



# Writing under Constraint in War Time: Literary Translation in France during the German Occupation (1940-44)

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## ► To cite this version:

Christine Lombez. Writing under Constraint in War Time: Literary Translation in France during the German Occupation (1940-44). *Chronotopos: a journal of translation history*, 2020, 2 (1&2), pp.51-61. 10.25365/cts-2020-2-1-4 . hal-03241092

**HAL Id: hal-03241092**

**<https://nantes-universite.hal.science/hal-03241092>**

Submitted on 27 Oct 2021

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1&2/2020  
DOI: 10.25365/cts-2020-2-1-4

Herausgegeben am / Éditée au /  
Edited at the: Zentrum für  
Translationswissenschaft der  
Universität Wien

ISSN: 2617-3441

### Abstract

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*Keywords: translation, wartime, France, German Occupation, Second World War, ideology, Resistance*

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Zum Zitieren des Artikels / Pour citer l'article / To cite the article:

Lombez, Christine (2020): Writing under constraint in war time: literary translation in France during the German Occupation (1940-44), *Chronotopos* 2 (1&2), 51-61. DOI: 10.25365/cts-2020-2-1-4



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### **Abstract**

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### **Introduction**

Translation is often seen as a bridge between literatures and cultures, which it is, in a way, even if the German speaking poet Paul Celan described it rather pessimistically in a letter to Karl Dedecius as “Brücken über Abgründe” (Bridges between abysses) (SANMANN 2013: 202). Indeed, such a dialogue can be deeply biased when the activity of translators is carried out in a politically confined background driven by ideological intention. How, for whom, and for what purpose does one then translate? The period of the German Occupation of France (1940-44) highlights these questions in the most exemplary and fascinating fashion. In addition to the obvious political and economic aftermath of the war itself after the defeat, the four years during which France was subject to the law of the occupier had a great impact on the cultural life of the country: following the 1940 armistice and the installation of a new power, Nazi Germany aimed at bringing defeated France to heel and at imposing a new order, based on national-socialist ideals, which were also conveyed through arts (several exhibitions were organized on the dangers of Bolshevism, of the Jews, on Collaboration,

etc.), literature (Céline and Drieu La Rochelle, to name but two authors especially committed to the new political order) and literary translations from German into French specifically investigated by the international program TSOcc I have supervised ([www.tsocc.univ-nantes.fr](http://www.tsocc.univ-nantes.fr)). This program aimed at collecting all literary translations published in occupied France as well as in Belgium between 1940 and 1945. As this paper is going to demonstrate, during those years of fear and repression, literary translation has been both a very powerful propaganda tool in the hand of the occupier and a most subtle and efficient way to spread dissident messages from the Résistance.

### **National socialist Germany's translation agenda during the Occupation of France (1940-44)**

First and foremost, the massive introduction of German authors into the “official” editorial marketplace (itself already wholly or partly controlled by German capital) is noteworthy. Actually, during the occupation years in France, a very deep interest in the practice of literary translation thrived. On the one hand, there was the impetus given by the so-called “Matthias” list – a repertoire of some 500 German works of history, philosophy, history of art, law and literature that were to be translated into French – established under the aegis of the German Institute of Paris and its Director Karl Epting, a friend of Céline. This program contributed to the re-orientation of the literary market towards German authors in a significant way. It is important to remember here that as early as December 1940, a Franco-German translation commission, linked to the German Institute, had been organized to select priority titles to translate. While no French publishing house was theoretically obliged to participate in this “translation program”, any publisher choosing one or more titles from the Matthias list was assured to be on the safe side, which at the time also meant receiving the necessary amount of paper needed for printing (then strictly rationed) and to obtain authorization from the censorship (RICHARD 1988). On the other hand, in line with the official program that aimed at promoting German literature (in its broadest sense) in France, the intense media coverage of translated works (seen as symbols of successful intellectual collaboration) in the occupied press shows that translation was also viewed as a major issue in imposing an ideological protocol. For the period considered here, Parisian newspapers such as *Panorama – hebdomadaire européen* (1943-44) or *Comoedia – Hebdomadaire des spectacles, des lettres et des arts* (1941-44), display a sustained interest in translation and foreign literature. Such an interest is evidenced by many reviews of recently published translations, articles on German writers, the publication of significant excerpts of translated texts or controversies about how to translate, series such as “*Connaître l'Europe*”, “*Bibliothèque européenne*” (LOMBEZ 2018), etc. Many foreign poets were then translated into French, a phenomenon which should be also accounted for, insofar as poetry is explicitly considered by the Occupier as the best way to know the “spirit” of a people – that is, the German people – and is therefore highly favoured in that respect. Occasionally, debates on the status of the literary translator are also to be found, in order to guar-

