

TranslAtWar Junior Conference

Translating Between Centre and Periphery: Literature in Europe during WW2 (1939-1945)

11-12 March 2027, Nantes Université (France)

The conference “Translating Between Centre and Periphery: Literature in Europe during WW2 (1939-1945)”, organised by the ERC research programme TranslAtWar (<https://www.translatwar-erc.eu/>), aims to study how the translation and circulation of literary texts during WW2 enables us to better understand literary relationships and movements, both within a national and European context as well as from a transnational angle.

Recent studies have highlighted the extent to which major historical events exert an impact on the evolving notion of “central” and “peripheral” literatures from a global perspective (see for instance *Centres et périphéries de la littérature mondiale*, edited by Amaury Dehoux, 2018, and the works of Pascale Casanova (*La République mondiale des lettres*, 1999)). Concerning the dynamics of languages and literature in translation, studies such as *Center and Periphery, Power Relations in the World of Translation* (2000) by Marija Zlatnar Moe, Tanja Žigon and Tamara Mikolič Južnič have shown how the relationships between central and peripheral languages can change depending on the context and their place within a global system (see also Franco Moretti, 2000). The same is true for transnational literary exchanges (Sapiro, 2018). This subject is also explored in the 2021 special issue “Périphéries – Centres – Traduction” (n°68, edited by Elżbieta Skibińska, Natalia Paprocka et Regina Solová) of the journal *Romanica Wratislaviensia* (Wrocław).

How to consider the manifold ways in which the upheavals related to the Second World War impacted those relationships within the context of European literatures and their circulation in translation? In the case of countries occupied by either the Axis Powers or the Soviet Union, the imposition of the occupier’s literature, oftentimes facilitated through translation policies established by the occupier, is one of the key factors impacting the shifting notions of centre and periphery. This shift can be observed on various levels: on a linguistic level (minority languages, and their relation to the linguistic majority), geographically (“literary centres” in relation to more “peripheral” areas) or economically (“popular” literature and the social background of their readership, genres with more limited “popularity”).

This question is situated at the crossroads of different fields, and can be studied from various perspectives, taking into consideration political, cultural, literary and linguistic aspects. In France, for instance, the Nazi occupier introduced a variety of measures aimed at promoting German literature, thereby highlighting the transformation of literary translation into a significant political act. In turn, translators became important actors with regard to enacting those literary exchanges, both on a national and transnational level. In Poland, on the other hand, no attempt was made to impose German culture, which can be taken as another proof of the profound disdain of the Nazis towards Slavic culture. This conference addresses,



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through the lens of literary translations, to what extent the Second World War can be regarded as a period of rupture (or of continuity) within the history of the circulation of literary texts in Europe, and with regard to perceivable shifts in the relations between different “central” and “peripheral” languages and literatures during this period.

We invite presentations that approach this topic from a variety of angles, including but not limited to the following research strands and topics:

1: The politics of translation

The political dimension of literary translation constitutes a first possible research strand. Given that the act of translation can be construed as a political act – whether in opposition to the ideology of the occupier, in alignment with it, or in trying to occupy a “neutral” position between resistance and collaboration – translations, as Christopher Rundle and Kate Sturge have argued in *Translation Under Fascism* (2010), can be considered an integral part of history. By focussing on the various systems and methods of censorship as well as on the different ways in which clandestine publishing took shape, research contributions addressing the political dimension of literary translation could examine the relations between “central” and “peripheral” languages and literatures – including minority and regional languages and literatures – in order to understand the manifold ways in which cultural policies imposed by the occupier have influenced the transnational trajectories of literary texts. Case-studies of translations in exile or clandestine editions, analysed with regard to their function as propaganda tools, could also contribute to this research strand.

2: Tracing translators and other literary actors in and through the archive

This research strand focuses on the traces that the trajectories of individual translators and other actors implicated in the production, distribution and reception of literary translations published during the Second World War have left in the archives. More specifically, we could consider the archival records of publishing houses, the role(s) of female translators and their (in)visibility in the literary field. By studying personal documents such as journals, letters, manuscripts and all kinds of other documents related to literary memory, this research strand explores the hidden lives of translators – whether erased and forgotten, or as central figures – thus questioning the ways in which archival records can be used to renegotiate the place of literary translators within literary history.

3: Reception studies and discourses on translation

A third research strand considers the discourses on translation that emerged in Europe during WW2, whether it concerns translation as a practice or an object of study and reflection. Contributions related to this research strand could present case-studies of the discourses surrounding a specific translation, but could also address testimonials by translators describing and reflecting on politics impacting their translation practice. Literary translations

could also be studied in relation to other institutional and media discourses – in newspapers, magazines, or other types of publications, but also in official documents – in order to better understand how translations were presented to literary audiences at the time. We could also consider the reception of literary translations, especially in occupied countries, and the impact of those discourses in shaping the perception of literatures and languages of the Occupier, and of allied or adversary nations.

4: “Big Translation History”: new methods for studying literary translations

Finally, we invite contributions with a focus on the (digital) preservation and conservation of (bibliographical) data as well as on quantitative methods of analysis within the field of the humanities. Regarding literary translation, the TSOcc programme’s database (<https://tsocc.huma-num.fr>), a compilation of literary translations published during the Occupation (1940–44) in France and Belgium, shows the direction such research could take. Research avenues related to digital humanities and the digital history of translation will enable us to examine the contributions of a quantitative approach – as proposed by Diana Roig-Sanz and Laura Fóllica (2018) – in order to examine how digital tools can be used not only in the creation of massive corpora (“Big Data”), but also in the exploration and the analysis of data, particularly for statistical purposes. This last research strand will thus enable us to assess the theoretical dimension of the digital humanities and their applications in the field of literary translation.

Modalities of abstract submission

We invite early-stage researchers (PhD students and post-docs) within the fields of Comparative Literature, European Literatures, Translation Studies, History and Sociology and other adjacent disciplines with a focus on the Second World War to submit an abstract. Contributions should last between 20 and 25 minutes, with time for questions and discussion afterwards. The deadline for abstract submission (250 to 400 words), accompanied by a short biography and bibliography, is 30 September 2026. They should mention a preliminary title and a research question, as well as briefly state the envisioned theoretical framework and methodology. Submissions should be e-mailed to: translatwar.phd@gmail.com

Abstracts can be sent in either English or French.

All abstracts will be examined by the scientific committee. All participants will be informed whether their abstract has been accepted before the end of December 2026.

Working languages of the conference: English, French

Deadline for the submission of abstracts: 30 September 2026

Conference dates: 11-12 March 2027, Nantes University (France)

Organisation:

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About TranslAtWar

The ERC research programme TranslAtWar, (<https://www.translatwar-erc.eu/>), directed by Christine Lombez at Nantes University, aims to interrogate the modalities of the circulation of ideologies, ideas and cultures in Europe during the Second World War through the lens of literary translations. It also explores the role of publishers and translators during this crucial period of twentieth century history and studies the impact that translation practices could have had on the intellectual development of a country during a time of political upheaval.

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