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When Philology Becomes Ideology: The Russian Perspective of J. R. R. Tolkien

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Translated by M. T. Hooker

Although I am old and gray of head,
And free of the stresses that others all dread,
I would learn English¹ and only because
The Professor in it wove a marvelous clause.
——Russian Tolkienist Limerick

Interest in the literary creations of J.R.R. Tolkien took flight almost immediately after the publication of *Lord of the Rings* (1955). The political system in Russia during the Soviet period, however, was not quite receptive to a book like this. The Iron Curtain kept the Russian reader well protected from everything that was happening in western society. The concepts of twentieth-century English literature were distorted and details extremely scanty. The English authors who were translated were carefully selected, and the official publication of translations of the works of such authors as G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams was practically impossible. That the publication of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* was hindered because the censor thought that the chapter "Piper at the Gates of Dawn" was dangerous is an excellent example of the situation that Tolkien's books were destined to encounter in the Soviet Union.

In the 1950s, a group of translators who were devotees of western literature formed around Zinaida Bobyr, a well-known translator of science fiction. The popularity of this genre in the USSR grew in the late-1950s following the launch of the first artificial earth satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957. Bobyr's list of translation credits includes Brian Aldiss, Isaac Asimov, John Gordon, Edmond Hamilton, Clifford Simak, and Stanislaw Lem, whom she translated from Polish. She was the one who first decided to acquaint the Soviet reader with *The Lord of the Rings*. In order to get around the barriers of censorship, however, she had to find a way to make it resemble the literature that was acceptable in the USSR, which meant that she had to reduce Tolkien's text either to a fairy tale or to science fiction.

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Bobyř's "translation" combined *The Hobbit* and the trilogy under the common name of *The Lay of the Ring* [Повесть о Кольце]. The book was subjected to a considerable abridgement, and at the beginning of each chapter there was a short "interlude." The translator's plan was that the book would be introduced by two letters, one written by Tolkien and one written by an imaginary friend of his. In his letter to the "readers," Tolkien said that "he received the manuscript and the accompanying cover letter" from a friend who works at the "Institute for Difficult Studies in Derbyshire." In this letter, the friend told Bobyř's Tolkien that "as a result of some unbelievable circumstances" he had been part "of a certain experiment," which "had ended tragically." In addition to "Tolkien's friend," the other participants in the experiment were an Engineer, a Physicist, a Chemist, a Computer Scientist, and a Coordinator, the same cast of characters who appear in Stanisław Lem's *Eden*. The origin of the Tolkien's renowned All-powerful Ring was explained scientifically as the Ring having been found when a drill core of basalt was melted. The heroes of the "interlude" record the Ring's history in a series of flashbacks, drawing the conclusion that the Ring is a special "device," "a repository of information, which it releases when subjected to sparks."²

This approach was the translator's idea of how to make it easier to get Tolkien into print. Fortunately, this monstrous plan was not successful, and this hideous hybrid remained a manuscript. Bobyř's work can, however, be viewed as the first Russian novel inspired by *The Lord of the Rings*. The difference between this and other Russian Tolkienesque literature is that this one is attributed to Tolkien, and not to its real author.

Having failed to publish *The Lord of the Rings* as Science-Fantasy, Bobyř tried to turn it into Fairy-Fantasy, producing yet another version of the trilogy under her editorship, adding something that finds no corollary at all in Tolkien's works: "The Silver Crown of Westernness." In the Chapter "Across the Mountains," Gandalf describes it as "one of the great treasures that the foreign travelers from across the sea brought with them." It is not just any crown either. "Whosoever dares to place the Silver Crown upon his head will receive omniscience and the greatest of wisdom, or will be turned to ashes on the spot, if he is not sufficiently prepared for it." At the end of *The Lay of the Ring*, Aragorn uses the crown for his coronation.

Despite all these machinations, disguising *The Lord of the Rings* as a translation, peppering it with elements from Russian folklore and terminology from science-fiction (the term "foreign travelers," for example, is used as an euphemism for extra-terrestrials in Russian science fiction), even this abridged retelling was not allowed to be published. It was, however, typed by hand in three copies, which were bound into

books that made the rounds of a small circle of the translator's friends in the mid-1960s. It was finally officially published during Perestroika in 1990.

