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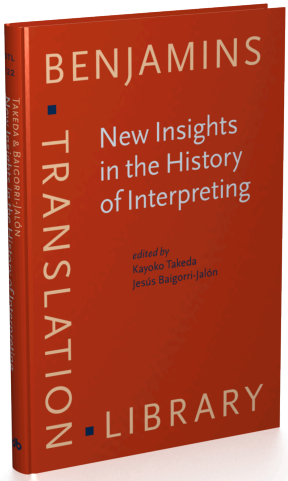

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CHAPTER 6

At the dawn of simultaneous interpreting in the USSR

Filling some gaps in history*

Sergei Chernov

In loving memory of my father

This chapter provides new evidence on the invention of simultaneous interpreting (SI) in the 1920s using records from Russian archives discovered by this author. SI was first implemented in the USSR in 1928, which coincided with the first full-scale use of SI at the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva. Language problems of the era associated with the declining use of French and waste of time due to consecutive interpreting (CI) required a new solution, which was SI, proposed by E. Filene in the West and Dr. Epshtein in the USSR. Epshtein's three-interpreter method was perfected by engineer Goron and implemented at the 6th Comintern Congress in 1928. Finally, interpreters/translators' profiles and working conditions in the 1930s are described briefly.

Keywords: Comintern, Filene-Finlay system, telephonization of interpreting, three-interpreter method, simultaneous interpreting

1. In lieu of introduction

The invention of simultaneous interpreting (SI) in the West is attributed to Edward Filene, a Boston businessman, who first came up with the idea in 1925, after he witnessed how consecutive interpreting (CI) was slowing down the debates in the League of Nations (LON) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), where he attended meetings as a delegate. His proposals were accepted by the ILO, and after initial trials in 1927, the first full-scale use of SI took place at the ILO 11th Labor Conference in Geneva, starting on June 8, 1928 (Baigorri-Jalón 2014: 145–146).

* The author wishes to thank his sister, Elena Chernova, of Moscow, for being the author's eyes in the Comintern archives, as well as Jesús Baigorri-Jalón and Robin Setton for their extremely valuable comments on several iterations of this chapter.

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Less than two months after the opening of the 11th Labor Conference in Geneva, SI was used in the USSR, at the 6th Congress of the Communist International (Comintern), which opened on July 17, 1928 in Moscow. Until recently, researchers interested in the history of SI in the USSR had to rely only on a very brief description of this episode in a 1963 article written by E. Gofman, a Soviet interpreter and veteran of the Nuremberg Trials:

> For the first time simultaneous interpreting was employed in 1928 in the USSR at the 6th Congress of the Communist International. A same-year issue of the *Krasnaya Niva* magazine published pictures of interpreters seated in armchairs in front of the rostrum. On their necks they are wearing a bulky contraption that supports a microphone. There are no headphones, and they listen to the sound coming from the rostrum directly. (Gofman 1963: 20)[1]

Figure 1 is a copy of the relevant page from the *Krasnaya Niva*, showing photos from the 6th Comintern Congress accompanied by the following caption and story, courtesy of the Russian State Library (formerly, the Lenin Library) in Moscow.


КРАСНАЯ НИВА

Техника на службе коммунистической революции

Figure 1. Top photo – participants listening; bottom left – interpreter (*Krasnaya Niva*, No. 32, August 5, 1928. Emphasis in italics has been added by the present author)

Translation:

Technology at the Service of the Communist Revolution

The VIth Comintern Congress is marked by the use of a new technical device.

Under the previous arrangement, at the end of every speech each group of delegates sharing a common language would listen to their interpreter. Now, *for the first time in the world,* a system of transmitting interpretation simultaneously with the speech has been introduced.

1. Here and throughout this chapter all quotes from original Russian language sources have been translated into English by the author.

> Instead of addressing the delegates, the speaker addresses the five interpreters – Russian, German, French, English, and Chinese. Each sentence uttered by the speaker is repeated by the interpreter in a low voice into the microphone affixed on the interpreter's chest. The interpreter's voice is transmitted by wire through a radio-amplification unit, to the delegates' seats. Each delegate seat is equipped with five pairs of jacks. The delegates can plug in their listening receivers into any one of the five jacks and listen to the speaker in a desired language.

What system was used in the USSR? How was it designed and built, and by whom? Was it a home-grown invention, or a "reverse engineered" Western system? What SI method was used? Who were those first interpreters, and how were they trained? We decided to look for answers to these and possibly other questions in the archives of the Comintern, stored in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) in Moscow and now available to the public.

2. Language practices and language problems of early 20th-century international conferences

Two years after the October Revolution of 1917 and only a few months before the official end of World War I (WWI) and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (June 28, 1919), the First Comintern Congress was held in March 1919 in Moscow. The Comintern was to become a unique militant international organization, combining features of a global communist party, an international workers' forum, and a very sophisticated intelligence gathering and covert operations headquarters. It would soon come to rely on heavy bureaucratic machinery to support its various operations, including a cadre of professional translators and interpreters.

The Comintern soon started encountering the same language problems as the other major international organization set up after WWI – the League of Nations (LON), that saw the transformation of post-WWI international relations – namely, the decline of the use of French as the language of diplomacy and the introduction of new languages as a result of democratization of international relations (Baigorri-Jalón 2014: 14–22). At the ILO, access to international gatherings was no longer reserved exclusively for diplomats from aristocratic families who spoke fluent French, as many delegates came from national labor unions or workers' organizations and needed to resort to interpreters. In fact, "until then workers did not have linguistic means of communication that allowed them to feel comfortable in international gatherings" (Baigorri-Jalón 2006: 102). Just as English was becoming the new lingua franca in the West, Russian was to become the language of the international communist movement.

The First Comintern Congress was attended by delegates from 21 countries. The working languages were German and Russian, with the majority of speeches

delivered in German and occasional interpreting provided from French, English, and Chinese. For example, the speech by the French delegate Henri Guilbeaux was summarized in the third person by the multilingual Russian communist leader Alexandra Kollontai (First Comintern Congress Proceedings 1933: 167).

The need for professional language support at the Comintern was obviously recognized very soon, as the Translation Bureau was set up approximately three months after the First Congress (Box 1).

Box 1. History of the Comintern's Translation Bureau

The Comintern Translation Bureau was created by the decision of the Comintern Executive Committee (ECCI) of July 4, 1919 (RGASPI, 495-1-1-34, 44). A Publications division co-existed with the Translation Bureau, with partly overlapping functions. Its functions also overlapped with the Information Division, and after the 1921 reorganization it was transformed into a de facto translation division, with four sections – Russian, German, English, and French. Until 1923 the division was headed by M. Kreps, and in 1923 he was appointed head of the Publications Division, which – following yet another reorganization – incorporated most of the Press Unit staff who by then were actively involved in translation work. In fact, that unit was unofficially referred to as the Translation Division. Between the 5th and 6th Congresses (1925–28), the Publications Division comprised several translation bureaus – based in Moscow and in Comintern publishing houses in Germany, France, Britain, and the US. The division was headed by M. Kreps, and his deputy was G. Gerish. The Publications Division was supervised by the Editorial Commission, which in 1926 comprised, among others, M. Kreps and O. Pyatnitsky (head of the International Liaison Division, which was responsible, inter alia, for undercover operations). General logistical and technical oversight was the function of the ECCI Secretariat Bureau, headed by M. Heimo. On September 28, 1928, G. Gerish was appointed chief of the translation division by the Political Secretariat (RGASPI 495-3-81-125), soon to be replaced by A. Brigadier. The ECCI Secretariat Bureau eventually set up a Translation Bureau headed by M. Levin, and since 1938 – by Shvetsov (see Adibekov et al. 1997).

