

# 'The guttural sorrow of the refugees'<sup>1</sup> – Constance Garnett and Felix Volkhovsky in the British Museum

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## Introduction

On the last day of 1893, Constance Clara Garnett set sail on a seven-week tour of Russia. She arrived in St Petersburg, then travelled to Tver, Moscow and Nizhniy Novgorod. She spoke some broken Russian, and lots of excellent French. And she dined with Tolstoy who, characteristically, ate only porridge.

Garnett seems an unlikely translator of Tolstoy, so their meeting has always been imbued with significance by literary historians. Firstly, take her knowledge of Russian. Since the mid-twentieth century, many critics (though relatively few translators) have disparaged her literary and linguistic talents.<sup>2</sup> A month into her trip, Garnett herself confessed: 'It is disappointing that I still cannot follow a conversation in Russian.'<sup>3</sup> Secondly, she was a lifelong atheist, yet the first of Tolstoy's works she translated was «Царство Божие внутри вас».<sup>4</sup> And thirdly, though she had learned French, Latin and Greek early in life, she didn't start learning Russian until her early thirties.

But it is simply too neat to imagine the meeting as a turning point in Garnett's life, laying the seeds for her versions of «Война и мир» and «Анна Каренина.» This narrative overlooks the formative professional activity which preceded her translation work. Tolstoy was one of the only translatees whom Garnett ever met, but she knew his work hardly at all: she didn't read «Анна Каренина» in Russian until 1896 (her translation was published in 1901). I am not convinced that Tolstoy made a significant impression on Garnett, nor she on him. Shortly before she left for St Petersburg, a journalist visiting Yasnaya Polyana noted that 'The Count did not speak very hopefully of the

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<sup>1</sup> From Louis MacNeice's poem 'The British Museum Reading Room,' *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1967), p. 574.

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov rails against Garnett in his *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981). His criticisms are a mixture of high-handed theory and petty observations on situational mistakes (as when Garnett writes of Vronsky's horse: 'she gazed at her master with her speaking eyes,' to which Nabokov objected: 'A horse can't look at you with both eyes, Mrs. Garnett.' (p. 111) The most famous criticism of Garnett's translations is Brodsky's: 'The reason English-speaking readers can barely tell the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is that they aren't reading the prose of either one. They're reading Constance Garnett.' As cited in David Remnick, 'The Translation Wars,' *New Yorker*, 7 November 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Garnett, *Constance Garnett: A Heroic Life* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Published by William Heinemann as *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (London: 1894).

forthcoming English translation of his new book' (i.e. Garnett's version of «Царство Божие внутри вас.») 'Apparently,' the journalist continued, 'the American edition of the book will be the best.'<sup>5</sup>

Garnett's feelings about meeting Tolstoy were ambiguous at best. She called on him twice in 1894. The second time, when finding him out, she wrote to her husband in indignation: 'These prophets are dreadful people to deal with!'<sup>6</sup> She also wrote bluntly of Sofia Andreyevna (whom she did meet on that occasion): 'She is a Philistine, admirably qualified to be the wife of the Mayor of Brighton,'<sup>7</sup> a gaudy English seaside town. In 1904, on her second, and last, visit to Russia, her vague intentions to visit the Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana came to nothing. Her version of «Царство Божие внутри вас» was requested by her publisher, not volunteered. He had liked her first translation, of Goncharov's «Обыкновенная история,» so commissioned the Tolstoy, thinking that it would be a commercial success, given the revival of religiosity in Victorian England.

