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Nikitin's Conversion in India to Islam: Wielhorski's Translation Dilemma

In 1858 Mikhail Wielhorski's *The Travels of Athanasius Nikitin* was published in London.[1] This was the first and only translation into English of the travels to India c. 1470 by the Russian merchant Nikitin. In recent years scholars outside Russia (Lenhoff and Banerjee) have dramatically and clearly shown how Nikitin's text reveals him accepting Islam.[2] Nikitin's Indian milieu and the actual form of Islam that he absorbed are interesting, but are not the focus of this article.[3] The central concern here is the translator Wielhorski. There has been little comment about the way in which his translation in the early 1850s (the only one available in English) systematically obscured these Islamic affirmations by Nikitin. Such a move to Islam was noteworthy in the context of Nikitin's late medieval Russia and of Europe generally.[4]

to filter his translation? Text and sub-text emerge amidst this dilemma for Wielhorski of what to translate and indeed what not to translate.

In considering how Wielhorski was portrayed and treated, it is useful to note that Wielhorski's translation was commissioned by the *Hakluyt Society*, an influential and prestigious body in Victorian London founded in 1846 to publish scholarly historical travel literature.[5] It took its name from Richard Hakluyt, author of *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America*

Wielhorski's death, that aspiring Russian diplomats were obliged to pass an examination in modern languages. This is somewhat ironic in light of Wielhorski's own translating activities under analysis here. Hamilton's judgement that "the regulations governing the eligibility of candidates for the Russian civil and foreign services were, however, almost oriental in their inspiration" is also ironic in the light of Wielhorski's translation of Nikitin's travels in the Orient.[9]

Two further things come to mind within all this. Why was there a "recall" of Wielhorski, and why was Wielhorski the "late" Wielhorski? Therein already lies some Victorian reticence and understatement by the editor, R. Major. Wielhorski's "recall" was delicately not explained by Major. Russia's image in the West deteriorated dramatically under the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855) who emerged as "the gendarme of Europe" suppressing dissent at home and intervening abroad, amidst growing Russophobia in Britain.[10]

> The second quarter of the nineteenth century was thus the age par excellence of black literature about Russia. Indeed, it was then that the repertory of negative stereotypes regarding Russia first emerged…. Russia, more than any one power, became the focus of the fears…the regime of Nicholas I loomed ever more ominously.[11]

Nicholas's crushing of the Hungarian revolt in 1848 compounded this image as "it produced a paroxysm of Russophobic rage…the spectre haunting Europe was not Marx's variety of Communism…but Nicholas and his Cossacks…morally Russia had been cast into the outer darkness of Asia."[12] Two particular areas of concern to Britain further heightened such fears. Constantinople, dominating the strategically significant Bosphorus straits, was captured for Islam in 1453 amidst the vigorous Ottoman expansionism of Nikitin's period. Such expansionism had given way to decline, and Russian opportunities, by Wielhorski's time. This was the "Eastern Question" where "on this issue Westerners could most plausibly evoke the idea of Russian megalomania…it brought the apogee of Western-Russian

estrangement in the nineteenth century."[13] Marx had judged in 1853 that the Bosphorus straits were "the principal means of intercourse of Europe with [Islamic] Central Asia. The principal means of re-civilizing that vast region depends upon the uninterrupted liberty of trading through the gates of the Black Sea."[14] Such wider Asian settings point to the second strategic area of concern to Britain, the "Great Game" where Britain and Russia increasingly fenced with each other across Asia during the nineteenth century amidst growing British fears about overland Russian threats to British India through Central Asia and Persia.[15] As Marx noted in London, "there are always some vague and alarming rumours afloat about Russian progress in Central Asia, got up by interested…politicians or terrified visionaries."[16]

In an interesting comparison between Wielhorski's and Nikitin's times, Marx saw a continuity of menacing Russian expansionism where "it becomes clear that the policies of Ivan III [1462-1505] and those of Russia today [1853] are not merely similar but identical…that policy of extension, under the cover of which Russia hopes, as heretofore, to carry out her projects on the East."[17] Whether Marx and Wielhorski ever met or knew of each other during their residence in London during the early 1850s is unclear, but it is an interesting possibility.

