STALIN'S ROLE IN THE NEW RUSSIAN TRANSLATION OF THE KNIGHT IN THE PANTHER'S SKIN

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Abstract - The paper investigates the history of the Russian translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* undertaken by the Georgian philosopher and professor Shalva Nutsubidze. In 1937, at the height of the Bolshevik terror, Nutsubidze was arrested on charges of espionage and of opposing the revolutionary movement allegations that at the time were equivalent to a death sentence. The translation project, however, became decisive for his survival.The study highlights Joseph Stalin's involvement in initiating and supervising the translation. The events are documented in Nutsubidze's own letter and confirmed by archival materials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Keywords - The Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Shalva Nutsubidze, Joseph Stalin, "The Knight in the Panther's Skin".

In Russian literature, information about Shota Rustaveli and his poem first appeared at the beginning of the 19th century. The first Russian book mentioning Rustaveli and containing an excerpt from the initial translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* was Yevgeny Bolkhovitinov's work *Historical Description of Georgia in its Political, Ecclesiastical, and Educational State* (St. Petersburg, 1802). This was the world's first translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. Rustaveli's poem was placed on a par with the works of Ariosto and Ossian.

There exist five complete poetic translations of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* into Russian: by Konstantin Balmont (*The One Who Wears a Leopard's Skin*, with a preface by Al. Svanidze, Paris, 1933); by Georgy Tsagareli, edited by V. Elsner (Moscow, 1937); by Panteleimon Petrenko, with the participation and editorial support of K. Chichinadze (Moscow–Leningrad, 1938); by Nikolai Zabolotsky, whose final version was based on the interlinear translation by S. G. Iordanishvili (1957); and by Shalva Nutsubidze, edited by T. Gorodetsky (Moscow, 1941). Each translation marked a significant milestone not only in the history of Russian-Georgian literary relations but also in the broader process of cultural rapprochement between the two nations. The aim of these translations was to create a Russian-language version equal in literary value to the original.

The history of Nutsubidze's translation is particularly notable and is recounted by the translator himself in a letter dated 1968.[1] He began working on the poem in 1937 and even read excerpts at informal gatherings. However, he was unexpectedly arrested by personal order of Lavrentiy Beria, ostensibly for "clarifying several unresolved questions".

The archival document titled **"UGB NKVD of the Georgian SSR"** (the State Security Department of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR) contains a file from November 29, 1938, regarding an individual named Salva Isakishvili Nutsubidze, born in 1888 in the Kutais Governorate, presently residing in Tbilisi at 6 Perovskaya Street. His profession and specialty are listed as teacher and researcher; he held a Doctorate in Philosophy and was a professor at the Tbilisi State University, heading a department.

Politically, he was affiliated with the Social-Federalist Party and identified as a social democrat. His party membership was listed as non-party (unaffiliated), and his nationality was recorded as Georgian. The record notes that he was arrested on August 31, 1938.

The primary legal basis for his prosecution was Articles 58-10 and 58-11 of the Criminal Code of the USSR, which pertained to counter-revolutionary activities. According to the NKVD of the USSR report dated December 1, 1938, he was detained under special surveillance and transferred from the local security department to the Moscow branch of the Soviet State Security Committee.

It is noted in the archive that Salva Nutsubidze was accused of espionage under Article 58.10 ofthe Criminal Code. This charge was allegedly based on a confession extracted from him underconditions of prolonged isolation, lasting nearly one year. The accusation held that he eitheractedas a spy or committed actions detrimental to the interests of the Soviet state, or knowingly engagedin counter-revolutionary activities.

[1]The Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, II, fond #8, inventory #14, file #209, manuscript by Sh. Nutsubidze, pages 6–11. The following citations will be taken from this manuscript.

Under Article 58-11, Nutsubidze, as a Doctor of Philosophy and university professor, was deemed an active participant or instigator of counter-revolutionary movements, or alternatively, a supporter of such anti-Soviet activities during the period in question.

It is worth noting that during the Stalinist era, individuals accused of such crimes, despite their intellectual achievements and social standing, often became victims of repressive measures. Nutsubidze's case reflects the broader pattern of political persecution characteristic of this period. Following such accusations, he was transferred from a Tbilisi prison to the Lubyanka in Moscow a few days later.

