

Title: Foreign Texts and Their Unready Readers: Translation as Education in Early Twentieth-Century Russia  
Author: D. Brian Kim, Stanford University

Abstract:

In 1897, scholar of reading practices Nikolai Rubakin observed that the reading material available to the Russian public was "characterized by the glaring absence of translations of a long line of distinguished works that decorate the canon of world literature." Responding to the rapid growth of literacy in the late nineteenth century, Rubakin called for more translations as a way to guide new readers away from boulevard literature to worthier works that would aid in their development as critical thinkers and productive members of modern society. This would be accomplished by exposing the populace to new ideas from all the world over; increasing the scope of translated literature would enable Russians to read more widely without obliging them to learn to read in yet another language.

At the same time, another problem lay in the relatively poor caliber of existing translations and the predatory practices surrounding their commission. This is substantiated by the unflattering portrayals of translators and language students that abound in works by such authors as Anton Chekhov, Mikhail Kuzmin, and Teffi. Rubakin's call for a general increase in the number of translations, which Maxim Gorky would echo two decades later, was thus also a call for an increase in the number of competent translators, and for the mobilization of translation as a tool for education.

This paper surveys the shifting attitudes in early twentieth-century Russia toward the questions of what translation can do and what it cannot, on the level of the text as well as that of its function in society. Though this period attests a growing focus on the quality of translations over their quantity, disagreements persist as to how quality should be assessed. This paper analyzes these arguments and traces the evolution of Russian thought on translation's didactic task in the prerevolutionary and early Soviet periods.