The danger of *The Lord of the Rings* that was noted by some commentators was the hidden allegory “of the conflict between the individualist West and the totalitarian, Communist East.” In a newspaper article entitled “Tolkien’s Cosmos,” the social order instituted by Saruman is termed communistic, because the description of the lands under his sway could have easily been applied to the Soviet Union. Everything that the farmers grew was collected (think “collective farm”). Prohibitive rules and regulations were posted everywhere. All travelers from other countries were controlled. Defenders of justice and freethinkers were punished. The commentators’ conclusion being that “*The Lord of the Rings* is—among other things—a political pamphlet in which Tolkien included an encoded description of the conflict of the political darkness of the East and the freedom of the West, and a prediction of the inevitable fall of Mordor and its analog on the real earth, the Soviet Union.”³ It is interesting to notice that modern Communists think differently about this. They view the anti-industrial ideas of Tolkien’s works as a return to primordial Communism, and discuss the possibility of creating a type of “Red,” Communist fantasy, whose father could be considered Tolkien.⁴

Soviet censors were not so optimistically inclined, and, therefore, the first complete, officially approved translation done by Vladimir Murav’ev and Andrej Kistyakovskij (there are now nine published Russian translations) was not published until 1992. The appearance of the Murav’ev and Kistyakovskij translation was a defining moment in the history of Russian Tolkienism. The translation was maximally Russified and is very much more emotionally specific than the original. Sam and Frodo in the Murav’ev and Kistyakovskij translation are presented as very close friends, and the elves sound like uncouth teenagers when they speak. The translators emphasize aggression as a dominating motivation.

In the preface to the translation, Murav’ev wrote: “The magical world, through which Mr. Baggins journeyed, is not all that magical. It is our world in disguise, but you can see through the disguise with a little experience.”⁵ Therefore, all of Tolkien’s text was perceived as the personal experience of someone doing battle with the Soviet power structure. In addition to that, the intentionally aggressive tone helped the translators bring out the nature of authoritarianism: “This is a book about the nature of power, which seeks after power over mankind, power without morals, an enslaving power, based on lies and violence.”⁶ *The Lord of the Rings* was turned into a three-volume banner for the fight for freedom and human rights. It was natural that this viewpoint caused a certain mutation in the perception of Tolkien’s works by the Russian

reader and that the Russian brand of Tolkienism is a direct reflection of that mutation.

Even in this distorted form, *The Lord of the Rings* became a breath of fresh air for many a Russian intellectual. The Tolkienist Movement began to take shape at Moscow State University, and, almost immediately, an informer sent the KGB a denunciation of this secretive, underground group that went off into the woods to hold secret meetings and practice hand-to-hand combat. The student body was infiltrated and it was learned that these people were reading the works of some “American” author, and that they called themselves Tolkienists.⁷

Inasmuch as the majority of the first Tolkienists had been in the Comsomol, and some of them had even become Communists, the essence of the movement was expressed as an opposition to the structures of government and the movement’s ideological base was a revolt against the Soviet system. It was during this time that an article appeared entitled “The Sources and Ideas of Russian Tolkienism.” An indication of its content can be found in its antecedent. In this article, A. Barkova paraphrased the well-known work entitled “The Sources and Ideas of Russian Communism” by the Russian religious philosopher N. A. Berdyaev (1874-1948), who left Russia after the Revolution of 1917, and who attained the rank of Professor at Cambridge in 1947. Much in the same way that Berdyaev shifted from a philosophy of Marxism to a philosophy of individualism and freedom, the first Tolkienists, reading the distorted Murav’ev and Kistyakovskij translation, saw in it a way out of the dead-end ideology, the structured, totalitarian world of evil, lies, and slavery.