Russian threats to Turkey in 1853 triggered rising furore in Britain, followed by Nicholas's decision to recall his ambassadorial staff from London in February 1854, including Count Wielhorski. The declaration of war on Russia by Britain and France came the following month, and with it the Crimean War of 1854-1856.[18] Major's editorial preface for the *Hakluyt Society* seems in retrospect to be summed up in "Cleese-ian" style as "above all, don't mention the war."[19] In Britain, the Crimean War was initially popular, with Marx writing about how "when Russia began her aggression upon Turkey, the national hatred broke forth in a blaze, and never, perhaps, was a war so popular as this."[20] Another

contemporary, Andrew White, noticed a similarly charged polemical atmosphere in Russia towards Britain.[21]

Amidst Crimean skirmishes, sieges, military blunders and medical mishaps, Wielhorski met his death on 22 November 1855. A revealing condolence letter in the *Journal de St. Petersburg* on 3 January 1856 was then translated in *The Times* (London) on 12 January. Such rapid textual dissemination between countries on the opposite extremes of the European continent is noticeable, even more so as they were still in a state of war. The person composing this condolence letter was no ordinary figure, being the Empress Marie of Russia, whose husband Alexander II had ascended the throne on the death of Nicholas I in September 1855, just before Wielhorski's own death. Mayer's talk of the aristocratic *Ancien Régime* spanning Europe during the nineteenth century comes to mind amidst such condolences across European national boundaries.[22] Empress Marie expressed her appreciation to Wielhorski's father (Count Mikhail "the elder") of "the generous sentiment which led your son to express the desire to go to the aid of the suffering among our brave soldiers wounded in the army of the Crimea."[23] The diplomatic career of Count Wielhorski ("the younger") seems to have been at a relatively early stage, with the Empress commenting to his father how due to "t

Wielhorski was proud of Nikitin's travels, citing Karamzin's assertion that "hitherto, geographers have ignored the fact that the honour of one of the oldest voyages to India, undertaken and described by an European, belongs to the age and country of Ivan III."[26] Wielhorski was ri

the reader's eye. Elsewhere Wielhorski admitted about Nikitin's material that "even when the meaning can be guessed at, it has sometimes, as in the present instance, been thought undesirable to supply it in English."[31] What was so "undesirable" in Nikitin's material to cause Wielhorski to restrict his translation?

One example of filtering comes with Wielhorski not translating some details concerning the practice of prostitution in India.[32] Such reserve may have reflected Victorian sensibilities in such matters.[33] However, apart from this example, there is a whole swathe of material in Nikitin that Wielhorski consistently filtered, namely that to do with Islam. Let us now turn to the question of what Wielhorski's untranslated passages on Islam concerned.[34]

Wielhorski was ready enough to translate great detail on Islamic trading patterns across the Indian Ocean and on Islamic military power in central India, together with Hindu religious practices at Parvat. Nevertheless, he consistently ignored material concerning Nikitin's own religious responses to Islam during his stay in India. Lenhoff and Martin note "the growing ratio of Oriental prayers to Church Slavic prayers" in the text, showing that "Nikitin came to embrace Islam in more than token fashion."[35] In Nikitin's time such a progression was unusual, potentially dangerous for Nikitin as an individual back in Russia, and scandalous for general Christian circles. After all, religious orthodoxy was then stamping out "Judaising" strands within the Russian church.[36]

How did Wielhorski deal with this progression? He was happy enough to translate Nikitin's preamble extolling the virtues of Christianity "by the prayer of our holy fathers, O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me, Thy sinful servant."[37] Admittedly, Lenhoff and Martin wonder if this preamble in High Church Slavic subsequently "may have been appended by an editor for the sake of decorum" at the monastery of Troitsk-Sergivsk in the late fifteenth/early sixteenth century.[38] Wielhorski consistently translated Christian-sounding material. However, the varied and increasingly devotional personal references

made by Nikitin to Islam were neither translated nor commented upon by Wielhorski—in particular, Nikitin's references to *Allah* (the mandatory Islamic term for God), Mohammed (Islam's central "Seal of the Prophets," rejected across medieval Christianity) and Islamic ritual formulae. What examples of this pattern present themselves in Wielhorski's translation?

