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## **How do interpreters become heroes? Narratives on Soviet/Russian military interpreters**

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*This article identifies and describes narratives, or storylines, which portray Soviet/Russian wartime/military interpreters. The data include popular science articles, websites, online media articles, the autobiographical writings of interpreters and documentaries. An examination of the data proceeds to some extent in accordance with the narrative typology provided by Baker (2006), that is, from general to personal narratives, with the assumption that personal narratives are embedded in collective narratives. The positioning of wartime interpreters who participated in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) is compared to that of military interpreters who participated in the military operations of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the war in Afghanistan. A narrative reading of the data uncovers the storylines that portray wartime/military interpreters as quiet war heroes.*

### **1. Introduction**

The aim of this article is to identify the recurring narratives or storylines, that surround Soviet/Russian wartime/military interpreters in Russian public discourse, that is, in sources accessible to the general public, including popular science articles, websites, online media articles, the autobiographical writings of interpreters and documentaries. These sources construct a public perspective on wartime/military interpreters. To the best of my knowledge, Baker's (2010) and Gaunt's (2016) narrative studies about contemporary wartime interpreters and translators in Iraq and Afghanistan are the only ones that draw on media reports as sources of data and investigate how wartime/military interpreters are narrated in them. In this sense, the present study contributes to further research in the field of the representation of interpreters and translators in the media and other sources and uncovers Soviet/Russian public discussion on wartime/military interpreting.

In Russian, the term *voennye perevodchiki* designates both “wartime” “military”, on the one hand, and both “translators” “interpreters”, on the other. In the present study, I use *wartime interpreters* mainly for the interpreters and translators who participated in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), as the war between the Soviet

Union and Nazi Germany is known in Russia, and *military interpreters* as the institutional name for the profession. “Soviet/Russian” denotes two periods of Russian recent history: until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the period following that.

Soviet wartime interpreters have been given a significant and heroic connotation in Russia. This perspective has emerged from at least three factors. First, everything concerned with the Great Patriotic War is almost sacred in Russia. Second, the cradle of Soviet/Russian wartime/military interpreters, the Military Institute of Foreign Languages (MIFL), founded in 1940, holds an important status in Russia. Third, many former wartime interpreters became the translation and interpreting elite, forming the foundation for the Soviet school of translation and interpreting. Just as many technical inventions initially emerged from military needs, so the most significant scholars of Soviet/Russian translation studies – Komissarov, Barhudarov, Shveitser and Minjar-Beloruhev, to name only a few – had their roots in the MIFL and still hold honoured positions in present-day publications: their books are reprinted and they are still regularly cited. Despite such significance, Soviet/Russian military interpreting and translation has not been thoroughly researched so far, from the narrative perspective even less so.

Therefore, this article partly fills in the gap by exploring how wartime/military interpreters are represented in public narratives. It discovers a public perception of wartime/military interpreters, and, at the same time, constructs a conceptual narrative about them. First, I introduce the methodological framework of this study, which rests on narrative analysis. Second, I present the research data and types of narrative found in that data. Third, I present the narratives or stories from the general to the specific, in which Soviet/Russian wartime/military interpreters are embedded.

## 2. Applying narrative analysis

The methodological framework of the present study rests theoretically on Baker’s (2006; 2010) narrative approach. For her, narratives are “stories we live by” (Baker, 2006, p. 3); through them we comprehend the world and tell about it. Baker is particularly interested in how translators and interpreters participate in creating, mediating, circulating and resisting the narratives that sustain violent political conflict (Baker, 2006, pp. 2–3). On the other hand, she is also interested in how interpreters and translators are narrated by others (Baker, 2010). The latter stance is applied in this study.

Following Baker, translation studies scholars have applied narrative methodology to topics such as translation as re-narration, the role of translation in news reporting, and volunteer and activist interpreting (accordingly, Al-Herthani, 2009; Harding, 2012; Boéri,

2008). All these studies deal to some extent with politics and power issues through addressing the sources, forms of representation, perspectives, and truth constructs of seemingly innocent stories (Baker, 2006, pp. 17–19; Harding, 2012, p. 296). In this, narrative analysis is reminiscent of critical discourse analysis, but compared to it, narrative analysis is more concrete, less bound with social structures and power relations, and pays more attention to personal and resistant stories (see Baker, 2006, p. 3; Boéri, 2008, p. 24). In addition, narrative analysis need not to be politicized at all, but can simply focus on stories and their structures.

From the point of view of the current study, the attraction of narrative analysis is that it allows us “to piece together and analyse a narrative that is not fully traceable to any specific stretch of text but has to be constructed from a range of sources, including non-verbal material” (Baker, 2006, p. 4). This is exactly where the methodological framework of the present study lies: to identify and to piece together storylines recurring in Russian public discourse on wartime/military interpreters. As a result of this endeavour, a conceptual narrative on wartime/military interpreters emerges.