Yet, the Tower of Babel effect was even more pronounced at the 2nd Congress in 1920, where the first half of the sessions were conducted mainly in French, which led to multiple complaints from the English speakers. For example, John Reed, who represented the Communist Labor Party of America, took the floor requesting that English be made an official language of the Congress on account that more delegates were English speakers than French speakers, and many spoke no French (Second Comintern Congress Proceedings 1934: 80). His request was echoed by the British delegate Murphy, who said that "delegates who are most interested in the important topics of the Congress are unable to follow the discussion as English is not recognized as an official language" (ibid.: 148). Halfway into the Congress, the chairman suddenly suggested switching the language of discussion from French to English, as "six or seven new comrades have joined us who do not

understand French. Half of the Congress was conducted in French. We now need to save time, and since we are to discuss mainly matters pertaining to trade unions and parliamentarism we will speak English"(ibid.: 284).[2] Although the language barrier was mostly bridged by distributing the main talking points translated into four languages (Russian, French, German, and English), at least part of the time there was interpretation. Speeches were interpreted in summary form, leading an Irish delegate to make this remark: "What Radek talked about for two hours was interpreted for us in 20 minutes. It seems strange that people here are so much into time savings, although it is not noticeable that people in Russia particularly value their time" (ibid.: 362). Delegate Pestaña of Spain made a point of order protesting that nothing was being interpreted into French and even refused to take part in a vote on the item of trade unions (ibid.: 365). At the end of the Congress, the frustrated Pestaña introduced a motion on Esperanto:[3]

> Given that interpretation into several languages of all speeches made at international congresses similar to ours complicates the work of the congress, I move that in the future each speaker use the language easiest for him to converse in, and that each speech be translated only into an auxiliary language – Esperanto. This language is easy to learn and it is very useful for business. If used as a language of translation, it would save much time and effort. (ibid.: 452)

With this, the USSR was effectively joining the Cosmopolitan Conversation, an international debate about the preferred language regime in international conferences described in the book of the same title (Shenton 1933).

In the USSR, Esperanto, or its more advanced form, Ido, was persistently offered as an alternative to using interpreters at international proletarian gatherings. One of the numerous letters to the 2nd Congress of the Comintern (1920), sent by M. Albov from the small Russian town of Totma on behalf of Soviet Esperantists, appealed to the Congress to use Esperanto as a language of communication between the delegates. He wrote: "Sessions of this multinational congress will inevitably involve interpreters, who, no matter how precise their interpretation may be, inevitably distort and muddy up the meaning of speeches, which will take up even more time" (RGASPI 495-99-66-013). This negative assessment of the role of interpreters was typical of advocates of an "international

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2. It would seem that the switch of the floor language to English for the discussion of these agenda items was dictated by pure pragmatism, as at least half of the delegates who signed up to talk on these items were English speakers (ibid.: 363).

3. An attempt to introduce Esperanto as an auxiliary language was also made at the LON (Baigorri-Jalón 2014: 69–71).

auxiliary language" in general (see, for example, Shenton 1933: 224, 239, 274; Dubin 1944: 31, 53, 55, 63–67). The Russian Esperantists, especially, were in favor of introducing an artificial auxiliary language for communication between "workers of the world," citing such arguments that it was time for the proletariat to break the monopoly on international communication held by "polyglot intellectuals" (RGASPI 495-99-66-029) and that Esperanto was easier to learn by workers who were not able to devote several years of their life to studying a foreign language (RGASPI 495-99-76-003/004).[4]

By the mid 1920s, it was becoming increasingly evident, both in the West and the USSR, that consecutive interpreting (CI) in multilingual conferences was a hindrance to the effectiveness of proceedings, especially when more than two languages were involved. Shenton (1933) provides a detailed account of language problems encountered at multiple conferences held since the end of WWI and where the problems of multilingualism were dealt with – in his view, in a less than satisfactory way – by choosing only one working language (increasingly, English was chosen over French), two official languages with no interpreting between them, CI into one or more languages, or even the use of "telephonic interpretation." According to Shenton (1933: 469), the best solution was to use a "neutral, synthetic, international auxiliary language."

The problem was evident, and it required a lasting and workable solution. In 1921 the Comintern set up an Advisory Commission for the Introduction of an International Auxiliary Language to study the possibility of using Esperanto as a language of communication at Comintern congresses (RGASPI 495-99-067-022), but after some deliberations the commission advised against it, and the matter was never included in the agenda of the next (3rd) Congress (RGASPI 495-99-067-060).

A very different approach was soon to be found, and it involved making use of modern technology of the time, the telephone. The second industrial revolution was well underway, offering increasingly sophisticated solutions to various technological problems. Delivering interpretation simultaneously with the speech was viewed as a technology problem, and technology was placed at the service of the Revolution. The New Soviet Man was expected to fulfill his role of a cog in the wheel and live up to the fast pace of technological progress (see, *inter alia,* Heller 1988).

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4. Ironically, Esperanto was invented by a Jewish-Russian intellectual, Dr. Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, an ophthalmologist from Bialystok, a multilingual and multiethnic town in Russia, presently northeast Poland (Matthias 2002: 23).

3. Doctor V.Z. Epshtein, inventor of "an apparatus for translation from all languages" in the USSR

Although documents pertaining to interpreting or translation found in the Comintern archive are rather scattered, they allow to draw the conclusion that the idea of providing conference interpreting simultaneously with the original speech was conceived in the USSR and in the West approximately at the same time, in April 1925, and that these inventions may well be classified as independent and concurrent. History knows many other inventions that were made concurrently and independently, sometimes in different parts of the world, such as the invention of the radio (Marconi-Popov), the telephone (Bell-Gray), or the phonograph (Edison-Cros).

In April of 1925, approximately a week after Edward Filene sent his letter to Sir Eric Drummond, Secretary-General of the LON, containing a description of a possible prototype SI system and method for the League (Baigorri-Jalón 2014: 135), a Russian medical doctor, V.Z. Epshtein, sent his proposal to the Comintern describing "an apparatus for translation from all languages" which was to be designed as follows:

> Congress participants of different nationalities use felt earmuffs to listen to proceedings (said earmuffs are described separately) covering their ears such that listeners cannot hear the original speaker of the meeting directly; the earmuffs conceal small telephones which enable the listeners to hear the translation of the original speech in their native language. So, how is such translation achieved?
>
> For this purpose, three interpreters (for each language) sit in the adjacent room; each is wearing a headset similar to the listeners in the meeting hall where the speech is delivered, but the interpreters' telephones are not covered with felt earmuffs. Each interpreter sits inside a sound-proof booth and, over a wire run to his location from the meeting hall, listens to the original speaker who uses a microphone placed in front of him. This microphone is connected to the headphones of all three interpreters, who can thus all hear the speaker at the same time. (RGASPI 493-1-7-062)

Dr. V.Z. Epshtein offered a truly revolutionary approach to dealing with the problem of concurrent speaking and listening. Baigorri-Jalón (ibid.) notes that at that time it was not even imaginable that the interpreter could listen and speak at the same time. Incidentally, the debate on whether SI is really simultaneous or whether it is achieved through contraction of the message or a faster rate of the interpreter's speech compared with the original, or if the interpreter takes advantage of natural pauses in the original speaker's discourse continued well into the 1970s (Setton 1999: 27; Chernov 2004: 11).