antee the quality of the texts produced and to ensure, among other things, compliance to the right ideological “line”. In addition, cultural and literary periodicals are to be taken into consideration, whether that be official publications, supported by the government (or published directly by the Occupier, as was the case for the *Cahiers de l’Institut allemand*, or *Deutschland-Frankreich* which appeared in a bilingual version under the auspices of the German Institute of Paris), or loose-leaves from the underground released in the free or occupied zone, as far as North Africa (cf. the case of *Fontaine*, an important literary journal published in Algiers, or *Aguedal*, which appeared in Rabat). To single out only one example, a periodical such as *Pyrénées – Cahiers de la pensée française*, published in Toulouse (South of France) between 1941 and 1944, offers an interesting panorama of translated texts betraying the quandary of an editorial board torn between its support of the Collaboration (with a clear “pétainist” line at the beginning at least) and the desire to publish less consensual writers, some of whom were even missing from the aforementioned Matthias list, e.g. Rainer Maria Rilke, who was considered subversive by the German authorities, mainly because of his pacifism (TAUTOU 2012, 2016).

### **Translation/publication strategies in times of war**

In times of war or of Occupation, translation is not devoid of danger, especially if translators/publishers don’t comply with the rules set by the Occupier regarding the choice of texts and/or authors. For political and ideological reasons, many authors had been banished from the French market at that time: Jews, communists, writers considered as “traitors” to the German nation (Th. Mann, B. Brecht, E. M. Remarque, etc.) and others from countries at war with the Third Reich (UK, USA, USSR after 1941). If “classic” authors such as W. Shakespeare, E. A. Poe, S. Coleridge or L. Carroll were still tolerated and printed, the translation of M. Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (*Autant en emporte le vent*, Gallimard, Paris, 1939, French translation by Pierre-François Caillé) swiftly disappeared from bookstores and libraries and most translations of other writers, such as Steinbeck or H. G. Wells, never came into being. Most of the “modern” English speaking authors in French translation are to be found in periodicals like *Fontaine* and *Aguedal*, (respectively published in Algiers or Rabat which then belonged to the French Colonial Empire, but were still far enough from the continent for them to feel free to print almost what they wanted – especially after November 1942 and the landing of Allied forces in North Africa). In June-July 1943, the poet Max-Pol Fouchet, editor of *Fontaine*, thus published (under the aegis of the philosopher Jean Wahl, then an exile in New York) a special issue on “Writers and poets from the USA” covering not less than 220 pages, from Robert Frost to William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot or Langston Hughes – certainly the most comprehensive anthology of modern American literature and poetry ever printed in French at the time. Translations into French of modern English language authors during the Occupation played an important role in positioning French culture with respect to the official authorities (notably allied) well before the Liberation, and the ongoing accu-

mulation of a literary “modernity capital” that the after-war years would consecrate in a striking way.

In occupied France, the frequent use of pseudonyms by translators (especially those in the French underground) reveals that the stakes of literary translation could be relatively high – especially as far as poetry was concerned, as evident in the anthology *Les Bannis* (*The Banished*) published clandestinely (by “Armor” and “Mauges”) for the “Comité National des Ecrivains” (CNE) by the Editions de Minuit in July 1944 (LOMBEZ 2013a). No wonder, when one reads the table of contents: H. Heine, F. Werfel, K. Tucholsky, E. Kästner, S. Zweig, B. Brecht, all those “banished” (i.e. unwelcome) German writers were represented, thus outweighing by far the “official” and celebrated bilingual anthology of German poetry (*Anthologie de la poésie allemande des origines à nos jours*) published one year before by Stock in Paris where, conversely, poets belonging to the SA, a paramilitary group of the Nazi party, featured prominently (LOMBEZ 2013b). This purpose obeyed to the one and only motto: “remplacer les deux volumes déshonorés de 1943” (“to supersede the two dishonoured volumes of 1943”), since the bilingual anthology published by Stock, a collaborationist publisher, was considered in the resistance as infamous. Translating those “undesirable” German poets was then viewed as a highly necessary resistant gesture and a moral duty, if only because it was, on the whole, a way of redeeming a German literature which had been dishonoured by the Nazi regime.

