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In search of Soviet wartime interpreters: triangulating manual and digital archive work

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates the methodological stages of searching for Soviet wartime interpreters of Finnish in the digital archival resource of the Russian Ministry of Defence called *Pamyat Naroda* (Memory of the People) 1941–1945. Since wartime interpreters do not have their own search category in the archive, other means are needed to detect them. The main argument of this paper is that conventional manual work must be done and some preliminary information obtained before entering the digital archive, especially when dealing with a marginal subject such as wartime interpreters.

1. Introduction

The subject of my study is Soviet wartime interpreters who were involved in the military conflicts between the Soviet Union and Finland from 1939 to 1944. Wartime translators and interpreters usually remain invisible in accounts of war, historical records and academic research (Baker 2010, Footitt & Kelly 2012, Probirskaja 2016). The subject falls between historical research and translation studies. The majority of historians were previously interested in the main lines of war, and not in everyday details of war, to which language translation and interpreting seemingly belongs. However, a more recent research branch known as *new history* or, in our case, *new military history*, is specifically interested in ordinary people's experience and in the everyday life of war. It more readily leans on such sources as memoirs and oral history (see Bourke 2006, Munday 2014). Translation studies scholars, for their part, do not always have the methodological knowledge to conduct historical research. In addition, they prefer primary sources, including translations and recorded interpreting sessions, which are difficult to locate in the historical records of war. Translation studies also aim at generalizing events whereas history research tends to contextualize them (Footitt 2012, Rundle 2012). This seeming tension may be overcome by adopting a historical framework, following languages into war situations, that is, investigating how foreign language needs are situated chronologically and organizationally within the military operation, and then contextualizing the interpreter/translator figure in the linguistic landscape of the war (Footitt 2012).

Recently, researchers of both history and translation studies have become interested in language arrangements, translation and interpreting practices during the Second World War. Thus, the British research project *Languages at War*,[1] conducted at the intersection of languages and historical research, aimed to reveal the language policies and practices of allied forces during the liberation of Europe from 1944–1947. The Finnish research project *In Search of Military Translation Cultures,*[2] in which I was involved, studied translation and interpreting policies and

[1] https://www.reading.ac.uk/languages-at-war/
[2] https://translationinww2infin.wordpress.com/

CEUR-WS.org/Vol-2084/short6.pdf

practices during the Second World War in Finland, with specific reference to Finnish, German and Russian.

Because of the historical and academic invisibility of wartime interpreters, studying them poses methodological and source-related challenges. Besides their own autobiographical writings, the only records of wartime interpreters may be inclusion in sporadic memoirs of former prisoners of war or other war participants who dealt with interpreters. Military archival records, in turn, do not usually contain more than stripped-down information. Furthermore, interpreters and translators do not have their own subject category in the catalogues of military archives; this is the case not just in Russia but also in other parts of the world (see Baker 2010, Footitt & Kelly 2012). This also applies to digital archives, as will become evident below. It is difficult to say whether it is the invisibility of the profession that makes interpreters marginal in archives, or the way in which archives are organized. A special methodological path must be taken to detect wartime interpreters or any reference to their presence. This path triangulates different sources including historiography, memoirs and biographical sources, conventional and digital archives. This paper intends to show the methodological stages of studying Soviet wartime interpreters of Finnish with a digital archive. My main argument is that some preparatory work must be done before using a digital archive. First, I present the Russian digital archival resource *Pamyat Naroda* (Memory of the People) 1941–1945. Then, I demonstrate how it can be applied to study wartime interpreters. I conclude by considering the pros and cons of using digital archival resources.

2. Digital archival resource pamyat-naroda.ru 1941–1945[3]

The Russian Ministry of Defence maintains the website *Pamyat Naroda*, which contains 425 thousand digitized archival documents of the fronts, armies and other Red Army units during the Second World War. These documents include orders, reports, correspondence and operational descriptions. In addition, the database contains interactive maps, more than 18 million entries on decoration documents, and information about the graves of 5 million soldiers and officers. According to the website, the purpose of the project is to provide information about the participants in the Great Patriotic War, as the war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany is known in Russia. The website is mainly intended to serve the relatives of these participants but it also may be used for research purposes. Image 1 shows the user interface of the website.