According to Epshtein's method, interpreter #1 listens to the speaker's first sentence, following which he immediately switches off the audio signal from his headphones and presses a button activating a light (electric bulb) or sound (electric bell) signaling interpreter #2 in the adjacent booth to start listening from that point forward. Having done that, interpreter #1 "quickly and concisely translates the sentence he just heard, speaking his translation into the microphone placed in front of him." At this time, interpreter #2, prompted by the light bulb or bell signal, begins to listen to the second sentence, while interpreter #1 – who has disconnected the "current" [audio signal] from his earphones and can no longer hear the original speaker – directs his undivided attention to providing a (consecutive) interpretation of the sentence he just heard. Having finished the interpretation of his speech segment, interpreter #1 again switches on his headphones and continues to follow the original speaker's discourse, thus obtaining at least some context for the speech as a whole. In the meantime, interpreter #2 listens to the second sentence (or two sentences, if they are short) and passes on the torch to the third colleague. As he finishes listening to his segment, interpreter #2 disconnects his sound and concentrates on rendering his part. Interpreter #3, prompted by interpreter #2, begins listening to his sentence or segment from the place marked by the signal, and as soon as he finishes rendering it, he again passes on the turn to interpreter #1, who by this time has already finished rendering his first segment, has re-activated "the current" and is ready to focus on the next sentence or segment as soon as he receives a prompt from interpreter #3 (RGASPI 493-1-7-062-063).

Dr. Epshtein wrote that "thanks to the presence of three interpreters each is able to complete his translation in time, there is no break in the translation flow, and each rendered sentence is sent to the ears of the listeners only with a slight delay after it is pronounced by the original speaker; this delay is equal to the time required by a qualified and intelligent interpreter to concisely render a segment of the original speech" (ibid.).

Recognizing that the difference in interpreters' voices may be a problem for participants, he suggested that the voices of selected interpreters should be as much as possible of the same pitch so that listeners did not notice a substantial difference between them. He stated, however, that "this difference would be largely unnoticeable [by delegates] listening to interpretation through headphones" (ibid.).

With this arrangement, interpreting was to become a three-person job, each interpreter working in very small segments, taking turns almost after every sentence, and having enough time to render his segment in a mode somewhere between consecutive and simultaneous. From the interpreter's point of view, the system allowed him to concentrate on rendering the segment without being distracted by continuous flow of original speech and provided control to determine

the size of the segment he would be comfortable interpreting. The downside of focusing on individual segments without hearing the entire discourse was a severe lack of context that would unavoidably have an adverse effect on interpreting quality. From the point of view of the audience, it would seem that despite the fact that rather poor-quality microphones of the time largely concealed the variations in the pitch of interpreters' voices, having to listen to three different people speaking one sentence at a time (and possibly using different renderings of the same concept) must have been quite a distraction.

Although Dr. Epshtein provided a rather detailed description of how interpreters would hand off the role of listening to the source language (SL), the second aspect, i.e. ensuring a smooth flow of target language (TL) speech despite breaking it up into extremely short segments between three interpreters, is not explained in sufficient detail in his proposal. Figure 2 shows some potential problems this method could cause:

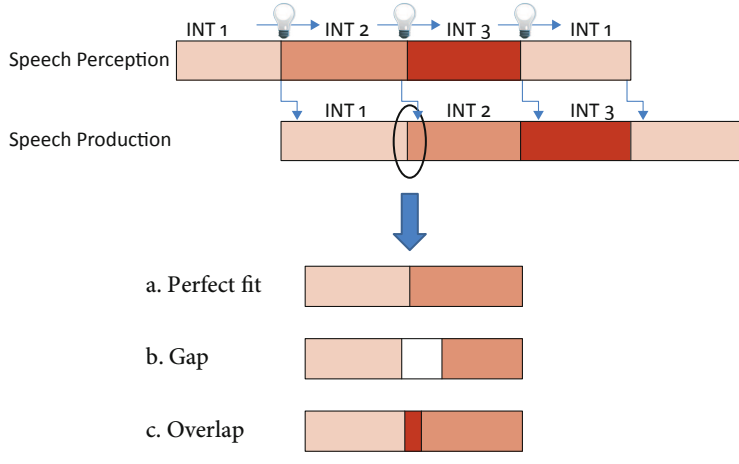

Figure 2. Analysis of Dr. V. Z. Epshtein's 1925 three-interpreter method of SI

Whereas the light bulb would probably provide a clear visual signal to the interpreter in the adjacent booth to start listening to the next segment, there seems to have been no corresponding signal to indicate that the previous interpreter has completed rendering his piece and the microphone was ready to be released to the next interpreter. Although scenario (a) is theoretically possible (see Figure 2) and would ensure a smooth transition between two interpreters, in practice TL segments produced by each interpreter would never be of exactly the same duration, leading to possible scenarios (b) or (c). Scenario (b), i.e. a gap between the two segments, would be realized if interpreter #1 is able to fit his rendering in less time than interpreter #2 takes to listen to his segment, while scenario (c) – which

is much worse – would cause an overlap between the two interpreters, if interpreter #1 takes more time to render his piece than it takes interpreter #2 to listen to his segment. The fact that interpreters were free to choose the length of the segments they were comfortable interpreting (one sentence, if it was particularly long, or two or more short sentences) would only increase the likelihood of gaps or overlaps in their speech, thus preventing a smooth and uninterrupted flow of TL.

Epshtein also suggested an alternative interpreting method – instead of switching off the audio from the original speaker only for the time it took to render one's segment, each interpreter, upon hearing his segment, would hand over "the current to his neighbor" and stop hearing the speaker until the audio signal came back to him and he again began to hear the floor (RGASPI 493-1-7-063). Dr. Epshtein described his understanding of the pros and cons involved in each of the two methods:

> Using this option, each interpreter hears only the sentences he needs to translate, whereas in the first option he continues listening to the original speech in the minutes he is free from working. The advantage of the first option is that the interpreter hears a significant portion of the speech (approximately two out of three sentences) and thus, being to a certain extent aware of the speech content, is able to provide a more sensible translation. On the other hand, this makes the interpreter more fatigued. (ibid.)

Epshtein proposed both methods as alternate options, to be used depending on the specific circumstances in a given conference.

Although no documents are available in the consulted archives on possible prior experiments, it seems plausible that the choice of such a complex method involving three interpreters for each language taking turns after each sentence was based on the outcome of some prior tests on the basis of which this proposal was put together. Indeed, why would one choose to use a team of three interpreters instead of one, unless other possibilities had been exhausted? Our hypothesis would be that such initial experiments could have involved professional ("qualified and intelligent") interpreters accustomed to working in the consecutive mode who were probably unable to cope with SI without prior training. Not seeing a practical solution to simultaneous listening and speaking, Dr. Epshtein recognized the limitations of his method, stating that the interpreters could provide a "more sensible translation" if they were more aware of the overall context of the speech (ibid.).

Three years would pass from the time this initial proposal was made by V. Z. Epshtein to the Comintern in Moscow before the system and interpreting method was perfected to the point where it was ready for full-scale trials in an actual conference setting.

What allows us to state that it was Epshtein's system, and not something else, that was used at the 6th Comintern Congress in 1928?

We know that Epshtein was credited with the invention of the system in 1928. The archive contains a letter from the Comintern requesting payment to Dr. Epshtein "for his invention," as well as minutes of the 6th Comintern Congress technical organizing committee that state that it was decided to "test the system proposed by Comrade Epshtein" (RGASPI 493-1-6-003/004).

