

# Translation of the Bible in the USSR and Russia

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IVAN V. LOBANOV

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In 1917, I. E. Evseev described, in the article “The Council and the Bible,” the need for a new biblical translation in the Russian language. At the time, the only available Russian translation was the Russian Synodal Bible; however, as Eyseev explained, it was a clumsy and archaic edition.

While this translation was completed relatively recently, only in 1875, there is a pressing need for its revision or, more correctly, complete replacement... The style of this translation is heavy and archaic, with the language artificially close to Slavonic... This is the language of pre-Pushkin’s time, not improved by flight of inspiration or artistic merits of the literary text.<sup>1</sup>

The Synodal Translation was made in Russia between 1858 and 1876, and it was partly based on the existing translations of the New Testament books available in the early 1820s, as well as some books of the Old Testament translated, in the period of the Russian Orthodox Church’s silence, by Father Gerasim (Pavsky) and Archimandrite Macarius (Glukharev), who received punishment from church authorities for their translations.

Unfortunately, Eyseev’s proposal to revise the Synodal Translation became irrelevant at the beginning of the twentieth century due to the upheaval of revolution and subsequent civil war. The Russian Empire was succeeded first by the Russian Republic and then by the Soviet Union. Since Marxism-Leninism became the dominant ideology and gave rise to militant atheism, any efforts for updating the previous Russian translations of the Bible were immediately eliminated from the agenda. Moreover, access to the Bible became inhibited; first it ceased to be printed, and then it was completely withdrawn from public libraries. For a short period, Protestants were allowed to print the Bible in a limited edition, but this time of relative freedom soon ended. The copies of the Bible in the Russian language could only be delivered from abroad and were regarded as contraband goods, which people could purchase on the black market at the risk of personal liberty for distribution of religious literature.

The three attempts to update the Russian Synodal Bible during the Soviet period deserve special mention. In the 1930s, Pastor Bernard Goetze, who lived at that time in Warsaw, Poland, revised the text of the Synodal Translation very carefully by replacing some outdated pronouns with newer ones and making minor

clarifications. He explained,

We removed from the Russian text some archaic words and phrases, which were understandable to every Russian person about a century ago, when the Bible was originally translated into Russian, but then little by little were disused in a colloquial language. It is self-understood that we proceeded with extreme caution, not only without violating the accuracy of the text, but also preserving sublime style and solemn order of the Russian translation of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

The second attempt was the translation of the New Testament edited by Bishop Cassian (Bezobrazov). This work was started in 1953 under the sponsorship of the British and Foreign Bible Society by a small group led by the Russian biblical scholar Bishop Cassian (1982-1965) at the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. The group also included Archpriest Nikolai Kulomzin, Baptist Pastor A. Vasiliev, and their followers. Boris Zaitsev, a Russian writer, was responsible for literary editing of the biblical text. Initially, it was supposed to be a revision of the Russian Synodal Bible; however, the group came to the conclusion that a new Russian version of the New Testament was necessary. The Russian Cassian New Testament embraced the achievements of biblical textology, the connection of the New Testament Koine with the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, as well as some changes that had occurred in the Russian language since the first publication of the Synodal Translation. The complete Cassian New Testament was published outside of the Soviet Union in 1970. In Russia, this book was not published until the late 1990s by the Russian Bible Society.

Finally, the third attempt was a project carried out by Soviet philologists and translators for a volume of the *World Literature Library* named *Poetry and Prose of the Ancient East*. The last section of the volume was devoted to ancient Hebrew literature with an introductory article written by I. Dyakonov. In his article, Dyakonov expounded on the history of the Jewish people, remarking that the biblical text has been conveyed from generation to generation since ancient times. He characterized Hebrew literature as biblical literature and described its artistic features. The section included *The Song of Songs* and *Ecclesiastes*, translated by I. Dyakonov; *The Book of Genesis* (Chapters 6-8, the Flood) and *The Book of Jonah*, translated by S. Apt; *The Book of Ruth*, translated by I. Braginsky; and *The Book of Job*, translated by S. Averintsev. All translations were briefly annotated. Regrettably, this very successful project did not include the entire Bible.