The first example of Wielhorski's re-direction of Nikitin's testimony on Islam comes at the end of Nikitin's trip to Parvat. Wielhorski's translation reads:

> From Pervota we returned to Beder, a fortnight before the great Mahommedan festival (Ulu Bairam). But I know not the great day of Christ's Resurrection; however, I guess by different signs, that the great Christian day is by nine or ten days sooner than the Mahommedan *Cagrim* (Cairiam). I have nothing with me; no books whatever; those that I had taken from Russia were lost when I was robbed. And I forgot the Christian faith and the Christian festivals, and know neither Easter nor Christmas, nor can I tell Wednesday from Friday, and I am between the two faiths. *But I pray to the only God that he may preserve me from destruction. God is* one, king of glory and creator of heaven and earth.[39]

Wielhorski's translation suggests Nikitin as lamenting but also trying to hold onto his Christian faith. A rather different message starts to emerge with full translation of Wielhorski's cry, "I am between the two faiths. *But I pray to the only God that he may preserve me from destruction. God is* one, king of glory and creator of heaven and earth." Here Wielhorski's translation is selective. The word translated as "God" by Wielhorski was not the Russian word *Bog*, which appears elsewhere in Nikitin's text. Inste

In Wielhorski's presentation of Nikitin, this turning point is then immediately followed by another pattern, namely non-translation by Wielhorski. Initially this non-translation concerns the Islamic term *Allah*. We read Nikitin affirming:

> I prayed to God Almighty, who made heaven and earth; and no other god of any other name did I invoke, Bog ollo, Bog kerim, Bog garym, Bog khudo, Bog Akber, God, king of glory, Ollo-Varian ollo garymello, sensen olloty.[40]

This sounds still compatible enough with Christianity, except that Wielhorski's un-translated *Bog ollo, Bog kerim, Bog garym, Bog khudo, Bog Akber…Ollo-Varian ollo garymello, sensen olloty* has an immediate Islamic thrust in its start (*Bog ollo*) and completion (*Ollo-Varian ollo garymello*, *sensen olloty*). Nikitin's own familiar Russian term *Bog* "God" was equated and then subsumed by Nikitin within Islam's own specific term for God i.e. *Allah* (*Ollo*). When translated, the whole passage then reads:

As it stands Nikitin's own sentiments are indeterminate from Wielhorski's translation, able to be read as showing Nikitin still turning to Christianity. However, when translated we see a continuing shift and identification towards Islam in Nikitin's concluding *Ollo pervodiger, Ollo garym', Ollo tykarim, Ollo karim, Ollo ragymello, Akhalim dulimo*. This translates as

second half of the Islamic *shahadah* "Affirmation of Faith," the first of the "Five Pillars" of Islam. Mohammed as *Rasuliyyah* was the *rasul* ("messenger") of *Allah*, described by Cragg as a "formidable" term, which is "the central historical element in the genesis and the significance of Islam."[42] Not just any messenger, but the final and fullest messenger, the "Seal of the Prophets" (Qur'an 33.40).

Wielhorski's account of Nikitin's concluding travel back to Russia across the Black Sea was significantly selective, projecting a general air of piety from Nikitin without any particular Islamic trappings:

> We lay for fifteen days at Platana, the weather continuing very bad, and then we twice attempted to sail and again met with a foul wind, that did not permit us to keep us to keep the sea: "Ollo ak, Ollo khudo pervodiger," except that we know no other God. Having crossed the sea, we rried first to Sukbalykae, and thence to Kzov (Azov), wh

untranslated by Wielhorski. The way Wielhorski finishes his translation with a general sense