The letter that requested payment to Dr. Epshtein stated: "Dr. Epshtein submitted a prototype design of this invention to ECCI back in 1925. At that time, the design was rather cumbersome. It was substantially perfected in the course of technical design work conducted mainly by engineer Garon [*sic.* = Goron, see Box 2]. However, the idea proposed by Dr. Epshtein was mostly kept intact. At this time the Congress is successfully using this interpretation system" (RGASPI 493-1-393-031).

Box 2. Isaac Goron

Isaac Goron (1902–1982), doctor of sciences, professor, was the founder of wired radio in the USSR, a nationwide one-channel station which was essentially a public address system that reached every Soviet home and broadcast over large pole-mounted outdoor loudspeakers transmitting official news and propaganda. He also founded, and for many years managed, the Moscow Radio Center, a state-of-the-art sound recording studio that is still used to tape chamber music and small symphony orchestras. In the 1930s–60s, Goron devoted himself to audio recording and became famous for restoring and producing remastered audio records of Lenin's speeches. Goron founded and for many years chaired the Department of Radio Broadcasting and Acoustics at the Moscow Electrotechnical Institute, where he was a long-standing professor. (Mishenkov 2003: 43; http://www.nec.m-necropol.ru/goron-ie.html)

In 1928, a 25-year old Isaac Goron, a young engineer at the Moscow long-distance telephone exchange, was put in charge of setting up the first SI system in the USSR.
(http://rujen.ru/index.php/Горон_исаак_евсеевич)

The invention of SI in the Soviet Union by Dr. Epshtein was confirmed to us by Dr. Sergei Mishenkov, professor of the Moscow Electrotechnical Institute, who had once been Prof. Isaac Goron's graduate student. In a telephone interview we conducted with him on April 18, 2014 from Washington, he recalled the words of Isaac Goron that simultaneous interpreting was invented by a physician by the name of Epshtein. Our intent in contacting Dr. Mishenkov was to learn more "oral history" about Isaac Goron, and his mentioning of doctor Epshtein as a medical doctor was a serendipitous detail.

Our efforts to research the identity and background of Dr. Epshtein have so far yielded only limited results. We can reasonably assume that V. Z. Epshtein was a medical doctor, both from Dr. Mishenkov's recollections and from the fact that the academic title of "doctor of sciences" was introduced in the USSR only in

1934. Comintern archives contain no reference to any staff member by the name of Epshtein with matching initials, and no personnel file could be traced. Epshtein is referred to as "Doc. Epshtein" in the letter from the Comintern to the Central Trade Unions Council asking for advice as to the amount of remuneration due to him for "his invention" (RGASPI 493-1-393-031). The initials "V. Z." appear on Dr. Epshtein's original typewritten proposal dated April 8, 1925, which bear his legible wet signature (RGASPI 493-1-7-064).

A photo in the Comintern archives possibly demonstrates Epshtein's active involvement in the implementation of the system for the 6th Congress in 1928 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. RGASPI 493-1-677-098

So far, we have been able to identify two people in the photo in Figure 3: Isaac Goron is on the left (positively identified by Dr. Mishenkov who knew him personally as well as by comparing this image with his later photos, including one found in an internet article on Isaac Goron (http://www.nec.m-necropol.ru/goron-ie.html)); the man wearing headphones and dressed in uniform is Mauno Heimo, Head of the Comintern's Executive Committee (ECCI) Bureau, who was in charge of organizing "telephonization of interpreting" at the Congress (we have identified him based on the photos in his personnel file, and his photo also appears in Gildi (2010: 570). This leaves the man in the middle. Our speculation is that it could be Dr. Epshtein. The official caption on the back of the photo erroneously reads: "13788. Russ_photo. VI Comintern Congress. *Inventor* of translation transmission apparatus *engineer HEIMO* listening to translation."[5] Since there are three people in this photo, the person who typed up the caption may have fused the three individuals together – the inventor, the engineer, and Mr. Heimo. We also know that in 1938, Dr. V. Z. Epshtein wrote to the People's Commissariat (Ministry) of Health suggesting the need for further research into chemo-therapy (GARF R8009-2-195-13-5/26), so his interests were multi-faceted. Further research may render new results about Dr. Epshtein's life story.

5. Italics added for emphasis by the author.

Box 3. Mauno Heimo

Heimo, Mauno (1894–1938), Finnish. Born in Tammerfors (Tampere), Finland, took part in the Finnish revolution of 1918, joined the Communist Party of Finland, in 1919 became secretary of the Comintern's Scandinavian bureau, where he rose through the ranks to become head of the ECCI Secretariat Bureau. Spoke Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, German, and Russian, some French and English. Enrolled in university but never graduated. In 1928, he was in charge of coordinating all logistics for the 6th Comintern Congress, including overall supervision of "telephonic" interpreting. Later in his career he was given various secret assignments, including traveling to Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, and France under assumed identity and false Swedish and other passports. Arrested by NKVD in 1937, executed in 1938. Rehabilitated posthumously in 1960.

(RGASPI 495-269-1086-002-004/014/045/047/056; Gildi 2010: 570)

4. Simultaneous interpreting at the 6th Comintern Congress, 1928

After Dr. Epshtein made his proposals to the Comintern in 1925, his original "rather cumbersome system" was improved by engineer Isaac Goron (RGASPI 493-1-393-031), and the 6th Comintern Congress used a new interpreting method – albeit with interpreters working not in booths but rather sitting in armchairs in front of the rostrum and speaking their translations in a low voice into neck-worn microphones hanging on leather straps.

It turned out to be almost exactly the same method as the one used at the 11th ILO Conference in 1928, but until just a few weeks before the 6th Comintern Congress was set to open, the plan looked very differently – and it involved placing interpreters in sound-proof booths. As we will see below, the organizers had to drop this idea at the last moment as for political reasons the Congress was suddenly moved out of the Kremlin and very little time remained to make alternative arrangements.

The idea to "telephonize" interpreting at the 6th Comintern Congress was brought up in a meeting of the Technical Organizing Commission, established to coordinate all logistics in preparation for the 6th Congress. Minutes #2 of the Commission's meeting that took place on April 25, 1928 (two months before the Congress was scheduled to open) contain an entry of a discussion on the topic of "telephonization" of the Congress meeting halls (*Telefonisierung* – like many of the Comintern working documents, the minutes were drafted in German). It was decided to "test the system proposed by Comrade Epshtein, said test to be conducted on a small scale in the Red Hall. To fund this, up to 1,000 rubles shall be allocated from the Congress budget. The use of this system at the Congress will depend on the results of this test" (RGASPI 493-1-6-003/004). Mauno Heimo, the Commission's chairman, was made responsible "for the preparation and design of

telephonization (mechanization) of interpreting during the Congress, for organizing a team of interpreters, and general supervision over them during the Congress" (RGASPI 493-1-7-001 and 023).

On May 10, 1928, Heimo reported to the meeting of the Technical Organizing Commission that "the test to telephonize interpreting yielded positive results: (a) it was proven that it is possible to equip the Congress with "telephonization"; (b) that interpreters capable of working with this system have been selected; and (c) that from the financial point of view the system is definitely cost-effective" (RGASPI 493-1-7-029). In view of the above, the Commission introduced a formal motion to the Comintern's Political Secretariat to approve this system of interpreting for the Congress and begin preparation for its installation in the Kremlin.

