: “The question of literary translation in our country, the USSR – is an affair of great state importance in which millions of people have a deep interest” (Chukovskii 1936, 6). Hence, the heavy responsibility that lay on the shoulders of the Soviet translator. Incidentally, the word ethics was not used in Soviet writings on translation; ethical
concerns were typically discussed in relation to the responsibilities of Soviet translators, which were elaborated in terms of guiding principles rather than codes.

Another theoretical school developed in the Stalinist period led by Ivan Kashkin, the popular translator of American literature – the works of Hemingway, in particular. Known as “realist” translation, this theory construed translators’ ethics as fidelity to the underlying reality being portrayed (Kashkin 1954). By placing content firmly above form, this approach avoided the charge of literary formalism, or excessive attention to form and formal experimentation, which was viciously condemned by the regime as a sign of bourgeois individualism. It also tacitly condoned translatorial interventions in order to align a given text with a socialist understanding of reality. At about the same time, Andrei Fedorov (1953) was formulating his ideas regarding the responsibilities of Soviet translators, which he elaborated in a set of four guiding principles: (1) the translator must possess partiinost’, meaning “party spirit” or “partisanship”; (2) the translator must not make any arbitrary additions or omissions; (3) the translation must be truthful; and (4) the poet-translator must pay close attention to the linguistic and stylistic qualities of the original (90). On a more general level, Fedorov characterized the ethical stance of the Soviet translator as one of optimism over the possibility of providing a fully adequate translation of both the form and content of the original, which he contrasted to the pessimism of Western translation theory, with its obsession over untranslatability (24–27).

After the Second World War, two opposing camps developed among scholars theorizing about translation, an opposition that was based largely on whether a scholar’s background was in literature or linguistics. Scholars working in literature emphasized the radical subjectivity of the translator’s task, especially with regard to poetic translation, with Efim Etkind describing translations as “an act of love” and with Samuil Marshak describing every successful verse translation as “a miracle” (see Baer 2016). Scholars in this camp, such as Ilya Sermon, Efim Etkind, and Iurii Levin, were also deeply interested in translation history and highlighted shifting translation paradigms and the contribution of individual translators. Scholars working in linguistics, on the other hand, sought “objective” criteria on which to base the translator’s decision-making, such as regularly occurring stylistic patterns (e.g. Retsker 1963). This linguistics-based approach is described today as the Linguistic Theory of Translation, which remains the dominant theoretical approach in Russia (see Dmitrienko 2015).

Later work by scholars in the linguistics camp, such as Fedorov, Barchudarov, Komissarov, Kolshansky, Sveitser, and others, may also be linked to the effect of Stalin’s 1950 rejection of the linguistic theories of Nikolai Marr, which the leader had previously championed. Marr believed that standard languages were bourgeois and that the languages of the Soviet peoples, through the cooperation and friendship engendered by socialism, would eventually merge and a general Soviet culture would form. The rejection of Marr’s theories marked the theoretical (and political) acceptance that linguistic and cultural differences among nations were likely to endure, as would translation, inaugurating new interest in comparative linguistics and comparative grammar. (See Fedorov’s 1953 Введение в теорию перевода [Introduction to Translation Theory]).

The theories that were developed by Soviet scholars after World War II also had an impact on the development of translation theories and concepts of translation in other socialist countries. In the post–war period until the fall of the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries formed a bloc under the Warsaw Pact that was led by the Soviet Union; this bloc was united by a planned economic system, and Marxism/Leninism was the dominant ideology in all spheres of life. It was argued that this was the epoch of the transition from capitalism to socialism/communism, which was characterized by a class struggle between socialism and imperialism. For translation practice, this meant that the choice of texts and languages was also conditioned by the political situation. The literature of other communist states, along with the classic works of Marx, Engels,
and Lenin, as well as the documents of the various congresses of the communist parties were translated into all the languages of the bloc countries. Publishing houses were nationalized and financed by the state, and censorship was instituted, although it was not officially referred to as such. Translation theory was perceived as embedded in and determined by the communist ideology of Marxism/Leninism in general and by official views on linguistics in particular. Moreover, in the Warsaw Pact countries, Soviet scholarship was influential in guiding the research of scholars, and it was often a requirement to include reviews of literature by Soviet scholars in publications. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), theoretical reflections on translation, which were deeply informed by Soviet translation scholars such as Fedorov, began to be published in the 1960s by scholars such as Otto Kade, Gert Jäger, and Albrecht Neubert. Since they were all working at the University of Leipzig, their theoretical reflections have often been referred to collectively as the “Leipzig School” of Translation Studies, although this was never a uniform approach to translation (see e.g. Schäffner 2003; Wotjak 2000, 2007; Fleischmann 2007).