Why were poetry and poetry translation so well represented in times of war? In the literary field of that period, both activities are obviously important: easily memorisable and distributable, capable of enclosing encrypted allusions that were undetectable by the layman, French and foreign poems were amongst the immaterial weapons used in the relentless battle led in France, both legally and clandestinely, by the different parties (LOMBEZ 2015). As shown by the data mining done by the members of TSOcc team over the course of five years<sup>1</sup>, poetry (not only German) was the most translated literary genre during the Occupation, as can be seen in figure 1:

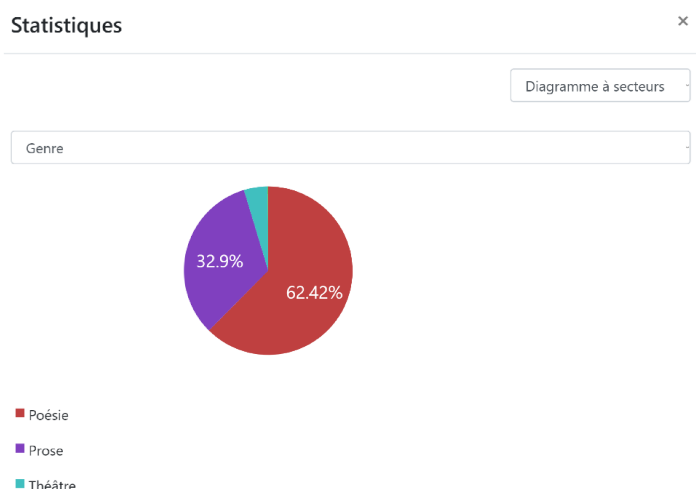


Figure 1: TSOcc database©

<sup>1</sup> This database is now available at <https://tsocc.huma-num.fr>

Based on a large amount of quantitative data (around 5000 references collected in France and in Belgium), the TSOcc database has also allowed for a detailed panorama of languages, authors, and works translated into French (and their translators) to be drawn (figure 2).

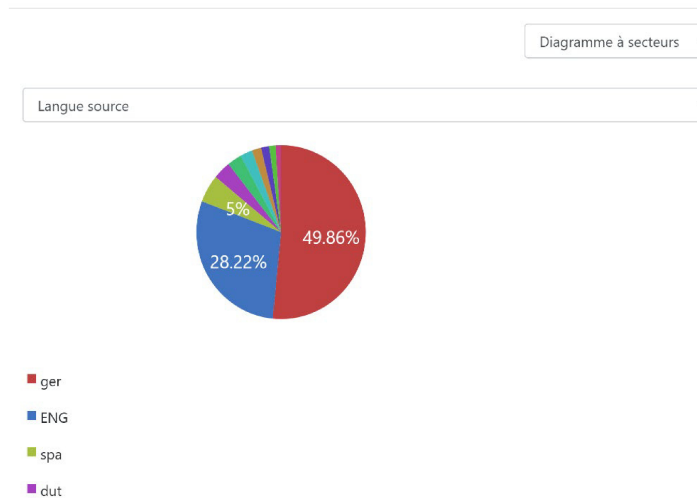


Figure 2: TSOcc database©

The almost 5000 translations in French that have been collected for the period 1940-44 are also a pretty good indicator of a strongly growing practice of translation during the Occupation.

Writers and translators had to build up specific strategies frequently so as to get their message safely across. First of all, how could censorship be bypassed? That is the question Max Pol-Fouchet must have had in mind when he brought the famous (and lengthy) poem “Liberté” by P. Eluard to the censor in Algiers before printing it in *Fontaine* in 1942 under the uncompromising title “Une seule pensée”. He therefore chose his time carefully, just after lunch. The censor, wishing to finish with his reading task as soon as possible (perhaps to quietly take a nap), quickly browsed through the first pages of the poem, cried “one more love poem!” and gave his permission for publication without further scrutiny (FOUCHET, 1968, 90). Had he been less sloppy, he would have found the famous *finale* on the last page “j’écris ton nom ... Liberté”. The so-called love poem (which it indeed was originally) had been recycled by Eluard himself as a resistance slogan and was bound to become the anthem of the “Free France”. Never take a poem at its face value, could very well be the lesson of this episode. This rhetorical ambiguity is also one of the reasons why poetry was so closely read at that time, watched by the authorities, and favoured by the underground.