My paper attempts to resolve the puzzle – why Garnett? I will argue that the reasons which led her to start translating Russian (and thus, inevitably, to start translating Tolstoy) may be found in the ten years between her studies at Cambridge and her first journey to Russia; not in snowy fin de siècle St Petersburg, but in foggy Victorian London. I hope to show how the British Museum's library collections, its employees, its habitual visitors, and its democratic architecture shaped Garnett's writing, and thus shaped Anglophone readings of Tolstoy. Even today, when she has been eclipsed as a translator, more people have probably read the Russian classics in Garnett's translations than in all other English-language translations combined.<sup>8</sup>

## 1883-1891

Of forty-six women who entered Newnham College Cambridge with Constance Garnett, then Constance Black,<sup>9</sup> in 1879, two-thirds would later become assistant schoolmistresses.<sup>10</sup> After her

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<sup>5</sup> Garnett, *Heroic Life*, p. 111. French and Italian translations appeared in 1893, a German version in 1894. Tolstoy was presumably referring to Aline Delano's recently completed translation. At that time it was being offered to a number of American publishers, without success. It was published in London by Walter Scott in 1894.

<sup>6</sup> Garnett, *Heroic Life*, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> There have been at least eleven full English translations of «Война и мир» (though some of these have leaned heavily on earlier versions), and eleven full translations also of «Анна Каренина.»

<sup>9</sup> Her grandfather, Peter Black (1783–1831), was an engineer who designed and delivered a steamer to the Russian government. He died on arrival in St Petersburg, and was buried at Kronstadt.

<sup>10</sup> Newnham was founded in 1871 as a residential College for women taking lectures at the University. Until 1948, women could sit University examinations, and were granted a certificate from their College, but could

final exams in 1883, she too started teaching, but like many a would-be academic, she drifted into librarianship and, in 1888, was appointed librarian at the People's Palace in the East End of London. This institution, founded in 1886, was part adult-education College, part gymnasium, and part vaudeville theatre. Supported both by socialist radicals and conservative Christians, the Palace was a paternalistic attempt to provide an educational and cultural centre for the local community. At the time, as now, the East End was poor, and a magnet for immigrants and exiles, including, in the 1880s and 1890s, Jews from the Russian Empire, fleeing Alexander III's May Laws.

The library of the People's Palace, known as the Octagon, was modelled on the Round Reading Room of the British Museum, in London's Bloomsbury district. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Museum's library to Victorian London. Its readers were among the most significant figures of the long nineteenth century: they included Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Trollope, Mahatma Gandhi, John Ruskin, Rudyard Kipling... et al. They were attracted not only by the books (which included the largest collection of Russian material outside the Russian Empire), but also by the architecture. The design and most of the planning for the Round Reading Room was the work of Antonio Panizzi (1797-1879), a naturalized Englishman originally from Italy, who rose through the ranks of British intellectual life to become the Museum's Principal Librarian.<sup>11</sup> Prior to the opening of the Reading Room in 1857, Panizzi told Parliament: 'I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his curiosity, of following his rational pursuits, of consulting the same authorities, of fathoming the most intricate inquiry as the richest man in the kingdom, as far as books go, and I contend that the Government is bound to give him the most liberal and unlimited assistance in this respect.'<sup>12</sup>

In Constance Garnett's time, the Museum's dominant figure was Richard Garnett (1835-1906). He had been appointed Superintendent of the Reading Room in 1875, editor of the General Catalogue of Printed Books in 1881, and Keeper of Printed Books in 1890. Constance had received no professional training in librarianship, and demonstrated little aptitude for it – she quit the People's Palace after only a year. But she took her cataloguing seriously, and asked Garnett's advice in constructing a shelflist. Her family had known the Garnetts for a decade: she and Richard's son Edward married in 1889. Richard Garnett had rooms in the Museum grounds, and although

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not take the title of their degrees. Newnham remains a women-only College today, though is now fully-affiliated as a constituent College of the University.

<sup>11</sup> See Edward Miller, *Prince of Librarians: The Life & Times of Antonio Panizzi of the British Museum* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Edward Edwards, *Lives of the Founders of the British Museum – With Notices of its Chief Augmentors and Other Benefactors, 1570–1870* (London: Trübner, 1870), p. 413.

Constance and Edward had a house in the country of Surrey, south-west of London, they often stayed in Bloomsbury – Constance gave the Museum as her address in correspondence.