Although there are similarities in the translation theories developed in Eastern European countries, there are also differences, due to their individual traditions and historical developments (see the entries for Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, and Slovak traditions in the second edition of the Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies (Baker and Saldanha 2009) and the contributions to Translation Theories in the Slavic Countries (Ceccherelli, Costantino, and Diddi 2015). We are not, therefore, treating the East European countries as a monolithic bloc. Moreover, there were significant differences within the confines of the individual states. In respect to the history of Slavic translation research, Costantino (2015) describes it as “including a multiplicity of approaches, local developments and directions in research, some of which developed in isolation, others as a result of joint efforts” (19). The same can be said about Eastern European countries in general. This also means that the label “socialist” theories may not be the most appropriate one. Differences are not only linked to the different approaches to socialism in these countries but also to different developments in the cultural and academic spheres. For example, while literary formalism deeply influenced translation theory in the Soviet Union, Czech and Slovak structuralism, dating back to the first half of the 20th century, informed the development of translation theory in Czechoslovakia, specifically in the work of Jiří Levý in the 1950s/1960s and of Anton Popovič in the 1960s/1970s (see Jettmarová 2015). In Bulgaria, the work of Aleksandar Ljudskanov, who developed a comprehensive semiotic theory of translation and also focused on machine translation, was highly influential. That being said, there were also differences within countries. In Yugoslavia, for example, the Serbs and Croats produced some theoretical reflections on translation (e.g. Sibinović 1979; Bugarski 1981; Ivir 1978) while Slovene reflection on translation was characterized by “the absence of a fully-fledged theory” (Ožbot 2015, 205). Nevertheless, one can trace commonalities across the Eastern European countries in that translation was approached from both a linguistic and a literary perspective. There was also a common interest in a scientific orientation, which led to the adoption of linguistics as the primary framework for translation theory in the 1960s, explicitly reflected, for example, in the label “Translationslinguistik” (literally: translational linguistics) introduced by Jäger (1975).

Until the 1980s, linguistics-oriented translation theories were very much linked to the concept of equivalence. Scholars in several countries agreed that a major task of translation theory was to determine relationships of equivalence between languages and to establish objective criteria as the basis for the translator’s decision-making, which informed both translator training and translational practice. International conferences were organized in Eastern Europe to provide a platform for scholarly exchange, e.g. the conferences “Grundlagen der Übersetzungs-wissenschaft” (Foundations of Translation Theory), which were held every five years at the
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University of Leipzig. Until the 1980s, the majority of participants at these conferences came from Eastern European countries. The focus on equivalence is evident in the theme of the international conference held in Leipzig in 1970: “Invariance and Transferability, Modelling the Translation Process.” A volume of selected papers included contributions by Kolshansky from the Soviet Union, Ljudskanov from Bulgaria, and Filipec and Sgall from Czechoslovakia, all addressing issues of equivalence and seeking to establish systematic relations between languages (Neubert and Kade 1973). Another publication of 1983 (Jäger and Neubert 1983) included selected papers from the international conference “Meaning, Text, and Translation,” which was held in Leipzig in 1981. The proceedings included contributions by Sgall on semantics and pragmatics as two distinct aspects of meaning, and by Ivir from Croatia on the causes of semantic shifts in translation. A joint publication by scholars from Leipzig and Moscow (Jäger and Neubert 1982) was intended to document their fruitful cooperation. The title of this volume was Equivalence in Translation, and it contained contributions from the Soviet scholars Kolshansky, Shveitser, Barchudarov, and Komissarov. The scholarly exchange among the Eastern bloc countries was also reflected in the translation of some key publications. For example, Levy’s 1963 Umění překladu [The Art of Translation] was translated into German Die literarische Übersetzung. Theorie einer Kunstgattung (Levý 1969) into Russian as Искусство перевода (Levyi 1974), and into Serbo-Croatian as Umjetnost prevođenja (Levi 1982). Popovič’s 1975 monograph Theória umeleckého prekladu [Theory of Literary Translation] was translated into Hungarian, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian, and Barkhudarov’s Iazyk i perevod (1975) and Ljudskanov’s Preveždat čovek i mašinata (1968) were translated into German as Sprache und Übersetzung (1979) and Mensch und Maschine als Übersetzer (1972), respectively.

