Translation in Early Modern Diplomacy

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Introduction

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When the papal envoy Giovanni Commendone travelled to the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1566, the Holy See instructed him to recruit a cook who would also serve as a spy (Braun, 2018). This undoubtedly required a sufficient knowledge of German, which Italians did not typically possess at the time. Commendone's instructions offer a glimpse into the complex world of early modern diplomacy, where assemblies of estates received international envoys, diplomacy and espionage intertwined, and a cook could also serve as a spy and translator.

This anecdote, moreover, highlights the transnational and interdisciplinary viewpoint adopted in this volume, which discusses translation in early modern diplomacy within the broad context of the development of translation practices and the evolution of diplomacy during the period. This was a time of burgeoning diplomatic activity on the European continent, and it was characterised by the spread of resident diplomacy and the appearance of multilateral peace congresses, which involved many changes in the use of languages in diplomatic interactions (Häberlein and Flurschütz da Cruz, 2024). Translation was central to this transformation of diplomacy and can be considered a melting pot of practices, a means of bridging divergent conceptions of order in transcultural contexts (Dierks, 2012), and an important element that linked individuals, institutions, and cultures.

The 13 chapters of the book emphasise the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon by addressing specific issues in the history of translation and interpreting in the early modern period. Together, they reflect broad social and cultural processes in a vast geographical area spanning both Europe – from Spain and France in the West to Russia and Ukraine in the East, and from Sweden in the North to the Ottoman Empire in the South – and regions outside Europe, such as Dutch East Asia. In other words, the case studies highlight the role of translation in encounters in and beyond Europe and shed light on the strategies Europeans employed to overcome challenges in these contexts.

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This introduction provides a gateway to the book's chapters. Our aim is to clarify key research questions, overarching thematic and methodological challenges, and the potential and objectives of the study of diplomatic translation and interpreting as a distinctive form of intercultural contacts and interactions in the early modern period. We have chosen to expand the discussion of a set of recurrent topics that bind the chapters together: the need for translation within early modern diplomacy, the recruitment of translators and interpreters, the interrelationship of translation and trust, early modern training practices and programmes, the tasks and multiple roles of translators, their career trajectories and social status, information flows and language, translators' working methods, and the organisation and quality of translation. These topics are not unique to the chapters of the present volume. On the contrary, they resonate with recent studies within the expanding field of research on the history of diplomatic translation. To situate the chapters within this broader field, the following discussion starts with some introductory remarks on fundamental terms such as 'language' and 'translation' and on common methodological challenges.

This volume partly originates from a conference held in January 2022 at the German Historical Institute in Moscow, organised as part of a German–Russian research project on language use in eighteenth-century Russian diplomacy within a European context. On the German side, the project is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), to which we express our gratitude for its support. The primary scope of this research project explains the particular focus on diplomatic translation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Russia that we adopt in this introduction.

Nevertheless, we draw parallels and make comparisons between the development of diplomatic translation in Russia and other geographical areas, primarily in Europe. This contextualisation is necessarily constrained not only by the scope of our expertise but, more importantly, by the state of research on the history of diplomatic translation in many European polities, which remains largely underdeveloped, particularly given the breadth of enquiry reflected in the studies published in this volume. Even within these limitations, this comparison underscores the diversity of institutional contexts and the multiplicity of practices across Europe rather than the uniformity one might expect when adopting a globalising perspective.

Languages of diplomacy and translation

Language is regarded as an essential human characteristic and the basis of social information exchange, with cognitive, epistemic, and affective functional attributions. In a comprehensive semiotic understanding, language is defined as a system of signs used for communication. In a narrower sense, it encompasses: (1) the species-specific human capacity for language, (2) the idiom specific to a culturally, spatially, and temporally defined language community, and (3) the concrete speech act in a performative sense (Schwarze, 2010, Eng. ed. 2021).

In a broader sense, the languages of diplomacy encompass non-verbal means of communication, such as ceremonial practices, gestures, and facial expressions, which have been the focus of recent research (May, 2016; Carayon, 2019; Joby, 2025). In a narrower sense, verbal communication takes centre stage, particularly the specific languages used in diplomatic contacts and negotiations.

The languages of diplomacy form a sub-segment of the court and state languages of the early modern period insofar as the princely residences and courts formed the stage on which a significant part of early modern diplomatic interaction occurred. The theoretical literature of the time – especially treatises on the "perfect ambassador" (Kugeler, 2006; Andretta et al., 2015) – required the envoy to have a linguistic competence appropriate to diplomatic multilingualism (Schmidt-Rösler, 2012). These treatises were themselves written in various languages, first in Latin, but also in Spanish, until the middle of the seventeenth century and thereafter primarily in French. They were, in some cases, also translated into other languages. François de Callières's renowned treatise, for example, was very quickly translated into English and German and, as Maria A. Petrova discusses in this volume, into Russian in the eighteenth century.

Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink's statement regarding early modern societies in general applies in particular to diplomacy: they were far more multilingual and multicultural than modern societies (2011: 879). A look at the period between 1500 and 1800 reveals that Latin initially held primacy among diplomats and negotiators before French increasingly replaced it in the second half of the early modern period (Penzholz and Schmidt-Rösler, 2014). However, at no stage did one language dominate absolutely in European diplomacy. Other languages played important roles in written and oral communication between chanceries and diplomats: Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Polish, and Tatar. The latter two idioms functioned as *lingua francas* in Eastern Europe, including in correspondence between Christian and Muslim neighbours (Kochegarov in this volume).

Diplomacy must therefore be defined as a transcultural space in which several cultures and languages coexisted. This multilingualism, rather than the dominance of one language, constitutes the linguistic legacy of early modern European political culture. The language of diplomacy can thus be described as a dynamic mixture of idioms, adapted over time to specific contexts. These changes reflected broader cultural shifts as well as the specific demands of diplomatic practice, resulting in a linguistic landscape that was as complex and varied as the political interactions it served.

A methodologically and substantively renewed diplomatic history has addressed translation challenges and achievements in early modern diplomatic contacts, in line with the "translational turn" postulated in recent scholarship (Bachmann-Medick, 2008; Lässig, 2012). In recent decades, scholars have begun addressing the functions and significance of language as a medium of written and oral communication in the field of foreign relations in the early modern period. This includes the languages of international treaties – both bilateral and multilateral – particularly peace agreements, which have been studied in greater depth (see, e.g., Burkhardt et al., 2014; Amirel and Maarten, 2024). The functions of language in negotiation processes have also been given more detailed consideration (Couto and Péquignot, 2017). Recently, the aforementioned research project on the linguistic practices of eighteenth-century Russian diplomats produced several publications focusing on the use of languages in other forms of diplomatic communication, namely external and internal diplomatic correspondence during the early modern period, not only in Russia but also in other European powers and beyond (Holm, 2024; Holm and Rjéoutski, 2024; Rjéoutski, 2024; Kazakov and Rjéoutski, 2025). In parallel, other publications advancing this field of studies have appeared, particularly a volume that, for the first time, provides a trans-epochal, interdisciplinary view of these problems from the perspectives of history, linguistics, and translation studies, paying particular attention to the actors and practices of translation (Braun et al., 2025).

As a result of the "linguistic turn" and the growing emphasis on cultural–historical approaches, research has increasingly focused on languages and ways of speaking (Andretta et al., 2010) and on translations, understood as both linguistic and cultural processes in intercultural contexts. These studies address interactions within Europe as well as between Europe and the non-European world, encompassing political, religious, and hybrid contexts (Windler, 2018, Eng. version, 2024). If translation in its original meaning refers to the transfer of a written text from a source language into a target language, the translator is also expected to have a precise understanding of the subject matter addressed in the text (Lüsebrink, 2011, Eng. ed. 2022), which refers to translation as a cultural process.

Linguistic and cultural translation go hand in hand. Translation is a compromise between two cultures that involves not only the transmission of meaning but also its transformation and even loss, resulting in misunderstandings and misinterpretations, which can be resolved through the negotiation of meaning. From this perspective, the translator is seen as a central actor who reconstructs the text in a unique way, constantly creating new meanings. Translation is embedded in the social context, interactions, and power relations and serves as an indicator of cultural dominants (Burke and Hsia, 2007: 8–10; Pernau, 2012).

However, although recent research has addressed the topic to some extent, the processes of translation in diplomacy remain understudied, as Lisa Hellman and Birgit Tremml-Werner (2021: 455) have correctly remarked. In other areas of historical research, such as imperial history, the role of language and translation has been the subject of insightful studies (Rindler Schjerve, 2003; Tageldin, 2011; Del Valle, 2013; Polskoi and Rzheutskii, 2022). Recent studies on diplomatic translators and interpreters in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Russia and the Ottoman Empire, characterised by extraordinary richness, highlight the imbalance in the study of diplomatic translation across different geographical areas.

Research rarely focuses on what many readers might consider the core of diplomatic translation: working with texts, the decoding and encoding practices of early modern translators. This gap reflects a broader desideratum in the history of early modern diplomatic translation, often overlooked due to the perception among many historians that this field belongs to the domains of linguistics or translation studies rather than social and cultural history. However, we argue that the methods and linguistic tools that translators employed were profoundly shaped by their social and cultural backgrounds – their 'cultural capital'. This influence was especially significant in the absence of formal training or standardised working instructions, which might otherwise have fostered a kind of 'corporate culture' among translators. For instance, clerks working in the Russian *prikazy* (state departments), often drawn from families of state servants, approached translation differently than monks or seminarians, whose education and world views diverged markedly (Polskoi, 2022; Boldyreva, 2019).

The advent of the age of resident diplomacy, the arrival of new players on the European political scene, and the increasing role of early modern states in diplomatic interactions on the European continent and beyond had a considerable impact on translation in diplomacy, affecting its functioning and role in various ways. Translation departments were formed or expanded and redesigned (Beliakov and Deloye in this volume, see also Deloye, 2024), and the need to train translators to increase the efficiency of foreign policy became evident to both major and smaller powers. Although translation challenges were significant in contacts between Christian European diplomats, they were even more pronounced in relations with non-Christian European envoys, particularly in diplomatic contacts and negotiations with the Ottoman Empire. These complex processes, in which linguistic and cultural translations are interwoven, place very high demands on methodology.

