

A Friend and a Foe? Interpreters in WWII in Finland and Norway Embodying Frontiers

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Kääntäjän ja tulkin henkilö tarjoaa mielenkiintoisen näkökulman sotien kulttuurisiin välitiloihin. Sodissa on kyse kulttuurisista, ideologisista ja geopoliittisista rajoista, jotka erottavat konfliktin osapuolet toisistaan. Näennäisesti selkeitä asetelmia kuitenkin sekoittavat sodassa muodostuvat monikieliset ja -kulttuuriset rintamayhteisöt ja sodan niihin liikuttamat henkilöt, jotka saattavat päätyä – siviileinä, sotilaina tai sotavankeina – kääntäjiksi ja tulkeiksi sodan erilaisiin viestintätilanteisiin. Tällaisten henkilöiden etniset, kulttuuriset, kielelliset ja poliittiset taustat voivat olennaisesti vaikeuttaa yrityksiä määrittää heidän kuulumistaan puolelle tai toiselle konfliktia. Sama koskee heidän toimijuuttaan. Niinpä esimerkiksi eettisten, sotajoukkojen toimintaakin olennaisesti määrittävien kategorioiden kuten ”lojaalisuuden” ja ”uskollisuuden” määrittely tai jopa peruskategorioiden kuten ”me/omat” ja ”muut/vihollinen” käsittely voi olla hankalaa. Jako ystäviin ja vihollisiin määrittää sodan perusasetelman, mutta sodan rintamayhteisöjen translationaalisissa tiloissa toimivien tulkien ja kääntäjien toimijuus voi sisältää tai sen voidaan epäillä sisältävän molempia rooleja. Tässä artikkelissa tätä perusasetelmaa tarkastellaan II maailmansodan kontekstissa.

Keywords: frontiers, intercultural, interpreting in war, translation history, WWII

1 Introduction

This paper¹ starts from the assumption that the study of translators and interpreters in war not only reveals but also challenges the narrative fixedness of the (ideological, cultural and/or geo-political) borders that their activity is intended to cross. The focus on translators and interpreters unveils the “interculturality” of wars and shows how the two violently opposing sides ultimately strongly intertwine culturally and how individuals embodying this intertwining space may have or may be assumed to have allegiances to both sides. The multiple allegiances – whether real or assumed – stem from the provenance of the individual people or from their cultural and linguistic competence, which have primarily determined their mediating roles in the contexts of war. All this reverts back to the discussion of interpreters’ position in binary terms such as “friend” vs. “foe”, “familiar” vs. “alien” or “us” vs. “them”.

In what follows, the discussion is first briefly framed, as the above terminology already indicates, with Anthony Pym’s suggestions for a stronger focus on translating and interpreting people and on the “interculture” represented by them. In the following steps, I draw both on post-hoc narrative materials (see Munday 2014) and

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“autonomous” vs. “heteronymous” translation strategies, a dichotomy proposed by Cronin (2002) for the description of solutions for translation and interpreting needs in colonial settings. The narrative accounts include a diary of a German soldier who acted as a military interpreter in Bergen, Norway, in 1941 (Linder 1941) and an interview of a former Red Army prisoner-of-war, who interpreted in a logging site close to Rovaniemi in the war years 1941–1944 (Liski 2015). Both accounts are used to give examples of embodied “intercultures” or middle grounds of war and to discuss how interpreters would experience or define their identity and agency in them. Cronin’s concepts, in turn, are taken up as examples for apparently useful concepts and “clear lines of methodology” that can be destroyed by “mixes of people” (Pym 2009: 31) in specific contexts of history. The discussion shows how the intercultural spaces may be of different origins and take very different forms. On the whole, however, it will always have various consequences for persons who embody it – regardless of whether he or she has created and taken up the space by her- or himself or whether it has been imposed on him/her by other participants in the given historical situation.