In addition to being one of the great figures of nineteenth-century librarianship, Richard Garnett was also a biographer, poet, and translator.<sup>13</sup> And if you wanted to get to know writers in the late 19th century, especially foreign ones, there was no better place than the British Museum. The elder Garnett was known for his associations with Russians – Kropotkin and Burtsev were close friends. His son, who followed in his father's literary footsteps, first met Felix Volkhovsky in the summer of 1891. Within weeks, Volkhovsky was living in the guest room of the Garnett's country cottage.

## Exiles

The British Museum Round Reading Room was where European political exiles went in London. It had, after all, been designed and run by an exile, Panizzi. Marx spent significant amounts of time in the Museum in the 1850s, escaping poverty and revolutionary politics. In some days in 1902, you could have looked around the Reading Room and seen Plekhanov, Zasluch, Trotsky and Lenin: Krupskaya claimed that her husband spent half his time there.<sup>14</sup> In his memoirs, German socialist Wilhelm Liebknecht recalled his own time in the reading room with Marx, surrounded by the 'scum of international communism.'<sup>15</sup>

It was Volkhovsky who first suggested to Constance that she should learn Russian (somewhat oddly, as a means to relieve her from the burdens of a difficult pregnancy). He gave her a grammar, a dictionary, and set her Goncharov's «Обыкновенная история» as a translation exercise. Though almost deaf, Volkhovsky helped, taught, and encouraged her. He played up the idiosyncrasies of his character to his sentimental landlords. Constance later described his dichotomous nature as 'on one side, a fanatical, almost Puritanical revolutionary, pedantic and strict... on the other hand, pleasure-loving, vain, rather intriguing, a tremendous "ladies man" ... fond of dancing.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Constance's grandson, author of her biography, was called also Richard Garnett (1923-2013). He too was a translator, though better known as a publisher and writer of fiction for children. Neither of the Richard Garnetts published translations from the Russian.

<sup>14</sup> Nadezhda Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/krupskaya/works/rol/rol04.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> In Isaiah Berlin's translation, Liebknecht claimed this moniker for the group of exiles who congregated in the Museum. *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 249.

<sup>16</sup> Garnett, *Heroic Life*, p. 74.

Sent to Siberia following the trial of the 193, Volkhovsky had escaped to England the long way, through Japan and Canada. He set up a Russian bookshop and an émigré journal (*Free Russia*) in London. Unlike most European exiles, he also engaged with British working class movements and socialist agitators (an approach he shared with Engels, who had him to dinner shortly after his arrival).<sup>17</sup> For a few years, Volkhovsky bridged the schismatic, class, and national divides between London's Russian speaking-exiles: he brought together the liberals of Herzen's generation with revolutionaries such as Stepniak. And they may not have read one another's newspapers, or visited one another's boarding houses, but most of these exiles spent at least some of their days in the British Museum's Round Reading Room, the one place they could sit together without arguing. The library was their meeting place, information point, and office.

Volkhovsky, and certainly Stepniak, who took over as Constance's Russian mentor (and was quite possibly her lover), were very different from Constance's effete husband, from whom she separated after a few years. Bernard Shaw once asked, of Edward, who Constance's 'pretty young man'<sup>18</sup> was. By contrast, Stepniak was the only man Shaw ever knew who could reduce him to silence. Constance dined at the Museum on the day before her trip to Russian. She then returned to her own London rooms (by this time, she was already estranged from her husband) to work on her Tolstoy proofs with Stepniak.

In her famous diatribe, *A Room of Her Own*, Virginia Woolf condemned the Round Reading Room as an oppressive panopticon of class and gender privilege. She compared the library to 'a huge bald forehead,'<sup>19</sup> and described its male scholars as lunatics, miscreants and misogynists. Woolf, partly for rhetorical effect, and partly due to her own alienation from the idea of the library as a social workshop, declared that everything about the Reading Room was embedded with a flavour of patriarchal domination. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The library's history is a radical one, an international one, and actually, a feminist one. The American literary historian Susan David Bernstein has lately done much to upend the still-widespread Woolfean view. She argues that: 'The British Museum signified a space for women intellectuals and activists and writers to congregate in public,' allowing them to seek 'meaningful work beyond their homes... democracy in

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<sup>17</sup> Engels also became a frequent visitor to the Museum following his move to London in 1870.

