

The middle way

Sheila Sim has found her own way of breaking into a highly specialised translation market in Russia, working with a long-term friend and colleague



Sheila Sim is a Russian-English translator living in Dunbar, Scotland. Over the last 30 years she has studied, lived and worked in Russia for several periods, but she has only recently become a professional translator. Her specialisms are horticulture, arts and culture, tourism and education. Sheila also works one day a week for East Lothian Council Museums Service, and as a sideline she leads occasional garden tours of Scotland for Russian groups. Her passions are gardens, photography and contemporary Russian literature. You can find her online at www.sheilasim.com.

I became a professional translator just a few years ago. I specialise in horticulture and the arts, and I have found it very difficult to break into the freelance market. My ideal direct clients are organisations in Russia, operating in my chosen fields. But you can probably imagine how difficult it is for botanical gardens or museums to find a budget to hire a professional translator. In Russia, even if such organisations can find the money, only some of the prestigious Moscow museums appreciate the value of hiring a native speaker as a translator. And don't talk to me about working with agencies; the rates can be pitifully low.

I have indeed chosen a demanding specialism from which to earn a living. But I have a secret weapon, and her name is Masha.

My friendship with Masha goes back to the days when we both worked on a British Council education project in Russia, at the turn of the millennium. At the time I was a research consultant and Masha worked as a project officer in the British Council's Moscow office. We bonded over our mutual love of languages, and since then we've become close friends. We've also supported each other professionally; she is now a freelance arts consultant in Russia, and we have been able to help each other with contacts in our respective fields.

Which explains how, on a beautiful September day last year, she and I came to be sitting in the back of an official car heading through the countryside of the Tula region towards the site of the Battle of Kulikovo Field. Masha is employed as an advising consultant



The museum has a stunning collection

to the recently opened Museum of Kulikovo Field, and thanks to her the museum had agreed to commission me to translate the text of its audio guide into English.

A famous victory

I confess that before this I knew very little about the Battle of Kulikovo Field. I learned that it took place in September 1380, and the opposing forces were the Mongol Horde, led by Khan Mamai, and a combined army from the Russian principalities led by Grand Prince Dmitry Donskoy. At that time, Russia (or Rus', as it was known then) was not yet a unified state but a collection of principalities, often in conflict with each other. Victory on Kulikovo Field played a decisive role in uniting the Russian princedoms and emancipating them from the Tatar-Mongol yoke. The battle is now regarded in Russia as one of the country's three great historic battles. Together with the Battle of Borodino in 1812 and the Kursk tank battle of

1943, Kulikovo marked a crucial turning point in Russian history. It was a hugely symbolic event.

I couldn't wait to see the museum, and it didn't disappoint. Throughout the building, technology abounds (interactive screens, sound stations, and so on) but does not dominate. Interpretation throughout the route is colour-coded: exhibits associated with the Horde are represented by green (the colour of Islam, the state religion of the Horde from the 14th century), while the Russian side is coded orange. Many exhibits are replicas of original artefacts – books, weapons and other items – which can be handled by visitors, making it very family-friendly. High-tech sound stations allow some of the battle's real participants to tell you their stories. There is also a room where a filmed reconstruction of the battle is shown simultaneously on all four walls, putting the viewer in the heart of the fighting.

The upper floor deals with the historical context, the chronology of events and the two opposing leaders Khan Mamai and Dmitry Donskoy. A zig-zagging ramp takes the visitor down to the lower level, where the displays provide a fascinating insight

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into 14th-century life. Here we see recreations of some of the items that were used by the local 14th-century population in their everyday life and work, as well as of their appearance and the way they lived. There is also a big focus on weaponry. There are specially mounted interactive exhibits, which allow you to get to know the physical capabilities of medieval weapons, including the crossbow, mace, axe, sabre, dagger and sword. You can handle a range of replica weapons, touch the fragments of chain mail and plate armour, and feel the weight of a Mongol shield.



**Top: all signage is in Russian for the time being
Bottom: the museum seen from outside**

The value of an intermediary

This is a wonderful museum, and it's well worth a visit, but it has one major flaw. The narrative panels, signage and all interpretation throughout the building are provided solely in Russian – a glaring oversight, I think, given that Kulikovo Field seeks to position itself as a modern, world-class museum. Visitors with no knowledge of Russian have no means of understanding any of the information or instructions provided. There are a number of excellent short films, for example, which have no subtitles; diagrams and schematics make no sense; and the quizzes are incomprehensible.

Visiting the place made a huge difference to my ability to embark on translating all this. During my tour of the museum I took photographs, noting particularly wherever the numbered images of headphones appeared on the walls (to show visitors which button to press on their audio guide). Once I was back home at my desk, these visual

prompts helped me to add useful bits of information to my text. For example, in the opening instructions I added the words: 'Do bear in mind that the headphone symbols and numbers on the walls are rather small, so you might need to look carefully for them.' I was also able to add prompts such as the following: 'Please note that as you walk through the museum you'll see the symbol of a hand on the wall next to various exhibits. The symbol of a green hand

Knowing that my words would be spoken aloud brought a slightly different aspect to the job that I thoroughly enjoyed

means that you're welcome to touch or hold the exhibit; if you see a red hand, please don't touch.' In parts of my translation I have had to add phrases such as 'If you understand Russian, touch the screen in front of you and watch the video'. English-speaking visitors will be relying on my audio guide not just to understand the content of the displays but also to work their way around the building.

But the advantages of my visit went further than that. Being able to wander freely around the actual field of Kulikovo gave me the chance to feel the atmosphere of the place.

From the outer deck of the building there is a 360° panorama of the surrounding steppe; there are no settlements encroaching on the territory, and you really do get a sense of the wild expanses through which the Russian and Tatar warriors made their way to battle.

In all of this, Masha's involvement was key. Without her, I would never have landed this job. Indeed, no native English speaker would have landed the job; the museum would have used one of its own Russian staff to do the translation. Masha 'educated' the client on the importance of hiring a native speaker. In addition, thanks to her existing relationship with the museum, I did not have to do my own due diligence; she was able to vouch for their good employment practices and payment terms. She also provided the channel for communication and administration. Any queries that I needed to put went through her. In addition, she handled the invoicing arrangements (in fact the payment was slightly less than I would expect from a UK client, but because Masha had done much of my admin for me this was absolutely fine).

Finally, as part of her own contract with the museum, Masha also edited the source text to make it suitable for translation for an English-speaking audience. Some sections of the original source text provided by the client were written in the Russian style for such things: rather overblown and bombastic, with emotional rhetoric threatening to overtake the facts. Between us, Masha and I created an English-language version to suit an English-speaking audience.

Before this I had never translated an audio guide, and knowing that my words would be spoken aloud brought a slightly different aspect to the job that I thoroughly enjoyed. Whenever I translate, as a matter of course I read my translation aloud to myself to make sure that it sounds right – but in this instance, it was vital! I believe that a native English speaker was given the job of recording my text for the audio guide. Next time I am in Russia, I will be sure to return to Kulikovo Field, and to the museum, to hear my words brought to life. ©