2 Translation Studies and Military History: “Interculture” as a Blind Spot?

Anthony Pym has pleaded at several stages for more translator studies by proposing a set of principles for “humanizing translation history” (Pym 2009; see also 1998 and 2000). According to Pym, translation history needs to have more emphasis on translators than on texts and focus on “intercultures”, i.e. “intersections of cultures” that such an emphasis could reveal. Intended as a critical response to systematic approaches in general and the approach of Descriptive Translation Studies in specific, Pym stresses that we should require more “than just raw data about texts, dates, places and names” and “portray active people in the picture, and some kind of human interaction” (Pym 2009: 23–24). In translation history, the study of texts seems to be the standard practice, but for Pym this “normal thing to do” immediately imposes upon the analysis the issue of sides and oppositions (e.g. source text or culture vs. target text or culture) and thus deprives us of questioning “the line separating those two sides” (ibid. 30–31). As a consequence, translation history is too occupied with histories of one culture only rather than with literary or cultural exchange and interculturality:

Just as the history of poetry has no reason to concern one language alone, why should a history of translation concern one country alone? A restricted empirism reproduces the ideologies of its frame. (Pym 2009: 26)

Examples for these reproductions include issues such as the development of “our” (e.g. Finnish) nation, language or literature through translations, all of them highlighting the role or even importance of translation and translators in the dynamics of a given society or nation. As much of these dynamics has long remained and still remains a “shadow culture” (Kittel 1998: 3) for many, the cultural value of such historiography for transla-

tion should be obvious. But for Pym the problem lies elsewhere: With a focus on one translation tradition we simultaneously assume not only a clear division of cultures but also an explicit positioning of the translator with his or her performance in one culture or the other. The middle grounds, “intersections of cultures”, as well as people actually moving between cultures or working in the middle ground, remain outside the scope of our investigation. (Pym 1998: 105, 178–182; 2009: 35–36)

Looking from the ongoing research project on military translation and interpreting practices, where we have been occupied with military historiography, the similarity of these issues to discourse and research on war is striking. Wars by definition involve frontiers, borders and cultural boundaries but they are usually discussed in terms of concepts that push forward an idea of a clear division of sides between confronting military troops or forces, nations, ideologies and cultural values all incorporated in narrative structures such as “us” vs. “them”, “familiar” vs. “alien”, “friend” vs. “foe” (cf. Baker 2010). The discourse framed by such bipolarity, in the Finnish history culture or in Western historiography in general, has the strong tendency to sideline issues of culture and above all linguistic contacts and the questions of “foreignness” in particular armies. In Hilary Footitt’s words, historical accounts of war and conflict tend to adopt “a nation-state ontology of conflict” in which “‘foreignness’ is positioned as an unproblematic given, its precise qualities largely irrelevant to the themes that are being considered” (Footitt 2012: 217).

As regards Finnish historiography, the national perspective of historical narratives can potentially conceal the multilingualism and multiculturalism of the Finnish Defence Forces. This linguistic and cultural variety to some extent reflects Finland’s past as an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, individual officer’s military service in the Imperial Russian Army or Jäger Officers’ military training in Hohenlockstedt in Germany during the Grand War. But the picture is further complemented by the role of several minorities (Finnish Jews and Tatars, Russian emigrants, Karelian and Ingrian refugees) as well as Estonian, Swedish and Icelandic volunteers in the Finnish Army.

Furthermore, if we look at the specific contexts of Finnish wars, then it is relatively easy to point at spaces that imply a significant role of intermediaries (prototypically interpreters or translators). In actual historical studies, however, these people and the “thick space of cultural interaction” (Barkawi 2006: 170) embodied by them tend to remain anonymous and invisible. Examples of such spaces include the handling of prisoners-of-war (POWs) on the front or in POW camps, Finnish-German military cooperation as well as the co-existence of Finnish civilians and German military troops in Northern Finland. All this suggests an interesting research theme: If one considers how wars – note the similarity to translation (see also Rafael 2010) – presuppose contact between at least two cultures in which questions of language use, social engagement as well as

cultural, national and ideological identity are constantly dealt with, then the operation of these intermediating persons in intercultural war, i.e. “in intersections and overlaps of cultures” (Pym 2000: 2), should offer an interesting area of study.

To illustrate such operations and intersections, let us look into the tasks and experiences of a German military interpreter in occupied Norway in 1941.

3 A Military Interpreter in Bergen 1940–1941

In his diary *Als Wehrmachtsdolmetscher in Norwegen* Richard Linder (1941) gives an account of his first months of service as an interpreter in Bergen, Norway, immediately after the occupation of the town in summer 1941.

During his training in an engineering unit in Aschaffenburg, Germany, the whole unit was addressed with the question of who knew Scandinavian languages. Linder responded that he knew Swedish and that he would be able to make himself understood in Danish and Norwegian as well. To his own surprise, Linder was soon commanded to interpreting training in Berlin. As a former student and assistant of the Department of Swedish at the University of Greifswald, Linder soon took a special position among Marines and other German soldiers with only a modest knowledge of Swedish or Norwegian, and was assigned to drill his Norwegian skills. After a two-week training session, Linder was transferred to Bergen, where he started as an interpreter in Department Ic (*Abteilung Ic*) of the local German Headquarters (Linder 1941: 3).