Methodological challenges

Research into diplomatic translation processes in the early modern period faces significant methodological challenges. Some are specific to this period, while others are more general in nature. However, this strand of research also offers insights which can contribute to a deeper understanding of early modern societies and cultures that goes far beyond the diplomatic and political, insofar as translators and interpreters contributed significantly to intercultural transfers and the circulation of knowledge (Rothman, 2021; Hellman and Tremml-Werner, 2021: 457–458; Petrova in this volume).

First, identifying translators and interpreters and locating them in the sources is challenging. They were often tasked with various missions not directly related to the translation of diplomatic documents: not only the translation and certification of documents but also diplomatic missions, tax collection, justice, and library work, among other possibilities. The early modern terminology referring to translators and interpreters highlights such additional functions (see more in detail later).

In certain regions, Russia being a prime example, the identification of translators and interpreters is further complicated by a common practice of renaming those of foreign origin who converted to Orthodoxy – Elizar turned out to be the Englishman Giles Crow(e), and Olferii Iakovlev and Ivan Adamov were identified as the Swedes Wolf Jacob Wyborch and Johann Böcker von Delden, respectively – but in some cases, researchers' efforts have been unsuccessful (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 183, 191). Furthermore, visual sources concerning interpreters are exceedingly rare (for a rare exception, see Cziráki in this volume; Rusakovskii, 2024 cites another example).

Moreover, written translation and oral interpreting were often equated or, at the very least, not clearly distinguished. For example, in Russian diplomacy, a clearer differentiation between translators (*perevodchik*) and interpreters (*tolmach*) developed towards the end of the sixteenth century or in the seventeenth century (Erusalimskii, 2022), whereas in the Ottoman Empire, the words *interprete* and *tercümān* combined both meanings even at the end of the seventeenth century (Poulios in this volume).

To further complicate matters, diplomatic envoys, their secretaries, and informants often acted as both interpreters and translators. Such individuals would be classified in present-day translation studies as non-professional, para-professional, or ad hoc translators and interpreters (see Antonini et al., 2017). Considering only those actors who held the title of translator or interpreter within early modern diplomatic services thus excludes a plethora of ad hoc arrangements (cf. Waugh and Maier, 2023; on the multiplicity of actors in this field, see also Hellman and Tremml-Werner, 2021: 461–464). However, encompassing everyone involved in diplomatic translation brings its own set of challenges, not least the issue of limitations.

Moreover, it seems counterproductive and incorrect to consider some actors 'professional' diplomatic translators because of their affiliation to foreign offices and contrast them with all other translators acting in the field of diplomacy (a distinction made, e.g., in Hellman and Tremml-Werner, 2021: 461). Such a distinction, we argue, obscures the similarities between the different groups of translators – whether affiliated with diplomatic departments or not – due to the absence of translator-training institutions with a clear curriculum and well-defined objectives, at least until the eighteenth century.

The entities sending ambassadors or envoys are also not easy to define. In addition to state actors, para-state or semi-sovereign entities, such as the hetmans in Left-Bank Ukraine (Kochegarov in this volume), and quasi-state actors, such as the 'company-states', including the Dutch East India Company, also played a prominent role in diplomacy. Such quasi-state actors were not only major economic players but also had considerable political power (Amirell in this volume).

Second, in addition to identifying and defining the actors, determining the object of study – namely, translation and interpreting – presents its own set of challenges. Translation and interpreting processes are either not described at all or are only insufficiently covered in early modern sources, especially for diplomacy. There are very few relevant theoretical reflections on diplomatic and negotiating practices in diplomatic correspondence, and in the theoretical, political, and legal literature, such reflections are rather rare and superficial.

Moreover, determining what should be considered translation is also challenging. The difficulty partly stems from the nature of early modern translation, which was a fluid and poorly defined phenomenon. Since texts within the manuscript tradition had no 'definitive' form, some researchers have argued that Middle-Age literature was a specific phenomenon within which it is almost impossible to distinguish between 'original' and 'translated' texts. Translation is seen as a new creation, a universal form for assimilating texts, practices, and forms of thinking (Lotman, 2010: 590–602).

Certainly, the early modern attitude towards authorship contributed to a very free approach to handling the original text. Translators typically adapted the source text to their audiences – real or imaginary – by omitting and adding information, changing the order of elements, and constantly creating new concepts in the process of translation (Hellman and Tremml-Werner, 2021: 462). Recent research on the acquisition of foreign news in early modern Russia, for example, has pointed to the various ways in which foreign texts were altered when translated, both by adding clarifications for readers and by summarising the content. The border between a translation and a summary in another language was elusive in this context

(Waugh and Maier, 2023; for an example of this approach among diplomatic translators, see Kosheleva, 2018). Similarly, in diplomatic situations such as early modern peace negotiations, translations sometimes contained significant revisions of the original. Dutch peace mediators in the seventeenth century, for example, incorporated entirely new conditions into their supposed translations of peace proposals, which they transported back and forth between the negotiating parties (Laufs, 2022).

From the perspective of archival research, translations are sometimes an invisible source, and the titles of archival documents are frequently misleading. Such documents are not always explicitly identified as translations, and in many cases, the source language is not indicated. In contemporary political or legal publications of acts and treaties, translations are often published without noting that the original was written in a different language, so that researchers may be misled regarding the diplomatic languages themselves (Braun, 2010).

Third, and relatedly, there is a gap in our understanding of the outcomes of linguistic transfer processes involving interpreting. Oral culture, by nature, is not directly preserved; if it survives at all, it does so only in written form, which strips interpretation of its core aspect of orality.

In contrast, the results of diplomatic translation in written forms are far better preserved. However, this wealth of sources poses another challenge for researchers and raises the question of the representativeness of the case studies selected. Do these studies reveal specific, context-bound peculiarities, or can they support generally valid conclusions about early modern diplomatic translations?

In many cases, however, we lack basic information – such as by whom, when, and how an original document was translated (Holm in this volume) – and we sometimes even lack the counterpart: either the source or the target text. The diplomatic collections at the Swedish National Archives, for example, contain a significant number of early modern translations from Russian to Swedish or German but comparatively few original documents in Russian. The latter were, as Kari Tarkiainen has concluded, probably not preserved, since they were unreadable for the Chancellery staff and hence had no practical value (Tarkiainen, 2017: 212; similarly concerning the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, see Liubaia, 2021). In some cases, one piece has been preserved in a completely different location, archive, or country than its counterpart, making the context unclear. Finally, most diplomatic translations preserved in archives are unsigned, making it challenging to identify the translators. The recent "archival turn" (Deloye in this volume, referring to Poncet, 2019) may hold the key to addressing this problem.

Fourth, translation and interpreting involve transferring a text or speech act from a source language into a target language. However, our current distinction between individual languages does not always align with early modern understanding and terminology, particularly for languages defined more by sociopolitical or sociological rather than linguistic criteria. For example, some French diplomatic sources do not make a clear distinction between Dutch and Flemish. Swedish is occasionally categorised as German, as in some Russian diplomatic sources of the seventeenth century, where the term *nemetskii* ('German', the original meaning being 'mute' or 'dumb') was applied to any language spoken in the Holy Roman Empire and northward. At the same time, clerks at the Russian Ambassadorial Chancery (*Posolskii prikaz*) often distinguished between *tsesarskii* ('Cesarian') and *nemetskii*, probably a distinction related to the origin of the translators rather than to the differences between language varieties. What exactly was understood by *shotlandskii* (Scottish), *valashskii* (Wallachian), *bukharskii* (the language of Bukhara), or *khivinskii* (the language of Khiva; Waugh and Maier, 2023: 188–190)? In some cases, languages were so similar that defining them often requires geographical rather than linguistic criteria (Kochegarov in this volume).

Fifth, and finally, research into early modern translation and interpreting requires considerable transdisciplinary skills and an interdisciplinary approach. Diplomatic translation is inextricably linked to a range of historical phenomena that historians must consider to fully grasp its complexity. These phenomena underscore the all-encompassing nature of translation as a crucible of human experiences while simultaneously rendering any attempt at an exhaustive study an unattainable ideal. The authors of this volume examine the intricate connections between diplomatic translation and numerous other historical phenomena, including human mobility across and beyond Europe, education and language acquisition, cultural capital, state policies, administrative evolution, and the circulation of information – not to mention the more evident domains of international relations and translation techniques, the latter of which requiring collaboration between historians and linguists. There are certainly successful examples of such cooperation between historians and linguists (Gerstenberg, 2014; Waugh and Maier, 2023) and even between historians and art historians (Duchhardt and Espenhorst, 2013). However, interdisciplinarity remains a constant challenge insofar as research interests, questions, and methods can vary greatly between fields.

On both sides, the overvaluation of printed sources compared to archival ones is a fundamental problem. The latter are far less accessible, more challenging to decipher palaeographically (spanning languages from Latin and Arabic to far less familiar scripts), and harder to handle due to their substantial volume. This creates a misleading impression of the distribution of diplomatic languages, as major languages – such as Latin and French in Europe – tend to be overrepresented in printed sources, while more minor ones, which often are more revealing of the translation processes, remain underrepresented.

Why and when was translation needed?

Given the many languages in use, translation was a routine aspect of early modern diplomacy. It appeared, as the examples discussed in this volume demonstrate, in various diplomatic spheres and at multiple levels of interaction.

Translation and interpretation were essential at courts where diplomatic representatives were accredited or sent on special missions. Diplomatic contacts could not be conducted in a single language, for reasons of both honour and rank, as well as because of specific language skills or the lack thereof. The use of one's own language was regarded as a special expression of status, sovereignty, and claims to power, while using the other person's or state's language was considered a sign of subservience and low rank (Bély, 1990: 453, 805). Different rules applied to oral and written communication: in oral exchanges, there were multiple distinctions between formal and informal speech acts, while in written communication, autograph letters and chancery correspondence were differentiated with regard to issuer and addressee. The complexity of these rules led to an increase in the languages used and thus to the necessity of translation.