Every story has at least three dimensions: (1) a form that can be a text, a video or an object, (2) a content (*fabula*) that is an event being narrated, and (3) a perspective from which an event is narrated (some call this perspective *discourse*) (see Bal, 2009, p. 5). Along with the structuralist approach, narrative is a “divided endeavour”, including *what* is told (the content) and *how* it is told (representation) (O’Neill, 1994, pp. 3, 13; Tamboukou, 2015, p. 41). Thus, narrative analysis may focus on one (or on all) of these dimensions: text or another medium as a container of the story; the content of the story; the way the story is presented; and, in addition, the dialogical relationship between a narrator and an addressee (Bal, 2009, pp. 5–6; Tamboukou, 2015, p. 40). Drawing distinctions between the content of the story and the way in which it is presented is hardly feasible in practice (Tamboukou, 2015, p. 40), because *what* is selected to be told reflects *how* one wants to represent a certain event. For instance, negative news may be omitted in order to promote a positive representation of an event.

In the analysis here, I present both sides of the narratives – *what* is told about Soviet/Russian wartime/military interpreters and *how* they are represented in Russian public discourse. In doing so, I do not always trace specific stretches of texts but indicate larger “bricks” from which narratives are constructed. Bringing along the content of the stories is also justifiable, because Soviet/Russian wartime/military interpreting is largely an unknown subject. Textual analysis of the narratives is, however, beyond the scope of this study because the data are far too extensive for a detailed analysis.

### 3. Research data

The data of this research represent sources accessible to the general public since the aim of this article is to identify the public narratives that surround Soviet/Russian wartime/military interpreters. The data include popular science writings, websites of military interpreters' communities, online media articles, the autobiographical writings of former wartime interpreters and documentaries on wartime and military interpreters. Some of the popular science writings, the websites, the media reports and the documentaries were retrieved from the Internet using the search clause *voennye perevodchiki* (wartime/military interpreters/translators) within the Russian domain. The sample is representative, because it contains all the relevant search results found using a search engine (yandex.ru) to retrieve information on wartime/military interpreters/translators in Russian public discourse.

Popular science writings included in the data are the texts of Cherednikova (2008), Gavrilov and Kurapova (2012), Kurapova (2009), Kurapova (2012) and Zhdanova (2009), as they all deal with wartime/military interpreting.

The websites of the MIFL alumni club (Clubvi, 2015) and the MIFL veterans' union (Vkimo, 2015) are the main sources of stories about the MIFL, the cradle of military interpreters. The alumni even have their own Viiapedia (VIA comes from the Russian abbreviation of the institute). The websites' information is presented in a multitude of forms, including articles, documents, pictures, videos, personal stories, interviews, slogans, songs, verses, forums and links.

The data also include two mainstream media articles: one by Novikova on the website *Pravda.ru* and one by Nehamkin (2014) on the website of *Argumenty nedeli*. Both articles rely on interviews. Novikova interviews a military interpreter who is a specialist in the Arabic language and culture, Chuprygin (2015), and Nehamkin (2014) a military interpreter and veteran of the war in Afghanistan, the chairman of the MIFL veterans' union, Loginov. In addition, there are media articles devoted to the legendary wartime interpreters Gall and Rzhavskaia (see section 11. Legendary wartime interpreters). Furthermore, the articles by Chuzhakin (2005) and Podoprighora (2010) represent the professional stance of military interpreters as the former was published in a professional journal for translators and interpreters, and the latter on the website of the MIFL veterans' union.

Another source of data were memoirs of the former wartime interpreters Levin (1981), Sinkliner (1989) and Vernikov (1977). These books were chosen because they seem to be the most popular on the subject, taking into account the abundance of quotations from and references to them in popular science writings, on the website of the MIFL alumni club and in documentaries devoted to wartime interpreters.

Documentaries are the last source of data. Two of these documentaries are posted on the website of the MIFL alumni club (Clubvi, 2015) and are devoted mainly to the veteran interpreters of the Great Patriotic War (Kurbakov & Kurbakova, 2005; Kurbakov, Tarasov, & Kurbakova, 2005). The third documentary was produced by the television company *Sovershenno sekretno* [Top Secret], which specializes in documentary investigations. The productions of this television company are broadcast by other television channels, including the main national channels. The *Sovershenno sekretno* documentary on wartime interpreters dates to 2013, although some of the interviews with the interpreters were recorded as early as 1995. The documentary called *Voennye perevodchiki* [Military interpreters] was included in a military programme series hosted by Sladkov (2012) and produced by the *Russia 1* television channel. This documentary is devoted mainly to Soviet military interpreters who served in Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia and Afghanistan in the 1970s and 1980s. The fifth documentary in the data set is called *Perevod na peredovoi*. This name has at least two meanings: translation/interpreting on the frontline and translation/interpreting in the foreground. The documentary tells about Soviet/Russian interpreters working at the top level with state leaders. Many of them have a military interpreting background. This documentary was produced by Okroev (2012) for the Russian military forces' television channel *Zvezda* [A Star]. The documentary includes an interview with the last leader of the Soviet Union, M. Gorbachev.