In the German military structure, the department was responsible for a range of tasks encompassing intelligence and signals analysis, counter-espionage, interrogation of prisoners-of-war, post control, outward enemy propaganda as well as inward propaganda and political cultivation within the German army. In practice, Linder interpreted interrogations of Norwegian prisoners-of-war as well as captured members of the Norwegian resistance, censored the local newspaper of Bergen, interpreted during raids and public meetings, translated public regulations and orders as well as organized accommodation for incoming officers and controlled the progress of German construction projects. As such, Linder’s tasks resembled the job description of a “fixer” used by foreign correspondents in more contemporary crisis areas such as Iraq or Afghanistan (see Palmer 2007). In addition to this, Linder also performed some “street surveillance” (*Straßenerkundung*) on his own initiative and used his language skills as a cover for hiding among Norwegians in order to acquire intelligence that would not have been accessible otherwise. Linder recalls:

As an interpreter I was allowed to wear civilian clothes, which is why I was able to eavesdrop on conversations that would have otherwise been out of a German soldier’s reach. Once I heard a

Norwegian worker boast how they had delayed the work on a military project to such an extent that it wouldn't be ready for a hundred years. (Linder 1941: 48; my translation)

All these tasks clearly frame Linder, as a matter of course, as an interpreter who had been commissioned and who had committed himself to the service of one side only, the German military. Linder's diary notes, however, reveal the other side of the story as well and show how interpreters in war could be "at once indispensable and troubling" (Rafael 2010: 387). His language skills not only served as important capital for the Germans but occasionally also created suspicions of him being an insurgent in the particular military context. Linder describes a trip outside Bergen, during which he was accompanying a Norwegian officer who wanted to retrieve private property he had left on an island in the middle of the occupation. Immediately after their arrival, however, they were both forbidden the access to the island by the German *Sicherheitspolizei*, who took them back to Bergen in custody and started to interrogate both of them on the grounds of suspected espionage and insurgence. Linder writes about how his explanations about his background, status and position in the German division headquarters of Bergen proved to be insufficient:

My military ID, which identified me as a private, didn't satisfy him at all. I arrived with two Norwegians, spoke Norwegian with them, wore a brown officer's belt, German officer trousers and boots and was identified in my ID as a private. One could easily come to the conclusion that a Norwegian had not been quite successful masquerading as a German officer. (Linder 1941: 42–43; my translation)

To sum up briefly, in the given military context, Linder without a doubt embodied a middle-ground, a space in which the interpreter could become suspect of personal affinities to both his own and the enemy side, even if the interpreter himself had a clear understanding of his allegiance to one side of the conflict only.

4 Wars Blur Concepts and Complicate Affinities

The methodological problem caused by the focus on sides – as suggested by Pym in the beginning – can be illustrated with concepts that have been part of our toolbox since the project on military translation cultures started, namely the concepts of "autonomous" and "heteronymous" translation and interpreting strategies proposed by Michael Cronin (2002: 393) as a distinction for two "systems of recruitment" in colonial settings.² By autonomous translation and interpreting, Cronin refers to practices of "self-translation", where it is for example the occupying military army and its members who acquire the necessary language skill of the native. Richard Linder acting as an interpreter in Bergen is one obvious example of this practice. In contrast to this, heteronymous translation and interpreting refers to a "dependent" translation practice, where the "colonizers have

² For discussion on the concepts in military contexts see e.g. Dragovic-Drouet 2007: 33–34; Kujamäki 2012: 94–96.

recourse to the services of the natives to interpret for them” (Cronin 2006: 40, 85). Local civilians acting as interpreters in Afghanistan, Iraq or Bosnia-Herzegovina for the foreign military and/or peace-keeping forces are examples of this practice from contemporary or most recent military conflicts. In the military contexts of WWII in Finland, both recruitment systems were in extensive use: In Lapland, for example, Finnish civilians and soldiers worked as interpreters alongside military interpreters and translators of the German Mountain Army. On the whole, the two concepts seem to imply that the interpreters’ ethnicity amounts to clear narrative categories of “us” and “them”.

Despite its immanent clarity, the division is not as clear-cut as the most obvious examples seem to indicate. If we look at the family backgrounds of our interpreters as well as the historical and geo-political specificities of the given situations, we soon discover that there is a significant amount of mobility and displacement of people. This fluidity challenges the clarity of these categories as well as the concepts leaning on them. The story of Aleksanteri Liski (2015) illustrates these issues.