Although equivalence was a key notion during these decades, the development of translation theories was not narrowly based on structural linguistics but included aspects of communication studies (already in Kade 1968), pragmatics, text-linguistics, and semiotics as well. Moreover, some key concepts were defined differently. As Jettmarová (2015, 94) argues, because the Czech tradition was based on the semiotic theory of function, its understanding of translation equivalence was quite different from that outlined in some linguistics-based translation theories in the Soviet Union and the GDR. In equivalence-based theories, a translation had to reflect fidelity to the underlying reality being portrayed, as proposed by Kashkin in 1954 (see earlier). The translator as an actor or an active agent, however, was not yet explicitly addressed or empirically researched in socialist regimes. The translator was seen as subordinate to the source text author. What was expected of a translator, then, was to reproduce the content (message) of the source text faithfully, although in line with the principle of socialist partisanship (discussed later).

Moreover, aspects of translators’ ethics were not explicitly addressed as ethics in the publications of “socialist” scholars produced between 1918 and 1990. Rather, they were implied in reflections on translators’ responsibilities and professional profiles. Some of the core issues and topics which thus relate to ethics will be addressed in the next section.

3 Core issues and topics

While there was much discussion of translators’ “responsibility” in the Soviet Union, no explicit codes of ethics were produced during the Soviet period. Since 1920, all professional organizations in the field of “artistic production” were under the control of the People’s Commissariat for Education, or Narkompros. As for translation, the only regulating body was the Writers’ Union, which had a special section for translators. As full members of the Writers’ Union, Soviet translators were expected to comply with its charter, which basically required that all members advance Socialist Realism, defined as demanding “a true, historically-specific representation
of reality and of its revolutionary development” (Iudin 1934, 26). As Katerina Clark (1981) has noted, the doctrine of Socialist Realism was implemented through exemplars or models rather than through a detailed elaboration of its precepts and characteristics, hence the absence of an explicit code of ethics, along with the assumption that Soviet norms would naturally be ethical.

In addition to the common focus on linguistic and communicative aspects of translation in the 1960s through the early 1980s, Translation Studies scholars in Eastern Europe regularly referred to Marxism/Leninism as the basis for translation theory, although to a different degree in the respective countries. This element was especially strong in publications of the GDR, and the following arguments will therefore focus on the writings of GDR scholars. Their theoretical reflections often dealt with both translation and interpreting as two modes that in German publications were combined under the cover term “Sprachmittlung,” literally, language mediation (e.g. Kade 1980). It was argued that since language mediation fulfills a function in social communication, it is itself a social phenomenon. As a social activity, language mediation is determined by the social forces whose interests it serves. As a consequence, language mediation has a class-based nature; it is a class-bound and ideology-dependent phenomenon of social communication (e.g. Kade 1973, 1977, 1980).

This view of translation was then systematically related to the principle of party spirit or partisanship (Parteilichkeit in German publications). It is this concept of partisanship that most closely relates to ethics, more specifically to the profile of the “socialist language mediator.” The concept of Parteilichkeit denotes a specific political and ideological commitment, attitude, or stance (e.g. Kade 1966; also Fleischmann 2007; Schäffner 2017). For language mediators in socialist countries, this includes an affirmation of the social system. A socialist translator thus serves the interests of his/her people and should rely on a genuinely scientific worldview founded on the precepts of Marxism/Leninism to ensure a proper and successful translation (an argument also put forward by Fedorov 1953, 21). Or in the words of Kade (1980):

Er muß in der Lage sein, die objektiven Bewertungsmaßstäbe, die zum Wesen der marxistisch-leninistischen Parteilichkeit gehören, subjektiv richtig anzuwenden, und dies setzt einen marxistisch-leninistischen Klassenstandpunkt als persönliche Überzeugung, aber auch marxistisch-leninistische Bildung voraus.

