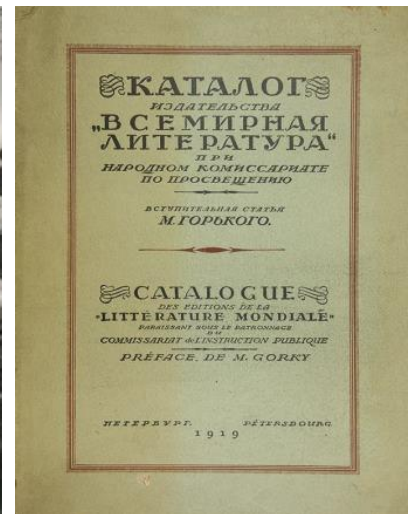


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## The Birth Pangs of a Future: Translating the World Literature into Vsemirnaia Literatura

The early Soviet translation project 'Vsemirnaia Literatura' (VL) (1918–1937) was initiated in the early days of the young Soviet Russia. The group was led by Maksim Gorky and several prominent literary figures of the time. The significance of the project was that it attempted to develop principles of literary translation as a literary activity approached from a new ideological and political perspective – masterpieces of the world literature were transformed into the literary treasure house fit for a state of workers and peasants. In this sense, the VL was meant to be an organic part of the proletarian ideology aimed at destroying the past and building a radically new future (cf. ves' mir nasil'ia my razrushim do osnovan'ia, a zatem my svoi, my novy mir postroim as was sung in the Russian version of 'The Internationale'). The transformation was, however, not always a rupture as it was desired. Rather it was a complex process of negotiation as can be observed in the case of the VL.



While the predominant tenor of the discourse at the time was to start from scratch, the VL turned out to be a compromise from the beginning. As a literary activity, translation had to return to the pre-revolutionary tradition of Russian literary translation: both practitioners and practices came from there. The first generation of the VL translators were necessarily translators who had begun their careers well before the 1917 revolution and the newly formed Soviet state: there were simply no proletarian translators as yet. The selection committee which defined the repertoire of literary works for translation and who educated new generations of literary translators were themselves representatives of the pre-revolutionary literary generations and, of course, they were selecting pieces from the old world which was to supposed be 'destroyed to its foundation'. The challenge was to forge a new tradition recycling 'old materials'. The VL, a translation project, became the site of translating not only literature, but also of transforming the past into the future. I will examine the VL and translation in it as a series of negotiations between continuities and discontinuities, ideological problems and suggested solutions, challenges and compromises played out in shaping a new Soviet school of literary translation.

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The paper, presented at the **World Literature in the Soviet Union** workshop at Queen Mary University of London, 28-29 June 2018, is also a contribution to the [History of Innovation in the Humanities](#) series of the [Transnational Strand of the Cross-Language Dynamics OWRI project](#).