# *Gde sobaka zaryta:* A problem of translation

When I was a child, growing up in France in a Russian-English family, I had to attend Russian language and music classes on Sundays. Every week, my homework included memorising a poem, usually one in some way evoking the natural beauty of the homeland and linking this implicitly to the indomitable Russian spirit. Every class would then start with me writing out this poem, and I would be graded on the accuracy of my memory, spelling and penmanship. Each time I effectively spilled a poem out onto a blank sheet of paper (usually having memorised it fifteen minutes before class), it would promptly be erased from my brain forever.

One day, when reading over a new poem that I would have to take home with me at the end of a lesson, I came across a word I did not know - '*mosh''*. I furrowed my brow in confusion.

"What is it?" my teacher asked. She was in many ways a stereotype of the Russian education system - strict, serious, proud - but also, as is far rarer, very kind and quick to laughter when her students behaved themselves. She had a deep and sonorous voice, which she used to great effect as a folk singer, entertaining wealthy expats in Russian restaurants on Friday nights when she would wear bejewelled traditional clothing and headpieces that brought out her pale complexion, oval cheeks and bright crystal eyes.

"What does '*mosh''* mean?" I asked her.

She looked around, considering.

Suddenly, she slammed her hands flat on the desk before her, threw her shoulders back, and with absolute certainty proclaimed in a powerful tenor:

"'*Mosh' ' - eto ya!*" - "'*Mosh' '* - is me!"

Afterwards, she began searching for synonyms and further definitions. I laughed and said it was unnecessary. I had understood perfectly once and forever what the word meant.

A quick search in the dictionary today tells me that '*mosh''* is translated into English to mean 'power'. Yet, to me, '*mosh''* will forever be associated with something grand, something dignified, and something distinctively untranslatable. It is, for instance, totally different in meaning to '*vlast''* - also meaning 'power', but referring rather to the power of authority, or '*sila*' - meaning 'strength'. '*Mosh''* is mighty.

Academic texts on Russian politics and society (including those I am currently working on myself) are full of references to such allegedly distinctive Russian concepts. The most frequently cited example is '*toska'* (meaning sadness), which Nabokov famously described as an untranslatable word. "No single word in English renders all the shades of toska", Nabokov believed: "At its

deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. ... At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom" (1990). Yet there is something inherently elitist and exclusionary about this assessment. The English concept of 'sadness', for instance, can easily incorporate the full spectrum of meanings embodied by Nabokov's '*toska*', for these meanings can be inferred from its context: "*I feel as though I have for months been drowning in an all encompassing sea of sadness*", versus "*I feel a bit sad when I'm on my own and don't know how to entertain myself*", or simply "*a sadness comes over me whenever it rains*". We can nitpick the subtle nuances that are lost in translation, but by referring to '*toska*' as 'sadness', it is certainly possible to be understood in English. (Incidentally, '*toska*' without context would likewise lose all of its complexity.)

Russian studies based in English are riddled with Russian words. The propensity to include them stems in the first instance from Russian scholars themselves, who imply that no other words can fully capture the nuances needed to explain the Russian condition. The practice is further entrenched and reproduced by foreign researchers, not to be outdone or left out, who use Russian words in order to justify the legitimacy of their writing by demonstrating their assimilation of the culture. Until recently, I never questioned this approach. On the contrary, I played along to demonstrate my own 'insidedness'. Then, something forced me to pause and reconsider.

On the morning of January 30th, I logged onto Twitter and was offered a totally random post "based on my interests" from an account I did not yet follow. In it, Michael Idov wrote sarcastically:

> "My favorite type of Russia essay is when they take a regular-ass word like 'boredom' (skuka) and go 'To truly understand the Russian mind, you must familiarize yourself with the concept of skuka. To stave off skuka, a Russian might take a walk, or play a game on a 'smartfon'" (2022).