[The language mediator must be able to apply in a subjectively correct way the objective criteria of evaluation which belong to the nature of Marxist-Leninist Parteilichkeit, and this presupposes both a Marxist-Leninist class position as personal conviction and Marxist-Leninist education.]

That is, objectivity can only be ensured if a translator assesses the communicative context from the position of the working class, which, according to Marxism/Leninism, was the “correct” one.

Since the theoretical description of language mediation included the view that language mediation reflects class interests, the profession of the language mediator was subsequently seen as a political task (e.g. Jäger 1977, 14). The characteristics of the profile of the socialist language mediator listed later (see Schäffner 2017, 417) have been collated mainly from editorials in academic and professional journals, textbooks (e.g. Jäger and Dalitz 1984; Salvesky 1979), and official documents from the GDR. The socialist language mediator:

- represents his/her socialist country and thus socialism;
- is trained and educated on the basis of the ideals and the policy of socialist society (i.e. on the basis of Marxism-Leninism as the ideology of the working class);
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• has high qualifications, extensive knowledge, and well-developed skills (further specified as knowledge of languages and of the relationships of equivalence between them; knowledge of the scientific basis of translation; knowledge of the two cultures; subject-specific knowledge; technical skills);
• has an excellent professional ethos, i.e. a sense of responsibility, a zeal for work, reliability, honesty, conscientiousness, discretion, modesty, and tactfulness;
• can translate objectively and in line with the historical truth (parteitlich) and act in conformity with the ideology of the Communist Party.

Such views and expectations regarding professional ethics had consequences for translator training in the socialist countries. Translator training as a political task required planning, and like all other activities in the socialist countries, it was subject to five-year economic plans. This planning included where students would be trained, how many to admit, in which languages, the number of teachers needed, and the content of the programmes. In view of the political nature of the task, a very significant admission criterion in the GDR was the social background and the ideological positioning of the students. The same argument was true in the Soviet Union, where “access to the profession required both high professional competence and ideological reliability” (Salmon 2015, 50). In the GDR, applicants from a working-class background had a much higher chance of being accepted than children of the intelligentsia. Close family contacts with the “West” normally made acceptance impossible, and applicants were often asked during aptitude tests whether they would be willing to forgo such contacts in order to demonstrate their political loyalty to the communist system and the state.

Regarding the notion of Parteilichkeit, students often found it difficult to understand what exactly this meant for their actual work. Lecturers too often struggled to explain this concept and its implications for the students. Such conflicts were particularly obvious in respect of ideologically sensitive topics (e.g. the division of Germany, freedom of speech), proper names (e.g. in the official discourse of the GDR, East Berlin was called “Berlin, capital of the GDR”), and labels for specific phenomena (e.g. the Berlin wall was officially called the “state border”). Debates were normally initiated by the students who would ask, for example, “What shall I do in an interpreting situation if a speaker says Soviet Zone instead of GDR; or Berlin wall?” These questions reflected insecurity and fear on the students’ part. In answering, lecturers would normally resort to a simple “translate/interpret in accordance with the source message/source text.” That is, if a speaker says “Berlin wall,” it should be rendered literally so that the other communicative partner can see the ideological position of his/her counterpart and react accordingly, e.g. by pointing out that “wall” is not an appropriate label. Such strategies would be easier to handle in an interpreting context since here the interpreter is a direct communicative participant and so is – along with the source utterance – more visible and active (in contrast to a translator); therefore, they can influence the communicative exchange and the wording (e.g. in negotiations).