<sup>18</sup> Garnett, *Heroic Life*, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), p. 28. It is unlikely that Woolf was thinking of Tolstoy, having already declared him 'the greatest of all novelists' ('The Russian Point of View,' in *The Common Reader, Vol. 1* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 173-82, p. 180).

practice.<sup>20</sup> Late nineteenth-century cartoons show men in despair at the number of petticoats surrounding them. The registration books of the time are full of women's names. These confluences – a public space where women's intellectual aspirations were respected, a hive of busy authors, a waiting room for exiles, and a way of making contact with Russia – helped Garnett become the person who would later transmit the Russian classics to English-speaking readers.

## Conclusion

In his poem, *The British Museum Reading Room*, Irish poet Louis MacNeice recalled 'the guttural sorrow of the refugees' among the library's desks. The poem's second stanza continues to describe the Reading Room's users as:

Cranks, hacks, poverty-stricken scholars,  
In pince-nez, period hats or romantic beards  
And cherishing their hobby or their doom  
Some are too much alive and some are asleep  
Hanging like bats in a world of inverted values,  
Folded up in themselves in a world which is safe and silent...<sup>21</sup>

MacNeice knew the library well – he too was a frequent user. When recalled in such terms, it is clear why the space attracted both Garnett and a certain kind of revolutionary Russian exile. The Reading Room contained both contradiction and uncertainty. You could spend your whole life there, working on a single project, or while away the hours, convinced that participation in a public spectacle of endless linguistic consumption and creation was meaningful. Kropotkin came for more than thirty years, travelling in most days by train from outer London. While he waited for the revolution, he wrote entries for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, as Marx had previously written newspaper articles. Marx never really came to terms with Victorian England – to the end his English was poor, and nearly all of his acquaintances Germans. By contrast, Kropotkin spent his evenings dining in the Garnett family rooms at the Museum.

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<sup>20</sup> 'Reading Room Geographies of Late Victorian London: The British Museum, Bloomsbury and the People's Palace, Mile End,' *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 13 (2011), available online at <http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/article/view/632>.

<sup>21</sup> MacNeice, 'The British Museum Reading Room,' p. 574.

In 1895, while walking to a conference of activists at Volkhovsky's house in West London, Stepniak was hit, and killed, by a train. Volkhovsky died in 1914. By then, Garnett had already left her Russian contacts behind. Her translations of Tolstoy were a commercial failure. In order to make up for the losses, she was obliged to translate Dostoyevsky (her publisher believing that these would sell much better: they did). She became inward-looking in her late thirties, moving away from her Fabian activities, her Museum and Russian connections. In the early 1900s, she no longer obtained Russian books from exiled friends or British Museum collections, but from the Russian library in Whitechapel, back in the East End. Her politics slid slowly to the right, and she rarely met Volkhovsky, who to the end remained a busy publisher, activist, and agitator. He continued to work in the Round Reading Room.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, Garnett avoided the Museum. From time to time she helped with Richard's collection-building. Writing to Chekhov in 1897 about the possibility of translating «Чайка» (which she hadn't actually read at the time), her letter ended 'My father in law, Dr Garnett... wishes me to ask you for a complete list of your writings, that we may add them all to the Library of the Museum. Forgive me for troubling you in this way.'<sup>23</sup>

But when Richard invited her to stay at the Museum in 1898, she declined, writing that it 'has such associations for me – that settle down like a cloud at once upon me.'<sup>24</sup> Her son attributed this reticence to her happy memories of working in the Reading Room with Stepniak. Her years there were formative, both personally and professionally, and helped bring Tolstoy to an English-speaking readership through a somewhat unlikely translator.

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<sup>22</sup> His only surviving daughter, Vera, also became a translator, best known for her collection of Saltykov-Schedrin's *skazki*, published in 1931 as *Fables* (London: Chatto & Windus).

<sup>23</sup> Garnett, *Heroic Life*, p. 162.

<sup>24</sup> Garnett, *Heroic Life*, p. 173.