Wielhorski responded to this concluding Islamic clarion call by Nikitin with a definite and deafening silence, save for a relatively bland comment tucked away elsewhere in his introduction that Nikitin "terminates his narrative by a long sentence in corrupt Turkish, expressive of his gratitude to heaven for his preservation and safe return to his native country."[51]

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At a wider level, Said has noted in *Orientalism* that "for Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma."[90] Such feelings of "resentment" and "trauma" were perhaps consciously or

circumstances, conversion to Islam would have been even more disturbing. After all in 1854, as the Crimean War broke and Wielhorski was recalled from London, another observer noted:

> Russia has claimed for its war of might against right a religious sanction as a war of the vice regent of god against the inp-11.of

> humiliated…under the conditions imposed on the Grand Dukes of Muscovy in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries by their masters the Tatars. But in Russia, like everything else, glory is of recent date.[101]

Wielhorski could have translated, and thus helped publicise, that Nikitin had earlier not just travelled through these particular Islamic areas but had also converted to Islam during Russia's "first" emerging waves of expansionism in the late fifteenth century. However, that would have also jarred against the "second" wave of Russian imperialism mounting against Islam in Wielhorski's nineteenth century.

Moreover the very concept of religious freedom of movement was alien in Russia, where race and religion had become fused. As Mackenzie Wallace witnessed in his 1870s travels, "in their minds religion and nationality are so closely allied as to be almost identical. The Russian is, as it were, by nature a Christian, and the Tartar a Mahometan; and it never occurs to any one in these villages to disturb the appointed order of nature."[102] Imperial politics were at play in this area since "Islam opposes a strong barrier to Russification."[103] Religious conversion from Christianity was treated as a criminal act in Russia, where "they cannot openly profess Mahometanism, because men who have once been formally admitted into the National Church cannot leave it without exposing themselves to the severe pains and penalties of the criminal code."[104] Cross-religious missionary activity was frowned upon as:

> It seems to a Russian in the nature of things that Tatars should be Mahometans, that Poles should be Roman Catholics, and that Germans should be Protestants…these nationalities are therefore allowed the most perfect freedom in the exercise of their respective religions, so long as they refrain from disturbing by propagandism the divinely-established order of things…with regard to the Russians themselves the theory has a very different effect. If in the nature of things the Tatar is a Mahometan…it is equally in the nature of things that the Russian should be a member of the orthodox Church. On this point the written law and public opinion are in perfect accord…change of religion is not justifiable; on the contrary, he is amenable to the criminal law, and is at the same time condemned by public opinion as an apostate – almost as a traitor.[105]

Here the comment by Lenhoff comes to mind in her original 1979 study of Nikitin's concluding section, that "Afanasij's closing prayer leaves no doubt as to the state of his [Islamic] faith. The Christian clergy would never have tolerated…the ultimate violation of medieval Russian social and literary etiquette."[106] In 1857 religious, political, social and literary barriers were still very much against acknowledging such a conversion. Wielhorski went along with such sensibilities, thereby solving his own dilemma through selective non-translation of Nikitin's testimony.

Nikitin's testimony has been the subject of ongoing historical reinterpretation and filtration down the centuries. Russian Christian concerns are one such area, seen in the monastic editing of the text in the early sixteenth century and still influencing Wielhorski's selections in the 1850s, by which time Russian imperialism had vigorously reawakened. Soviet-era projections of Nikitin, in turn, emphasised his supposed class-consciousness.[107] Pt12.24O(s)-7.shRuncououou.

of it which the ruler wishes to make known is displayed. The memory of what happened yesterday is the property of the Czar; he alters the annals of the country according to his own good pl-(-(-(-009 T6.5(1.4(;)-131(-0L.1493 TDl3a(1.4(;)-nd d8(h)4y)1131(-0L-(-(