Another problematic issue was the requirement that translators and interpreters represent their country and thus socialism. In addition to dealing with ideologically sensitive topics and/or labels, interpreters in particular were openly encouraged to act as political agitators, especially when they were employed as escorts for a visitor or a delegation, where they would have contacts beyond their formal interpreting tasks. It was argued that since foreigners often get their first personal impression of the socialist country through an interpreter, a poorly performing interpreter could cause political and economic damage. It was thus required for an interpreter to demonstrate in any personal communication with foreign visitors that they were a worthy
representative of the socialist state, aligning themselves with (the policy and ideology of) the state and thus using every opportunity to present a realistic image of the respective socialist country. Training manuals also pointed out that if the original message or its intended effect was not compatible with the political-ideological position of the translator/interpreter, they could distance themselves in a suitable way, e.g. with a personal comment, or, as a last resort, by refusing the job (Salevsky 1979, 11). Interestingly, incompatibility of political-ideological positions was assumed only if the speaker was not from a socialist country. Such discussions about the ideological stance and responsibility of translators and interpreters, however, were not normally related directly to the notion of ethics.

Ethical aspects of translation and interpreting were also relevant to professional associations in socialist countries. In the GDR, for example, the Vereinigung der Sprachmittler (VdS), literally Association of Language Mediators, was established as an independent association in 1971, but was still affiliated with the Association of Journalists (Vereinigung der Journalisten, VdJ); it had been the Interpreters and Translators section within the VdJ from 1962 till 1971. Such professional associations would organize regular meetings of their members, normally on a regional basis. These meetings served the purpose of providing professional development (e.g. information on terminology, new research) as well as ideological education (e.g. discussions of targets to support the advancement of socialist society). Although the development of a socialist professional ethos (sozialistisches Berufsethos, e.g. Misslitz and Noffke 1979, 5) was included in the tasks of the VdS, ethics was not explicitly addressed; it was rather implied in the notion of the socialist profile of the translator/interpreter. The political role of the VdS was explicitly expressed in the formulation of its aims and tasks in its 1986 bylaws:


(VdS 1986, 2)

[Its main task is the political-ideological and subject-specific further education of its members. It organises the political and subject-specific exchange of experience and vigorously promotes close interaction between the theory and practice of language mediation. It helps language mediators to recognize the current problems in the further shaping of the advanced socialist society in the GDR and to contribute to their resolution.]

Other examples of declarations of an explicit political nature can be found in the editorials of the journal Fremdsprachen, the journal for translators and interpreters. These editorials stressed the political role of translators in the GDR and expressed their full support for the Communist Party. One example of such an editorial, written before the XIth Congress of the Communist Party of East Germany (the SED, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Socialist Unity Party of Germany), should suffice:


(Fremdsprachen 2/1985, 76)
[The language mediators of our country support peace and progress. Through good work they will strengthen our republic further and thus make an honourable contribution to the preparations for the XIth party congress of the SED to be held in April 1986.]

The professional organizations of the socialist countries had close contacts and organized joint training sessions and workshops (see e.g. Salevsky and Schmitz 1986). For example, the Bulgarian Translators’ Union organized annual meetings of Bulgarian and Soviet translators. The VdS became a full member of the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT) in 1981, and had a representative elected to the FIT Council in 1984. In reports on the FIT world congresses in the GDR’s professional journals, it was pointed out that all recommendations put forward by FIT had already become a reality in the GDR (e.g. Schubert 1984). Professional associations of other socialist countries were also members of FIT before the political changes that took place around 1990. For example, the Yugoslav Society of Translators’ Associations had become a member of FIT in 1961. Some of these national associations had also started as sections of their respective Writers’ Union (e.g. in Poland, Romania, Hungary). Representatives of socialist countries played a significant role in FIT. For example, the Bulgarian translation scholar Anna Lilova was elected FIT president in 1979 (and served in this role until 1990), and FIT’s journal Babel was published in Budapest (Hungary) from 1977 to 1988 with György Rádó serving as editor in chief for 14 years in the 1970s/1980s. To what extent translation associations from socialist countries influenced the themes and the programme of FIT’s World Congresses (e.g. the theme “Translators and Their Position in Society” of the 10th Congress held in Vienna in 1984), and to what extent their membership in FIT influenced debates on professional ethics in the socialist countries themselves, remains to be investigated. An interesting case study would be Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Translators’ Union (BTU) was founded in 1974 and had translated FIT’s Translator’s Charter into Bulgarian already in 1976. Anna Lilova, in her role as FIT president, was a great asset to BTU. She was also the wife of the second highest-ranking official in the Bulgarian Communist Party, which gave her access to resources (material and personnel) that were not readily available to individual translators. The political changes of the late 1980s led to the establishment in January of 1990 of BTU’s Club for Democracy as a generator of ideas and initiatives to accelerate democratic change in the association. In April of 1990, the BTU General Assembly endorsed and introduced amendments to BTU’s statutes in line with the changes taking place in the country. However, in 2003, the BTU discontinued its membership in FIT due to a lack of financial resources, although its full membership was restored in 2009.