This made me laugh perhaps more than it should have, because it so aptly called out the book I am currently working on. Deferring to the Russian language has become a habit for many analysts, supporting the notion that to understand Russian culture, society and politics, one must operate within a totally different frame of reference than that generally used within English language social sciences. Obviously, the ability to speak and read Russian is a massive advantage in understanding Russia, for this gives a researcher access to policy, laws, official statements, critical commentary, and homegrown debate in their original form. However, is such an understanding translatable through academic writing into English? What interests me most in this question is whether there is any harm caused by an over-reliance on Russian words in Western academic discourse, and what such harm may be.

I am at heart a Foucauldean scholar, because I believe in his notion that human beings internalise the ways of thinking that we are routinely forced into through repetition and discipline (1975). I believe therefore that there is an implicit assumption, which Russia scholars internalise whenever they are forced to import Russian words into English to debate Russian society, and it is this: that Russian politics, culture and thought are inherently alien, other and untranslatable, that the "Russian mind" differs from the (often implicitly more civilised or more logical) Western one. On

the Western side, this leads to the Barbarisation of Russian culture, and on the Russian side it amounts to what we frequently call at home "*good old russkii chauvinism*". Foucault's book, *Discipline and Punish*, would lead us to conclude that this assumption of difference provides a conceptual stranglehold, forcing analysts to keep returning to a fundamental partitioning of Russia from the Western world, which determines in many ways the political chasm growing between the two.

Few would dispute that there is a state-led war of ideas and ideals building between Russia and the Western World. In January 2022, as I was scrolling through Twitter, I was mainly looking for indications as to whether this war was about to turn violent, looking for signs that would indicate whether Russia was about to (re)invade Ukraine. Analysts and Twitter folk were divided: there were the obvious ideological splits between those in favour of war and those against, those buying into Putin's narrative of the conflict and those rejecting it, those critiquing Biden and Europe, those wanting peace at any cost and those wishing to protect Ukrainian sovereignty. However, a more fundamental split across these camps could be seen between those who claimed Russia would invade because Putin did not want to appear weak by backing down from confrontation, and those who claimed that Russia would not invade because Putin was too risk-averse a President to initiate a war with an uncertain outcome. I am, of course, oversimplifying these positions. Most analysts highlighted the extreme unpredictability of the moment. Yet many argued that those in the opposite camp to themselves did not fully understand Russian domestic affairs: that those disagreeing with them were doing so simply because they *did not understand Russia*.

The Russian Federation is currently embroiled in what has been deemed by multiple observers to be a game of “History Wars” (see, for example, Kolesnikov, 2021; Edele, 2017; Emmerson, 2014). Through these History Wars, the Russian state is competing with other nations and, in some cases, with its own historians to establish the preeminence of its authorised discourse of the Second World War in particular, as well as of other adjacent events. Most of this discourse is in line with the teaching of World War history elsewhere in Europe, though placing a stronger emphasis of course on the role of the USSR in the conflict; just as British schools would emphasise the leadership of Winston Churchill and the movements of British soldiers; American schools of the American involvement; and so on. However, aspects of Russia’s discourse are proactively argumentative, going against dominant academic thinking.

The Russian elite are divided “between those who see the past as something to be liberated from, and those who deeply regret the loss of a golden past” (Gjerde, 2015, p. 157). The state for its part is striving to reform this relationship by promoting a discourse of history that builds national pride in the present, which is a distinct trajectory emerging from between these two positions. It is doing so in the face of more internationally recognised narratives emerging from the West and former Soviet bloc that are highly critical of the USSR, and this has led to Putin’s aggressive rejection of much mainstream academic historic consensus.

Russian history reform under Putin has coincided with a similar yet discordant wave of reforms in the post-Soviet bloc, one that emphasises how Russia’s neighbours suffered under Soviet repression. “Tendencies in these countries to equate Nazi and Soviet occupation,” summarise

Bækken & Enstad, have helped to justify Russia's securitisation of history to protect its internal social cohesion by preventing the spread of these discordant narratives into Russia, where comparing the USSR to Nazi Germany is now outlawed (2020). Bearing this wider context in mind, Putin's positive history provides an insulating cocoon to protect against foreign criticism while incubating national unity and pride.