[19] A line later immortalised in the 1980s *Fawlty Towers* classic comedy series with John Cleese's admonition to his staff concerning hotel guests from Germany.
[20] Marx and Engels, 188. On the conduct and challenges of the war see O. Anderson, *A Liberal State at War: English Politics and Economics During the Crimean War* (London: Macmillan, 1967); J. Connacher, *Britain and the Crimea, 1855-56* (London: Macmillan, 1987).
[21] *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White*, ch.2 where "some other Russian efforts at keeping up public spirit were less legitimate. Popular pictures of a rude sort were circulated in vast numbers among the peasants, representing British and French soldiers desecrating churches, plundering monasteries, and murdering priests."
[22] A. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1981).
[23] Letter reproduced by Major in "Editor's Preface," Wielhorski, iii-iv, iii.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Notes by Wielhorski, xiv-lxxx (part of Major's own "Introduction" preface there, v-xc), lxxv.
[27] Ibid., lxxvi.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] A. Marwick, *The New Nature of History. Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 172-179.
[31] Wielhorski, 18, fn. 1.
[32] Ibid. "[I]n India *pachektur a uchu zeder sikish ilarsen ikishitel akechany ilia atyrsen a tle jetelber bularadastor akul kara-vash uchuz charfuna khubbem funa khubesia kap karaam chuk-kichi khosh*." This translates as "in India women are obtained by contract and they are cheap; you can have intercourse for two sitel. For four fun you can get a pretty one; for five [fun]—a pretty negress, all black with small and pretty nipples." Elsewhere Wielhorski translated other comments from Nikitin like "in the land of India, it is the custom for foreign traders to stop at inns; there the food is cooked for the guest, by the landlady, who also makes the beds and sleeps with strangers. Women that know you willingly concede their favours, for they like white men" (ibid., 21). A harsh view was generally taken of women at Beder with "the women all harlots or witches" (ibid., 12).
[33] In Wielhorski's untranslated piece, the explicit commercial pricing ("intercourse for two

[38] Lenhoff and Martin, 335.
[39] Wielhorski, 18.
[40] Ibid., 19.
[41] Ibid., 28-29.
[42] K. Cragg, *The House of Islam* (Belmont: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1969), 19.
[43] Wielhorski, 32.
[44] Cragg, 5-18, 7.
[45] Wielhorski, 32.
[46] Lenhoff, 445.
[47] Lenhoff and Martin, 338-339.
[48] "Son of God" would have reflected Christian trinitarian terms, particular prevalent in Russian Orthodox circles of Nikitin's background. On the one hand such a Russian Orthodox trinitarian emphasis was in part against Islam's stark monotheism (where Jesus appeared as the "secondary" subsequent "spirit of God"). On the other hand such a Russian Orthodox emphasis was also against Roman Catholic nuances which for them seemed conversely to over-emphasise Jesus within the Trinity—a battle conducted in the general "Filoque" clause controversies of Nikitin's fifteenth century.
[49] Banerjee, 8-9.
[50] Ibid., 11-12.
[51] Wielhorski, lxxiv.

Deconstructing History (London: Routledge, 1997), and the forthcoming study on "A Buddhist 'construction' of History" by the present author.

[58] N. Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70.4, 1995, 822-864, 846.

[59] E. Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from the Tempest to Tarzan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[60] L. Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambience: An Essay in Historical Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3.1, 1942, 1-42.

[61] My thanks to Clare Scott for tracking down these tangled nineteenth-century aristocratic genealogies.

[62] W. Wasielewski, "The Violoncello and its history (Cello Playing in the 19th Century Slav States and Hungary)," www.celloheaven.com/wasiel/19ssah.htm Matvei's younger brother Jozef (1817-92) also played the cello and piano.

[63] Berlioz, *Memoires*, at

[82] Ibid., 320. Classical works by Tacitus and Plato were suppressed, the censor Mekhelin spent time and effort to remove all references to the words “republican” and “republicanism” from earlier studies on Ancient Greece

[104] Ibid., 243.
[105] Ibid., 463-464.
[106] Lenhoff, "Beyond Three Seas…," 445.
[107] Ibid., 446, fn. 6 for references to varied Soviet writers, like Osipov, Aleksandrov and Goldberg (1951), V