4 New debates and emerging issues

Explicit discussion of ethics began only after the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of its regulatory bodies, resulting in the relative autonomy of various professional fields, translation and interpreting among them. We will address the first initiatives to develop codes of ethics, with a particular focus on Russia, and then some theoretical and evaluative reflections on ethics in socialist translation theories.

With the fall of the Soviet system of centralized planning, most translators were no longer state employees; they were now independent professionals who had to find their way in a newly unregulated market economy. This resulted in a shift in translation and interpreting discourse from translation to translators. This shift is evident when one compares two influential Russian translation manuals: one by Komissarov (1990) and the other by Alekseeva (2004). While the former discusses only norms of translation, the latter includes a chapter on translator ethics and the norms of professional conduct (2004, 39). Moreover, translator ethics appears to be a topic
of increasing interest among students, translation scholars, as well as for other players in the field (see Khamatova 2011; Parshina 2017; Elin and Kostina 2013).

Unlike the Soviet Union, contemporary Russia does not ban professional associations, and the associations that have emerged appear to follow the example of Western associations and have sought to integrate themselves into the global translation community. The Union of Russian Translators was founded in 1991 and became a full member of FIT in 1993 (Alekseeva 2004, 41). The Union of Russian Translators does not, however, have a monopoly on translator ethics. A collaborative project launched by various translation agencies and freelance translators in Russia and Kazakhstan resulted in *The Ethical Code of Translators* (http://translation-ethics.ru/code/). The purpose of which is to define the norms and rules of behaviour for members of the translation community (or, more broadly, participants in the translation market) while performing professional activities, founded on moral–ethical values and professional standards. Failure to observe these ethical principles can serve as the basis for the moral censure of violators.

The professional principles elaborated in the code are similar to those in other professional organizations:

work within the limits of your competence; do not accept conditions that do not allow you to complete the commission in the necessary way; objectivity and independence; conscientiousness; respect copyright; avoid conflicts of interest; international practice and legislation of the Russian Federation; the right of refusal; professional development; and confidentiality.

Finally, different translation agencies or local associations of translators have developed their own codes of ethics and professional conduct.

As with the former Soviet Republics, the former socialist bloc countries adapted their professional associations and codes to the new political and economic circumstances and/or established new associations, e.g. in Romania, the Professional Union of Interpreters and Translators was founded in 1990. For the GDR, German unification meant that the VdS initially continued under the new name *Verband der Dolmetscher und Übersetzer e.V.* (Association of Interpreters and Translators) which, however, was dissolved in 2017. Its members were offered easier access to the *Bundesverband der Dolmetscher und Übersetzer* (BDÜ), the professional association of West Germany, which had been in existence since 1955. Some of the former GDR translators and interpreters made use of this offer or joined other professional associations in Germany. For those who did join the BDÜ, its Code of Professional Conduct became their point of reference. The code (*Berufs- und Ehrenordnung*) focuses on quality and interpersonal relations but is free from any overt ideological requirements such as acting on the basis of a specific ideology.