It is noteworthy that it took only 16 days from the time it was decided to test the system until it was reported that the system and interpreters were ready for the Congress. This could not have given enough time to train interpreters, so it is likely that they were selected based on their natural aptitude for SI. The organizers probably had trouble securing the required full team, because on June 9 the Organizing Commission was still discussing the need to complete the interpreter selection process, test them in an equipped conference room, and negotiate their remuneration (RGASPI 493-1-7-033). The "test" in May 1928 was probably a limited-scale demonstration of the proof of concept to a high-level audience (the ECCI Presidium, at whose session the test was conducted, was one of the Comintern's governing bodies which included such high-ranking members as Stalin and Bukharin). The VIPs must have been satisfied with what they heard, because on the following day, May 11, the Political Secretariat considered the following draft resolution, cited here in its "original" translation from German, made by the Comintern in 1928:[6]

> TELEPHONISATION OF ORAL TRANSLATION AT THE WORLD CONGRESS
>
> To enable the delegates to the Congress to understand the speakers at the Plenary Sessions by means of a simultaneous translation which will give them an opportunity to participate more intensively in the work of the Congress, a scheme has been drawn up for the telephonisation of translations. The technical arrangements required for this method of translation have been tried on a small scale; the enunciation technique for the translators has also undergone a test. Without going into the details of the technical arrangements and of the question of translators, one can safely say after these experiments that this method of translation can be very well applied to the World Congress.

6. The original document was drafted in German and translated at least into Russian and English. The archives contain the Russian and the English versions, both identified as translations from German.

> Therefore, the organisational-technical commission proposes to the Polit-Secretariat to make the following decision:
>
> The Polit-Secretariat declares that the experiment made at the last Session of the Presidium[7] to carry out the oral translation through a telephonic arrangement has proved successful. It therefore resolves to instruct the Org. Commission for the preparation of the World Congress to organise in this manner the translations at the World Congress; the means required for this are to be placed at the disposal of the Commission. The Secretariat of the VTZIK[8] is requested to give immediately permission for the erection of the technical apparatus for the Andreev Hall in the Kremlin. (RGASPI 493-1-7-031)

According to this document, as late as May 11 it was still being planned to hold the Congress in the Kremlin, but on July 17, 1928 the 6th Congress of the Comintern was inaugurated in the Pillar Hall of the House of the Unions (*Krasnaya Niva* No. 31, July 29, 1928). The Andreev Hall of the Kremlin, where the previous (5th) Congress was held in 1924, suddenly became unavailable, and the decision to move its venue was made somewhere between May 11 and the opening day, July 17. Leon Trotsky, who by then had already been exiled from Moscow to Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan, wrote that "the eviction of the Sixth Comintern Congress from the Kremlin to the Pillar Hall was 'symbolic'" (Felshtinsky 2002: 61). In Trotsky's opinion, this "eviction" could be explained by Stalin's preparation to sign the Kellogg-Briand Pact (which renounced war as an instrument of national policy) and the desire of the Soviet authorities to place some distance between themselves and the Comintern, which was viewed as an entity that could compromise the Soviet intentions. As is known, the Comintern advocated armed workers' uprisings in capitalist countries. It can also be explained by the power struggle between Stalin and Bukharin, which by then reached a critical stage.

And yet, the question about the venue of the 6th Congress remained open as late as June 29, when M. Heimo suggested several options, including the House of the Unions and the Moscow Conservatory. The House of the Unions was to be freed up from the Shakhtinsky trial[9] around July 5 or later, and if that venue was to be selected, no "telephonization" of translation was going to be possible – there

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7. ECCI Presidium was a governing body of the Comintern. In 1929 its membership included, among others, Joseph Stalin.

8. VTZIK – The All-Russian Executive Committee, the top legislative and administrative body in Soviet Russia. It existed from 1917 to 1937.

9. The Shakhtinsky trial was the harbinger of the famous Moscow Trials of the 1930s. A group of mining engineers in the Shakhtinsky district in the Donetsk coal basin was tried in the House of the Unions in 1928. Five men were sentenced to death and the rest to various terms of imprisonment on trumped up charges of counter-revolutionary activity and sabotage.

was not enough time to install the system. The Conservatory was considered a more suitable venue for "telephonization," and in the view of engineer Goron, the SI system installation could be completed within two weeks if allowed to be placed in the orchestra rows (RGASPI 493-1-7-073).

In the end, a political decision prevailed over technical recommendations, and the Conservatory was ruled out for political reasons. The Shakhtinsky trial hearings continued in the House of the Unions until July 6, leaving only eleven days to equip the Pillar Hall for what was to become the first international gathering in the USSR where SI was used on a full scale.

With such a short time remaining to complete all preparations, sacrifices had to be made and corners had to be cut. Let us examine what it meant for the arrangements to provide SI.

We can draw some conclusions on what was being planned for the Kremlin based on an unsigned and undated document found in the Comintern archives (RGASPI 493-1-7-068/071).[10] This document can be viewed as a proof-of-concept paper for the SI proposed for the Congress and presents technical, linguistic, and financial arguments in favor of this approach. Let us analyze its main points:

1. *Discussion of time savings and interpreting quality*

> At all Comintern Congresses and Plenums, nearly half the time is consumed by translations. Moreover, the quality of translations usually suffers because the interpreter, somehow having noted down the original speech /most of them are not stenographers/, usually uses his own words to reproduce the speech, which inevitably leads to certain elements of fantasy and invention.
>
> (RGASPI 493-1-7-068)

As explained in the *Krasnaya Niva* article quoted in the beginning of the chapter, before the introduction of SI the common method of providing multilingual interpreting in the Soviet Union involved delivering parallel consecutive interpretations, so that "at the end of every speech each group of delegates sharing a common language would listen to their interpreter" (*Krasnaya Niva*, No. 32, August 5, 1928). This interpreting method closely resembled Gaiba's definition of "simultaneous successive interpretation" where "the interpretations were simultaneous with each other but not with the original speech" (Gaiba 1998:31), but it was achieved without SI equipment. The anonymous author of this proof-of-concept document expresses a generally low opinion of the poor quality of CI,

10. It is addressed to the Organizational Commission for the 6th Comintern Congress and must have been drafted between mid-May and end of June 1928. We can be certain of this date range because it quotes a news story from the newspaper *Vechernyaya Moskva* of May 5, 1928, and still proceeds from the assumption that "translations simultaneously with the speech" would be organized in the Andreev Hall of the Kremlin.

recognizes the time losses suffered when recurring to consecutive, and gives the main reason why, in his mind, interpreters tended to take too many liberties in their renderings – because they did not use stenography as a note-taking technique to recall the content of the speech. This comment probably also reflected the Comintern's institutional concern with finding a more efficient way of keeping permanent records of the proceedings, in particular by using telephonographs or similar devices to record the original speeches (RGASPI 493-1-7-069/070). The value of such assessment of interpreting quality is questionable as we do not have sufficient information on the identity of the author of this document. It could have been written by Isaac Goron, the engineer, Mauno Heimo (who was fluent in several languages but was not an interpreter himself), or by another Comintern official who was a user of interpreting services.

2. *Mention of Western experience*

> To improve this situation, one can make use of the experience already available in other countries when organizing meetings with the participation of speakers of different languages. (See, for example, the news report in the *Vechernaya Moskva* of May 5, 1928, No. 103, about the League of Nations, which says that "an interpreter will speak simultaneously with the original speaker at the sessions of the League of Nations and other international conferences in Geneva. He will speak softly into the microphone and it will be possible to listen to him using headphones.") (RGASPI 493-1-7-068)

This reference to the Western experience is important. The target audience of this document needed to be convinced that such an approach to organizing interpreting was already used (or would soon be used) in the West, and that the USSR was perfectly capable of handling this task. It could also mean that the Soviets were aware of the Filene-Finlay experiments in Geneva (see Baigorri-Jalón 2014) and were following those developments with a degree of interest.[11] As they were preparing to host a major international conference in Moscow, it was important for the Soviets to showcase the success story of the new regime, that they had all the same attributes of the modern world as the West, and their technology was placed "at the service of the communist revolution." It was under that headline that the *Krasnaya Niva* magazine proudly announced that "now, for the first time in the world, a system of transmitting interpretation simultaneously with the speech has been introduced" (*Krasnaya Niva*, No. 32, August 5, 1928).

