

An Outline of History of Quran Translation into the Russian Language

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Abstract:

It is uncommon to find a religious book that has acquired a high position in studies of great scholarship and has attracted the attention of scholars, researchers, and translators over the ages more than the holy Quran. The last divine book after the Book of Abraham, the Torah to Moses, the Psalms to David, and the Gospel to Jesus. Despite the fact that the Quran is the word of the Almighty Creator, which is characterized by miracles in terms of formulation, rhetorical, and eloquent features, it is rightly considered inimitable. However, without a shadow of a doubt, its translation has not been interrupted so far. One of the most prominent languages in which the Noble Quran has been translated is the Russian language. Because the translation of the holy book is a process of transformation rather than a literal translation. In this context, we will list, in chronological order and according to a qualitative descriptive methodology, the main translators of the holy Quran into the Russian language, with overviews of the quality of each translation and try to figure out if, in fact, Quranic text has undergone evolution from Sablukov to Kuliev after all this time.

**Keywords:** Quran; Qualitative descriptive methodology; Russian language; Sablukov to Kuliev; Translators.

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1. Introduction:

It is established that as a result of the expansion of the geographical area of the Caliphate and the inclusion of non-native speakers of the Arabic language, the ethnic diversity of the Muslim community, as well as the need for knowledge of the meanings of the Quran which increased steadily as time passed, it was necessary to have recourse to translation as a required

approach to overcome the language barrier. In fact, the translation of the Quran is theologically problematic because the Holy Book cannot actually be translated. As a result, translation of the Quranic text into languages has always been viewed with suspicion, if not outright refusal. It has been a bone of contention until now. It should be noted that some scholars have banned translation and prohibited it categorically, and some of them have authorized it, following the example of Ibn Taymiyya in his book on "The Agreement of Reason with Tradition," where he declared that it is permissible to translate it. In the twentieth century, a fatwa of Al-Azhar approved the translation of the meaning of the Quran. Beyond any doubt, its translation has not been postponed until now. The Holy Quran has been translated into many languages over the years. In this regard, one of the most important languages in which the Noble Quran was translated is Russian language. Dealing with a unique Quranic text marked by rhetoric and a sublime style with aesthetic elements, Russian translators in most did not spare time and effort to translate the holy book from Arabic into Russian without arousing interest and controversy so far. In light of this, the objective of this article is to highlight different biographies of translators and mapping commentaries on their own translations by researchers and religious scholars, underlying at the same time the evolution and approaches of Quran's translation into the Russian language.

In other words, the research problem, as a specific issue addressed in this article, is: did reliable and serious Quran translation advance, starting historically and methodologically from a free translation of Quran in the 18th century as mentioned below and ending with scientific translation in the 21st century? All this is encompassed in a well-known approach, which is a qualitative descriptive methodology that reveals the differences in translation and, at the same time, the "transformations" that the translation of the Quran has undergone.

## **2. The first steps towards Russian translation**

Translation of the Holy Quran from Arabic into Russian was made by order of Peter I. The Quran was translated by the first Doctor of

Philosophy in Russia - Piotr Postnikov. This translation was published in St. Petersburg in 1716 under the title “Alkoran about Mohammed, or the Turkish Law”. (Avtorkhanov, 1988, 116)

In general, the printed translation presented a literal reproduction of the French translation with the transfer to the text of all the features of the author Andre Du Ryer’s arrangement, as well as inaccuracies and the omission of significant points in the Surahs, from a single word to a whole phrase.

A new era in the history of the Quran in Russia is associated with the reign of Catherine II (Victory in Russo-Turkish wars, the final annexation of the Crimea in 1783). By a decree of Catherine II, in 1787 the full Arabic text of the Quran was printed for the first time in Russia in Schnorr’s printing house. The Quran was printed, especially casted for this purpose in a font from the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, which reproduced the handwriting of one of the best calligraphers, Mullah Usman Ismail, and surpassed all Arabic fonts that existed at that time in European printing establishments. (Rezvan, 2001, 397, 399)

The scientific translation of the Quran presupposes an adequate transmission of its meaning; this is indeed what some Russian orientalists have been trying to do for many years. It should be noted that the translations of the Quran in Russia were studied quite deeply by outstanding Orientalists, Arabists and Islamic scholars, including: G. Sablukov, I. Krachkovsky, V. Porokhova, M. Osmanov, Elmir Kuliev.