4.1 An interpreter in Lapland 1941–1944

Aleksanteri Liski was born 1920 in Saamusti, Ingria, close to Hatsina and St. Petersburg.³ Between the two World Wars, Ingria was part of the USSR, and many of the ethnic minorities, among them the Finnish-speaking Ingrians, were suffering under the Communist administration (see Sihvo 2000). After Liski studied at the local Finnish school for seven years, it was closed down and he was obliged to continue his studies in a Russian school in Leningrad. As Liski had thus far collected little knowledge of Russian from the simplest conversations with Russian salespeople at the local market place, the schoolwork was fraught with great initial difficulties in understanding even the most essential concepts. However, as Liski simultaneously worked in a Russian factory, he soon grasped hold of the language. A couple of years later, around 1941, he was drafted into the Red Army and, after six months of military service, in July 1941, he was sent to the Finnish front on the Karelian Isthmus, where he was almost immediately captured by the Finns. All in all, Liski’s military service on the front lasted only three days. (Liski 2015)

As a prisoner-of-war (POW), Liski was transported to the island of Ajos in Kemi, where the Finnish Army was establishing a new camp (No. 9) for Red Army POWs to be used as labour in construction work on the harbour (for further details about the POW camp No. 9, see Westerlund 2008: 75). However, as a speaker of Finnish, Liski was soon transferred further to a logging site near Rovaniemi where he started as an interpreter for around twenty POWs and a group of Finnish guards. Although a POW himself,

³ Then Leningrad.

Liski's Ingrian background separated him from the other inmates and made him a "trusted man" who was, in addition to his interpreting tasks, responsible for the food depot, cooking and workhorses on the site and shared accommodation and meals with his guards. Furthermore, as a visual distinction from his fellow inmates, Liski never wore clothing marked with a white V (for *vanki*, prisoner) on the jacket back or a white stripe on the trousers signifying a POW but a white armband with the word *tulkki* (interpreter) on his left arm. (Liski 2015)

In autumn 1944, after three years of imprisonment and work on the logging site, Liski was transferred to Hanko, where Red Army POWs were collected as part of the peace terms imposed by the USSR, then transported to the USSR, interrogated and, after several turns of faith, deported to Siberia. He later returned to Petrozavodsk, studied engineering at the local polytechnic and had a long working life in the Russian steel and paper industry. In 1995 he moved to Finland, and he now lives in the city of Turku. (Liski 2015)

4.2 One of Us or One of Them?

Now, as regards Cronin's two categories, should we look at Liski's interpreting role at the Finnish logging site for Russian and other Red Army POWs as an example for the autonomous rather than for the heteronomous recruitment system, as is suggested by his forced engagement in Finnish Lapland? Should we see Liski as one of the Finns (or: "us") rather than as one of the enemy soldiers ("them"), as is in turn obvious from his membership in the Red Army? Different perspectives provide different answers. An important one is the commissioner's perspective, i.e. the perspective of the Finnish Military Headquarter's POW Office and of the Home Troops Staff, both responsible for the establishment and arrangement of POW camps during the Continuation War. The POW camps and labour sites established far away from the theatre of war – the logging site in the forests of Rovaniemi as the case in point – can be viewed as isolated colonies inside a country at war representing Red Army captives in the role of "imported" colonized natives and Finnish guards and camp officers as colonizers. In this view, the use of Finnish-speaking prisoners-of-war as interpreters supporting the structures and discipline of the colony indeed suggests itself for the category of heteronomous strategies. In the Finnish POW camps, this strategy was in common use because of the chronic shortage of interpreters that the Finnish Home Troops Staff could produce from its own "autonomous" and security-checked sources (Pasanen & Kujamäki forthcoming). The categorization as "heteronomous strategy" thus, at first, associates Liski with the narrative role of the alien "them".

From the perspective of Aleksanteri Liski's personal view and experiences, however, the categorization as one system or the other becomes much more complicated. Like

any individual interpreter in war, Liski embodies a multitude of context-specific ethnic and geo-political determinants that together challenge our attempts to establish any clear-cut categories for how these people might have positioned themselves between the frontiers of the particular military conflict. In addition to their ethnicity, language skills and cultural background, they carry along different narratives that they might have shared or were still sharing with each side of the given interaction. Instead of clear binary belongings, interpreters and translators “*are intersections*” (Pym 1998: 182; his italics), embodying allegiances to and memberships in both sides of the conflict.