[3] https://pamyat-naroda.ru/

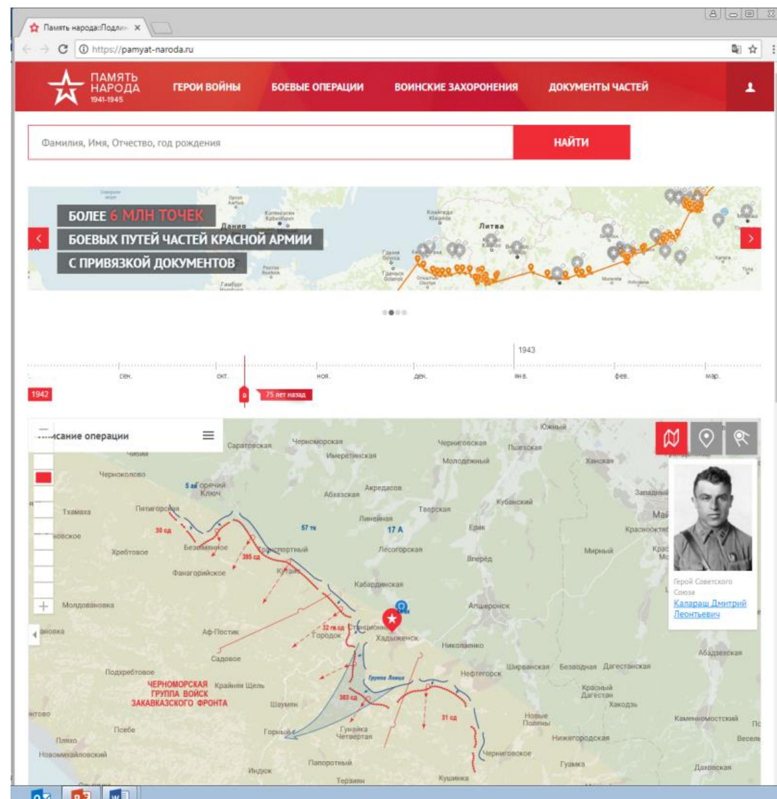

Image 1. The user interface of the *Pamyat Naroda* website.

A search may be conducted by personal name, operation name, military unit or location of a grave. Accordingly, some initial information is required before starting to search. As my research subject is wartime interpreters, I tried a search with the word *perevodchik* (translator/interpreter). Even though there is no such search category as a military post, a fuzzy search is possible. Eventually, I had a list of 22 names, mainly interpreters of German. Naturally, this is not a complete list of all interpreters who served during the war. From previous research we know that The Military Institute of Foreign Languages alone trained about 4000–5000 military interpreters and translators during the war, and 2600 wartime interpreters and translators were decorated (see Podoprigora 2010, Zhdanova 2009). In addition, native speakers of the language, such as Finnish-speaking Soviet soldiers, might have performed the task of interpreter or translator without additional training.

The problem is that the database retrieves only those names with which the search word *perevodchik* occurs, and that is not consistent. Thus, we cannot retrieve all the interpreters or translators from the digital archive but we need other means to trace them. Furthermore, not all of those who performed interpreting or translation tasks held the official post of military interpreter. They might have had other positions, such as assistant chief of an intelligence unit or speaker of a propaganda unit, or they might have acted as ad hoc interpreters. For instance, a search with the word *iazik* (language) brings up correspondence between different units with requests to find which soldiers and officers had language skills in German, Bulgarian, Japan, Lithuanian, Latvian or French, apparently to perform interpreting or translation tasks.