We aim to study these translations individually in our article respecting the chronological order of the translations.

### **2.1. G. Sablukov**

Sablukov’s translation is one of the best scientific translations of the Quran known as “The Quran, the legislative book of the Mohammedan dogma”. His translation in printed form was published the first time in 1878. In 1879, the second part of Gordy Sablukov’s work was issued under the name “An appendix to a translation of the Quran” (a commentary to texts),

and two treatises as below: "An information about Quran on the legislative book of Mohammedan dogma" (Kazan, 1884) and "A comparison of the Mohammedan teaching about the names of God with the Christian teaching about them" (1873). (Gusterin, 2014, 12)

### **2.1.1 Sablukov's translation review:**

However, in the course of time and with the development of oriental studies in Russia, deficiency and negative aspects of the venerable translation of G.S. Sablukov were felt more and more strongly by everyone who refers to it. For an Arabist, his many inaccuracies are intelligible. For a non-specialist, in some points, it was difficult to read because of the features of the Russian translation language, which proved to be overloaded with archaisms, and often because of vague and obscure expressions, which did not allow to get to the usual meaning; the latter, even made it necessary to raise the question, whether the translator himself understood what he wanted to convey in the translation. According to scholars, the Quran is the expression of beauty of the language which is an absolute advantage of the translation. At the same time, there are semantic inaccuracies, verbal archaisms, as well as the application to the Quran of Russian and Slavic biblical phraseology, which are not linked to its characteristics. (Gryaznevich, Belyaev, 1986, 17)

In this regard, and according to Krymsky, Sablukov's translation of the Quran is uneventful and literal, it is impossible to understand in many aspects without referring to the original, so with no doubt it contained many errors. Despite all these critics, Sablukov's Qur'an was met with great interest. This is attested by numerous reviews of Sablukov's translation in pre-revolutionary and Soviet Oriental literature. (Kuznetsova, 1989, 17)

### **2.2. Krachkovsky:**

From 1920 and over the course of eight years, the Quran was translated into Russian by another outstanding Academician, I. Krachkovsky, but it was published posthumously in 1963. The first lectures on the Quran were read by Krachkovsky back in 1915-1916. In 1934, he described the manuscript of the Russian translation of the Quran; the latter

was identified as being an original translation of P. Posnikov. At that time, Krachkovsky had the idea to make a complete translation of this masterpiece. Besides, in 1919, the translation of the Quran was already listed earlier in the prospectus of the Gorky's World Literature Publishing House.

### **2.2.1 Krachkovsky's translation review:**

Krachkovsky's translation was more literary and was intended for Arabists and Quran scholars. When translating the Quran, the main goal that Krachkovsky set was not only to understand the meaning of the Quranic verses as a literary masterpiece of the 7th century and its influence on the life and lifestyle of the Arabs but also to make a translation understandable and easily read by ordinary Muslim believers. That is why Krachkovsky's translation has repeatedly been criticized by the Muslim community for the ambiguous interpretation of many points and the disparity of Krachkovsky's translation with the Islamic dogma. (Rezvan, 2001, 443)

However, despite the lack of final refinement, the significance of the translation by I. Krachkovsky is considerable. P. Gryaznevich highlighted this contribution in the preface to the 2nd edition: Time has shown that this publication was well-founded and brought undoubted benefit to our oriental science. Its scientific significance is determined by the philological accuracy of the transmission of the Arabic text and the novelty of the methodological approach. This translation is and will serve as a reliable basis for all future Russian translations of the Qur'an. The approach of I. Krachkovsky to this translation retains its value to this day, as the only possible way to adequately interpret this masterpiece. (Gryaznevich, 1986, 3, 14)

A similar opinion is shared by other modern national researchers of the Quran. So, E.A. Rezvan notes that "by the nature of the approach to the text and the philological accuracy, the work of I. Krachkovsky surpasses not only all Russian ones, but also many European translations." (Rezvan, 2001, 608)

