

Production, Circulation and Reception of Soviet Nonconformist
Culture in Italy (1957-1991): A Transnational Perspective

CRAFTING FREE RUSSIAN-SOVIET LITERATURE IN ITALY: PARATEXTS AND PERITEXTS IN THE *DI FRONTE E ATTRAVERSO* SERIES (JACA BOOK, 1977-1981)

PLASMARE LA LETTERATURA RUSSA-SOVIETICA LIBERA IN ITALIA: PARATESTI E PERITESTI
NELLA COLLANA *DI FRONTE E ATTRAVERSO* (JACA BOOK, 1977-1981)

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ABSTRACT

In the realm of published works, whether original literary creations or translations, the significance of paratexts and peritexts in shaping a text's reception cannot be overstated. In the encyclopaedia entry titled *Livre* (1990) Jacques-Alexandre Breton, Henri-Jean Martin and Jean Toulet observe: "Tous les éléments constitutifs du livre, la lettre, la mise en pages, l'illustration, la reliure peuvent être mobilisés pour renvoyer à des valeurs autres qui exaltent ou occultent sa fonction de communication". In the famous *Seuils* (1987), Gérard Genette emphasises the centrality of the cover and peritext as the "lieu du label", constituting "un trait explicite et localisé" that conveys specific suggestions to the audience. It goes beyond the mere details of the author's name and the work's title to convey to the public an overarching idea. It is precisely within this conceptual framework that the series of the Italian publisher Jaca Book *Di fronte e attraverso* [In front and across] has thrived. This series, initiated in 1977 with the release of Lidia Chukovskaia's *tamizdat* novel *La casa deserta* [The Deserted House], stands as Jaca Book's inaugural venture into Soviet and Russian dissent literature. Since its inception, it has been dedicated to publishing literary texts emerging from Soviet and Russian dissent. The series stands as a testament to the profound impact of paratextual and peritextual elements in shaping both narrative and reception. The publications in the series are devoted to a wide range of texts belonging to what I define as "free Russian-Soviet literature," adopting the category formulated by Iurii Mal'tsev in the title of his renowned *tamizdat* volume *Vol'naia russkaia literatura* (1976). This definition does not refer solely to unofficial or dissident literature (or other similar expressions that will be discussed in this paper), but to the entire body of independent literary production — that which stands apart from the official canon of Socialist Realism.

Keywords: Free Russian-Soviet Literature; *Tamizdat*; Italian Editorial Panorama; Jaca Book Publisher.

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Nel campo delle opere pubblicate, che si tratti di creazioni letterarie originali o di traduzioni, non si può sottovalutare l'importanza dei paratesti e dei peritesti nel plasmare la ricezione di un testo. Nella voce enciclopedica intitolata *Livre* (1990) Jacques-Alexandre Breton, Henri-Jean Martin e Jean Toulet osservano: "Tous les éléments constitutifs du livre, la lettre, la mise en pages, l'illustration, la reliure peuvent être mobilisés pour renvoyer à des valeurs autres qui exaltent ou occultent sa fonction de communication". Nel famoso *Seuils* (1987), Gérard Genette sottolinea la centralità della copertina e del peritesto come "lieu du label", costituendo "un trait explicite et localisé" che trasmette suggestioni specifiche al pubblico. Va oltre i semplici dettagli del nome dell'autore e del titolo dell'opera per trasmettere al pubblico un'idea generale. È proprio all'interno di questo quadro concettuale che ha prosperato la collana dell'editore italiano Jaca Book *Di fronte e attraverso*. Questa collana, avviata nel 1977 con la uscita del romanzo *tamizdat* di Lidia Chukovskaia *La casa deserta*, rappresenta l'impresa inaugurale di Jaca Book nel campo della letteratura dissidente sovietica e russa. Fin dalla sua nascita, la collana si è dedicata alla pubblicazione di testi letterari scaturiti dal dissenso sovietico e russo. La collana testimonia il profondo impatto degli elementi paratestuali e peritesti nel plasmare sia la narrazione che la ricezione. Le pubblicazioni della collana sono dedicate a un'ampia gamma di testi appartenenti a quella che definisco "letteratura libera russo-sovietica", adottando la categoria formulata da Iurii Mal'tsev nel titolo del suo famoso volume *tamizdat Vol'naia russkaia literatura* (1976). Questa definizione non si riferisce esclusivamente alla letteratura non ufficiale o dissidente (o ad altre espressioni simili che saranno discusse in questo articolo), ma all'intero corpus della produzione letteraria indipendente — quella che si distingue dal canone ufficiale del Realismo Socialista.