#### 4. Types of narratives

Drawing on a study by Somers and Gibson (1994), Baker (2006) provides a typology of four kinds of narrative: ontological (personal), public, conceptual (disciplinary) and meta-(master) narratives. Personal narratives are stories that we tell about ourselves (Baker, 2006, p. 28). All other types of narrative can be combined into the group of shared or collective narratives (Harding, 2012, p. 291). Therefore, public or, as Harding (2012, p. 293) calls them, societal narratives, are stories that are elaborated collectively and circulate in a particular society or in smaller social units, such as the family, the workplace, the school, an institution, or an organization (Baker, 2006, p. 33; Harding, 2012, pp. 291–292). Conceptual or disciplinary narratives are set apart into their own category, although they might be a subcategory of public narratives since scholars form their own communities or schools of thought. They are stories told by scholars elaborating on their objects of study (Baker, 2006, p. 39). Public narratives may grow into a meta-narrative “when they achieve a certain temporal and physical breadth, a sense of inevitability and inescapability, of applicability to various events” (Boéri, 2008, p. 25). Meta-narratives contain global stories circulating around the world, such

as the Enlightenment, Colonialism, Communism, Capitalism or the Cold War (Baker, 2006, pp. 44–45).

All four types of narrative are present in the current study. Thus, personal narratives in their purest form, such as stories about oneself, are present in the autobiographical writings and in the documentary interviews. Public narratives emerge from popular science writings, websites, media articles and documentaries. The publications of the websites of the MIFL alumni club (Clubvi, 2015) and the MIFL veterans' union (Vkimo, 2015) are professional narratives by nature, "stories and explanations that professionals elaborate for themselves and others about the nature and ethos of their activity" (Boéri, 2008, p. 26). Professional narratives also belong to the category of public narratives. Conceptual (disciplinary) narrative appears in the present research in the form of narrative concepts from translation studies, such as *invisibility*, and eventually, the output of this research is also a conceptual narrative, that is, a representation elaborated by a researcher, or a "narrative as the product of inquiry" (Baker, 2006, p. 39). The existence of the meta-narrative of the Great Patriotic War is verified in the current study by inquiries from the other researchers.

The distinction between types of narrative is not clear-cut, since they are all interconnected, from particular (personal) to general (meta-narrative) (Harding, 2012, pp. 294–295). Thus, personal and public narratives are interdependent in that personal narratives sustain and, at the same time, shape public narratives (Baker, 2006, pp. 29–30). On the one hand, personal narratives subscribe to the public narratives in which they are embedded and, on the other, they inform or contest public narratives. For instance, the personal narratives in the memoirs of former German-language wartime interpreters Levin (1981) and Vernikov (1977) are written along with the public narrative according to which the Soviet Union is undoubtedly a war hero and Nazi Germany a villain. This disposition is clearly black and white with "no space for critical reflection or inconvenient questioning of the underlying narrative" (Baker, 2010, p. 199). This manifests in Levin's and Vernikov's books, for instance, in their depictions of Soviet soldiers as *brave, heroic, clever, humane and moral people*, whereas Nazi soldiers are generally narrated as *cowardly, arrogant, cruel and unintelligent*. At the same time, Levin's and Vernikov's books are quoted in different sources, thus contributing to public narratives. Memoirs of wartime interpreters published in more recent times, such as Stezhenskii (2005) or Stupnikova (2003), do contain some criticism of the Soviet Union regime. This does not, however, mean that the mainstream public narrative changed, but that some alternative narratives emerged. Quite another issue is how widespread alternative narratives are compared to mainstream narratives, a topic that would also require investigation.

Particular personal stories, when embedded in media reports or documentaries, may be exploited to serve a certain public narrative, for

instance, by way of selective appropriation (Baker, 2006, p. 71; Harding, 2012, pp. 292, 294). In the documentaries, wartime interpreters recount their stories in an anecdotal manner as stories that happened to them. Bits of these stories – for instance, about how the narrator obtained crucial information when interrogating a prisoner of war – help in constructing a general narrative of war heroes. Furthermore, some people accumulate stories around them and become a part of public narratives as such. In other words, when someone else shares your story, it has become public. Such individuals are, for instance, legendary wartime interpreters Gall and Rzhnevskaya, whom I present in a separate section below. Their personal wartime stories circulate in different media, and therefore, their stories have become a part of public narratives. At the same time, their personal stories are embedded in a meta-narrative of the Great Patriotic War.

The public narratives that I identify in this study are constructed from many pieces. In addition to recurrent personal stories, the interviewing of rather authoritative persons, such as Gorbachev, gives “currency and acceptance” to public narratives (Baker, 2006, p. 30). Popular science publications give, in turn, some scientific currency to public narratives, and professional narratives contribute to public narratives as voices from the field. Media reports and documentaries promote a certain public narrative as well, despite the fact that they are made by individual journalists. Journalists work for a particular media agency and, most likely, follow the policy of that agency, which, in turn, subscribes to a particular mainstream public narrative or disseminates alternative narratives.