An essay on "The Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" written by Putin in 2021 is a perfect illustration of this rebellion against mainstream history. Here, Putin writes that:

> "the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy. These are, first and foremost, the consequences of our own mistakes made at different periods of time. But these are also the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity. ... Hence the attempts to play on the 'national question' and sow discord among people, the overarching goal being to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another." (12/07/2021)

On the surface, this part of the address calls for unity and understanding, but its message of friendship has been severely undermined by Russian troop movements on the Ukrainian border. Underneath what is written, there are therefore other interesting things happening in the essay:

1. We must note the term "historical and spiritual space", which, in the Russian version of the essay appears directly as "*odno istroricheskoye i duhovnoye prostranstvo*", or a "single" space. This extends the Russian spatial terrain to its past Soviet historical reaches, disregarding any present day confinement by territorial borders. In a departure from common state political discourse, the essay then frames this space as comprising "*russkiye zemli*" - ethnic "Russian lands", rather than "*rossiiskiye*" lands (or lands pertaining to all peoples of the Russian Federation). The word choice is targeted towards the conflation of "Ukrainianness" with "*russkii*-ness", negating the former by subsuming it into a singular ethnic Russian grouping;
2. Ukrainian independence from Russia is depicted as unnatural and its more recent estrangement as the goal of Russia's enemies. The present renewed Ukrainian political turn away from Russia is, according to Putin, the product of "a forced change of identity" on the Ukrainian side: "Russians in Ukraine are being forced … to deny their roots" in favour of a "path of forced assimilation", and "the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us [Russians]" (ibid). It is essential to note that what Putin conceives as an artificial segregation is also to him an ideational construct that speaks to the need to tightly control heritage and history discourse in the region in order to protect Russian ("*russkii*") people from both overt ethnic cleansing and subtler erasure by their enemies;
3. Conversely, Ukrainian independence is explained to be the product of a Russian mistake: "modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era", writes Putin later on (ibid). Russia, as the "legal successor of the Soviet Union" (Malinova, 2017, p. 44) bares ultimate

responsibility for allowing Ukraine to exit from its administration, and Ukrainian independence is not seen as reflecting any Ukrainian agency or legitimate political will;

4. Further, though this may seem to be a contradiction to point 1, the essay notes that Russia must not simply be thought of as a territory for ethnic Russians and must not be divided by "the national question". Instead, it stretches to include all territories with which it shares a "spiritual unity"; and,
5. The people of the Russian and former Soviet territories (especially ethnic Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians) are, Putin believes, "one people" with a common Russian core, and all other divisions that have followed are arbitrary products of historical accidents.

With his emphasis on the strength of the Russian state and pride in Russian history, it is clear that Putin is writing more to an internal audience than to his Ukrainian neighbours. Putin's dismissal of Ukrainian sovereignty is totally at odds with European history discourse and NATO understandings of contemporary geopolitics.

Putin's essay is evidence that the Russian state is in the process of fully delinking its teaching of history and support to the study of geopolitics from Western academic discourse. Increasingly, voices that stand in opposition to the state view of history as prescribed by President-historian Putin are silenced, labelled to be foreign agents, pressured into leaving the country, or imprisoned and in some cases poisoned (or poisoned and then imprisoned, as was the case with public enemy #1). Underneath the authorised cannon is an insidious assertion: *we are in conflict with the Western world and they are in conflict with us because they do not understand our history or our identity*. This is a classic "clash of civilizations" dichotomy underpinned by an inherent assumption of Russian exceptionalism.

Sen writes that the notion of a "civilizational clash is conceptually parasitic on the commanding power of a unique categorisation along so-called civilizational lines", a categorization based on the "imagined singularity" of the identities of those on both sides of the divide that is designed to obscure their shared humanity (2006, p. 9). Accordingly, Russian exceptionalism is both artificial and largely imagined. I believe this is chiefly a political divide, one that is carefully maintained through education, academic discourse, media, history, aesthetics and heritage. As academics, we sometimes contribute to the problem. It begins with the very tools that we use to engage with Russian politics: it begins with language and the idea that any analysis of Russia, written in any language, requires its own terminology, rooted in Russian itself, to highlight Russia's otherness and division from the world. *Vot gde sobaka zaryta* - *that's where the dog is buried*.

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