Translation and interpreting were also necessary in the realm of extraordinary diplomacy, especially at major peace congresses from the seventeenth century onwards. Westphalia, Carlowitz, and Soissons (discussed by Braun, Poulios, and Fernández García, respectively, in this volume) provide outstanding examples of multilateral diplomacy that required numerous interactions between actors from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The Congress of Carlowitz, for example, brought together speakers of Dutch, English, Italian, German, Ottoman Turkish, Polish, and Russian. At these 'small Babel[s]', as Konstantinos Poulios describes them, traditions, international legal conventions, and considerations of honour and rank shaped situational linguistic practices, resulting in multilingualism and creating a need for translation and interpreting. Additionally, negotiators' personal skills and preferences, as well as the availability or lack of translators skilled in particular languages, could influence language use and translation processes (see, e.g., Larina, 2024).

As our book shows, assemblies of the estates were also involved in early modern diplomatic contacts, interactions and negotiations, receiving foreign envoys, and dealing with their concerns or defining the foreign policy of their own polity. This was evident at the Swiss Diet and the Perpetual Diet of the Holy Roman Empire (Bechtold and Braun, 2024), as well as in the cases of the Dutch States General or the Venetian Senate

(Saux-Escoubet, 2025), which acted as the actual bearers of sovereignty. The Swedish Diet, which Sophie Holm discusses in this volume, provides another significant example. Here, too, legal and normative requirements, along with ceremonial frameworks, necessitated multilingualism and, consequently, recourse to translation and interpreting.

These activities were also unavoidable in the consular sphere; this is not the focus of the contributions in our book, but relevant research has already addressed it (Windler, 2002; Gautier, 2006; Marzagalli and Ulbert, 2016). Similarly, translation was needed in contacts between diplomatic envoys and other correspondents or interlocutors, either at court (the Viennese court being a prominent example; see González-Cuerva, 2023) or outside the political sphere, since the pronounced multilingualism of the time often exceeded even the language skills of the most polyglot envoys.

In some geographical areas, translation and interpreting occurred in concentrated forms, for example, in empires that were themselves multilingual and whose capitals hosted a particularly large number of diplomatic representatives from the most diverse points of the compass. Istanbul is a well-researched example (see, e.g., Ghobrial, 2013; Talbot, 2017). The Pacific-Southeast Asian region also became an area of close diplomatic communication for economic reasons, as evidenced by the large number of treaties negotiated between the Dutch and regional countries and rulers (Amirell in this volume).

However, the limits of the need for translation should not be overlooked. Many envoys and their interlocutors were multilingual despite the lack of formal training. The Flemish scholar and Habsburg diplomat Ghislain de Busbecq spoke several modern languages (German, Croatian, French, Italian, and Spanish, in addition to Dutch). The Dutch humanist and diplomat Constantijn Huygens knew at least eight languages (Joby, 2014). In early modern diplomacy, some of the challenges posed by diplomatic multilingualism were addressed by the envoys themselves, who, in certain cases, provided translation or interpreting services. Furthermore, translators were sometimes deemed unnecessary when the languages used by the diplomacies of the countries in contact were sufficiently similar, as was the case between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Muscovy in the sixteenth century (Erusalimskii, 2022).

Finally, it is worth noting that the translation of diplomatic documents also reflected tradition and a desire to emphasise the role of the domestic language – the language of the monarch – within state administration. This was particularly true for documents written in French. Although French was widely understood among diplomatic actors in the eighteenth century, in some cases, documents written in this language continued to be translated into the domestic language, with Spain and Russia being notable examples (Rjéoutski, 2025; Rjéoutski et al., 2019: 447). This function of translation concerned less the facilitation of access to information than the assertion of representation and, arguably, self-identification – important factors for many early modern actors.

Recruitment, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds

In a period when formal training was scarce, the recruitment of translators followed patterns that strengthened the importance of translators' ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. In many cases, translators were recruited on an ad hoc basis, as in pre-eighteenth-century Russia, where, as Andrei V. Beliakov notes in this volume, anyone deemed suitable could be offered the job. Cases of recruitment among Russian-born subjects for European languages were rare at the time, reflecting the general lack of interest in and knowledge of foreign languages in this milieu. However, Russians who had been released from captivity – where they had learned foreign languages – were sometimes appointed as interpreters.

This ad hoc recruitment often involved coercion. Sometimes prisoners were released from captivity on the condition that they serve as translators or interpreters at the Ambassadorial Chancery, as was the case with the Scotsman Sterling at the end of the sixteenth century (Nozdrin, 2019). Russian authorities did not hesitate to use force to retain translators working for foreign diplomats and even, in some cases, high-ranking foreign diplomats passing through Muscovy on diplomatic missions. A notable case is that of Adam Thurn von Einödt, an imperial diplomat, who was forcibly retained in Russia and later converted to Orthodoxy (Kosheleva, 2019; Beliakov et al., 2021b: 146–147). This practice was part of a broader and continuous strategy that Russian authorities used to secure specialists with specific expertise (Rzheutskii and Guzevich, 2019). However, this method of recruitment was by no means exclusive to Russia. Similar cases are documented, for instance, in relation to the Crimean Khanate (Kochegarov in this volume).

While largely ad hoc, the recruitment of translators could still be accompanied by formal procedures, such as qualification exams. In Russia, candidates for translator and interpreter roles were required to pass examinations conducted by experienced translators. These tests assessed both written and oral translation skills. However, insufficient language proficiency did not necessarily lead to rejection if candidates were considered capable of improving their level quickly (Beliakov in this volume).

Translators and interpreters from among Europeans were often recruited to the Ambassadorial Chancery years after they had been captured; this explains why they generally had a good knowledge of the target language (Gus'kov and Maier, 2019), although examples of poor language proficiency were also frequent (Liseitsev, 2019). Those who translated from and into Oriental languages were often recruited among the tsar's subjects known as 'grand princely serving Tatars'. Tatar was then a *lingua franca* that was widely used in interactions among Eastern polities (Khisamova, 1999).

In practice, some countries used foreigners or tributary populations with particular linguistic and cultural expertise in the field of diplomatic translation. The Ottomans relied on various minorities living under Ottoman rule as translators for their diplomatic contacts. These dragomans, frequently of Greek or Wallachian origin, often gained recognition and played an important role in the system of Ottoman foreign affairs, even rising to positions of power; in some cases, they became rulers in tributary principalities under Ottoman control (Rothman, 2021). The Austrians also turned to the Ottoman Empire's tributary states, such as Ragusa, as a source of translators for their foreign office (Cziráki in this volume).

Such individuals not only had the necessary linguistic proficiency, but they also brought cultural expertise that made their services particularly valuable. Living and working in a multilingual and multicultural environment, translators often had to be cultural brokers with hybrid cultural identities (see, e.g., Rothman, 2021). Translators and interpreters were thus recruited from specific ethnic, cultural, geographical, and linguistic groups that were perceived as bridges between distinct cultural and political spheres. The need for broader cultural competence was apparent in geographically distant diplomatic postings, such as the Dutch East India Company's diplomatic interactions with East Asian actors, where interpreters provided vital information (see, e.g., Joby, 2025).

However, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, similar skills were also important in diplomatic relations on the European continent. Ragusans, for example, not only possessed the necessary language skills required in diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire; they were also, as Cziráki stresses, at home in two sociocultural realms and were familiar with both European and Ottoman customs. Tatar interpreters and translators within the Russian administration often came from prominent families from the Meschchera region and, as Andrei V. Beliakov mentions, sometimes had ties to Tatar kings and Siberian princes. These connections allowed them to provide access to important social networks. Similarly, interpreters and translators of Western European languages were often recruited from among the children of naturalised foreigners, which gave them a certain cultural expertise.

The importance of a translator's ethnic or linguistic background often led to the formation of relatively closed groups of cadres frequently dominated by foreign subjects, religious minorities, or even specific families. For a long time, Greek families of the Phanar controlled the position of the Great Dragoman of the Ottoman Porte. In the seventeenth century, the dragomans serving the Venetian consulate in Istanbul, for example, came from a dozen families who controlled the recruitment of apprentice dragomans through intermarital connections, made these positions de facto hereditary (Veinstein, 2001; Gautier, 2006; Rothman, 2021: 23). The strong influence of the Venetian dragomans' endogamous community and, consequently, their fear of losing their position might, as Nathalie Rothman proposes, explain why no Oriental academy was founded in Venice, although other powers, such as France and the Habsburg monarchy, invested in linguistic training programmes at home (Rothman, 2021: 248). Tatar translators in both the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and, later, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, as well as in Russia, were often related to each other, constituting large clans which controlled the recruitment of translators for oriental languages (Liubaia, 2021; Beliakov in this volume).

Among Western European powers, it was not a completely unfamiliar phenomenon for a group of translators forming a clan to control recruitment for diplomatic translation. In Spain, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Gracián family secured key translator positions within the Spanish administration and succeeded in transmitting them through generations until, in the eighteenth century, this system had become outdated and was replaced by a more open, competitive form of recruitment (Cáceres-Würsig in this volume). This example shows that, despite profound differences between diplomatic translation in Western and Eastern Europe before the eighteenth century, their recruitment systems had some similarities.

Translation and trust

The use of foreigners, particularly war prisoners, as translators inevitably raised issues of loyalty and trust. The importance of trust and the challenges that a lack of trust implied are recurrent themes in the *longue durée* history of diplomatic translation. Early modern authors of treatises on the 'perfect ambassador' highlighted the potential risks of entrusting diplomatic translators with secret matters, as did François de Callières, emphasising that negotiators should be proficient in languages to avoid being exposed to "the infidelity or ignorance of interpreters" (Fernández García in this volume, quoting Callières, 1716: 62). Drawing on research on interpreters in such diverse historical and geographical contexts as the Spanish monarchy and its colonies, early modern European–Ottoman relations, and present-day war zones, Ingrid Cáceres-Würsig has stressed that expectations of trust have influenced the selection of interpreters and the development of translation structures throughout history. She further highlights that loyalty has sometimes been valued even more than linguistic competency (Cáceres Würsig, 2017). In early modern diplomacy, a parallel can be drawn with ambassadors and envoys leading diplomatic missions; they were not necessarily recruited primarily based on merit but rather based on their social status, patron–client relationships, and expected loyalty to their ruler.