In what follows, I present narratives surrounding Soviet/Russian wartime/military interpreters, ordered from meta-narrative to personal stories. I call this research model *matryoshka*, meaning that smaller narratives are inserted into larger ones. This research model is convenient for presentational reasons, but it should be cautioned that making a clear-cut distinction between different types of narrative is quite difficult for the reasons mentioned above.

## 5. The Great Patriotic War as a Russian meta-narrative

An examination of the Great Patriotic War as a Russian meta-narrative relies on the conceptual narratives of scholars who have studied that war from a narrative perspective. From the perspective of the current research, they are meta-narratives also in that they are removed from the primary analysis and provide the context for further analysis.

According to sociological enquiries, Russians consider their victory in the Great Patriotic War to be the most important event for Russia/the Soviet Union in the 20th century (Dubin, 2004). The narrative of the Great Patriotic War has been purposefully constructed since 1965

by means of state propaganda, mass media, cinematography, literature, art, education, libraries and other distribution systems (Dubin, 2004). The key storylines of the Great Patriotic War narrative underline the struggle between good (the Soviet Union) and evil (Nazi Germany), the heroism and sacrifice of the Soviet people, the wisdom of the Soviet commanders and the Soviet Union as a liberator of Europe from Nazism. The aim of this narrative has been to legitimize state power, to consolidate the Soviet/Russian people ideologically, to create a collective “us” narrative and, at the same time, to justify the entire existence of the Soviet Union (Dubin, 2004). In contrast to Germany, in Russia the war and the traumas related to it have not been worked through, and the war is more like a monument, not a memory (Dubin, 2004).

With the beginning of *perestroika* in 1985 and until the early 1990s, the revision of Stalin’s regime and a critical reevaluation of the Soviet past took place, which resulted in the temporary fading of the significance of the Great Patriotic War (see Kangaspuro & Lassila, 2012, p. 380). During the perestroika movement, it was also revealed that many wartime interpreters were charged with espionage and treason, and prosecuted (*Sovershenno sekretno*, 1995/2013). Given the longstanding presumption of *traduttore traditore* and the fact that mere foreign-language skills might arouse suspicion during the war, this was not surprising (see Footitt & Kelly, 2012, pp. 26–27).

Nevertheless, since the mid-1990s, the Great Patriotic War narrative has been reactivated, and it is gaining more and more strength as a main resource of the (re-)creation of a superpower image, Russian unity and a collective identity (see Kangaspuro & Lassila, 2012, p. 381; Kuposov, 2011). To unify the interpretation of history and to sustain officially approved narratives, legislative initiatives on the criminalization of the falsification of history emerge from time to time, not to mention the existence of schoolbooks that have been cleansed of any critical consideration of the Great Patriotic War (Kuposov, 2011). Alternative narratives do exist, but their impact on public opinion remains practically invisible, since all mainstream information conduits are state controlled (on these issues, for instance, see Yagodin, 2014).

War veterans, who share the glory of the victory, are an intrinsic part of the Great Patriotic War narrative (Kangaspuro & Lassila, 2012, p. 389). The same glory covers wartime interpreters as veterans of the Great Patriotic War. The veterans of less heroic wars, such as the war in Afghanistan (1979–1989), do not receive such a privilege.

## **6. The war in Afghanistan: A narrative of a hidden and forgotten war**

The war in Afghanistan represents an opposing narrative to the Great Patriotic War. This war, just as all other conflicts in which the Soviet Union has been involved since the 1950s, remained in the shadow of the

Great Patriotic War as less heroic and less glorious. The Soviet Union's involvement in the war in Afghanistan was presented in Soviet mass media, which acted as a mouthpiece of the official narrative of the war as international assistance to fraternal Afghanistan people in their fight against Mujahedin and their supporters – American imperialists and NATO (Avdonina, 2014, pp. 195–200). Information on the Soviet troops' participation in the fighting and the real losses of the Soviet army in Afghanistan was classified; marking the place of death on the graves of soldiers killed in Afghanistan was forbidden (Avdonina, 2012, p. 75). In the words of journalist A. Borovik, it was a “hidden war” (as cited in Avdonina, 2015).

It was not until the period of perestroika that information on the war in Afghanistan became public to the Soviet audience (Avdonina, 2012, p. 153). According to Gorbachev, “it is not our war”, and in 1986 the gradual withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan began (Avdonina, 2012, p. 159). Eventually, the Soviet involvement in the war in Afghanistan was officially declared a mistake of the previous government. Accordingly, the public narrative has changed to denoting the war in Afghanistan with phrases such as a *political mistake*, a *stalemate*, an *inglorious war* and a *vain war* (Avdonina, 2012, p. 178). This discourse also affected veterans of the war in Afghanistan. In contrast to the veterans of the Great Patriotic War, they were “deheroized”, as Avdonina (2012, p. 164) put it. The public discussion on veterans of the Afghanistan war related to the social and adaptation problems of former soldiers, hazing out the army, defection and imprisonment.