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11. Note that Filene was not aware of the existence of Soviet competitors, although he learned about a competing SI system produced by Siemens & Halske in Germany when filing for international patents for the Filene-Finlay Translator in Europe in 1930 (CUNA 402299 AR 10 23 06 f0909wJwtZx: 4).

3. *Opinion on accuracy of SI vs. CI*

> Clearly, the translation quality with this approach will be much better, and the translation immediately with the speaker will be significantly more accurate than the one performed afterwards – based on the interpreter's memory and his notes. (RGASPI 493-1-7-069)

It is interesting to note the author's firm conviction that SI would be more accurate than consecutive. Debates regarding interpreting quality at that time were also going on in Geneva, where consecutive interpreters expressed opposition to the introduction of the simultaneous method based on the argument that the quality of SI was inferior, while some of their clients saw its advantages (Baigorri-Jalón ibid.: 156–157).

4. *Cost/benefit analysis of using the new system*

> The cost of equipment, especially in our Andreev Hall, will be nominal. It will amount to the cost of wire, installation of 4–5 main bypasses, and the wiring of participants' desks. The already existing radio equipment will require only 4 additional microphones and approximately 500 (one per delegate) ordinary [telephone] receivers. In my opinion, all this can be easily obtained for the Congress in the Low Voltage Trust, and nothing is going to happen to the [telephone] receivers if they are used for 2–3 weeks at the Congress. Savings resulting from this work will be enormous. On average, it will result in saving the Congress at least 2–3 weeks of proceedings, i.e. shorten it by approximately 20 days. If we multiply 20 days by the cost of daily subsistence for delegates, it is clear that it will save tens of thousands of rubles. Not to mention the time savings for important political persons. (RGASPI 493-1-7-069)

The "Low Voltage Trust" was the nationalized Siemens telephone equipment factory in Moscow, but it was not the only place where the Comintern was looking to obtain equipment. At approximately the same time, on June 12, 1928, an unsigned letter addressed to H. (probably, Heimo) is received by the Executive Committee of the Comintern, possibly from a Comintern agent in Germany, where he reported on the results of his work to select "chest-worn telephone-microphones, such as those worn by girls at the telephone exchange, or by pilots," and suggested purchasing 12 of them from Siemens (RGASPI 493-1-7-072).

Of note is also the comment about "time savings for important political persons." As M. Heimo wrote on August 15, 1928, when the time came to remunerate Dr. Epshtein for his invention, "whereas it is difficult or nearly impossible to calculate the savings generated by the application of this system, in any case we can state that the time savings are at least 50 percent. Converting this, even approximately, into monetary units, we obtain savings of about 40,000 rubles" (RGASPI 493-1-393-031). Nevertheless, the financial aspect did not seem to be the decisive

factor here. Heimo emphasized the reputational gains for the country: "We stress again that the monetary savings here are rather modest, but this should in no way belittle the political and practical importance of this invention" (ibid.).

5. *Description of system installation*

The proof-of-concept document goes on to provide a technical outline of the proposed SI system that was to be installed in the Andreev Hall of the Kremlin. What remained of Dr. Epshtein's original idea were the interpreting booths, and it was recommended to install them inside the meeting hall in direct view of the speaker, so that the interpreters could clearly see the auditorium from the end of the hall or from the space in front of the rostrum usually reserved for VIP boxes (loges).

> From the microphone installed in front of the speaker on the rostrum, along with the wiring leading to the loudspeakers, bypass wiring should be made to the interpreters, say, into German, English, French, and Russian.[12] The interpreters should be placed either in adjacent rooms or, what would be preferable, in the hall itself in booths made to be similar to telephone booths (but somewhat larger), so that the interpreters could observe through the glass in the booth what is happening in the meeting hall, but so that, at the same time, their voices are not heard in the hall (the booths could be installed either at the end of the Andreev Hall or, conversely, instead of loges under the rostrum, using the space below the podium). The interpreters will listen to the speaker using ordinary receivers placed over their ears, and will be making their translation immediately following the words of the speaker into the microphone placed in front of them.
>
> The microphones placed in front of the interpreters should be wired to the delegates' desks, as follows: the German interpreter is to be connected to the group of German speaking participants, the English interpreter to the English speaking delegates, etc. The main lead going from the interpreters to all delegates should have simple extension wires terminated with ordinary telephone receivers.
>
> Thus, any delegate who does not understand the language of the speaker can immediately follow the delegate by listening to the interpretation.
>
> (RGASPI 493-1-7-068)

Booth design is described in detail for the first time – they were to be made "similar to telephone booths but somewhat larger" and equipped with glass panes to enable the interpreters to observe the meeting room while remaining soundproof. The interpreters were to be supplied with headphones to listen to the speaker and with microphones to transmit their voices to the participants. The interpretation was to be distributed around the room by sectors, to groups of seats reserved for participants following the proceedings in a particular language.

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12. The 6th Comintern Congress used five working languages – Russian, German, French, English, and Chinese. (*Krasnaya Niva*, No. 32, August 5, 1928).

Epshtein's original 1925 proposal actually included this option as a cheaper alternative, whereby "the listeners are confined to their reserved seats but less wire is needed" (RGASPI 493-1-7-064).

The schematic diagram in Figure 4 shows the signal flow from the speaker on the podium to the interpreters' booths (one booth per language), and from the interpreters to the delegates whose seats are divided into sections based on the language they understand. Booths are drawn as cubes and interpreters are identified by the headphones symbol.

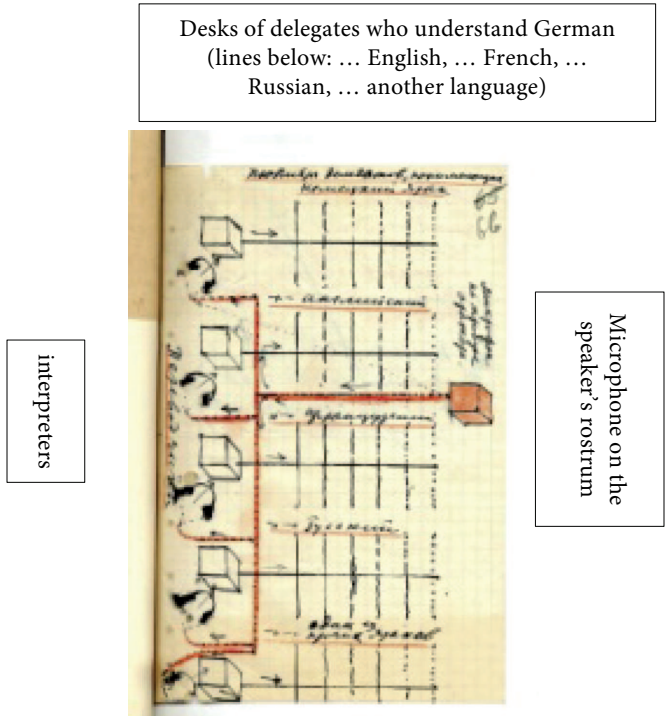

Figure 4. RGASPI 493-1-7-066

With the available records we can conclude that the most notable improvement over Epshtein's original concept of three years before was that the three-interpreter method was abandoned and interpreters were expected to provide full-text simultaneous interpreting, instead of relieving each other after each sentence. We draw this conclusion on the basis of several pieces of evidence. Interpreters' photos from the Congress (see Figures 7, 8, 9) are not consistent with the three-interpreter method – they show interpreters working independently; the comment that Epshtein's cumbersome method was significantly perfected by 1928 (RGASPI

493-1-393-031); the overall description of the SI process in the proof-of-concept document ("the interpreters … will be making their translation immediately following the words of the speaker" (RGASPI 493-1-7-068)); and the schematic diagram in Figure 4 which shows one booth per language.