Tolkien’s were not the only ideas that were sucked into the philosophical vacuum of Russia at that time. With the fall of the Communist regime, Russia was flooded with literature of so-called “foreign Russian” authors, philosophers, and historians, who had not accepted the Revolution and fled abroad after the Soviets took power, people like Berdyaev. There were also the works of banned authors who had been imprisoned in the Stalinist camps, like Solzhenitsyn. People tried to fit Tolkien’s ideas into the Russian paradigm and interpret them in the light of the teachings of Russian philosophers and theologians. For example, the All-powerful Ring was seen by some as the allegorical embodiment of sin, that Pavel Florenskij⁸ expounded upon in his *The Pillar and Base of Truth*. The Russian analogy of Tolkien’s “secondary” world was found by others in *The Rose of the World* by Daniil Andreev.⁹

Despite efforts like these to find tangents to Tolkien in Russian culture, the reason for the popularity of this English author in Russia is that many Russian ideas are abstractly philosophical in character and are of interest only to a narrow circle of intellectuals, while Tolkien’s world is close at

hand and seems real to many.

The ideas contained in *The Lord of the Rings* became important and necessary in this unstable country that had long been held in intellectual slavery, because the values presented in Tolkien's books are not abstract categories and not utopian. He translated morality from the realm of words to the realm of action, which gave birth to the need to live Tolkien's world, and led to the creation of role-playing games.

The basic trait of Tolkienesque culture in Russia at that time could be characterized as living in two worlds. Tolkien's mythology, which took one beyond the limits of historical time, became a sort of Magic Key to the unknown universe that opened the present time to the world of antiquity.

The early 1990s saw "Hobbit Games" being held in many Russian cities. In Moscow, a "City of Masters" was founded. Gaming Masters not only worked out scenarios, but also made corresponding props and costumes. In the mid-1990s, the City of Masters counted about two hundred Tolkienesque clubs and organizations as participants in the "Hobbit Games." The role-playing movement spread as far as Siberia, where the "Siberian Con," which consists of a program of sword-fighting tournaments, concerts of original music, an overview of the games and a grand ball, is still held today.

The popularity of the Hobbit Games, was, obviously, also influenced by the fact that during the last two decades, Russian society has seen a rebirth of courtly gatherings, patriotic monarchists, Cossacks and other stylized recreations of the past, which provided an appropriate backdrop for them. Tolkien's world, however, has proved itself much wiser and more cozy, and, therefore, many Russian intellectuals moved right in to Middle-earth. Playing at *The Lord of the Rings*, which at first served as a search for an alternative to Communist ideology, has today become an alternative for the contemporary ideology of the commercialization of society.

Nevertheless, it would not be correct to equate Tolkienists with role-players, for whom the game has gradually become dominant, pushing Tolkien's books onto the background. The Russian Tolkienist movement underwent an internal split, making it look like a tree with two crowns on a single trunk. There are scholarly Tolkienists whose primary interests are the study and translation of Tolkien's literary legacy, and the creation of their own original songs, poems and art based on his works. There are the gamers, whose playing at Tolkien's bright world has gone beyond the borders of a simple game, to become a lifestyle, to form a special ritual, demanding serious self-discipline.

Tolkienists have turned to the sources, which form the base for *The Lord of the Rings*: the literary heritage of the Celts, Northern mythology

and folklore, etc., and Tolkien's works have become a guidebook into this rational, solid, inspired world. As a counterweight to the cult of technology, the cult of supermen, the cult of violence, Tolkien offered the reader a completely different path: to the earth, into the past, into the depths of myths and fairy tales, and for many this path has proved itself to be the true one, inasmuch as the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* live in a river of time measured in millennia, and not within the fragile shell of contemporary time, which separates the consciousness of man from its origins.

Despite the depth and breadth of the Tolkien phenomenon, the mass media often refuse to note the positive facets of Tolkienism, intentionally exaggerating its sociological effect. Following a sensational article entitled "A Black Mass. A Lesson for Life,"¹⁰ the Russian FBI (FSBRF) took an interest in Tolkienists. The author of the article accused Tolkien's readers of Satanism and sacrificial rituals, an accusation that, when investigated, turned out to be complete nonsense and slander.