Mistrust towards translators is often described using the Italian expression *traduttore, traditore*, and numerous relevant examples are found in historical studies. Dragomans are a prominent example of how both individual translators and entire groups of translators have been viewed with suspicion (Rothman, 2021: 30–31). Another example is the interpreters of various backgrounds that the Portuguese monarchy employed in Asia, known as *línguas*. They were recruited from among captives, slaves, Jews, convicts, and other often marginalised groups, and, as Dejanirah Couto has stressed, their masters often mistrusted them. It was the *línguas*' ability to move between different worlds and access a mental universe foreign to their masters that created uncertainty regarding their cultural belonging and suspicions of a "corrupted soul" (Couto, 2003).

Several chapters in this book describe situations in which translators were mistrusted because of multiple loyalties, suspected espionage, or for other reasons. Multiple loyalties were not uncommon, since a shortage of translators with particular expertise during the early modern period often created conditions for sharing such precious personnel. The Austrian translator Franz von Dombay (1758–1810), who worked in Morocco, was so appreciated among the local diplomats that he was constantly invited to provide translation services to diplomatic agents of other countries stationed in Morocco, such as Spanish and Venetian consuls (Schmidt, 2000; Stillman, 2018). Such situations posed potential problems of loyalty.

Foreign origin could be, and was, used as an argument against someone, as demonstrated by Tomás Gracián's critique of a competitor (1558–1621) while protecting his family's position as official translators for the Spanish crown (Cáceres-Würsig in this volume). This occurred with Ragusans in the Habsburg diplomatic service (Cziráki in this volume). Although their origin provided useful cultural skills in both Western and Eastern sociocultural contexts, their loyalty could be questioned for the same reason. As Cziráki notes, intermediaries with multiple, entangled loyalties could hardly be avoided in Habsburg–Ottoman diplomatic relations, making it important to understand how to use them effectively.

Translators regularly encountered difficulties due to the challenge of gaining trust. In Russia, some translators of foreign origin were held in the country against their will, since the government had reasons to expect that they might attempt to escape (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 136). In cases of suspected disloyalty, translators and interpreters were not only interrogated but also, in some cases, subjected to torture (Beliakov, 2019).

At the same time, trust could be and was built, and suspicions were circumvented. The Russian administration encouraged and secured allegiance by increasing the annual allowance for translators who converted to Orthodoxy and, later, by requiring that all translators be Orthodox (Beliakov in this volume). A recent publication by Oleg Rusakovskii of a diary by a seventeenth-century Russian diplomatic translator of German origin emphasises that, in this context, the political and cultural sympathies of such translators, as well as their self-identification, could evolve considerably over years (Rusakovskii, 2024).

One way of facilitating trust was the establishment of a national corps of interpreters who could substitute foreigners. Such corps emerged in several countries in the early modern era. As Juliette Deloye notes in her chapter, the new training establishments were concerned not only with laying a foundation for efficient language acquisition among aspiring diplomatic personnel but also with the need to trust the agents. Cziráki points to a similar tendency in relation to the Ragusan translators employed by the Habsburg administration. Although Ragusans continued to be recruited from abroad, the administration also made efforts to train its own interpreters with the intention of creating more loyal translators, namely by founding an Oriental Academy in Vienna in 1754. A plan for the establishment of this Academy explicitly mentioned that learning languages abroad, specifically in the Ottoman Empire, contributed to alienating the aspiring translators (*Sprachknaben*) from their Austrian origins ("heimatlichen Sitten entfremdet", literally "alienated from native customs", HHStA, Staatskanzlei, Interiora 55: Orientalische Akademie 1754–1775, Konv. 1753, fol. 1–10, quoted by Bronza, 2013).

Training

Loyalty was only one factor driving early modern diplomacies to establish training programmes for aspiring translators; another key reason was the need for specialisation. This problem was not specific to the corps of translators alone. Out of 179 French ambassadors and ministers plenipotentiary active between 1715 and 1719, only 14.4% had any prior diplomatic experience (Béchu, 1998; also see Braun, 2014). We argue that it is anachronistic to consider such training schemes to be steps towards a more 'professionalised' diplomatic service, as it presupposes that the early modern phenomena are judged by today's standards, which are assumed to be fully 'professional' (a useful discussion on the nature of early modern professions in general can be found in Prest, 1987; on alternative approaches to the dilemma of 'professionalisation' in diplomacy, see: Félicité, 2020).

Yet if we refrain from using teleological vocabulary, we need not conclude that the diplomatic actors of the time were unconcerned with the need for specialisation in their field. Differentiating between various categories of diplomatic personnel is helpful, as Maria A. Petrova (2024) has recently suggested. Due to the growing diplomatic Francophonie, high-ranking diplomats, including ambassadors, residents, envoys, and others, seem to have been less concerned with linguistic specialisation in the eighteenth century than before, while the subordinate staff was characterised by a dynamic of specialisation (the conclusion reached by Niels May based on the prosopographical study of diplomats who participated in early modern peace congresses: May, 2020; see also Rjéoutski, 2024). The topic of translation is particularly conducive to elucidating these parallel evolutions, thereby providing a more nuanced perspective on the multifaceted ways in which diplomatic activity developed in general.

Heidrun Kugeler has shown that ideas about the need to train diplomats and translators originated with theorists who, in some cases, were diplomats themselves and were well aware of the practical needs of diplomatic service. However, it is difficult to link the known training programmes to these ideas, which are often presented in the form of treatises on the 'perfect ambassador', such as those by Vera y Figueroa, Wicquefort, Rousseau de Chamoy, Pecquet, and Callières (on these treatises, see Kugeler, 2006, part II; Andretta et al., 2015). What is clear is that the need to train diplomatic translators was gradually recognised in both Western and Eastern Europe.

Here, we focus particularly on Russian initiatives in this field, as they reveal the distinct nature of early modern diplomacy as a cultural phenomenon and are less well-known than similar programmes established by Venice, France, Prussia, the Habsburg monarchy, Poland, and Spain (cf. Keens-Soper, 1972; Thuillier, 1983; Dehérain, 1991; Thuillier, 1996; Majda, 1997; Mantran, 1997; Palumbo Fossati Casa, 1997; Kugeler, 2006; Cáceres-Würsig, 2012; Gautier, 2006; Cziráki, 2016; Deloye, 2022, 2024, etc.).

The Russian system of recruiting translators and interpreters mentioned earlier satisfied the limited needs of the Russian Foreign Office until the end of the seventeenth century. However, it became obsolete in a new situation, when, under the rule of Peter I, Russia opened itself more resolutely to Europe and established permanent diplomatic missions in many European capitals. Retaining thousands of specialists in various fields by force was impossible, and soon, a system of contracts was established. This system was particularly widely used during the so-called Great Embassy, a long trip of the Russian tsar and his close collaborators across various European countries in 1697–1698. Thousands of Europeans with various kinds of expertise were hired during this trip and in its aftermath (Guzevich and Guzevich, 2008).

However, hiring foreigners to fulfil the Russian Foreign Office's translation needs was not a viable solution because so few people outside Russia were familiar with the Russian language. If, in the seventeenth century, this problem could be circumvented, for example, by assigning two translators – one foreigner and one Russian – to one text (on relay translation at the Ambassadorial Chancery, see Waugh and Maier, 2023: 178–179), this was not a viable solution for the new, intensified diplomatic contacts, not the least because of the issues of trust discussed earlier. Russian authorities wanted to have numerous interpreters and translators readily available. In this situation, one solution was to train Russian subjects abroad.

There were occasional instances of Russians sent abroad to learn European languages before Peter I. Some students from the circle of the Novgorod Archbishop Gennadii studied in Livonia and in Rostock at the end of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and were later involved in diplomacy. Some Russian diplomats on diplomatic missions abroad in the seventeenth century brought their sons or other young family members who could familiarise themselves with foreign customs and languages (Wimmer, 2005; Waugh and Maier, 2023: 177, 222–223). However, it was only during the reign of Peter I that young (and sometimes not so young) Russians from diverse social backgrounds were regularly sent to Western European countries (Altbauer, 1980).

Peter wanted his own specialists in various fields: shipbuilding, engineering, arms production, medicine, and others. It is noteworthy that hardly anyone was sent abroad to be trained specifically in translation or simply learn languages. However, some young Russians who learned sciences and crafts in Venice, Holland, German lands, England, and France eventually worked for the Ambassadorial Chancery, either as high-ranking diplomats, in case of aristocrats, or as translators and secretaries, for those of lower social origins. Konstantinos Poulios describes one such case in this volume. Petr Postnikov was one of the first Russians to receive a doctoral degree in medicine, which he did in Padua. As he was in Western Europe at the time of Peter's Great Embassy, he became involved in Russian foreign affairs as an interpreter and translator and was particularly useful in this capacity during the Peace Congress of Carlowitz (1698, modern Sremski Karlovci, in Serbia).

As Russia's foreign relations expanded, there was a pressing need to establish training programmes. Indeed, by the time of Peter I, Russia did not have sufficient translators, even in languages that its diplomatic translators traditionally used, such as German and Swedish. The case of the Russian–Swedish negotiations at the Åland Congress at the end of the Great Northern War (1718–1719) clearly shows that this problem was endemic during the whole reign of Peter the Great (Larina, 2024). The situation could be even worse for the languages of countries with which Russia did not previously have close diplomatic relations; Spanish is a case in point (Rjéoutski, 2023).

Training programmes were established in various European countries, although they were rarely long-term endeavours. However, they certainly reflect the evolution of ideas within state bureaucracies regarding the necessary specialisation in diplomacy. The chapters in this volume provide new elements to the overall picture, spanning several early modern diplomacies: French, Ottoman, Russian, Spanish, and Ukrainian. They attest to the significance of social and political factors in creating environments of informal learning during an era when institutional training for translators did not exist or was only gradually emerging in the form of early institutional experiments.