The (mis)use of ancient literature during the Occupation in France is another example of such ambiguities. If many Greek and Latin poets were translated and retranslated at the time, it was not always/not only for mere pedagogical reasons. Homer, Virgil, and Sophocles, for instance, could serve as very convenient screens and doubtless offered a certain degree of safety for a writer/translator wishing to encourage double-reading. Thus, the Trojan War could be assimilated to the conflict opposing the French and the Germans, with Agamemnon featuring as a despot and Achilles as



a resistant rebelling against an iniquitous order (going even so far as refusing to fight and withdrawing under his tent). That's at least how the surrealist poet Pierre Albert-Birot (a friend of Apollinaire's) seems to have read the first "Canto" of the *Iliad* he was busy translating in Paris between 1940 and 1944. In his foreword, written in March 1944, he gives several hints showing that Homer's epos was for him, so to say, taking place right in front of his eyes (LOMBEZ 2016: 55-76). Also of note were Simone Weil's new translations of the same poem (some excerpts of which were published in 1940 in Marseilles by *Les Cahiers du Sud* under the pseudonym Emile Novis), praising the strength that does not kill ("la force qui ne tue pas" – certainly not the one the Nazis had in mind) and insisting on v. 309 in the 18<sup>th</sup> Canto, that the God of War does not have any favourite in the battlefield: "Arès est équitable et il tue ceux qui tuent" (Ares is fair, and kills those who kill). By using the plural and thus slightly changing the original (where it reads: "Enyalos [*another name for Ares*] is impartial and kills the one who kills"), the translator tacitly provides a timeless moral lesson which applies to all (cf. in the Bible, *Matt.* 26:52: "... for all who will take up the sword will die by the sword") and sounds like a warning directed toward the Occupier. Working on a translation of the *Bucolics* at the same period, the poet P. Valéry also seems to draw some interesting parallels between Virgil's times (the Civil War in Rome) and his own. Moreover, he discretely encourages his reader to read between the lines when he reflects in his foreword on the relationships between poets and political power, wondering whether a poet should surrender to the latter to be able to create in peace (LOMBEZ 2016: 74-76; 416-418). The role played by Antiquity during the war is perhaps even more obvious if one reads the comments on Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* published in *Poésie* 43, an important literary journal founded by Pierre Seghers in 1940. Reflecting on Oedipus, the critic André Rousseaux writes: "Il possède la seule liberté dont jouissent vraiment les hommes [...], la liberté de l'âme consciente de sa vie propre" ("He owns the one and only freedom mankind really enjoys, the freedom of the soul aware of its own life"). *Oedipus the King* was translated twice in 1941 alone (by Gabriel Boissy in Marseilles, published by Laffont, and J. René Chevaillier in Paris, published by Hachette). For anyone who knew how to read between the lines, such words could not fail to ring a bell to contemporary ears.

The Occitan poetry translated into French between 1940 and 1944 is especially interesting here as a practice of such a reading. Two literary journals from the south of France, *Les Cahiers du Sud* (Marseilles 1942) and *Pyrénées* (Toulouse 1944) showed a keen interest in regionalism during the Occupation period, in line with the ideals of the "Révolution Nationale" launched by the Vichy head of state, Marshal Pétain. Poetry in the Occitan language particularly stood out at the time, especially the one written by both medieval (Arnaut Daniel) and modern "troubadours" (Jordi Rebol, Max Rouquette), the latter translating themselves into French. Many self-translations (LOMBEZ 2019b) published in *Les Cahiers du Sud* as well as in *Pyrénées* demonstrated how vivid this literature still was (although often considered as dead or second-rate), which was perhaps also intended as a gesture of resistance, the "*Génie d'Oc*" and "*l'Homme méditerranéen*" being viewed here as the epitome of civilization (opposed to an "anti-humanism" coming from the north, as the philosopher Simone Weil put



it, celebrating the “Occitan inspiration” as the last remnant of the Greek heritage to help fight totalitarian strength):

*“L’essence de l’inspiration occitanienne est identique à celle de l’inspiration grecque. Elle est constituée par la connaissance de la force. [...] Connaître la force, c’est, la reconnaissant pour presque absolument souveraine en ce monde, la refuser avec dégoût et mépris.”* (NOVIS 1942, 154)

[The essence of the Occitanian inspiration is identical to that of the Greek inspiration. It is made up of the knowledge of strength. [...] To know strength is to recognize it as almost absolutely sovereign in this world, and to refuse it with disgust and contempt.] [Our translation]

Here again, poetry translations from Occitanian could be used as very convenient shelters to safeguard one’s cultural identity and moral values.