6. *Relay interpreting*

It is noteworthy that this document also contains a description of what would be referred to as relay interpreting in modern terminology:

> In the event that the speaker were to speak, for example, a language understood by only one of the interpreters, and not understood by the rest of the interpreters (for example, the speaker is speaking Chinese and only one English interpreter understands him), it would be necessary to make a bypass connection from the English interpreter's microphone to the other interpreters who understand English and translate into German, French, and Russian languages. The latter interpreters, having switched their microphone [*channel*] from the speaker at the rostrum [*floor channel*] to the interpreter making a translation into English [*pivot, or relay provider*], will immediately provide their respective interpretations into the other languages following the speaker and the speaker's first interpreter.
>
> (RGASPI 493-1-7-069)

Note that the pivot language was assumed to be English, not Russian. It could have been just an example with an arbitrary choice of languages, but it could also mean that the team of interpreters was international, or at least with language skills strong enough to work directly between languages other than Russian. This is indirectly supported by later requests from the Comintern Headquarters to the French communist party to send typists from France (RGASPI 495-18-879-9) and to procure abroad German-English, German-French and other dictionaries not involving Russian (RGASPI 495-18-879-9; RGAPSI 495-7-23-107). It could also mean a fundamental lack of understanding of how interpreting quality could suffer if interpreters were to work between their "B" or "C" languages. Incidentally, this method of providing SI at multilingual conferences would become standard years later in the USSR, but with Russian as the pivot language. As the Soviet Union became more and more isolated from the rest of the world, this approach was understandable: with a nearly total absence of interpreters whose language combinations did not include Russian (for example, English-French or Spanish-German), SI at multilingual conferences always assumed that Russian was the pivot language for the other languages: for example, English-into-French interpretation would be provided in two steps: the Russian/English booth would interpret from English into Russian, and the Russian/French booth would take relay from Russian into French (see Minyar-Beloruchev 1994: 105).

As the Congress had to change its venue on short notice, and not everything that was planned for the Kremlin ended up being implemented in the House of the Unions, what exactly did the organizers of SI have to sacrifice?

The way SI was actually organized can be pieced together from the above-quoted report in the *Krasnaya Niva* magazine (*Krasnaya Niva*, No. 32, August 5, 1928) and several photos preserved in the RGASPI archive.

The delegates' seats were not wired by language sectors, as was proposed in the proof-of-concept paper to save on telephone wire – each delegate's desk was equipped with five pairs of jacks, corresponding to the five Congress languages, and the delegates could select their desired language by plugging their headphones in to the respective jack (see photo in Figure 5).

Figure 5. RGASPI 493-1-677-091

Figure 6. RGASPI 493-1-677-092

The photos in Figures 5 and 6 show delegate desks (similar to student desks of the period) revealing hastily strung wires terminating in a plate with plug-in connection jacks, each labeled with the name of the language (Russian, German, French, English, or Chinese). The headphones are not connected, leaving it up to the delegate to connect to the language of their choice.

No interpreting booths were installed, and interpreters were not provided with headphones to listen to the speakers. They were seated in ordinary theater armchairs in the front rows close to the rostrum, listened to the speaker with no sound reinforcement, and spoke in low voices to minimize interference with each other. They used no sound-dampening devices similar to the Hush-a-Phones employed in the Filene-Finlay system (Chernov 2013: 72). The interpreters had neck-worn telephone exchange operators' microphones that were, most likely, purchased for them in Germany, as described above.

Figure 7. RGASPI 493-1-677-096

Figure 8. RGASPI 493-1-677-105

The photos in Figures 7 and 8 show interpreters at work, seated in armchairs. One of the men is smoking, and the female interpreter is holding a water flask. Their names are not identified. Note that both men and women served as interpreters: as interpreting was a rare skill, there was no discrimination based on gender, and,

according to Comintern personnel records, many interpreters were Jewish and not members of the Party (this would change later in Soviet history).

The interpreting mode was, most likely, spontaneous simultaneous, at least part of the time. We base this conclusion on the following note that was distributed to the delegates several days into the work of the Congress, on July 25, 1928:

> TO THE DELEGATES OF THE VIth CONGRESS
>
> To simplify the work of the interpreters and possibly improve the interpretation quality, we ask all speakers who have drafted their speeches in advance, to provide 3–4 copies of their speech to the Secretariat before delivering it. In cases when there is no written speech, it would be good to provide a summary of talking points to the interpreters in advance. (RGASPI 493-1-393-005)

Figure 9. RGASPI 493-1-677-095

With no booths or sound-dampening microphone attachments, the interpreters had to improvise makeshift sound insulation techniques. Figure 9 shows how interpreters have commandeered a prompter's box. The interpreter on the left is covering his mouth with a sheet of paper to help isolate his voice. He is looking over the prompter's box to try and see the speaker whom he is interpreting. The second interpreter is either doing sight translation (or SI with text), or perhaps preparing a speech. The pocket watch placed on the desk between them may indicate that the interpreters could have been using it to monitor the duration of their turns at the microphone.

In Figure 10, interpreters are either on a break or studying documents to prepare for the next session. They seem to be highly popular, being surrounded by curious delegates. A photographer is seen pointing the camera at them. One of the interpreters is rubbing his temples, attempting to concentrate. The bald-headed interpreter in the deep corner has been identified as "interpreter Kobyliansky." Efforts were made to identify other interpreters from the 6th Congress, but so far the archives have yielded no information enabling us to positively identify any other interpreters on these photos.

Figure 10. RGASPI 493-1-677-103

Figure 11. RGASPI 493-3-58-058

The archive file caption for Figure 11 identifies this individual as "interpreter Kobyliansky." This is the same photo as was published in the *Krasnaya Niva* (No. 32, August 5, 1928) as shown above in this chapter. Our research of interpreter Kobyliansky has revealed details of his incredible life story and professional career (see Box 4).

5. First conference interpreters in the USSR

The Comintern archives are largely silent on the personalities of that first generation of conference interpreters. As seen above, the only interpreter from the 6th Congress identified by name is Kazimir Kobyliansky. Yet we were able to find some information about interpreters and translators recruited for the 6th Congress of the KIM (Communist International of the Youth) held in 1935 (RGASPI 533-1-316-10/11). Interpreters were recruited from various Comintern-family organizations,

Box 4. Kazimir Kobyliansky

Kazimir Kobyliansky (aka Casimiro Kobylianskij, aka Roberto Bertoli), 1904–??, was born in Paris into the family of an exiled Russian-Polish revolutionary. When Kazimir was one year old, the family moved to Italy, where he was raised and lived until 1923. Having participated in Socialist youth rallies, he was arrested by Italian police and exiled from Italy. He made his way to Soviet Russia and, as a native speaker of Russian and Italian with working knowledge of French (he acquired Spanish later), he became an interpreter/translator/analyst for the Comintern, KIM, and Profintern. He worked as an interpreter at the 5th, 6th, and 7th Comintern Congresses. In 1936–38, during the Civil War in Spain, he served as an interpreter in the Spanish Republican Air Force and upon return to the USSR was awarded a Red Star for his service. In Spain he was known as Roberto Bertoli. Upon return from Spain, he worked for the TASS news agency, several publishing houses, and after World War II began teaching Italian language and history, first at the Diplomatic Academy and then the Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow. He published a book of memoirs in Italy in 1988. (Kobylianskij 1988; MSIFL Archives)

in addition to the KIM itself: Comintern, Profintern (Red International of Labor Unions), ILS (International Lenin School, which provided ideological training for foreign communist students), MOPR (International Red Aid), as well as the Central Union of Electrical Engineering, the Union of Agricultural Workers, and even NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, precursor of the KGB). They were recruited based on their language combinations and directions.