The theme of war in Afghanistan was later drowned out by the rise of other important events of the perestroika and post-perestroika periods: negative revelations of the Soviet past, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wars in Chechnya. The war in Afghanistan remained “unknown” and “forgotten” (Avdonina, 2012, p. 181). The same applies to the military interpreters of that war. According to a Ukrainian television report (Inter, 2014) on military interpreters in Afghanistan posted on the website of the MIFL veterans' union and the comments posted about the report, about 1 000 military as well as civilian interpreters, many of whom were former language students, participated in the Afghanistan war. About 200 of them were killed or went missing. From the report and the comments, the bitterness of the military interpreters of the Afghanistan war is apparent, manifested in their being “forgotten”; those who were killed were not awarded with military honours, and their relatives did not receive any monetary compensation (Inter, 2014). In addition, since military missions during peacetime are classified, contemporary military interpreters do not have the same rights and privileges as the veterans of the Great Patriotic War (Kurapova, 2009).

From these examples of the Great Patriotic War and the war in Afghanistan, the status of a particular war in a society affects the status of its veterans, including interpreters.

### **7. The MIFL: A narrative of a legendary institute**

The legendary reputation of the MIFL, the cradle of military interpreters, comes foremost from the interconnectedness of its history with the Great Patriotic War. Historicity is a narrative resource that can be used to show continuity between the past and the current situation (Baker, 2006, p. 57). In our case, the storyline reads “the institute is legendary due to its history”. The history narrative of the institute recurs in all types of data examined: popular science writings, websites, media articles, autobiographical writings and documentaries, thus, promoting the *legendary* image of the institute with this very word. In what follows, I present the elements of this narrative.

The narrative starts with historical background. The post of military interpreter of the Red Army had been established on 21 May 1929 by decree No. 125 of the Deputy Commissioner for Military and Naval Affairs, J. Unshliht.<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s, however, only short courses in military interpreting existed in various military districts of the Soviet Union. In 1940, the Moscow Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages and the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies founded the Military Faculties to train specialists with competence in the languages of potential enemies and/or allies. On the basis of these faculties, the MIFL was eventually founded in 1942. The major subjects of the institute were military interpreting/translation and foreign-language teaching for the Red Army.

The second element of the legendary narrative is about the training of the institute, which has been highly respected since its foundation, despite all the difficulties related to the war situation. With the outbreak of the war in 1941, the Soviet army desperately needed interpreters and translators; therefore, all training was directed to satisfying that need. Teaching was very intensive: training courses lasted from six weeks to six months, depending on the skills of the students, who were mainly former philology students (History of the MIFL, 2015; Zhdanova, 2009, p. 14).<sup>2</sup> Besides being taught language skills and military terminology, the students went through military training and studied the organization and equipment of the enemy army. The beginning of the war saw the publication of learning aids, such as a Russian–German military phrasebook, an interrogation technique textbook and later a German–language textbook for the Red Army (History of the MIFL, 2015; Levin, 1981, p. 27). Eventually, direct practice with captured material, such as private letters written by soldiers, diaries, soldiers’ identification cards, orders, circulars, instructions, reports, military plans, maps, and the

interrogation of prisoners of war were the main means of learning translation and interpreting skills (Levin, 1981, p. 54; Sinkliner, 1989, p. 11). Both the teaching material and the curriculum were adapted to the needs of the particular war situation, and the interpreter/translator training during the war could be compared to training “on the job” (see Footitt & Kelly, 2012, pp. 170–172). The institute trained about 4000–5000 military interpreters and translators during the war (numbers vary in different sources; see Gavrilov & Kurapova, 2012; Podoprigrora, 2010; Zhdanova, 2009).

The third element of the legendary narrative pertains to the official acknowledgement of the institute and its graduates. Thus, after graduating, students received the rank of lieutenant, which demonstrates official acknowledgment of the professions of interpreter and translator. In the same vein, official contribution to the public narrative of quiet war heroes (see below) is manifested in the decoration of 2 600 wartime interpreters and translators, which is more than the average of any other military profession (Podoprigrora, 2010).

The institute was reorganized several times after the Great Patriotic War. During the 1970s and 1980s, many officers and cadets of the institute participated in military conflicts in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Egypt, Angola, Mozambique, Libya and Iraq, among others. Similarly to the time of the Great Patriotic War, some students were sent to their destinations after intensive courses before completing the entire education programme, because they were needed quickly (Sladkov, 2012). In the 1970s and 1980s, during what was considered peacetime in the Soviet Union, more than 50 alumni, students and cadets of the institute were killed on international duty in other countries (Gavrilov & Kurapova, 2012). These events resulted in the institute’s being decorated with the Red Banner medal in 1980. This official acknowledgement also contributes to the public narrative of quiet war heroes: since military missions during peacetime are classified, the hero narrative cannot be proclaimed aloud but must be told in the form of a soundless medal.

The current successor to the institute is the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the Military University, which is subordinate to the Defence Ministry of Russia. At the moment, the faculty provides training in approximately 30 languages, including both Eastern and Western languages (Vumo, 2010): the number of languages studied depends on the global situation and Russia’s involvement in world affairs.