3. Manual work before using the digital archive

The manual part of the work includes several stages and several sources used in a snowball method; that is, information extracted from one source leads to the next source. Wartime

interpreters/translators may be approached by the tasks they performed, by the organizational division of the army, by chronological events or by geographical location. Pekka Kujamäki (2012) uses the term "fields of translation and interpreting practice" referring to geographical location and military activity within it. Previous research, which was based mainly on the memoirs of former wartime interpreters, tells us that wartime interpreters performed interrogations, communicated with civilians on the occupied territories, translated captured documents, gathered intelligence information, monitored the enemy press and radio, intercepted radio messages, composed and delivered propaganda speeches, and participated in truce negotiations (cf. Levin 1981). In addition, we know that wartime interpreters served mainly in two types of division: intelligence/reconnaissance units or political propaganda units (see Defence Commissariat order № 0071, 19 April 1943 on the reorganization of the Military Intelligence administration of the Red Army headquarters). Chronologically, military operations follow the trajectory of pre-deployment, deployment and post-deployment (Footitt 2012, 222). Translation and interpreting can be situated within these phases. For instance, during offensives and occupation, that is, deployment, interrogation of prisoners of war, propaganda work, communication with civilians, and translation of documents become unavoidable. Nevertheless, retrieving information in digital or conventional archives presupposes the availability of some hard facts, such as names, unit numbers and locations, that is, information provided by traditional historical research, whereas memoirs provide us with rather soft facts.

In the present case, I proceeded by geographical location. Historical research has demonstrated that the main theatre of war between the Soviet Union and Finland was Karelia, the borderland between Finland and Russia. Hence, when looking for Soviet wartime interpreters of Finnish in the Central Archive of the Russian Ministry of Defence, the main point of departure is the Karelian front and, especially, its administration and staff lists. Furthermore, the memoirs of former prisoners of war recall that Soviet interpreters were basically native Finns who spoke flawless Finnish and were lower officers by military rank (Hiltunen 1989). This information led us to the archival document called *List of officers of Finnish nationality* (28 August 1944) which contains the names of 58 officers of ground forces on the Karelian front, 11 of whom held the post of military interpreter. Then these military interpreters/translators of Finnish could be retrieved from *Pamyat Naroda* by their names.

The search results show that all 11 of these military interpreters were decorated. Entries of seven of them contain the award letter with a description of the feat for which the person was decorated. Image 2 illustrates an award letter given to Petr Mullo. The letter states that Petr Mullo served as a military interpreter in the intelligence unit. By interrogating the prisoners of war, he got crucial information on the enemy positions and plans. The officers of the headquarters respected him a lot for his skills and diligent work. Thus, award letters provide information about military interpreters' duties, the tasks they performed, and their position in the unit. The letters tell us that interpreters were praised for obtaining valuable information about the enemy by interrogating prisoners of war, or by translating, investigating and analysing captured documents. They also participated in reconnaissance missions and fighting. Commanders and fellow soldiers respected them and their knowledge. This information reconciles with the memoirs of former wartime interpreters (for instance, Levin 1981). Thus, the digital archive document verifies the information obtained previously from the memoirs. Further searches may be elaborated on the basis of information that interpreters served in intelligence units – such as searching by military unit. Still, it is by no means certain that an interpreter or interpreting in general would be mentioned in the documents of a particular unit at all.

4. Conclusions

Digital archives bring the research subject to the researcher at the press of a button in accessible and easily retrievable form. Still, at least in the studied case, and also in a quick investigation using the Finnish WarSampo portal, manual work must precede work with digital archives. In the present digital archive, the problem seems to be that the military post of a person is not always indexed with his name. Another problem, as I have mentioned, pertains to the reality that interpreting and translation tasks could also have been performed by other people in the army who did not hold the post of military interpreter. As a humanities researcher, I would like to see more index words used to describe the subject; at least consistent indexing of the military posts would make searching easier. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that real life is far too complicated to be completely indexed. Therefore, some creativity is needed in formulating search terms.