Regarding theoretical reflections and critical evaluation of the notion of ethics in socialist translation theories, however, there is a marked dearth of publications. It may be that, especially in the 1990s, scholars in Eastern Europe were busy catching up with the latest research now that the fall of the Iron Curtain had given them access to both the literature produced in “the West” and to the international academic community. It could also be that they wanted to distance themselves from “old” ideology-laden theories. Whatever the reasons may be, a critical engagement with theoretical reflections, specific (definitions of) concepts, or avoidance of concepts in socialist countries would contribute to our understanding of the development of Translation Studies worldwide. One example of such critical reflection is Fleischmann’s engagement with...
the notion of Parteilichkeit in the “Leipzig School.” As Fleischmann argues, making partisanship a constitutive feature of GDR translation studies and an object of research illustrates how closely a wider scholarly perspective was linked to a doctrinaire way of thinking (Fleischmann 2007, 101). More research into translation policies in the former socialist countries (also going beyond Europe to include, for example, Cuba and China) could also enhance our understanding of socialist ethics. One example is Thomson-Wohlgemuth (2009) who, from a wider socio-political perspective, illustrates the effects of ideology on the translation of children’s literature in the GDR.

In addition to retrospective conceptual or theoretical research, more concrete empirical research is needed to provide a clearer understanding of the actual working conditions of all translators and interpreters and their status (for some initial work on the GDR, see Berg 2012, and specifically for literary translators in the GDR, see Kerstner and Risku 2014; on literary translators in Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia, see Sherry 2015 and Kamovnikova 2019). It would be interesting to find out more about their cooperation with editors and literary agents, or, in the case of non-literary translators, about their interaction with other translators, revisers, and clients in their respective contexts (e.g. in the state-owned translation companies or translation departments of companies). How did they reflect on their role and their professional ethics? Did the requirement for an ideological commitment indeed impact the actual practice? Did translators behave in line with the imposed ideology? With respect to the Soviet Union, Salmon (2015, 33) argues, “all translators considered their job to be a ‘national contribution,’ a matter of social involvement.” But is this really true? Was Marxism/Leninism really their own personal conviction? Or did they submit more or less voluntarily to the imposed ideology? More research is therefore required to determine the actual motivations for the shifts identified in translations that aligned them with the dominant ideology. Were they the result of a translator’s commitment to the communist ideology, or rather an act of self-censorship or censorship by editors or other authorities (these options are also addressed in Pokorn 2012 in respect to the translation of children’s literature in the countries of the former Yugoslavia)?

Additional questions for future research might include: was there scope for resistance and for subversive or dissident translation and/or interpreting? Did this happen? Did dissent or oppositional groups of translators exist and what did they think of their professional ethics? Was subversive and non-normative behaviour a form of empowerment? Other interesting material for a translation history focusing on ethics could be gathered by researching the changes in the translation policies and practices and in the status of translators after the end of the Cold War (see e.g. Pokorn 2012 for post-communist Slovenia). This could be done by conducting archival research and by carrying out interviews with professional translators and interpreters and with trainers and scholars who have first-hand experience of these periods. Kamovnikova (2019) is a good example of such scholarship; her monograph, based on numerous interviews with Soviet translators and editors, sheds important light on how individual translators under communism negotiated their professional ethics, often on a case-by-case basis.

There is also work to be done in documenting the ethical positioning of translators and interpreters in socialist states by analyzing the many autobiographies of translators and interpreters from the Soviet and Soviet bloc countries that were published after the fall of the Soviet Union, as well as the documentary films that have emerged more recently, such as Vadim Jendreyko’s film Die Frau mit den 5 Elefanten [The Woman with Five Elephants] (2009) about the German translator Svetlana Geier and Oleg Dorman’s Postrochnik [The Interlinear Trot] (2009) about the Soviet translator Lilianna Lungina (see Baer 2018).
5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have illustrated how the development of translation theories is shaped by political and ideological factors. This had consequences for the understanding of professional ethics as the role of socialist translators was presented as a political task that was expected to serve the interests of the working class and the socialist state. We also illustrated how such perceptions influenced translator training and the work of professional associations. We noted, however, that reflections on ethics (as part of socialist translation theories, or in publications of professional associations, or in statements by individual translators) are more complex and more diverse than one might expect. In both the theoretical literature and professional practice in the GDR, for example, the focus on the translator’s ideological commitment seems to have been much stronger than in other socialist countries. Other countries (notably Yugoslavia but also Hungary and Bulgaria) had a much more open attitude toward the Western world. A major reason for the higher degree of ideologization in the GDR may be seen in the history of the country (i.e. the division of Germany after the Second World War) and its geographic location, sharing a border with West Germany. It may well be that these political factors were more important for incorporating the issue of partisanship as an element of a socialist translation theory than Marxist epistemology.