This becomes evident from Liski’s own narrative. In the interview, he mentions repeatedly the fact that he was a prisoner-of-war himself among the others (“Olin vanki itsekin”), displaced in a labour site for Soviet POWs wearing a Red Army uniform – at least until it wore out and was replaced by other available clothing. In the main, however, Liski associated himself first and foremost with the Finnish side: His mother-tongue was and is Finnish, his parents spoke Finnish, and he received his elementary school education in Finnish. More importantly, he felt like sharing Finnish ideological views: “As regards my ideology, I was a Finn and the Finns knew that alright.”⁴ (Liski 2015; my translation). As Liski stated repeatedly, this can be traced to Ingrian history under both Russian and Soviet oppression, which continued long after WWII (see for example Sihvo 2000). The ideological distancing from the Russian or Soviet side, however, never complicated everyday routine interaction between the interpreter and the other Red Army POWs, nor did it prevent Liski from helping them, when he deemed it appropriate or even crucial: Liski recalls how the logging site received a group of new POWs, famished and in poor condition. Some of the prisoners were sent farther to another site, and Liski later heard that two of them, when given the opportunity, had accidentally eaten themselves to death, whereas Liski was able to save those who had stayed by giving them first porridge and bread, and only later stronger meals (including horsemeat). (Liski 2015)

Such empathy, his human agency in the middle of the two opposing sides, occasionally brought Liski into difficulties. Once he made the mistake of telling other prisoners news from the front, which was in general strictly forbidden for all personnel of the POW camps as well as civilian visitors. The commander of the site, who knew some Russian, had overheard Liski’s conversation with the prisoners, and prohibited him from any further communication with the Finnish personnel. In Liski’s own words, “I didn’t tell them too much, because I don’t really like Russians”⁵ (Liski 2015; my translation), but the argument nevertheless escalated to an extent that Liski felt his life threatened and applied for a transfer back to the POW camp on the island of Ajos in Kemi. (Liski 2015)

⁴ “Ideologian puolesta olin suomalainen, ja suomalaiset tiesivät sen kyllä.”

⁵ “En minä kertonut liikaa, koska en oikeastaan pidä venäläisistä.”

In order to merge these two perspectives into Aleksanteri Liski's position – the commissioner's view as well as the interpreter's own experiences – we could characterize Liski's interculture as that of a friendly “enemy alien”: No longer a potentially hostile outsider alone, but through his ethnicity and linguistic skills so “domesticated” that he could be given a trusted position in the POW camp structure (Tobia 2012: 65). Liski took up the position willingly, modified its content by taking on new tasks, thus identifying himself with the Finnish rather than with the Soviet side of the conflict, yet never fully and truly belonging to the former only. Ultimately, Liski was a prisoner-of-war the entire time. This was a status that clearly separated him from many other Ingrians in Finland, who lived and worked as free men, conducted business with German soldiers in Finnish Lapland and then resold cigarettes to people like Liski whenever the opportunity arose. In other words, Liski shared with his fellow Ingrians the ethnic background, linguistic skills and world views, but their position on either side of the boundary between being an Ingrian in captivity or an Ingrian *cum* Finnish citizen in Lapland was determined merely by the fact of whether they had come to Finland as prisoners-of-war during the Continuation War or as emigrants between the two World Wars, after the Russian revolutions.

5 Conclusion

Richard Linder and Aleksanteri Liski found themselves performing translation and interpreting tasks in different ways and were engaged in distinctive translational practices: Linder was a member of a German military unit occupying Bergen and his translation activities served campaigns and operations designed to sustain the Third Reich's military and administrative power in the area. In contrast to this, Liski was a POW from the Red Army who became an interpreter for a relatively small POW labour camp in Northern Finland. Locally, Liski was responsible for the daily routine of the logging site, but in more general terms he became attached to the enemy side, i.e. to the Finnish prisoner-of-war and internee camp system. Despite the differences in the specific conditions of their practice, however, both of them were living in a space of cultural overlapping and interaction, a space that the prototypical idea of wars between two nations tends to conceal. In such a space, the positioning of the translator and interpreter on one side or the other, as implied e.g. by concepts such as “loyalty” or “affinity”, may be seriously constrained by their personal backgrounds and turns of faith. Friends and foes are constitutive of wars, but people living in and embodying a frontier may take up or be suspected of performing both roles.

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