Last but not least, pseudotranslations published in the French underground are also to be ranked among the ideological weapons of the time. The anthology *L’Honneur des poètes II – Europe* was clandestinely released by the publisher Editions de Minuit, in May 1944. It is a sequel to the initial work *L’Honneur des poètes*, published a year earlier (July 1943) and edited by Pierre Seghers, Paul Eluard and Jean Lescure, who brought together the poems of resistance authors (P. Eluard, L. Aragon, J. Tardieu, R. Desnos, E. Guillevic, F. Ponge) hiding behind pseudonyms. Nevertheless, *L’Honneur des poètes II – Europe* cannot be simply understood as a sequel to the 1943 project. Here the editors wanted to demonstrate their commitment against anti-fascism, but also to fight the rise of nationalism among resistance poets themselves (Louis Aragon for instance stood prominently for a “French Europe” in his famous “Leçon de Ribérac” published by *Fontaine* in June 1941). Lacking “real” European poems to publish, they decided to write some themselves: thus, Eluard ordered a “Norwegian poem” from Robert Desnos, André Frénaud provided the Czech and Polish poems, and Eluard himself hid behind the so-called Dutch poet. The strategic role of these four pseudotranslations in the “Europe” section of the volume is not to be taken lightly. The real stake of *L’Honneur des poètes II* was indeed to make the Germans feel insecure by having them believe in the existence of an “*internationale de poètes*” in all of the countries occupied by them, ready to rise against their common enemy. The safety provided by those “fake authors” thus conveniently enabled them to take part in the ideological fighting with weapons of their own (LOMBEZ 2017).

### **Portraits of translators: an overview**

Conversely, some well-established translators sided with the opposite party, that of the Germans and the Collaboration, which led them sometimes to rather disputable choices, as can be seen in the volume *Traduire, Collaborer, Résister. Traducteurs et traductrices sous l’Occupation* (LOMBEZ 2019 a), which consists of a series of portraits of critics, poets, writers, teachers, students, and amateurs who were all working as translators during the German Occupation of France and Belgium. Material found in

several libraries in Paris or in the provinces, in archives (National Archives in Paris, Departmental Archives in Toulouse, Diplomatic Archives in Paris and Nantes, IMEC archives in Caen, Archive of the Foreign Office in Berlin) or communicated by helpful translators' families helped us sketch the (sometimes controversial) destiny of some mediators. The volume has brought to light numerous translators' lives which for the most part were unheard of and remain unique. Thus, it is surprising to discover that some amongst them had very atypical agendas, leading them for instance to simultaneously translate National Socialist authors and authors blacklisted by the Nazi regime. This is notably the case of Louise Servicen who translated works by both Thomas Mann and (under the pseudonym of Pierre Vence) others more in line with NS ideology such as Gustav Frenssen (*Der Untergang der Anna Hollmann*, 1911, translated in French *Le Naufrage de l'Anna-Hollmann*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1942) and Hans Fallada's *Der eiserne Gustav* (partly rewritten on Goebbels's request, which made her feel very uncomfortable as revealed by some letters to her editor kept in the IMEC archives<sup>2</sup>). The question of gender (as it is used in Gender Studies) and the feminine specificity of translation must also be addressed in this context. Indeed, many translators were female and their lives are difficult to retrace, either because there is not much available data on them (as is the case with the Baroness of Aiguy, Gertrude Stein's translator), or because they used – often male – pseudonyms as shown above with Louise Servicen, which are now impossible to clearly identify as such. As the proportion of male to female translators and the relative importance of the role of each is forcibly affected, reestablishing a more balanced view through the TSOcc research project was of great importance. The portraits of Hélène Bokanowski (BRAËNDLI 2019) or Geneviève Bianquis (TAUTOU 2019) are therefore very significant, as was the destiny of these two women during the war.