Another issue worth considering is that the data selected to be digitalized create a specific narrative. Archives, whether digital or conventional, are “a locus of power” in terms of what material is selected to be preserved, who has access to the archival documents, and what meaning they construct (Claus and Marriott 2012, 386–399, Munday 2014, 71–72). In the present study, digital data of the *Pamyat Naroda* obviously create a hero narrative (cf. Probirskaja 2016), since the documents selected for digitalization focus on lists of awards or of the fallen. Thus, digitalization projects may have an ideological or political agenda and direct the research in a certain way. The marginal subject, as wartime interpreters and translators appear to be, may not be worthy of digitalization with a category of its own. Hence, we need rather microhistorical means to reach the subject.

As translation history scholar Christopher Rundle (2012, 239) suggests, instead of asking “what history can tell us about translation” the more fruitful approach would be asking “what translation can tell us about history.” For instance, memoirs of the state leaders’ interpreters may shed light on the state leaders themselves and their politics (like the memoirs of Stalin’s interpreter Valentin Berezhkov). In the present case, studying wartime interpreters tells us, among other things, that the Red Army employed ethnic Finns as interpreters, even in such a delicate area as intelligence, notwithstanding the fact that Finland was the Soviet Union’s enemy, and thousands of Soviet Finns were deported to Siberia during the war (Musaev 2004, 285–291). Furthermore, the fact that Finns were still employed tells us that there was probably a lack of qualified personnel during the war, and that the state was not prepared for the war. Many became interpreters by chance because they happened to know the language required, and “there was a lot of improvisation on the ground” (cf. Footitt & Kelly 2012, 93). In addition, the nation-centred depiction of war become questionable as representatives of the same nationality might have been fighting on the different sides of the war.

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Все графы заполнять полностью.

83/Ж

Отдел К Вход. № 05798 «…» … 1944

755

НАГРАДНОЙ ЛИСТ.

1. Фамилия, Имя, Отчество – МУЛЛО Петр Иванович.
2. Звание – ст. лейтенант а/с.
3. Должность, часть – Переводчик следственной части РО Штарма 32. Представляется к награждению орденом "Красная Звезда"
4. Год рождения – 1916.
5. Национальность – Финн.
6. Партийность – Член ВКП(б) с 1942 г.
7. Участие в гражданской войне, последующих боевых действиях по защите СССР и Отечественной войне (где, когда) – Карельский фронт, с 7.10.41г. в 37 сд, 33 ОЛБр и Разведотдел Штарма 32.
8. Имеет ли ранения и контузии в Отечественной войне – не имеет.
9. С какого времени в Красной Армии – с 7.10.41 года
10. Каким РВК призван – Добровольно через ЦК ЛКСМ КФ ССР.
11. Чем ранее награжден – наград не имеет.
12. Постоянный домашний адрес представляемого к награждению и адрес его семьи

Тов. МУЛЛО П.И. служит в разведорганах с первых дней Отечественной войны, непрерывно работая военным переводчиком. За это время он вырос в настоящего специалиста своего дела, в совершенстве изучив технику и содержание допроса пленных. Его трудоспособность, умение и добросовестное отношение к работе особенно ярко выявились в период наступательных боев.

В этот период, несмотря ни на какие трудности как в обстановке, так и в самой работе, тов. Мулло умелым и точным допросом обеспечил своевременное получение от пленных всех необходимых данных и быструю передачу их командованию.

В наиболее ответственные моменты, когда от быстрого, полного и точного допроса зависело знание группировки противника, его намерений, а отсюда и решения командования на ведение боя, тов. Мулло, выезжая в части, с честью выполнял возложенные на него ответственные задания по допросу пленных на местах.

За умение и добросовестное отношение к работе тов. Мулло пользуется заслуженным деловым авторитетом у офицеров штаба.

Будучи парторгом РО Штарма, принимает активное участие в партийной и политической работе. Политически грамотен, морально устойчив. Делу Большевистской Партии Ленина-Сталина и Социалистической Родине предан.

Достоин награждения орденом "Красная Звезда".

Зам. Нач. Штарма 32 по разведке
полковник (подпись) (КОЗЛОВ)

"15" сентября 1944 г.

Image 2. Award letter given to Petr Mullo.