For example, while most interpreters worked in language pairs involving Russian (English-Russian, German-Russian, bidirectional or unidirectional), there were some multilingual interpreters capable of bypassing Russian and working in such language combinations as German-English, French-English-German, English-French-German-Spanish, French-Norwegian, English-Norwegian, German-Norwegian, and even an interpreter who could work "from all Scandinavian languages." One interpreter was classified as "capable of working in committees only," which attests to the differentiation between different classes of interpreters based on their skills. There was also a category of escort interpreters who were to "accompany delegates in their factory tours and excursions" (RGASPI 493-1-7-033).

All together the provisional team of the Congress comprised 26 interpreters, working in over 20 language combinations. As far as we can judge, the team was international and included non-Russian native speakers capable of working between English, German, French, Spanish, and Norwegian directly, without going through Russian. Some interpreters with Russian as their "A" language are listed only as working into a foreign language. This is, possibly, a reflection of what would become a hallmark of the Soviet interpreting school – focus on interpreting into one's "B" language (Minyar-Beloruchev 1994: 105).

6. Interpreter training and working conditions

Analyzing professional backgrounds of interpreters from the 1935 KIM Congress, we can begin to paint a typical interpreter profile of the era. Early Soviet interpreters were either Russian-born people who studied foreign languages or, in more rare cases, bilinguals or those who acquired foreign languages by spending time abroad. While the latter ones were mobilized for translation and interpreting work because of their existing language skills, the former category received language training. The majority of interpreters were not members of the Party, and they were often Jews and many were women.

Most interpreters in the consulted archives did not have university degrees. Prior to 1930, the institution offering language training was the Higher Foreign Language Courses attached to the Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow. These courses became very popular and in 1930 they were transformed into the Institute of New Languages, precursor of the Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Languages, the first institution to offer tertiary education degrees in languages.[13] Between 1930 and 1933, the Institute had two branches – Translation and Teacher Training, each subdivided into English, French, and German sections. The Translation Branch seems to have offered rudimentary training (its objective was to train interpreter-guides) and was shut down in 1933, when the country began to close its doors to foreigners. Some of the initial trainers were foreigners who were not professional language instructors but whose main value was being native speakers. It was reopened in 1942 as the Department of Translation with the growth of demand for military interpreters and translators (Nikolsky 2001a: 5, 2001b: 6).

Regarding the interpreters' working conditions, we know that interpreters at the 6th Comintern Congress in 1928 were going to be paid the equivalent of the "party maximum,"[14] provided with free meals and granted an extended leave of up to one month (RGASPI 493-1-7-033). At the 6th KIM Congress in 1935, when

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13. The Institute of Foreign Languages was the leading institution of higher learning in the USSR that offered professional language degrees, with two main tracks, pedagogical (trained foreign language teachers) and translation (trained translators and interpreters). In 1990, it was transformed into the Moscow State Linguistic University.

14. "Party maximum" (partmaximum) was a wage ceiling imposed on Soviet communist party members, introduced in 1920. The highest salary of a party official under this principle was not to exceed the salary of a skilled worker. On May 7, 1928, the party maximum was fixed at 2,700 rubles per year (225 rubles per month). The party maximum was *de facto* abolished at the end of 1929, and officially cancelled by secret decree of the Politburo of February 8, 1932 (Felshtinsky 2002: 112).

the "party maximum" was no longer applied, they were paid a very generous rate of 55 rubles per day (the average wage of a Russian worker in 1935 was 170 rubles a month) (Wollenberg 1936: 70–72).

Translation and interpreting work seems to have been mostly interchangeable, and translators were recruited to work as interpreters whenever circumstances called for it. In fact, as the Russian term "перевод" applies both to translation and interpreting, and the term "переводчик" to translator/interpreter, it is often not easy to distinguish which type of work is referred to in Russian documents, unless the term "устный перевод" ("oral translation" = interpreting) is used. Nevertheless, it is our general conclusion from analyzing the primary sources that the Comintern Translation Bureau employed full-time translators, and whenever interpreters were needed for congresses, ad hoc teams would be put together from translators and other staff from various organizations in Moscow who were deemed up to the task. Freelance interpreters did not seem to exist as a category, but interpreters/translators who held full-time jobs with one organization were allowed to moonlight for other organizations or would be temporarily seconded to them.

Some information could be found about the status of translators. For example, on September 11, 1931, the Political Secretariat adopted procedures for hiring and dismissal of ECCI staff members. It established three categories of employees: executive staff (high-ranking officials), political officers (professional staff), and technical staff. Translators were placed in the category of political officers appointed by the Political Secretariat (unlike technical staff, who were appointed by the Personnel unit) (Adibekov et al. 1997: 38). This demonstrates that translators (and interpreters) were valued for their rare skills and expertise.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the initial SI system and method proposed by Dr. Epshtein in 1925 reveals its multiple deficiencies, but it was nevertheless a fascinating attempt to accomplish a task that seemed impossible at the time – interpreting speeches into multiple languages at the same time and simultaneously with the original speaker. The technical design and process improvement performed in the three years leading up to the 1928 Comintern Congress offered incredible progress, producing a very sophisticated system very closely resembling a modern SI arrangement as we know it today. The system was tested, interpreters were selected, and a decision was made to install it in the Kremlin. For political reasons, the Congress was moved to a different venue shortly before opening day, and several fundamental aspects of planned SI arrangements had to be sacrificed. The original proposal involved the use of SI booths with direct view of the speakers, sound reinforcement for

interpreters, and relay interpreting; and it outlined the advantages of using SI over CI, such as better quality, time savings for VIPs, substantial monetary savings, and reputational gains. The actual setup, as implemented, was substantially pared down: no SI booths were built, and there was no sound reinforcement for interpreters. Based on archival evidence, at least part of the time the interpreting mode was spontaneous SI.

Multiple file photos are available in the archives, but no names could be attached to most interpreters in the photos. On the other hand, an interpreting team roster from a congress in 1935 was located, which allowed us to glimpse into early interpreters' typical profiles and professional backgrounds.

Some of the interpreting problems highlighted in the early years of SI were still debated decades later (such as simultaneous listening and speaking), and others are still relevant today (relative quality of SI vs. CI, pros and cons of working into one's "A" or one's "B" language, interpreter fatigue, etc.). More research could be done in this field, including re-creating Epshtein's three-interpreter environment in a historical experiment or reenactment using a slightly modified modern SI system. The identity of Dr. Epshtein still remains largely a mystery, as well as the evolution of the originally proposed SI system and method between 1925 and 1928. Finally, more research is needed to bring out the identities of Russia's first conference interpreters, to find out more information about their training and working conditions. We have just scratched the surface.

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