### **8. Professional narratives: A unique education and an indispensable multitasking profession**

The professional narratives found on the websites of the MIFL alumni club (Clubvi, 2015) and the MIFL veterans’ union (Vkimo, 2015) subscribe to the legendary institute narrative and emphasize the

*uniqueness* of their alma mater. As evidence of this uniqueness, they mention the great number of languages taught, with a special emphasis on Far, Middle and Near East languages, training expertise in foreign armies and regional studies, and an extensive military humanitarian education. According to the uniqueness narrative, the institute has a reputation for being the most intellectual among the military schools and the most military among the schools of the humanities (Podoprighora, 2010). The institute alumni are part of this uniqueness narrative, since many of them have become famous scholars, teachers, top-level interpreters/translators, writers, journalists, military and area experts, managers of large corporations, generals, politicians and diplomats in the Soviet Union/Russia (Viiapedia, 2015), including translation studies scholar R. Minjar-Beloruhev, the interpreter of state leaders V. Suhodrev, the famous writer A. Strugatskii, the diplomat and academic M. Kapitsa, and the only woman general in the Russian Army E. Kniazeva.

Military interpreting/translation is narrated as being an indispensable, much-needed profession, because, as Cherednikova's (2008) article states, "no war can do without interpreters" (in Russian: *bez tolmachei ne obhoditsia ni odna voina*; the same idea is in Kurbakov et al., 2005). Military interpreters have been involved in all the military conflicts of the Soviet Union/Russia (Kurapova, 2009; Nehamkin, 2014), of which the Soviet Union has officially recognized 25 (during the Cold War) and unofficially 37 (Nehamkin, 2014). Chuprygin (2015) states that there always is a shortage of military interpreters and translators, because the army trains specialists according to the actual demand, not for keeping in reserve. For instance, the army currently needs specialists in the Arabic language and culture (Chuprygin, 2015).

Furthermore, the tasks of wartime/military interpreters extend far beyond "just interpreting", but combine a synthesis of two professions: military officer and interpreter (Kurapova, 2009). As I have mentioned elsewhere, they are soldiers first and interpreters second (Probirskaja, 2016), "[a]nd the boundary between soldiering and 'languaging' may not be so clear-cut" (Footitt & Kelly, 2012, p. 239). Thus, wartime interpreters mainly served in two divisions: intelligence or reconnaissance units, or political propaganda units (Levin, 1981, p. 137; Zhdanova, 2009, p. 22). They performed interrogations, translated captured documents, gathered intelligence information, intercepted radio messages, participated in reconnaissance missions, composed and delivered propaganda speeches and participated in fighting alongside other soldiers. Outside of warfare, military interpreters work at training centres for foreign armies and act as assistants to military advisors and as liaison interpreters (Chuprygin, 2015; Kurapova, 2012; Loginov, n.d.). Another special type of interpreting is the interpretation of Air Force radio communications on board a plane. In addition, military interpreters are involved in Russian military cooperation with India, Syria, Argentina, Peru, Brazil and Venezuela, among others (Kurapova, 2009). Translating

functions include the translation of technical documentation, the military literature of foreign armies, radio messages and foreign media reports. In addition to these duties, military interpreters do participate in fighting (Kurapova, 2012).

### 9. The scouts' brothers narrative

Military interpreters and translators have been intertwined with military intelligence institutionally as well as in practice, and from this background the scouts' brothers narrative emerges. Institutionally, the MIFL was subordinate to the Military Intelligence headquarters, which also approved the curriculum of the institute. In addition, according to the structural organization of Military Intelligence, military interpreters and translators functioned at all levels of military intelligence, from the headquarters of the army to the regiments (Defence Commissariat order No. 0071, 19 April 1943 on the reorganization of the Military Intelligence administration of the Red Army headquarters).

With regard to the handling of this intelligence in practice, the famous Soviet scout and writer V. Karpov calls interpreters "scouts' brothers", arguing that intelligence has no meaning without the translation of the captured material or interpretation for a prisoner of war (Karpov, cited in Levin, 1981, p. 5). This citation from Karpov recurs in all the data, thus marking this narrative as both public and popular. Another recurring expression states that "intelligence is blind without interpreters" (Rzhevskaja, interviewed in Samoilova, 2010).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, wartime interpreters accompanied reconnaissance missions to capture enemy soldiers and to immediately interrogate them, to follow the enemy troops at close range or to infiltrate enemy lines and operate in enemy territory. Since these operations took place on the frontlines, they are described in literature and documentaries with the words *dangerous*, *risky* and *sacrificial*. The same narratives are applied to wartime interpreters serving in political propaganda units who risked their lives on the frontlines delivering propaganda speeches to the enemy.

The main task of reconnaissance missions was to obtain information on the enemy's plans and to obtain a "tongue" (*jazyk* in Russian), that is, a prisoner of war captured for interrogation purposes. Since the interrogation of a "tongue" was the task of the interpreter (Levin, 1981, p. 93), the importance of the interpreter's role in obtaining crucial military information is clearly demonstrated here. According to the scouts' brothers narrative, the work of interpreters prevented many enemy offensives before they started, and saved many cities from destruction (Kurbakov et al., 2005; Levin, 1981, p. 100). The narration depicts military interpreting as a highly responsible profession (see also Gorbachev, interviewed in Okroev, 2012) in that the success of the next battle and the lives of other soldiers may well depend on an interpreter's

abilities to convey crucial information during reconnaissance missions (Inter, 2014; Levin, 1981, p. 83). Thus, interpreting is indeed an indispensable part of military intelligence and reconnaissance.