M.B. Piotrovsky fully agrees with P.A. Gryaznevich: Translated by I.Yu. Krachkovsky is scientific and, in attempt to understand the text, he proceeds from the Quran itself, and not from its later commentaries. The latter, as researchers have repeatedly shown, give a coherent and intelligible interpretation of the true text, but often distorted (to varying degrees) its initial meaning. (Piotrovsky, 1991, 219)

In his assessment of the current situation around the translation of the Quranic text into Russian and which translation he prefers in his research in propria persona, the Head of the Science Department of the Moscow Mufti Farid Asadullin said the following: It is impossible not to welcome the ambition of skilled people to translate the Qur'an into other languages, including Russian, if sincere and good intentions are pursued, and as the translator has in his possession the appropriate scientific and preferably theological training. (Stoupina, Bekin, 1999)

At the same time, it is necessary to understand that any translation of the Quran into Russian and other languages is only a semantic translation and nothing more because the sacral text and its interpretation in another language cannot be identical. By definition, the believers consider the Quran as a mujiza, that is to say a sign (literally, a “miracle”) that cannot be fully adequately understood. Therefore, any translation, with all the diligence and devotion of the author, is doomed to remain only a rough and approximate copy of the original.

I thought that in the future, even if it is not imminent, the desire to understand divine revelation will compel people to go not in a roundabout way, but directly turn to the Holy Book. As a matter of fact, reading the Quran in the original is an experience that, for a believer, cannot be compared with any other. As far as I'm concerned, when my own knowledge is not enough, I turn to tafsirs. I mean the numerous commentaries on Quran. I have great respect for the translation by Ignaty Yulianovich Krachkovsky, which I consider the most accurate from a philological point of view. I continue to get acquainted with the translations of Valeria Porokhova and Magomed-Nuri Osmanov. (Stoupina, Bekin, 1999)

In the same line of thought, Professor, vice director of St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences Efim Rezvan aforementioned that:

Each translation carries its own semantic charge, reflecting its own era. For a serious study of the Quran, I would recommend Krachkovsky's translation. This is a truly scientific translation. As for a general acquaintance, not at the expense of meaning. In this case, I advise readers the translation made by Dmitry Nikolaevich Boguslavsky. He added that there are no such encyclopedically educated translators as Krachkovsky. Secondly, the quality of translation will improve if philologists, historians, and religious figures are involved in the work. Moreover, we already had experience of such work. (Stoupina, E. Renat Bekin, R, 1999)

### **3.3. Shumovsky :**

Russian linguist and orientalist, doctor of historical sciences, a Polish by nationality. He spent his childhood in Azerbaijan, where his family moved during the First World War. In 1932, he entered Leningrad State University at the Oriental Faculty. He was a student of I. Krachkovsky, who is considered as the founder of Soviet Arabic studies, as well as the holder of the poetic translation of the Qur'an into Russian. He speaks 22 languages.

#### **3.3.1 Shumovsky's translation review:**

Despite the critical assessment of many orientalists, the translation of Academician Krachkovsky marked the beginning of a new era in the history of translations of the Qur'an into Russian. Krachkovsky "succeeded" accurately to convey the meaning of most of the Qur'anic verses, which facilitated the work of his followers, and it could be said with confidence that all subsequent translators of the Quran into Russian regularly referred to his work.

One of them was doctor of Historical Sciences T. Shumovsky, who made a poetic translation of the Quran into Russian, published in 1995. In the preface to his translation, he wrote: In this translation, one should not look for a word-for-word reproduction of the monument: with regard to a

rhymed text, such an action is impossible; one of the greatest Russian translators, M. Lozinsky, likened such a problem to “squaring a circle”. But every thought of the Quran is expanded, carefully and clearly conveyed in this book by rich means of the Russian language. (Kuliyev, 2003, 339)

Shumovsky translated the Quran into Russian in poetic structure, he believes with confidence that a poetic translation is the best way to convey the meaning of the Quran. His purpose is to persuade the reader to agree with the argument expressed below:

It is impossible to translate the Quran in prose - this kills the nature of the great Book, and its spirit. When the rhymed prose of the Quran is translated as normal, then the brightness, expressiveness, and clarity of the Quranic speech decline figuratively. It must be remembered that poetry permeated the entire Arabian worldview (even in the field of astronomy. The fact that the revelations of the holy book are expressed in a poetic way made it easier for them to enter the heart of the Arab people, who are not indifferent to gracefulness, but also to strict poetry. (Shumovsky, 2004, 18)

#### **4.4. Porokhova :**

Russian professional translator and interpreter from English. The author of the semantic translation of the Quran from English into Russian. His translation is similar to a poetic work, i.e. in verse, the same way of course, as Theodor Shumovsky. Although the poetic approach translation to the Quran was all the time controversial, it should be noted that poetry and the poet occupy an obvious place in Islam, for example Hassan ibn Thabit is one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. He possessed a poetic talent and wrote poems in honor of the prophet and Muslims. He was called "the poet of the Messenger of Allah. He raised the morale of Muslim fighters with his poems and participated in various disputes, with his poems he provided ideological support to the Muslim movement". (Alizade, 2007, 288)

#### 4.4.1 Porokhova's translation review:

In general, the comments were not on her side, sometimes they were ruthless. You could see this in the following reviews:

The translation carried out by V.Porokhova proves to be a person who does not know Arabic and does not have special elementary training. Her work turned out to be a synthesis of extremely successful management and a highly illiterate implementation of the most complex scientific task.

For a long time, fragments of Porokhova's translation were published in the form of separate books. In 1993 the full text was published, and in 1997 an expanded and supplemented edition was published in Abu Dhabi at the expense of a local charitable foundation. It was provided with a facsimile of a document from the chancellery of the famous Muslim university al-Azhar, confirming the accuracy of the reproduction of the Arabic text of the Quran, published in parallel with the translation. (Gordine, 2003, 40)

Moreover, the author and editor of the Russian text gave out the al-Azhar document for the official approval of the translation itself by this authoritative Islamic center. In 1997, publication of the translation caused a real scandal in the Emirates. The Dubai Waqf Ministry has set up a special commission to analyze the published text. It included Egyptian, Saudi and Moroccan scholars, as well as Russian ones. Their opinion was unanimous: the publication of Porokhova's translation should be banned due to the huge number of errors that seriously distort the content of the Holy Text. In addition, according to a number of members of the commission, the preface to the publication promotes "the ideas of communism, the Crusades, Zionism." Extremely unflattering assessments were given to the translation in Iran as well. Members of the Association of Islamic Studies at the Council of Muftis of Russia also "do not consider it possible to recognize this translation in any way adequate to recommend it to readers". (Rezvan, 2001, 449, 450)

Although, In 1999 the well-known Russian Islamic scholar A. V. Malashenko, in a survey by “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”, made comments on Porokhova’s translation as follows: I would recommend Porokhova’s translation to readers, which, in my opinion, is a brilliant poetic work. Porokhova called her translation "a translation of the meanings of the Quran. I think this is correct, because no one will be able to carry out an absolutely accurate translation of the Quran. (Dorofeev, 2008, 47)

### **5.5. Osmanov :**

Magomed-Nuri Osmanovich Osmanov Russian orientalist, Iranologist, and Islamic scholar. Doctor of Philology, Professor of the Department of Iranian and Turkic Philology and Director of the Institute of Islamic Studies of the Dagestan State University, Chief Researcher of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Corresponding Member of the Jordanian Royal Academy. One of the translators into Russian of the meanings of the Quran.