Informal learning had long been implemented in translators' dynasties that sought to preserve and transmit valuable cultural capital across generations, transforming it into administrative, financial, and sometimes social advantages. Ingrid Cáceres-Würsig in this volume stresses the importance of language instruction within the Gracián family, which, as mentioned earlier, withheld important translator positions for several generations, although formal university instruction also played a significant role.

Informal training was also a daily routine in some translation departments. In the Ambassadorial Chancery, knowledge was passed from more experienced to less experienced translators through working methods: for example, two individuals translated some documents; the less experienced one produced a draft which the more experienced translator revised and improved (Beliakov in this volume).

Some outstanding translators left various published works and numerous mentions in archival documents, which give us insights into how such individuals could be trained. Franz von Dombay was not only a sought-after, skilled translator, but he was also partly self-trained. After studying Arabic at the Oriental Academy in Vienna, he continued to train himself throughout his career, working first in Morocco and then in Spain for Austrian diplomacy in the second half of the eighteenth century. He was a polyglot who avidly learned languages and thus became a highly qualified and (probably overly) meticulous language expert (Schmidt, 2000; Bronza, 2013).

The first institutional initiatives in training future diplomatic personnel under the auspices of the Russian Foreign Office date to the early eighteenth century. A close analysis of a school founded by a war prisoner, Pastor Ernst Glück, in Moscow in 1703 highlights its rather loose ties with the Foreign Office. The school was formally independent, but the Ambassadorial Chancery controlled and funded it; at the same time, its curriculum was not based on the actual needs of the Foreign Office but rather reflected ideas associated with noble education and, incidentally, the personal interests of Glück, an exceptional connoisseur of languages, and, incidentally, the role of languages in German protestant theology (Rjéoutski, 2019; see also Glück and Polanska, 2005). In the 1720s, another school was established, this time within the College of Foreign Affairs (CFA), the successor of the Ambassadorial Chancery (Shikulo in this volume). This probably denotes a need for tighter control over training to ensure that it aligned more closely with the needs of diplomatic service.

Young men were often sent to the Ottoman Empire to learn Eastern languages because it was difficult to achieve a high proficiency in them in European capitals. The practice of *giovani di lingua* – which Venice initiated in Istanbul in the middle of the sixteenth century and which was known later as *jeunes de langues*, following the French school founded there in the 1670s – provided an example for other nations. The Habsburg monarchy followed this trend by sending several young men, known as *Sprachknaben*, to the Austrian mission to Istanbul. As Tatiana Bazarova demonstrates in this volume, Turkish-language instruction began at the Russian mission in the Ottoman capital soon after its establishment at the very end of the seventeenth century. The early Russian policy in this matter was shaped by the head of the mission, Petr Tolstoi, rather than by the instructions of the Ambassadorial Chancery. According to Tatiana Bazarova, this policy wavered between two approaches: teaching Turkish to Russian subjects, which proved difficult, and teaching Russian to foreigners who already had a strong command of Turkish, which aroused suspicions of disloyalty.

These early teaching practices ultimately evolved into a training programme that Maxim Shikulo reconstructs in this volume based on numerous unpublished documents. This programme involved attaching aspiring personnel to Russian diplomatic missions abroad. However, the author suggests that there was no clear, standardised curriculum or set of instructions for students attached to Russian missions abroad. This makes it challenging to establish any link between the Venetian, French, and Austrian training programmes, on the one hand, and their Russian equivalent on the other.

A revealing corpus of documents from the 1740s sheds light on the role of translation and, more generally, language expertise in the training of young men sent to Russian diplomatic missions abroad: a series of exam papers from six young Russian aristocrats who had been sent to Paris in 1742–1743 as *gentilshommes d'ambassade* (embassy noblemen) at the Russian embassy to the French court and, in 1746, returned to Russia (AVPRI, f. 2, op. 6, 1676).

The responsibilities of ‘embassy noblemen’ were not very well defined. They studied in parallel with their service. Judging by the exams, translation was one of the main subjects, along with history, geography, arithmetic, geometry, trigonometry, fortification, and more. There was a lot of significant variety in the number and range of subjects that these noblemen studied and presented at the exams. The same is particularly true of languages.

Comparing this diverse set of subjects with the curriculum designed for the *Académie politique* in France, which existed in the 1710s (Kugeler, 2006: 169–194), reveals notable differences. On the one hand, the Russian programme appears more varied; on the other, it seems to lack a common core. While some subjects taught at the *Académie politique* – such as history, international law, and modern languages – are also mentioned in the Russian case, the overlap is limited. The *Académie politique* maintained a strong connection to diplomatic archives, which served as an essential reference point. Although the Russian system involved working with embassy documents, this appears to have been more incidental than part of a defined curriculum.

One common trait among Russian embassy noblemen was their proficiency in French. As part of their examinations, all young noblemen were required to compose a letter in French or to translate one into French. The letter was, of course, one of the primary genres used by diplomats across Europe. However, from a Russian perspective, the most extensive correspondence that Russian diplomats of that era produced was not in French but in Russian, the primary reporting language for all Russian-born diplomats. Furthermore, the test topics assigned to these noblemen – such as the benefits of travel for young men of their rank or friendship – were hardly typical for a diplomat. In other words, the subjects that these noblemen studied do not indicate any particular specialisation in the field of diplomacy. Instead, they align with the curriculum designed for the sons of aristocratic families. These young men, drawn from the most prominent families of the Russian Empire, were expected to obtain an education suitable for their social rank.

Other eighteenth-century training institutions for aspiring translators and diplomats share similarities with this ‘noble’ curriculum. The Oriental Academy in Vienna was a socially selective institution. Its curriculum included, among many other subjects, ‘noble arts’ such as fencing, dancing, and even painting. Unlike in Russia, however, students at the Oriental Academy studied a wide range of languages: both Eastern, such as Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, and Western, including French, Italian, Greek, and Latin. The training programme of this Academy appears much more specialised. Its graduates became translators and diplomatic agents of the

Habsburg monarchy in the Mediterranean region, ultimately enabling Austrian diplomacy to replace foreigners with Austrian subjects, particularly in many consular positions (Bronza, 2013).

Considered within the broader context of early modern diplomatic training, the chapters in this volume highlight its hybrid nature – situated at the intersection of tailored education for specific social groups and the necessary specialisation in diplomacy.

Tasks and multiple roles

Earlier, we mentioned the variety of actors in the field of diplomatic translation (Hellman and Tremml-Werner, 2021: 461–464). Equally characteristic of the period, and a recurrent theme in this volume, was the multiplicity of translators' roles, whether specifically within a diplomatic context or more broadly. This variety of tasks could partly be explained by a lack of formal training and partly by the fact that, before the eighteenth century, narrow specialisation was not characteristic of state administrations.

Ragusan interpreters in Vienna often served as diplomatic couriers (Cziráki in this volume). In seventeenth-century Russia, interpreters were involved in an array of tasks typical of lower-ranking clerks: being on duty at the office for various matters during the day and at night, being dispatched to other offices with documents, providing foreign embassy missions with food and drink, and participating in legal proceedings (Beliakov in this volume). In general, the duties of interpreters appear to have been broader than those of translators. The latter's expertise was sometimes regarded as superior, as was the case in Russia, since they worked with written documents, whereas interpreters were not always literate (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 119).

Some other responsibilities of early modern diplomatic interpreters arose from the areas in which Foreign Affairs departments happened to be involved. In seventeenth-century Russia, translators and interpreters working for the Ambassadorial Chancery were sometimes tasked with control over the foreigners who wanted to leave Russia, including their interrogation; they sometimes played the roles of bailiffs; and, at times, they were sent to the Volga region to facilitate trade (Beliakov in this volume; Beliakov, 2019; Moiseev, 2019; Nozdrin, 2019). This phenomenon reflects the shortage of translators, whose expertise was often required in fields beyond foreign affairs. Observed in various European diplomacies during the early modern period, it led to a form of institutional multitasking, where translators had to respond to requests from different state departments, as in the case of the Interpreters' Office in France in the second half of the eighteenth century (Deloye in this volume).

It is true that, due to the endemic lack of translators, high-ranking diplomatic personnel also had to multitask. Even ministers and ambassadors had to roll up their sleeves, as the example of the Åland Peace Congress (1718–1719) shows. In the absence of a qualified translator, the Russian representatives had to translate some documents themselves during this congress (Larina, 2024).

The opposite is also true: diplomatic interpreters sometimes took on the role of diplomatic agents. During diplomatic negotiations about the Swedish–Russian border in 1590, the Swedish negotiators sat in silence while their interpreters talked. This led to complaints from the Russian counterparts, who demanded that the Swedish negotiators talk first, and the interpreters would provide a verbatim translation (Tarkiainen, 2017: 209–210). In such a case, the diplomatic role of interpreters was obvious, as was the fact that this role was contested.

This role of interpreters was also ubiquitous in Russia before the eighteenth century. In some stages of their career, interpreters such as Petr Postnikov, the Stepanov brothers, Bodgan Lykov, Sevastian Avraamov, and Prokofii Vrazhskii assumed truly diplomatic tasks which involved political responsibility and access to secret matters (Kislova, 2019; Vinogradov, 2019; Kosheleva, 2019; Moiseev, 2019; Poulios in this volume). However, if, in certain contexts, the roles of diplomats (this generic term, uncommon in the early modern period, included various functions, and not all diplomats performed them to the same degree) and interpreters overlapped, generally, the expertise, specialisation, and status of low-ranking diplomatic personnel were different from those of high-ranking personnel (Petrova, 2024).

Another task often entrusted to diplomatic translators and interpreters was intelligence-gathering, primarily among diplomats (Vinogradov, 2019; Kosheleva, 2019). This activity seems to be traditional for this milieu, particularly among translators and interpreters working on site, in foreign legations of the country for which they worked, or going abroad on assignment, as may still be the case for some present-day diplomatic interpreters. The authorities in the Swedish border town Wyborg, for example, employed so-called intelligence peasants (*kunskapsbönder*) from the multilingual local population who were paid to cross the border illegally and gather information about the situation in Russia. Their linguistic expertise was valued, and their sons sometimes became interpreters with a higher social status (Tarkiainen, 2017: 209).