### 10. Invisible soldiers narrative

The narrative of invisible soldiers is related to the narrative of the scouts' brothers. The origin of this narrative comes from the Russian phrase calling scouts "soldiers of the invisible front" (*boitsy nevidimogo fronta*). The invisibility narrative emerges from representing military interpreting as a subaltern, unknown and misunderstood profession, which is, in addition, invisible both in literature and in academic research. It is argued that the military interpreter's profession is unknown to the greater audience, and that the greater audience considers it as a non-combat, non-heroic profession (Sladkov, 2012; *Sovershenno sekretno*, 2013). Since military interpreting and translation are associated with administrative work at headquarters, interpreters and translators are imagined as working in a back room, in a warm place, performing the easy task of translating documents (Sinkliner, 1989, p. 18). Public opinion is partly correct in that some interpreters and translators do indeed work at headquarters, but they are also badly needed on the frontline, not only on reconnaissance missions, but also as fighting soldiers (Kurapova, 2012; *Sovershenno sekretno*, 2013).

The reason for the public ignorance about military interpreters and translators might be due to the limited amount of literature on them, and because even what exists is mainly memoir-biographical in nature (Cherednikova, 2008; Zhdanova, 2009, p. 8). This is not just the case in Russia but internationally – "translators and interpreters are largely invisible in existing accounts of any war" (Baker, 2010, p. 202). What is more, interpreters do not have their own subject category in catalogues of military archives (see Footitt & Kelly, 2012, pp. 10–11). The causes and consequences of this invisibility are difficult to pinpoint: Is it the invisibility of the profession that makes interpreters marginal in archives, or is it in the way in which archives are organized that makes interpreters invisible? Whatever the truth, the problem is that memoirs and archive documents seldom focus on interpreting as such.

Academic research on military interpreters is scarce as well, even in Russia where major scholars of translation studies have a background in military interpreting. One explanation is that Russian translation studies is still linguistically orientated, that is, the social context is not taken into account (see Kemppanen, 2012a, 2012b on Russian translation studies). Second, military interpreting and translation have been intertwined with intelligence and state secrecy in the Soviet Union/Russia, and this area is closed to civilian researchers.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the MIFL was closed to the public and was not mentioned in

any lists of schools of higher education in the Soviet Union (Sladkov, 2012). This secrecy is even reflected in the name of the documentary about this topic: *Sovershenno sekretno* [Top Secret].

At the same time, the heroic aura of military interpreters derives directly from the invisibility narrative, because they are a kind of martyr who honourably and with dignity have fulfilled their duties, without claiming awards or glory. They are narrated as representatives of “a quiet profession” as opposed to “loud glorious professions” (Karpov, quoted in Levin, 1981, p. 5). The invisibility narrative states that they remain in the shadows of those whom they interpret, but much depends on them (Okroev, 2012) – the success of negotiations or even the successful outcome of the next battle. Interpreters and translators play an important role in making history, but remain invisible and unnoticed in the background (Chuzhakin, 2005, pp. 77–78).

## 11. Legendary wartime interpreters

In the next two subsections, I present the stories of two wartime interpreters who have been characterized as legendary: V. Gall and E. Rzhavskaia. Stories on them during wartime recur in different online media, becoming components for constructing a public narrative. Gall’s story contributes to a popular narrative that depicts wartime interpreters with the words “their weapon was the word”, which is a kind of “master plot” or “skeletal storyline” filled in with particularities from Gall’s story (see Baker, 2006, p. 78 on particularity as a feature of narrative). The titles of the media articles devoted to him demonstrate the image he represents: *His word was harder than the Citadel* (Kostiuhin, 2009); *The Citadel surrendered without a fight* (“Krepost Shpandau sdalas bez boia”, 2010); *A negotiator conquered the fortress with a word* (Kanavin, 2005). Rzhavskaia’s story as an interpreter and “the woman who held Hitler’s teeth” (Lovejoy, 2011) contributes to the narrative that interpreters are involved in history-making. She is “a witness of the century” (*Svidetel veka*), as reads the name of a documentary series, one part of which was devoted to her (Shlianin, 2000).

### 11.1 “He conquered the fortress with a word”

“He” was Vladimir Gall, a German-language translator/interpreter who served in a political propaganda unit during the war. Before the war, he had graduated from the Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature in Moscow. At the end of the war, on 1 May 1945, he participated in negotiations on the surrender of the Citadel Spandau in Berlin. He walked alone with another Soviet officer to the citadel to negotiate with German officers on its voluntary surrender, and the negotiations were successful.