Geneviève Bianquis (1886-1972), was among the most prolific translators from German during the Occupation period. A Communist academic and member of the Vigilance Committee of Antifascist Intellectuals during the interwar period, this eminent specialist of Goethe and of German romanticism was dismissed from the University of Dijon and automatically pensioned off by the Occupant for having tried to hire non-brainwashed university readers on her own initiative. In her situation, literary translation was a salutary escape as well as a welcome source of income. She was apparently unaware of the stakes of the 1943 celebrations in France surrounding the centenary of the death of F. Hölderlin, and translated the German poet in the same year, she claimed, only for the purposes of a university program. This thus underscores the great naivety of some French Germanists who basically took on the mission that Karl Epting (the Director of the German Institute in Paris) assigned to the least compliant professors: "helping the Franco-German reconciliation by devoting all [their] activity to translations [...]." This sneaky mission was sometimes even carried out against their will, since some translations had been in fact undertaken before the war itself (TAUTOU 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise\\_Servicen](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Servicen) (last seen 17/11/20)

As far as she is concerned, Hélène Bokanowski (1910-2000) was born perfectly bilingual (in English) in the upper French bourgeoisie and was passionate about literature. After the armistice of June 1940, she left with her husband to Algiers, where they socialized with resistant and diplomatic circles. It was during the Occupation and her temporary exile in North Africa that Hélène Bokanowski discovered translation. She joined the Algerian intellectual resistance and the team of the resistant periodical *Fontaine* as an occasional writer and translator. Hélène Bokanowski published her first translations in *Fontaine* in 1942: a text by William Saroyan and three poems by Dylan Thomas. These are some of the very first translations of Dylan Thomas in French, since the author's first complete collection in French translation would not come out before 1957. Between 1942 and 1944, Hélène Bokanowski published twenty other translations in *Fontaine*. These are mainly to be found in two special issues: n°27-28 (June-July 1943), entitled "Writers & poets from the United States of America" and n°37-40 (1944), "Aspects of English literature from 1918 till 1940". Among these translations feature several texts by prominent authors from English-speaking modern literature (then banned by the Otto censorship lists), notably by D. H. Lawrence, William Faulkner, Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf. Some of her choices seem directly linked to the political and ideological context of the time, such as the translation of the poems by an English RAF pilot, John Pudney, and the text "The Mixed Transport", by Arthur Koestler, one of the very first to address the deportation of civilian populations by the Nazis. Through her activity as a translator, H. Bokanowski was one of the important mediators in the reception of English and more particularly American culture during this period, working for the circulation of ideas during the Occupation and paving the way for the intense American-French cultural transfers that were to develop during the post-war years in France and in Europe (BRAËNDLI 2019).

Such portraits (among others), in the wake of the "Translator's turn" in translation studies, which aims to give translators their historical visibility and importance back (CHESTERMAN 2009; MUNDAY 2014), have shed new light on translators' activities during wartime, on the role of female translators, as well as on the part all of them played in the political and cultural life of their time, including their political and ideological commitment, which is not to be belittled and will be subject to further investigations.

### Concluding remarks

As a matter of fact, there is no such thing as a neutral translation. Translating is always a personal choice (sometimes a very difficult one), and choices in times of war are more often than not likely to collide with circumstances. Moreover, as a power relationship between languages (CASANOVA 2002), translation is never free of ideological purposes, which blatantly shows during the Occupation period of France and its very oriented translation politics. Besides, there are cases of translators (mostly German language teachers) who were prosecuted in France after the war and even convicted, some of them wrongly, since not all translators were politically involved

between 1940 and 1944 (they translated German authors to make a living in these very complicated times without being ideologically committed): nevertheless, the indictment held against them was in most cases “intelligence avec l’ennemi” (“fraternizing with the enemy”) and prevented them for instance from further teaching.<sup>3</sup> This fact alone reveals that translating in times of war is never devoid of far-reaching consequences, and is even a very risky business, especially if one sided with the wrong party.

The systematic use, in a second step of our research, of the bibliographic data collected by the TSOcc team will make it possible to further refine the perspective thanks to new statistics and targeted studies which should make speak for many documents still unpublished or remained unexplored until now.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. here the files of the “French legal purges” in the French National Archives, especially regarding René Lasne (Z/6NL/426/9691) and André Meyer (F/17/16850).

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