Fluency in the languages of the countries that translators and interpreters visited was paramount for intelligence-gathering. For example, Tatar interpreters attached to the Russian mission in Crimea during the 1560s and early 1570s gathered significant intelligence thanks to their linguistic expertise, mobility, and close ties with local merchants and the khan's officials. These connections allowed them to obtain copies of documents circulating to and from the khan's chancellery (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 134–136, 139–145; the authors also discuss the effectiveness of this system of intelligence-gathering in Crimea). However, interpreters' familiarity with the culture of the countries they visited could also lead to a lack of curiosity and reports containing little information (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 170).

Several chapters in this volume give evidence that intelligence-gathering was widespread among diplomatic translators and interpreters, for example, in the monarchy of the Habsburgs (e.g., Cziráki in this volume). Translators and interpreters working at the court were also frequently involved in intelligence-gathering, for example, during court ceremonies or accompanying foreign diplomats to and from the border. However, as Waugh and Maier have stressed, other actors, such as foreign merchants, also collected information and transmitted it to their governments (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 120, 141 etc.).

Translators also gathered intelligence by engaging in the translation of various texts that were not strictly diplomatic. For example, in Russia, diplomatic translators participated in compiling news from the foreign press, which prepared them to write handwritten information bulletins, known as the *kuranty*, produced for the tsar and his entourage (Waugh and Maier, 2023, pt IV). In the second half of the eighteenth century, personnel at the French Foreign Office also typically translated foreign gazettes, a task regarded as an alternative to the traditional roles of spies and informants (Deloye in this volume). Furthermore, translators in France were involved in what Juliette Deloye labels 'retrospective' translation work, translating old documents in the archive repository to facilitate access for Foreign Affairs personnel.

In her chapter, Juliette Deloye also provides a rare account from the actors themselves of their perception of their responsibilities. In 1761, Edme-Jacques Genet, Head of the French Interpreters' Office, prepared a summary of the diverse tasks that he and his staff undertook. Deloye categorises these responsibilities into three main areas: administrative, political, and educational. The administrative role is self-evident for the head of such an office; the political role pertained to the intelligence-gathering activities of translating the press, mentioned earlier; and the educational role referred to the regular training of new translators.

Diplomatic translators who worked with languages which were unfamiliar to the majority of their colleagues within the state administration were often tasked with translation outside the sphere of foreign affairs, as well. Given the relative unfamiliarity with foreign languages among Russian seventeenth-century elites, for example, diplomatic translating staff rendered a wide variety of texts into Russian; typically, these were unrelated to foreign affairs but of interest for the tsar and his court. Among this ancillary output of diplomatic translators were works such as a geographical treatise (Mercator's *Cosmography*), a guide to horse-riding (*Manege royal* by Antoine Pluvinel), a German herbal, and even the Quran (Koshelеva, 2018; Boldyreva, 2019; Maier and Rusakovskii, 2019; Kislova, 2019; Waugh and Maier, 2023: 177). In Spain, some diplomatic translators combined their work with duties as royal librarians (Cáceres-Würsig in this volume).

The following examples highlight the permissiveness of hierarchies regarding diplomatic translators' scope of involvement. Some members of the Gracián family, who served as diplomatic translators across several generations, supplemented their regular income by preparing translations for external clients (Cáceres-Würsig in this volume). Maya Lavrinovich has recently analysed a similar case: in the second half of the eighteenth century, the head of the Moscow Archives of the Russian College of Foreign Affairs, where diplomatic translations were routinely produced, employed his staff to translate foreign books unrelated to foreign affairs, evidently with the purpose of selling them to Russian publishers to earn more than their official, modest salaries (Lavrinovich, 2022). These cases suggest that Foreign Office leadership, recognising the limited remuneration for diplomatic translators' work, tacitly allowed occasional side work that compensated for the shortfall in income from serving the sovereign.

Translators working on site not infrequently took advantage of their position to study local cultures and languages, thus becoming true cultural intermediaries. The earlier-mentioned Dombay, who stayed in Morocco for several years, also acted as a linguist and an orientalist, compiling a lexicon, a grammar, and a collection of proverbs, and he even prepared works on Moroccan history (Schmidt, 2000; Bronza, 2013).[1] In her chapter, Ingrid Cáceres-Würsig also underscores early modern Spanish diplomatic translators' similar writing activities, which reflect the breadth of their interests and their versatile nature.

This role of cultural intermediaries, inherent to diplomatic translators through the nature of their work, was even more significant in the case of translators who operated in geographically and culturally distant areas that were unfamiliar to the cultural elites of the powers they represented. A lesser-known example is the work of Philippe Hernandez, an important cultural intermediary who facilitated exchange not only as a translator but also as a tutor, bookseller, journalist, and collector of books and manuscripts.

Hernandez tried to make a living in France as a journalist and a translator publishing French translations of English books.[2] This activity apparently did not provide him with sufficient income, leading him to accept the proposal of a Russian aristocrat who invited him in 1759 to Moscow to serve as a tutor for his son.

Not entirely satisfied with his new role, Hernandez established a book trade in Moscow by receiving books from Marc-Michel Rey, a renowned publisher in Amsterdam. Using his previous valuable experience as an editor for the well-known French *Journal étranger*, he founded in Moscow in 1760 the *Journal des Sciences et des Arts*, the first periodical in French published in this city. The journal covered a wide variety of topics such as gardening, agriculture, economics, geography, engraving, navigation, history, music, technology, miniature painting, architecture, astronomy, physics, and medicine. Hernandez regularly included announcements for new books, particularly English ones, and he published translations from English, a language few knew at the time not only in Russia but in continental Europe in general (for more on this journal, see Rjéoutski, 2013).

When he returned to France after about ten years in Russia, Hernandez brought an extensive collection of books and manuscripts. He proposed to the Royal Library in France to acquire it (on Hernandez and his collection of books and manuscripts, see Rjéoutski, 2009). He qualified his collection in these terms:

> *Je possède un Trésor de manuscrits Russes qui sont à tout fait [sic!] inconnus encore au Reste de l'Europe. A ce Trésor j'ai joint tout cequi a paru en Russie concernant sa constitution, sa législation et son histoire, pour composer à la fin un ensemble de tout cela, et de connoître un Pays qui commence à élever sa tête et à faire des Exploits.*
>
> (BNF, Mss fr., 9454, fol. 201v.)

> I have a Treasure of Russian manuscripts that are entirely unknown yet to the rest of Europe. To this Treasure, I have added everything that has appeared in Russia concerning its constitution, legislation, and history, with the aim of ultimately compiling a collection of all of this and to understand a country that is starting to raise its head and to accomplish great feats.

At this time, the French Royal Library seems to have held extremely few Russian books and manuscripts; however, there is no evidence that it acquired this collection. Hernandez also sought an appointment as a translator at the Royal Library, obviously without success, but in 1769, he was recruited to the Interpreters' Office and worked there, it seems, until his death in 1784 (AMAE, Personnel, Dossiers de carrière, série reliée, vol. 38, fols. 351–353; we are grateful to Juliette Deloye for kindly sharing this document with us).[3] This position represented the culmination of a lifelong engagement as a cultural and linguistic intermediary.

Career and social status

The chapters in this volume paint a picture of a 'professional' group with significantly varying career paths and social statuses that depended on background and situation. Some translators remain anonymous actors in the sources, whereas others achieved high positions close to the power centre.

In some countries, such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a diplomatic translator's career typically began in lower positions, such as an officer escorting an embassy, with the possibility of promotion to diplomatic courier, interpreter, and finally translator – the highest position attainable in this field (Liubaia, 2021: 100).

Cziráki's chapter highlights the opportunities that the career of an imperial translator offered to translators and interpreters from places such as Ragusa. It moreover underscores the crucial role of patronage and translators' need for support at court and within the institutions of the empire, such as the War Council, to succeed in their career and hold a central position within the body of imperial translators.

Patronage was of the utmost importance, particularly when a translator sought to have his son or a family member succeed him in his position. In some early modern diplomatic services, the position of diplomatic translator could indeed be hereditary, as in the case of Spain (Cáceres-Würsig in this volume), and, to some extent, Poland–Lithuania (Liubaia, 2021), Russia (Beliakov in this volume), and France. One example illustrating this point is the support that Chrétien Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, a high-ranking French magistrate and President of the French Academy of Sciences, provided for a request from Philippe Hernandez, mentioned earlier, who sought to have his son succeed him as a translator at the Bureau of Translators in France (his letter to Charles Gravier, Count of Vergennes, French Foreign Minister, dated 16 September 1784, AMAE, Personnel, Dossiers de carrière, série reliée, vol. 38, fol. 353).

Even with powerful support, translators did not always succeed in achieving their goals. The competition for a diplomatic translator position could be fierce, as demonstrated by the assassination attempt on Bratutti, a candidate for a position as imperial translator, that his rival, d'Asquier, orchestrated (Cziráki in this volume). Moreover, the system was no longer closed to outsiders, unlike in the Secretariat of Interpretation of Languages in Spain prior to the eighteenth century.

A career as a diplomatic translator could sometimes be accelerated through conversion to the dominant religion, which obviously increased trust. This regularly occurred in Russia, where various material incentives were practised to encourage translators and interpreters of foreign origin to embrace Orthodoxy, which was the equivalent of citizenship today. Conversion nearly always resulted in a considerable increase in salary. For example, one of the most experienced and talented translators at the Ambassadorial Chancery in Russia, Ivan Tiazhkogorskii, alias Hans Schwerenberg, saw his salary doubled following his conversion to Orthodoxy in 1669 (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 218).