From the records in the Ministry of Internal Affairs archive, we learn that the Doctor of Philosophy was accused of espionage. Upon arrest, his copy of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* and translation excerpts were confiscated. The reason for the arrest, as well as Stalin's growing interest in the translation excerpts a few months later, is documented. Subsequently, Nutsubidze was informed that he would be permitted to complete the translation, and he resumed his work in detention with heartfelt dedication. The translations he produced during the week were reportedly presented to Stalin. On one occasion, Nutsubidze was summoned to the Kremlin for a meeting with Stalin, who discussed translation challenges and inquired, "What is your story with Rustaveli?" The translator replied with irony and respect, "For eight months now, we have both been in confinement." This response made Stalin smile. Stalin also asked if acceptable working conditions had been arranged, and seemingly unaware of the circumstances of his detention, promised to look into the matter, as if it were beyond his control. He assigned Beria to provide all necessary assistance "in this very important matter."

At one point, the security official Kobulov relayed to Nutsubidze that Stalin had asked Beria, "Have you heard the singing thrush in the cell?"(The Archive, p.8).Beria failed to understand Stalin's metaphor, who then explained, "Is there not a singing poet in the cell? If you truly want the translation of Rustaveli's poem, then release the poet from the cage where you force him to sing" (The Archive, p.8). It is likely that Stalin's intervention allowed Nutsubidze to complete the translation, on which his life and death depended. When Nutsubidze's hope for release began to fade, Kobulov delivered Stalin's decision on possible liberation—only on the condition that the poem be translated within a strictly set deadline, whether he was in prison or free, all depending on "the results of negotiations." For Nutsubidze, agreeing to such a condition was extremely difficult. At that time, he had a draft translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* but still consented and set a deadline of one and a half years for completion.

By Stalin's order, Nutsubidze was released but with the condition that he finish the translation within the prescribed time frame. Kobulov advised him: "Remember that the translation of Rustaveli is the condition of your salvation" (The Archive, p.8). The translator was housed in Sokolniki, in an area between a prison and a psychiatric hospital. Though an illusion of freedom was created, he was surrounded by an oppressive atmosphere to constantly remind him of the extraordinary surveillance and his "condition of salvation."

After one and a half years of work, Nutsubidze completed the translation, which Stalin publicly praised in the Kremlin: "Until now, I knew the good translation by Petrenko, but this is not only the best translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, but also the best literary work." For the translator, these words were a significant recognition and a guarantee of his inviolability. *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* saved him from death.

During their second meeting in the Kremlin, Stalin proposed his own translation of two verses. Without hesitation, Nutsubidze incorporated them as "more accurate and poetic." These were verses 1413 (1414) from the episode of the capture of the fortress of Kadjeti.It turns out Stalin actively participated in the translation work. According to Nutsubidze, the final version of the translation was corrected and edited by Stalin himself.

The presentation copy of Nutsubidze's translation was gifted to Stalin on his birthday, December 21, 1940. Despite the difficult international situation (World War II had already begun), Stalin thoroughly reviewed the edition. He personally corrected the title page, particularly changing "Translation by Shalva Nutsubidze" to "Translation from Georgian by Shalva Nutsubidze," emphasizing "from Georgian" and altering the form of Shalva's name. In Nutsubidze's translation, the poem's title was *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. According to Nutsubidze, Stalin "improved" the previously "distorted" and "ambiguous" titles in early translations (such as "Leopard Skin," "Covered in Leopard Skin," "Tariel, Leopard Skin," "The Hero Covered in Leopard Skin," "Wearing Leopard Skin"). Stalin deemed it appropriate to specify the genre by adding "Poem in Verse" under the title. He also redesigned the typography, varying font sizes for the author, title, and genre, and adjusted paragraph placements. In fact, Stalin entirely redesigned the title page and personally transferred an inscription originally not planned to the cover.

Stalin also reviewed the illustrations included in the edition. He found the painting by Zichi near the title page *The Arrival of Tariel and Avtandil at the Cave and Meeting with Asmat* inappropriate as it did not convey the poem's main idea. He marked it "Not suitable" in blue pencil. The editors took his remarks into account and placed the illustration where it corresponded to the text, replacing the frontispiece with another Zichi painting—*Meeting of Nestan and Tariel at the Kadjeti Fortress*. Stalin also requested an additional illustration showing the punishment of persecutors, which was added to the end of the chapter.Stalin reviewed works by S. Kobuladze and I. Toidze—he crossed out Kobuladze's painting *Meeting of Tariel and Avtandil (in the cave)*, which was replaced by Zichi's painting. Regarding Toidze's *Three sworn brothers near the Kadjeti fortress*, Stalin noted "The panther's skin is not visible here" and crossed it out because the depiction of the panther's skin on Tariel's armor was vague.

The sole presentation copy (1940) with Stalin's handwritten corrections was gifted to Nutsubidze. Nutsubidze's note on the copy reads: "With Stalin's autograph. If I perish, please transfer to the Museum of Georgian Writers in Tbilisi. Moscow, 21.VII.41. Sh. Nutsubidze." This demonstrates that Nutsubidze still feared for his life.