This operation is described in numerous publications available on the Russian Internet as a “heroic feat” (see Kanavin, 2005; Kostiuhin, 2009; “Krepost Shpandau sdalas bez boia”, 2010; Levandrovski, 2009; Pobeda 2010; Prenzlauer, 2013; Russkii mir, 2011). According to the main storylines, at the end of the war, negotiations with the enemy were extremely dangerous – some negotiators were killed during the negotiations. Thanks to Gall and his fellow officer, meaningless bloodshed was prevented, and the civilians inhabiting the citadel were protected from a possible battle. According to an interview with Gall (in Zhdanova, 2009, pp. 134–152) and the publications devoted to him, the civilians were grateful to him for saving their lives, and the German officers were impressed that the Soviet officers had been courageous enough to come alone to the lair of the enemy. Here Gall’s story subscribes to the Great Patriotic War narrative, depicting Soviet soldiers as courageous and humane.

The negotiations in Spandau were illustrated in the Soviet–East German film “*Mne bylo 19*” [“I was 19”] directed in 1967 by Gall’s friend, Konrad Wolf, a German antifascist serving in the Soviet army. From 1950 and until his retirement, Gall was a Senior Lecturer in German language at the Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages (Zhdanova, 2009, p. 120).

### 11.2 “A witness of the century”

Born in 1919, Elena Rzhavskaia, like Gall, studied at the Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature before the war (Ru.wikipedia, 2015). She voluntarily joined the army and became a German-language interpreter after having finished a short programme of military interpreter courses at the MIFL. Rzhavskaia is the author of numerous autobiographical documentary books and novels “revealing the human face of war” (Elkost, 2015). Rzhavskaia had difficulties publishing her works after the war precisely because she describes everyday life and the human experience of war instead of heroic stories (Samoilova, 2010). The most famous of her works is *Berlin, May 1945*. This book has been republished about ten times, and excerpts of it have been translated into about 20 languages (Elkost, 2015). It was published for the first time in 1965, 20 years after the end of the Great Patriotic War and at the time of Khrushchev’s thaw, when censorship had abated to some extent. The book was a sensation then, because Rzhavskaia had revealed the details of the operation for identifying the remains of Hitler’s corpse.

During the last days of the war, in May 1945, Rzhavskaia took part as an interpreter in the discovery and identification of the body of Adolf Hitler and was the first person to read the documents related to the history and the last days of the Reich (among which were the

personal papers of Hitler, the correspondence of Magda Goebbels, and most important, the diaries of Goebbels), and to prepare them for archiving. (Elkost, 2015)

Rzhevskaja was entrusted with a small satin-lined box containing Hitler's teeth, which had been wrenched from his corpse by a Russian pathologist for later identification ("Secret evidence of Hitler's identity", 2005). Rzhevskaja was told that she had to guard the box with her life until a dentist who could identify the teeth as Hitler's could be found. For some reason, Stalin had proclaimed the whole identification operation secret. "Only two officers knew what I was carrying and I had to hold my tongue," Rzhevskaja told *The Observer* ("Secret evidence of Hitler's identity", 2005). She was forced to keep this secret until the 1960s:

By the will of fate I came to play a part in not letting Hitler achieve his final goal of disappearing and becoming a myth. Only with time did I finally manage to overcome all the obstacles and make public this "secret of the century". I managed to prevent Stalin's dark and murky ambition from taking root – his desire to hide from the world that we had found Hitler's corpse. (Rzhevskaja, quoted in Elkost, 2015)

## 12. Conclusion

The public narrative of a particular war, that is, how it is perceived in a society, has an impact on the attitudes towards the veterans of that war. Therefore, whereas the veteran interpreters of the Great Patriotic War are represented unconditionally as heroes, the veteran interpreters of the Afghanistan war do not have such a glorious status, but are depicted rather as forgotten and unknown heroes.

The legendary reputation of the MIFL is sustained mainly by its history narrative. Professional narratives, in turn, focus on the unique education the institute provided, on the indispensable and multitasking nature of the military interpreter profession, and on the high social status of its alumni in various sectors of society: science, education, journalism, business, politics, diplomacy and the army. However, the military interpreting background of these distinguished individuals is largely unknown, which gives them the aura of mysterious masons in a strong closed community. This view is reflected in the general narratives depicting military interpreters as invisible heroes who, unknown to the public, faithfully fulfil their duties (invisible soldiers narrative), whose job is full of responsibility and risks (the scouts' brothers narrative), whose word can save lives (Gall's story), and who, hidden in the background, participate in history-making (Rzhevskaja's story). *Courage*, *valour* and *honour* are words used in connection with wartime/military

interpreters. Their invisibility causes some bitterness, especially among veteran interpreters of the Afghanistan war, but at the same time, it is what makes them martyrs.

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1 Since 2000, this day has been celebrated in Russia as a professional holiday for military interpreters and translators.

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- 2 Complete training would take three years.
  - 3 Cf. “without languages, ‘human intelligence’ is not accessible” (Footitt & Kelly, 2012, p. 55).
  - 4 This state of affairs not only exists in Russia, but in other parts of the world as well (see Baker, 2010, p. 203; Footitt & Kelly, 2012).