In some cases, such translators and interpreters could aspire to nobility. In 1630, Nikolai Dmitriev Selunskii, who was of Greek origin, arrived in Muscovy from the Ottoman Empire, accompanied by Russian diplomats. The Chancery of Foreigners (*Inozemskii prikaz*) initially recruited him as an officer in the Russian army. It was only in 1650 that he passed into the Ambassadorial Chancery due to his expertise in Greek, Turkish, and Russian. However, he was not appointed as a translator, a position that held significant prestige. He was not satisfied with the proposed salary, and, in 1653, he returned to the army. His service was highly regarded, and by 1658 or 1659 he was granted the title of 'foreign nobleman'. In this new role, he was regularly assigned to diplomatic missions, such as accompanying embassies to Persia on several occasions (Oparina, 2019). This example demonstrates that the career paths of diplomatic translators could sometimes be non-linear and that, at times, they could be involved in foreign affairs without being formally attached to the foreign office. Thus, over the course of their careers, some translators could achieve not only social advancement but also considerable financial benefits. This was the case of a Tatar translator in seventeenth-century Russia, Prokopii Vrazhskii, who concluded his 30-year career at the Ambassadorial Chancery as a noble who owned several estates (Liseitsev, 2021).

However, in most cases, a position as a translator or interpreter offered only modest opportunities for advancement on the hierarchical ladder in early modern Russia. The rare exceptions include Petr Shafirov, who began his career in 1690 as a translator of German and Dutch at the Ambassadorial Chancery. In the early eighteenth century, he rose to become Vice-President of the College of Foreign Affairs, the successor of the Ambassadorial Chancery – in other words, deputy minister of foreign affairs. He was later appointed senator and President of the College of Commerce. If such an extraordinary career may be seen as the result of Peter's reforms, which enacted a relatively meritocratic approach to career advancement, even before Peter's reign, some translators could have outstanding careers in Russia. Similarly, Andrei Vinius, a Dutchman who served as a translator at the Ambassadorial Chancery starting in 1664, later secured a high-ranking position at the Apothecary Chancery (equivalent to a ministry of health) and eventually became Moscow's postmaster (Beliakov et al., 2021: 86, 223–224).

If we compare Russian diplomatic translators of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with Austrian translators promoted from the Viennese Oriental Academy, in the latter case, we observe a considerable number of brilliant careers. Many Austrian translators rose to high-ranking diplomatic positions and even entered the upper echelons of Austrian bureaucracy. The highly selective admission criteria of the Oriental Academy explain this phenomenon; there, over 70 per cent of students in the eighteenth century came from noble families, often with close ties to the court. Additionally, it appears that, unlike in Russia, in Austria, there was no clear social division that restricted diplomatic translators from belonging to privileged social circles. On the contrary, the careers of many former students of the Oriental Academy suggest that a position as a translator of oriental languages did not hinder professional or social advancement (Bronza, 2013).

Translation and information flows

Diplomatic activities outside the formal spheres of diplomacy – information gathering, discussed earlier, and informal socialising or espionage – indicate a different linguistic landscape than that of official diplomatic relations. Whereas peace negotiations were often held in one of the *lingua francas* used in different corners of the European continent – such as Italian in the Mediterranean (e.g., Schnettger, 2012), German in the Baltic Sea region (e.g., Burkhardt, 2007), and French on a pan-European level – and many envoys shared a common language with the social and political elite at the court to which they had been sent, these same languages were not necessarily used in all other areas of diplomacy. In the mid-eighteenth century, for example, foreign envoys in the Swedish capital could use French when communicating with the local elite but depended on translation when procuring information from other sources, such as documentation on Swedish boat types, which interested the French foreign affairs administration (Holm, 2021).

In these kinds of information flows, far from audience halls and negotiating tables, translation was a "structure of everyday life", and on-the-spot oral translation mattered as much as or more than formal, written translation (Ghobrial, 2013: 92). This was especially true in the multilingual hubs of commercial, political, and diplomatic information flows, where diplomats encountered linguistic barriers on a daily basis; this is the case, for example, with the information flows in Istanbul that John-Paul Ghobrial has explored (2013). European diplomats sent to the Porte were nodes in complex networks of news circulation, and the connections in various directions depended on translation in one form or another. As Ghobrial has emphasised, it was not only dragomans who performed these translations;

rather, they were collaborative efforts in which actors from various spheres in society participated. For example, Ottoman scribes aided official dragomans, and a European diplomat could gain access to information circulating in other languages through a doctor or merchant. In the imperial context of the Ottoman capital, polyglots with multiple cultural connections were a common phenomenon.

The same linguistic features of the Ottoman Empire were, as Cziráki discusses in this volume, one reason that Ragusans were favoured as translators within the Habsburg administration. Besides mastering Ottoman Turkish, they knew languages in which important information was transmitted in the region: not only the regional *lingua franca*, Italian, which was commonly used among both diplomatic and commercial actors in Istanbul, but also their native, Slavic language (Croatian). Knowing a Slavic language was, as Cziráki notes, not an official requirement for Habsburg translators, but it counted as an asset because it helped with information-gathering about the Ottoman army's possible advancements in the area where Balkan Slavic languages were spoken.

Access to information affects the evolution of decision-making processes and, consequently, influences political agency. Diplomatic decision-making processes are no exception to this dynamic (Lobenwein and Rous, 2024). Early modern diplomats, like their present-day counterparts, were highly engaged in acquiring up-to-date, relevant, reliable, and exclusive information about events in their host country, everything from the latest court intrigues to military movements at the borders and beyond. This information was often gathered in a language other than the one used to transmit it to the administration at home, resulting in diplomatic reports that not only included translated information but that were occasionally multilingual. For example, the Spanish ambassador in Lucerne in the 1710s, the Marquis of Beretti Landi, used an intelligence network of more than 20 people who sent him letters in French, Italian, and German. He passed on this information either as untranslated attachments in his dispatches or as comments in letters written in Spanish (Rjéoutski, 2025).

Although French progressively became the preferred language of communication between diplomats, as well as between diplomats and their informants, the need to translate intelligence gathered in this language did not disappear. This was especially the case in European countries, where reporting in French instead of the domestic language was not well received. Simon de Las Casas y Aragorri, who represented Spain in Prussia in the 1780s, met with a considerable number of diplomats from other powers in Berlin. Although he most certainly used French to communicate with them, all summaries of these conversations, including, as Las Casas claimed, literal quotations of what they said or what Las Casas read in letters they showed him, were, as in Beretti Landi's case, written in Spanish

(Rjéoutski, 2025). Likewise, as Maria A. Petrova has shown, during the reign of Catherine II, reports from Russian diplomats of foreign origin were mainly written in French but were regularly translated into Russian, although this was seen as a useless burden (Petrova, 2025).

However, the role of legations was not only to gather information. Rather, individual diplomatic actors – whether envoys, agents, or interpreters – were nodes in complex, multidirectional networks of information flows and news markets. They gathered information, including from the press, as discussed earlier, but were also tasked with distributing information locally as part of their monarch's communication apparatus abroad (Gellard, 2014). In that role, they were highly dependent on their ability to manage news circulations; consequently, their presence sometimes became a premise for the urban audience's access to diplomatic and military news through oral transmission (Ewing, 2014: 37). Legations further wrote and distributed political pamphlets (e.g., Bodensten, 2022) and provided news gazettes which were favourable for the court they represented (Peacey, 2016; Dulac, 2016; Offord et al., 2018, ch. 7; Holm, 2023) in efforts which have been described as "early modern public diplomacy" (Helmers, 2016). In doing so, they sometimes had to overcome the same linguistic barriers as when acquiring information. This two-way information-processing illustrates the point that Lisa Hellman and Birgit Tremml-Werner (2021) recently made when stressing that practices of translation are incompletely understood if translation is seen only as a one-way tool of power through which the metropole reaches and creates the periphery.

In her chapter, Sophie Holm stresses the importance of translation in the information flows surrounding the decision-making processes at the Swedish Diet. When discussing diplomatic affairs, Diet members often depended on some form of translation. Foreign-language documents such as diplomatic *pro memorias* submitted to the Swedish Majesty or the minutes of negotiations from conferences with foreign envoys in Stockholm were translated into Swedish. These translation efforts supported the ability of Diet members to participate in decision-making processes.

However, linguistic barriers also had the opposite effect. For example, a lack of available translations strengthened the influence of an inner circle of Diet members who could process documents in several languages. Minutes from the Diet also testify to the importance of on-the-spot oral translation by key figures among the Diet members or within the state administration. These individuals interacted with foreign envoys and orally conveyed their conversations to the Diet members in charge of foreign affairs. Translation was an integral part of these oral and written multilingual communication chains, and access to or a lack of translation contributed to internal power asymmetries at the Diet.

Working methods, organisation, and quality of translation

While this volume focuses more on social and cultural aspects of translation than it does on the challenges of translation as a decoding and encoding practice, some studies provide a glimpse into the possible impact, prior to the introduction of formal training, of a variety of factors on the quality, standards, and political results of translation. In the following notes, we highlight the role of some of these factors, such as the organisation of translation, its spatial dimension, and the ethnic and linguistic composition of the corps of diplomatic translators.

Assessing the working methods that translators employed in the past is often challenging due to the methodological issues outlined earlier. Sources, as discussed, typically provide the result – a translation – but rarely reveal the process behind it. However, many chapters in this volume give insights into how both institutions and individual translators organised translation activities and how that organisation affected the efficiency of translation.

The general lack of translators with specific expertise was a lasting phenomenon in different parts of Europe. In this situation, some European diplomacies found ways to circumvent or at least mitigate the negative effects of the shortage of translators. For instance, in 1597, the Russian embassy to Iran insisted on using Turkish rather than Farsi to draft a treaty, as no translators proficient in Farsi were in Moscow at the time (Moiseev, 2021: 105). Similarly, in 1615, due to a lack of translators with knowledge of English at the Ambassadorial Chancery, Russian authorities required English diplomats to submit their letters in German translation (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 179). For Eastern languages such as Farsi, a practical solution to the shortage of translators with needed expertise was to pair an individual capable of reading the letter and translating it orally with a scribe who recorded the translation in writing (Moiseev, 2021: 105).