His translation of Quran is considered the first which combines scientific character, accuracy and the desire to convey the artistic and sacred properties of the Qur’an, and also to make the translation accessible to the reader. Apparently, in the near future, it will occupy the niche of the main translation of the Qur’an into Russian. However, there is no final opinion on this work (as well as on all the above translations) among researchers. (Ivanteev, Khudyakov, 1999)

#### **5.5.1 Osmanov’s translation review:**

Elmir Kuliev said the following: Having carefully studied the translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran into Russian by Academician Krachkovsky, Professor Osmanov, Dr. Sablukov and Dr. Porokhova, I came to the conclusion that the most successful of them was the translation of Professor Osmanov, who found the correct style of translating the meanings of the Qur’anic revelations. Furthermore he said too: A much more reliable translation of the meanings of the Quran into Russian is the translation of Professor M.-N. O. Osmanov, who was assisted by a group of eleven Russian orientalists and Islamic scholars. Moreover, after

further reading and in-depth research, Kouliev came to the conclusion that :Having deeply studied the advantages and disadvantages of previous translators, they managed to find the most correct style of translating the meanings of the Quran into Russian. However, the erroneous views of the authors of this translation also did not allow them to protect themselves from some ideological and Sharia errors. Despite this, the translation of Professor M.-N. O. Osmanova was the most successful translation of the meanings of the Koran at the end of the 20th century, which could be quoted when translating Islamic literature. (Kuliev E, 2003, 240, 241)

## **6.6. Kuliev :**

Elmir Kuliev is an Azerbaijani religious scholar and philosopher, Ph.D, director of the department of geoculture at the Institute for Strategic Studies of the Caucasus (Azerbaijan), a member of the editorial board of the journal "The Caucasus and Globalization" (Sweden). The author of the semantic translation of the Qur'an into Russian, the author of the books "Prophecies about the approach of the end of the world", "On the path to the Quran", "Comments on the collection of hadiths "Bulugh Al-Maram" Al-Hafiz Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani (in three volumes), "The Quran and globalization: in search of humanistic ideals".

### **6.6.1 Kuliev's translation review:**

However, in E.Kuliev's translation, we notice shortcomings in translation, in particular, the replacement of certain words and phrases of the Quran itself with his own synonyms and phrases. In these cases, the semantic nuance of words and phrases is somewhat distorted. On September 17, 2013, the Oktyabrsky District Court of Novorossiysk recognized the Russian-language text of the Qur'an as extremist material, and also decided to destroy this book. On December 17, 2013, the Krasnodar Regional Court overturned the decision and recognized the book of the Azerbaijani theologian Elmir Kuliyeve, "Semantic Translation of the Holy Quran into Russian." (Sharipov, Sharipova, 2010)

Chairman of the Islamic Committee Heydar Jemal believes that this translation is softer even in comparison with the academic version of Krachkovsky. Leonid Sukiyainen. Doctor of Law, Professor of Higher School of Economics: My opinion is that the translation of the Koran by Elmir Kuliev is not extremist and textually one of the most successful modern translations. In turn, Aslambek Ezhaev notes that he considers Kuliev a professional translator: "We consider him the most advanced person who knows Russian, studies philosophy, studies Arabic, and studies the interpretation of the Quran." Lawyer Musaev adds: "His semantic translation of the Koran is free from subjective value judgments. It is almost interlinear; it is close to the original. This is not an interpretation of the Quran ". (Orlova, 2013).

### **Conclusion:**

This chronology of Russian translation covers a period from the 19th century to the 21st century. The scholars and translators of Russian background, for historical, cultural and geopolitical reasons have worked hard to translate this book .Conscious that Quran in its original version is written in Arabic and the fact that the Quran has such lexical and semantic features that give it a unique and inimitable character. It is important to emphasize that the differences between these works are due to the methodology on which the academicians relied. Often strewn with shortcomings, and stylistic imperfections. However, it can be seen that Sablukov translated the verses more vigorously. In turn, Academician Krachkovsky resorted to an interlinear translation dealing with the Quran as a literary masterpiece. As for Shumovsky and Porokhova in their translations considered Quran as a poetic text. Regarding Osmanov, his methodological approach is more a process of interpretation than an academic translation. On Kuliev, he admitted on several occasions that he had benefited from the experience of his predecessors, the aforementioned scholars and translators. Nevertheless, his translation was qualified as literal. As a matter of fact, the Quranic text itself has undergone changes for the sake of clarification, in the approach and method of its translation by referring to qualitative descriptive methodology, which reveals the

differences in translation from one translator to another. This demonstrates that translation is a long process of transformation rather than just a verbatim adaptation.

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