In 1941, Nutsubidze's Russian translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* was published (edited by S. Gorodetsky), incorporating all of Stalin's comments and corrections. It is noteworthy that Stalin wrote to the director of the State Literary Publishing House (Gosizdat), P. Chagin: "I demand that my name not be mentioned in the preface to *The Knight*." According to Nutsubidze, this showed Stalin's "respectful" and "noble" attitude. Presumably for the same reason, Nutsubidze expressed gratitude to editors S. Gorodetsky, S. Kavtaradze, and N. Tikhonov at the end of the preface. The translation was preceded by a letter from the publisher and a preface by the translator.

Concluding his letter, Nutsubidze recounts Stalin's position regarding the completion of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*: "Stalin believed that both episodes—the battle of the Khataians and the episode of the Khwarazm belonged to Rustaveli's original text" (The Archive, p.10). This clarifies Stalin's attitude toward the composition of Rustaveli's poem. Nutsubidze considers these episodes integral to the poem and believes their exclusion would have been an "obvious anti-Stalinist act."

As evident from the above, Stalin demonstrated his multifaceted abilities in relation to the publication of the translation ranging from the translation of the title, design of the title page (including font sizes), selection and placement of illustrations, to inclusion of his own "best" two verses in the text.

Thus ends the story of the complete poetic Russian translation by Shalva Nutsubidze. However, a significant question arises why was Stalin so interested in this translation?

In his letter, Nutsubidze notes that "Stalin did not intend to correct or edit." The translator offers his explanation: "... his (Stalin's) historical position and the situation linking him with Rustaveli's poem inevitably demanded some definiteness in this matter. On the other hand, Stalin had to have his own opinion on the text of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*" (The Archive, p. 9).

For Stalin, the existence of a new, full translation and a comprehensively produced edition was extremely important. In the 1920s, Joseph Jughashvili faced strong and dangerous opposition. His political course was resisted by the intelligentsia and émigrés alike. He had opponents in the legislative and executive branches, diplomatic and military institutions. His greatest threat was opposition from old Bolsheviks and party leaders of the Soviet republics. Abroad and within Russia, people thought of Stalin as a barbarian, a son of a wild nation. Starting from the early 1930s, his leadership and hold on power were under serious threat.

Stalin needed to demonstrate, both domestically and internationally, that he was a son of a people with a great and noble history, a successor of a high spiritual and material culture. He required the ancient history of his country to achieve this. To that end, he took decisive action. The first political event in this direction was the First Congress of Soviet Writers, at which he was personally present. He did not approve the report on Georgian literature by the well-known Bolshevik M. Toroshelidze. The version read at the congress, as it turns out, was written under Stalin's dictation, with all conclusions belonging to Joseph Stalin. From Stalin's perspective, this was a stance taken against Filippé Makharadze, who had been polemicizing with Stalin since the 1920s and had opposed the evaluative judgments of Chavchavadze.

By Stalin's initiative, in 1937 a Decade of Georgian Culture was held in Moscow. All spheres of Georgian art—literature, theater, music, choreography, and others—were fully showcased across the Soviet Union, further highlighting the uniqueness of Georgian culture.

Also in 1937, the centenary of Ilia Chavchavadze's birth was celebrated throughout the USSR. Numerous letters from writers, critics, historians, and publicists were published in Georgian and Soviet journals and newspapers. Commemorative events were held in Moscow and Leningrad, exhibitions were organized, and a five-volume collection of Ilia Chavchavadze's

works was published. Through this celebration of Ilia Chavchavadze's contribution, Stalin continued to present the culture of his people to the world.

In the same year, the entire USSR also marked the "Great Festival of Soviet Culture" — the 750th anniversary of the poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, preparations for which began in 1934. Editions of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* were published in translations by K. Balmont (1935, 1936, 1937), Tsagareli (1937), and N. Zabolotsky (1937). The Soviet press featured letters and works from Russian and foreign scholars and writers. The poem's universal significance was fully presented, and it was recognized as "the first book about the human soul and character," "a poem of struggle for new ideals, brotherhood, friendship, and love." Rustaveli was hailed as a poet who had anticipated the Italian Renaissance humanists by more than a century.

With the 1941 publication of the complete Russian poetic translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* by Shalva Nutsubidze, Stalin achieved a significant objective: the entire world saw and came to believe that the great leader was a son of a nation possessing a magnificent civilization. This was attested by the assessments of numerous scholars, writers, and public figures from various countries regarding the translation.

In conclusion, it can be said that for Shalva Nutsubidze, the translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* proved to be a "pledge of life's salvation." The song of love, humanism, and the triumph of good over evil saved the imprisoned poet from death, and the immortal poem itself immortalized the name of its translator.

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