A reluctance to delve deeper into the true essence of Tolkienism is also engendered by attempts to categorize it as a sect, and to view it as the emergence of neo-religiosity. These attempts are based on a chain of prerequisites. The first structural prerequisite for the formation of a "Tolkienian" religion is the presence of a "sacred text" and the possibility of the construction of a "sacred history." The next part of the structure is the presence of Tolkienists who have not read Tolkien.¹¹ This is bound up in the "ritual" of the giving of names, which is likened to the catechism of new converts to Christianity.¹²

The reasons listed above, however, are not sufficient for the creation of a "sect" or neo-religious movement, just as an author's cult following by itself is insufficient. Structures like those above are simply a profanation, a desire to subvert Tolkien's works into a new ideology, a myth of mass culture or a game, the rules of which have little to do with an Oxford Professor.

Russians, united by Tolkien's literary works, get together primarily to discuss his works and their own original works based on his creations. They are not locked into a "secondary world," nor do they desire to be escapists. They are only expanding the boundaries of the real world. It is Tolkien himself who remains the Lord of the Minds of many a generation of Russian readers, and his books continue to inspire them to the creation of their own "secondary worlds."

The reason for the unflagging popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien in Russia is that the pre-historic reality of his books is a continuation of, or, perhaps, the pre-quel to the thrilling novel written by the Author of the "primary" world (i.e. God), and, therefore, in any context—even the most esoteric—Tolkien's creations can find a lively resonance and understanding. Time

and space are not that important here, because the tale of this English author appeals to the universe and eternity.

NOTES

- 1 There have been three various Russian editions of *The Hobbit* for Russian-speaking English learners.
 - Хоббит, или туда и обратно (*Hobbit, or There and Back Again*): Учебное пособие для педагогических институтов по специальности «Иностранный язык». М.: Просвещение, 1982.
 - *Learn English with the Hobbit*: Английский язык для детей. По сказке J.R.R.Т. Хоббит, или туда и обратно. СПб: МП «ТЕКАРТ», 1992.
 - *Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. Серия: книги для чтения на иностранных языках. Издательство «Престе», 2000.
- 2 Семенова Н. «Это не просто кольцо, а какой-то прибор» // Знание – сила. No. 9, 1997.
- 3 Слепцов У. Космос Толкина. // Независимая газета. 30.01.1997.
- 4 <http://www.comunist.ru/cgi-bin/article.cgi?id=0300dudko0101>
- 5 Толкин Дж.Р.Р. Властелин колец. Т. 1. // Пер. с англ. В. Муравьева, А. Кустяковского. М., 1992. С. 15.
- 6 Муравьева и Кустяковского, 1992. С. 27.
- 7 Шлеймов Р. Хохмы железного Феликса. // Независимая газета, No. 54, 02.08.2001.
- 8 P. A. Florenskij (1882-1937) was a philosopher, theologian, engineer, biologist, mathematician, poet, orthodox priest, the “Russian Leonardo da Vinci.” In 1928, he was exiled to the Russian North; in 1933, he was arrested and sentenced to a Stalinist camp. He was executed by firing squad in 1937. *The Pillar and Base of Truth* is a religious tract, reflecting his Weltanschauung, based on the Greek Orthodox tradition, in which he tries to synthesize science and religion, sense and sensibility, reason and intuition.
- 9 L. Andreev (1906-1959) was a poet, author, religious philosopher, and

sociologist. He fought in World War II. In 1947, he was accused of “anti-Soviet literary activity,” arrested and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. *The Rose of the World* is a synthesis of all the “religions of light,” in which he tries to create a meta-history of Russia, Russian culture, human evolution and “the spiritual growth of the individual.” *The Rose of the World* is full of the mystical revelations of different cultures and religions. In it, Andreev presents his view of the “meta-religion of the future” as well as a hierarchical system of worlds, both visible and invisible. The book offers a tossed-salad of science, social utopias, and religious inspirations, forming a kind of occult “superknowledge” and claiming the power of being able to transform the world completely.

- 10 Беспалов А. Черная месса. Урок на всю жизнь. // Российская газета, No. 175, 11.09.1998.
- 11 Сиверцев М.А. Толкинизм как элемент неорелигиозности. // Палантур, No. 24, 2000.
- 12 Ярцева К. Феномен неорелигиозности: «Обретение себя» в толкинизме. // Палантур, No. 26, 2000.