Another way of processing and transmitting information without qualified translators was the use of a relay translation (Schaub, 2010; Waugh and Maier, 2023: 178–179), a phenomenon known before, during, and after the reign of Peter the Great. As Maxim Shikulo highlights in this volume, translations were partly made on site in the Russian missions abroad and partly in St. Petersburg. Thus, in the 1730s, the head of the Russian mission to the Spanish court, Prince Ivan Andreevich Shcherbatov, employed a secretary who lacked proficiency in Russian and could translate only from Spanish into French. These French translations were then sent to St. Petersburg, where they were further translated into Russian (Rjéoutski, 2023). This system of relay translation exemplifies some persistent features in diplomatic translation before and after the Petrine divide.

This "spatiality" had an impact on the quality of translations and shaped core aspects of diplomatic processes by influencing access to information and determining where and how diplomatic decisions were made (cf. Holm, 2021). In his chapter, Kirill Kochegarov discusses the role of the spatial factor in translation within the hetmans' chancery in late seventeenth-century Cossack Ukraine. Hetmans Ivan Mazepa and Ivan Samoilovich lacked translators capable of handling correspondence from the Crimean khan and the Ottoman grand vizier, requiring them to send such letters to Moscow for translation. This reliance on off-site translation tended to slow diplomacy and increase Ukraine's dependency on Russian foreign policy.

Some translators within the Russian administration were permanently placed in border regions, meaning that translation services were divided between the central administration and local authorities. In some cases, translators in border regions were officially assigned additional tasks. For example, the interpreters of the Ambassadorial Chancery in Astrakhan were granted monopoly over translations during trade transactions as a form of additional remuneration (Beliakov in this volume). The spatial distribution of the Russian diplomatic translation reveals local needs, such as the deployment of Tatar interpreters to Astrakhan, where they dealt with nomadic populations of Turkic speakers (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 190). This particular spatial organisation was also helpful when no specialists in the capital had the necessary language combinations. For example, some translations from Eastern languages for the Ambassadorial Chancery were performed in border cities, where individuals with the necessary expertise could be found more easily (Moiseev, 2021: 105).

The administrative organisation of translation was not without tension. In her chapter, Juliette Deloye discusses an experiment within the French Secretariat of State for Foreign Affairs to centralise translation within an interpreters' office. The office served all the secretariats of state, in particular War and Foreign Affairs, but also the Navy and the *Contrôle Général* (Finances). This division of services across secretariats of state, Deloye concludes, caused conflicts and tension and may have been the reason the experiment did not last.

Both recent studies and some chapters in this volume emphasise that translation was often a collaborative effort. As John-Paul Ghobrial has highlighted, this was particularly true in the formal and informal networks underpinning the constant exchange of information in the multilingual Ottoman capital (Ghobrial, 2013: 120–121). Even high-ranking dragomans occasionally struggled with translations in commonly used languages and relied on assistance from less prestigious actors. In a similar manner, when faced with languages unknown to them, the Grácian family, who held positions as official translators for the Spanish Crown, subcontracted translations (Cáceres-Würsig in this volume). This method enabled the Graciáns to protect their business while coping with the volume of translations and their multilingualism. It simultaneously meant that more actors were involved in translating for the Spanish Crown than the official privileges granted to the members of the Grácian family implied. In other cases, a collaborative aspect was integrated into the work. Within the Russian foreign administration, for example, translation was sometimes organised in groups of two or more translators; one prepared a first version, and another controlled the translation (Beliakov in this volume; Kosheleva, 2018).

Recruitment, discussed earlier, had a lasting impact on the quality of translations. Research on seventeenth-century translations by Russian diplomatic translators – often former prisoners of war or foreigners forcibly retained in Russia, as emphasised earlier – sometimes highlights their difficulties in both understanding the source texts and rendering them into Russian. Such cases caused dissatisfaction among diplomats, who could complain and even request the dismissal of the translator, as happened in the relations between the Crimean khanate and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the sixteenth century (Liubaia, 2021: 100). These challenges are evident, for example, in the translation from Latin into Russian of Gerardus Mercator's famous *Cosmography*, which was the work of two diplomatic translators, one of Russian and the other of German origin. These challenges were partly due to the translators' unfamiliarity with specific terms, some of which lacked clear Russian equivalents at the time. To be fair, when faced with the absence of the necessary terminology, even the best translators sometimes produced translations which were likely incomprehensible to contemporary readers, as evidenced by the Russian translation of Jacques Ozanam's book on trigonometry theory by Ivan Tiazhkogorskii (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 220).

However, many challenges stemmed from a poor grasp of idiomatic expressions, geographical names, and the syntactical structures of the source language (on the Russian case: Kosheleva, 2018; Boldyreva, 2019; on the case of Venetian translators in Constantinople: Villain-Gandossi, 2013: 37). On the one hand, these challenges reflect the prevalence among some translators of 'routine-based' learning methods, far from academic institutions, and the absence of formal instruction. On the other hand, they could have been a consequence of government policy. For example, in the first half of the seventeenth century, relations with France were not a priority for Russia, leading to a lack of recruitment and poor-quality translations produced by the few Frenchmen employed at the Ambassadorial Chancery, such as Ivan Nikolaev, also known as Jean Nicolas (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 194).

Not only ethnic but also social and 'professional' backgrounds significantly influenced working methods and the quality of translations. A marked difference in education can also be observed between translators in the Latin and Tatar departments of the chancery of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the sixteenth century, with the former typically being university graduates (Liubaia, 2021: 99). Translators from among Ukrainian Orthodox monks had significantly greater expertise in Latin and ancient Greek than many translators working for the Ambassadorial Chancery, but they lacked proficiency in living European languages. Their translation methods also differed markedly, sometimes resulting in word-for-word translations written in dense and difficult-to-read language (Maier and Rusakovskii, 2019).

Extended stays in the country and years of practice with translation helped many diplomatic translators of foreign origin reach a high level of expertise, as in the cases of Leontii Gross and Ivan Tiazhkogorskii in the second half of the seventeenth century, in translations not only into their native language (in this case, German) but also into Russian, which they learnt on site. This is not surprising, as some diplomatic translators of foreign origin were raised or even born in Russia. It was therefore expected that they would master Russian at a high level and produce Russian translations nearly identical to those of native Russian translators, aside from some typical spelling errors (Gus'kov and Maier, 2019).

However, the relative isolation of Muscovy sometimes produced another effect: sons of foreigners raised in Russia lacked expertise in their fathers' native languages due to insufficient instruction and the impossibility of being educated in the country of their fathers' origin. For example, diplomats complained about the quality of translations produced by one of the sons of the Swede Efim Meisner in the 1680s; according to them, he did not understand the language (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 193; another similar case from the sixteenth century: Erusalimskii, 2022).

Generally, early modern translations are characterised by the considerable liberty with which translators approached source texts. Rearrangements, omissions of sections of the text, additions, glosses, and paraphrasing of individual fragments – all were natural ways of handling the source text during the translation process in the early modern period. Even the best translators often adopted this approach, producing free adaptations rather than precise translations (Waugh and Maier, 2023: 209, about the techniques of Andrei Vinius, one of the best seventeenth-century Russian diplomatic translators).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the ideal of a free translation was generally advocated. In many cases, the opposite was true, especially in diplomatic translation, where precision could be of utmost importance. Chigi's correspondence from the Westphalian peace congress, for instance, provides information about the ideal of translation, which consisted of the greatest possible 'fidelity' to the original – that is, a literal translation (Braun in this volume). Stylistic features such as elegance apparently played no role in the translation of negotiating acts and other documents related to the peace congress.

However, historians exploring diplomatic translation tend to focus on the translation of non-diplomatic texts, which highlights the need for a more thorough examination of diplomatic translations in the strictest sense of the term. Approaches to translation could vary significantly, even among translators from the same social group (Pentkovskaia, 2019: 107–108), due in part to the role of early modern institutions – such as foreign offices – that established translation standards and quality-monitoring mechanisms, making the study of early modern institutional policies in the field of translation an important aspect of translation studies.

* * *

In the early modern period, in certain countries – Russia being one of the most striking examples – the vast majority of translations were produced by translators employed in foreign offices. This was due partly to the underdevelopment, in these countries, of readership and private publishing, which in Western Europe fuelled numerous translation projects, and partly to the fact that diplomatic translators were sometimes commissioned by the sovereign and the court to translate works beyond diplomacy. Therefore, examining state and court policies on diplomatic translation is particularly enlightening for understanding translation in the early modern period, which was crucial for the flow of information and the exchange of knowledge and technologies, both within European space and beyond.

This introduction emphasises the extent to which, during the early modern period, before the more rational and standardised organisation of foreign affairs departments in Europe, diplomatic translation was a multifaceted phenomenon characterised by a lack of uniformity, particularly between Western and Eastern parts of Europe, let alone the non-European space. Social and ethnic origins, cultural and linguistic expertise, the organisation of translation services and the spatiality of diplomatic translation, training or a lack thereof, and other factors had a significant and lasting impact on early modern translation as a cultural, social, political, and linguistic phenomenon.

Such a multifaceted exploration of this phenomenon is difficult to realise. This explains a considerable imbalance in studies of the social and cultural history of diplomatic translation across different geographical areas, emphasised in this introduction. Although the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and the Habsburg monarchy have been relatively well explored from this perspective, many other regions in Europe and beyond remain comparatively understudied.

To date, research has shown a relative lack of interest among historians of diplomacy in the core of translation activity, namely work on texts, which should be studied in collaboration with specialists in translation studies and sociolinguists. Such studies can yield valuable insights, for example, into the working methods of diplomatic translators; the quality of translations, intrinsically linked to the history of concepts that translators were the first to shape; and the development of translation standards and mechanisms for quality control within foreign affairs departments. These and other research desiderata can be addressed only through decidedly transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches that integrate methods from political history, social and cultural history, translation studies, and sociolinguistics.

Notes

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3 The identification of the interpreter with the individual who went to Russia and stayed there about ten years is based on references to Russia and Malesherbes's support which appear in both cases.

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