Other experiences in translating the Holy Scripture into Russian go beyond the history of the Soviet Union and belong to the history of Russia. Thanks to Gorbachev's *perestroika* (1985-1991), the former *samizdat* and *tamizdat* (literature banned in Soviet times) began to be published in the Soviet Union, first carefully and partly illegally, and then openly. The Bible also appeared for sale, albeit from private sellers only.

The idea of preparing a new translation gained momentum in the early 1990s after several attempts to popularize the Bible. For example, in celebration of the millennial anniversary of Christianity in Russia—an event known as the Millennium of the Baptism of Russia—in 1988 the Bible Translation Institute (at that time headquartered in Stockholm) published, in cooperation with other organizations, the Explanatory Bible of

Lopukhin and his successors. The publishers frequently had to explain the biblical text in the comments, by translating it from old Russian into modern Russian, or to point out that the original text sounds somewhat different than that in the Synodal Translation. Eventually, it was necessary to read the Bible with a person who had additional knowledge, such as a clergyman, linguist, or another person possessing religious knowledge.

New translations appeared in the West in both English and German, so enthusiasts decided to translate the Bible from English into Russian, because there were many more specialists in these languages. *The Bible in Modern Russian Translation* by the Texas Translation Institute is one such translation (first published in the early 1990s, it is still in print). However, any translation from a mediator language will not be correct and, therefore, cannot be implicitly trusted.

At the beginning of the 1990s, several groups were organized to translate individual books of the Bible. The era of *glasnost* opened up new opportunities for those who dreamed of sharing the Word of God, since spiritual revival in Russia was impossible without access to the Holy Scriptures. Many Russian scientists, biblical scholars, and clergymen, such as S. S. Averintsev, Father Alexander Borisov, A. M. Bychkov, Archpriest Alexander Men', M. P. Kulakov, A. A. Rudenko, and N. L. Trauberg, saw the importance of publishing a new translation.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, these ideas began to take shape. Simultaneously, although independently of each other, a number of books of the Bible were translated and published in Russian. Among them were the author's translations of individual books of the Bible appeared thanks to efforts of enthusiasts, such as the Synoptic Gospels translated by Father Leonid Lutkovsky, the Canonic Gospels translated by V. N. Kuznetsova, the Epistle to the Romans translated by M. P. Kulakov, and the Gospel according to Mark translated by S. V. Lezov.

Later on, several projects for translation of the complete Bible into Russian were launched. It is worth mentioning not only the translation of the Holy Scriptures made by the International Bible Society—originally entitled *The Word of Life Bible*, its revised version of the New Testament was later published as *The Bible for Our Life*—but also the translation of the Bible made by the Russian Bible Society (RBS).

Around this time the Bible Translation Institute was founded under the umbrella of Zaoksky Theological Seminary. As a result of decades-long efforts, it became possible to prepare a new version of the Bible in the contemporary Russian language. It is worth considering in more detail the translations made by the Russian Bible Society (RBS) in 2011 and the Bible Translation Institute in Zaoksky (BTI) in 2015.

The RBS translation consists of the New Testament, prepared by V. N. Kuznetsova and revised for this edition by a group of specialists, and the Old Testament, prepared by the Hebraists under watchful eye of M. G. Seleznev. This is an overt translation accompanied by extensive historical and philological commentaries. Interestingly, Metropolitan Illarion (Alfeev) wrote a negative review of the translation of Paul's epistles made by V. N. Kuznetsova, reproaching the translator for a peculiar choice of vocabulary and calling her translation a “bad retelling,” in which Pavel's speech allegedly resembles a squabble in the kitchen. It is only fair to say that there

were also positive reviews of this translation, which highly rated the painstaking work of the translator. Speaking of the tasks of the RBS translation, M. G. Seleznev noted that the team of translators, among other things, was keen to convey the stylistic features inherent in the authentic text. The preface to the first edition reads:

First of all, it is necessary for translators to convey the exact meaning of the Holy Scripture by literary means rather than to reproduce its verbal form. At the same time, it is also necessary to preserve the expressive uniqueness of the biblical texts, which relate to different historical epochs, literary genres and linguistic styles.<sup>3</sup>

The translation prepared by the Zaoksky Bible Translation Institute was published

thanks to the enthusiasm and selfless work of Mikhail Petrovich Kulakov (1927–2010), the famous church and public figure and honorary member of the board of the Russian Bible Society... Away back in the years of the state atheism in the USSR, M. P. Kulakov<sup>4</sup> cherished a dream of making a new translation of the Holy Scriptures, aiming to promote the familiarization of compatriots with the ideological and artistic world of the Bible. From his early youth upwards, M. P. Kulakov had devoted himself to the study of languages and biblical texts, and in the early 1990s he could assemble a team of professionals, with whom he worked fruitfully, making his dream come true.<sup>5</sup>

Upon the death of M. P. Kulakov in 2010, his son Mikhail Mikhailovich Kulakov continued the efforts to complete the translation of the Bible. The second of Mikhail Petrovich's three sons, he received theological education abroad and defended his doctoral dissertation at Oxford (his work was dedicated to one of the famous pre-revolutionary religious leaders of Russia, St. Theophanes the Recluse (1815–1894)). Although M. M. Kulakov became a faculty member at Washington Adventist University in the United States, six months before his father's death he also became co-director of the Bible Translation Institute. Immediately after his father's death, in February 2010, he took a five year sabbatical to work on the Bible translation project. Due to his efforts and excellent organization of the work, the translation of the Holy Scripture into modern Russian was completed and published in 2015.

The translation had taken twenty-two years, from 1993 to 2015, to complete and the involvement of translators from many different Christian denominations. The objectivity of the translation was ensured by the professional competence of a multi-confessional team. Among the principal translators of the Old Testament were A. S. Desnitsky and L. V. Manevich. Some of biblical books were translated by A. V. Bolotnikov, M. V. Boryabina (now Opiyar), M. A. Glebushko, L. P. Gunko, M. M. Kainova, O. V. Pavlova, E. B. Rashkovsky, S. A. Romashko, E. M. Smorgunova, and many others. E.B. Smagina was responsible for editing the translation of the Old Testament's historical books.

In this review of Bible translations into Russian, which makes no claims to universality or completeness, special attention has been given to the translation prepared by the Zaoksky Translation Center. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was able to manifest itself in this work as a church faithful to the living and powerful Word of

God. In conclusion, it is pertinent to quote the statement of I. E. Evseev about the Bible, which he called a treasure of national importance:

In order to express in translation the respect for the sacredness of the original, meet the literary requirements and impart influence to the translated text, it is necessary to produce not a backward and primitive work but a literary, creative translation, moreover, with constant care for its improvement. The values of national and universal significance require the most caring attitude and great consideration.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible Translation Institute, named after M. P. Kulakov, continues its work and prepares new publications for the Russian people.

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## SOURCES

*Due to decades of persecution, historical sources were very often not preserved in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and as a result, Adventist history in Russia and other successor states of the USSR is dependent on collective memory and oral traditions, on which this article draws.*

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## NOTES

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2. *Bibliya. Knigi Sviashchennogo Pisaniya Vetkhogo i Novogo Zaveta* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Religijne Goetze B., 1939), 5.
3. *Bibliya. Knigi Sviashchennogo Pisaniya Vetkhogo i Novogo Zaveta. Sovremenniy ruskiy perevod*. (Moscow: Russian Bible Society, 2011), 2.
4. The life and work of M. P. Kulakov are described in detail in the book by Olga A. Suvorova, *We are Just Standing on the Shore* [My tol'ko stoim na beregu] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2012).
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