In the last three decades, more attention has been given to the translator as an active agent. Translators are now conceived not only as experts in text design for transcultural interaction (Holz-Mänttäri 1984) but also as engaged interventionists (e.g. Venuti 1995) who make that intervention visible (see also Chapter 17 “Ethics of activist translation and interpreting” in this volume). Such interventions have been illustrated in respect to feminist translation or post-colonial translation (e.g. Simon 1996; von Flotow 1997; Tymoczko 1999; see also Chapter 8 “The ethics of postcolonial translation” and Chapter 9 “Feminist translation ethics” in this volume). Through such work, the notion of the activist translator has been put forward (e.g. Baker 2006; Boéri and Maier 2010; Inghilleri and Harding 2010). Activist translators too act in the interest of a specific agenda, which may be a political or ideological conviction, and the translator’s intervention in such cases is usually seen in a positive light. For example, Ghessimi (2019) reports on an Islamic Marxist translator in the socio-political context of Iran in the 1960s and 1970s who “wielded his own politics in translation to illuminate Iranians’ thought against the imperial regime to subvert the Pahlavi dynasty” (Ghessimi 2019, 51). Socialist translators were not expected to make changes to the text; in other words, socialist partisanship did not entail turning the target text into one that was in line with communist ideology, although in reality this did occur through censorship and self-censorship. This raises the questions: to what extent can a translator working under socialism be compared to an activist translator? Would such a comparison be fruitful? Would it be fair to do so? Would a distinction between a socialist translator and a translator working under socialism be a more appropriate line of investigation? But how can such a distinction be empirically documented? Retrospective interviews with translators who worked at the time of socialism could reveal the same shortcomings as do interviews in general: can such statements really be taken as true? It would be useful to investigate archives of publishing houses or the secret service to see whether they contain documents revealing surveillance or prosecutions of translators for their non-socialist activities or professional ethics.

Since translatorial decisions (e.g. regarding the choice of words, the choice of text, or the acceptance or rejection of a commission) can have wider cultural and ideological implications, questions arise as to where the limits of the translator’s responsibilities lie and whether a commitment to a political cause is part of a translator’s ethics. Chesterman (2001, 147) sees an ethics of commitment, despite its moral value, as outside the professional realm and argues that
“[p]rofessional ethics . . . govern a translator’s activities qua translator, not qua political activist or life-saver.” This would mean that the requirement of socialist translators (in particular interpreters) to act as political agitators when accompanying foreign visitors would not be part of a professional ethics, although it was seen as an essential part of the profile of the socialist language mediator. Such retrospective research into socialist translation theories and practices could therefore inform our current debates.

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Related topics

Virtue ethics in translation; translator ethics; professional translator ethics; ethics of activist translation and interpreting; ethics in translator and interpreter education.

Notes

1 Russian names in the body of the text are given in their established English spelling, such as Chukovsky. When referencing Russian sources, however, the names are transliterated according to the Library of Congress transliteration system, hence: Chukovskii.

2 All translations from the Russian and German are by the authors.

References


Fedorov, Andrei V. 1953. _Введение в теорию перевода_ [Vvedenie k teoriiu perevod]. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura.


Ethics in socialist translation theories


Further reading


The chapters in this volume provide information on translation research traditions in several Slavic countries. It introduces the readers to main theories, concepts, and translation scholars.


This book presents an understanding of translation as a social phenomenon and a theory based on Marxism/Leninism. It also illustrates the principle of the translator’s socialist commitment.


This monograph explores how a communist and socialist ideology and censorship influenced the translation of children’s literature and juvenile fiction published in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SRFY). It is based on archival research and interviews with translators and editors.


This monograph explores the effects of a socialist ideology on the translation of children’s literature in East Germany. It illustrates the censorship machinery with refer