Parole chiave: Letteratura russa e sovietica libera; *Tamizdat*; Panorama editoriale italiano; Editore Jaca Book.

1. THE ROLE OF FREE RUSSIAN-SOVIET TRANSLATED LITERATURE IN THE ITALIAN EDITORIAL LANDSCAPE FROM THE LATE 1960S TO THE 1990S: THE CASE OF JACA BOOK PUBLISHER

Soviet and Russian literature had a significant impact on Italian culture from the 1970s to the 90s. Translated literature becomes embedded in the literary field of the receiving culture (Bourdieu 299-310). This observation derives from the historical tendency to regard translated works as secondary in the broader literary and knowledge production process, often struggling to attain recognition with a distinct status in literary theories. From Pierre Bourdieu's studies to the works of Itamar Even-Zohar and Theo Hermans, it remains evident that within a national literature translations assume a pivotal role. They can either form a separate subsystem with unique characteristics and models or seamlessly integrate into the indigenous literary system. They may occupy a prestigious position at the centre of the literary system or remain peripheral; they function as 'primary' polemical tools challenging dominant poetics or as instruments reinforcing them (Hermans 11). This perspective finds its roots in the seminal insight of Iurii Tynianov, i.e. literature, and thus, also literary translation, is envisioned as a dynamic system (Tynianov 256, 258). Building upon this idea, Even-Zohar expands the concept into a *polysystem* (Even-Zohar). Indeed, despite being perceived as of secondary importance, translated literature exerts a significant impact on the receiving literary field stimulating the latter to reflect on its own literary

identity – such as the Italian literary identity in the case under examination – and the concept of the ‘foreign canon,’ exemplified by the Russian literary canon in this instance.

Reconstructing the publishing market for translated literature requires examining the interaction between text and context, and the historical evolution of the literary field of the time. Analysing the editorial production of Jaca Book as a case-study becomes a lens through which it is possible to understand the broader historical and literary context in which it has developed. Jaca Book was founded by a group of friends and university students – including Sante Bagnoli, Maretta Campi, Laura Geronazzo, and Paolo Mangini – who shared “the same experience of a Christian community”¹ (*Autobiografia* 6), and was quite closely associated with Father Luigi Giussani and the Centro Culturale Charles Péguy [*Charles Péguy Cultural Center*].² The founders of the publishing house declared that the name Jaca Book was chosen quite haphazardly – “the evening before we had to go notarize the charter, with the precise desire of avoiding any activist connotations”³ (*Autobiografia* 5) – and with the intent of distinguishing themselves from the politically engaged celebrities of contemporary Italian publishing like Feltrinelli and Einaudi. The Portuguese name ‘jaca’ – “a kind of bread tree” (5) – was chosen to underscore their desire to “work internationally” (5),⁴ which, talking about the Soviet and Russian literature, they did by crossing the borders of the Iron Curtain. Since its establishment in the early 1960s, Jaca Book has set itself apart within the Italian publishing industry, offering a distinctive approach compared to other prominent publishing houses such as Einaudi, Mondadori, Bompiani, and Feltrinelli (Larocca 1-10). I will examine a specific Jaca Book series – *Di fronte e attraverso* – which holds a prominent place in the publisher’s catalog and remains active to this day. Established in 1971, since the late 1970s this series has been dedicated to promoting what I refer to as the “free Russian-Soviet literature”. This notion deserves closer analysis in order to define the category of Russian-Soviet works translated within the *Di fronte e attraverso* series.⁵

¹ “Una stessa esperienza di comunità cristiana”. Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine.

² The Charles Péguy Cultural Centre (*Centro Culturale Charles Péguy*) was founded in October 1964 in Milan by a group of graduates, postgraduate students, and university assistants from the Catholic University of Milan who were close to the *Gioventù Studentesca* (GS) movement – the Catholic student movement founded and later re-established by Father Luigi Giussani between 1953 and 1954, which would eventually give rise to *Comunione e Liberazione* (CL). The Centre was chaired by Professor Orio Giacchi, a lecturer in canon law at the Catholic University of Milan, who became involved through one of his assistants, Giorgio Feliciani, who had met Father Giussani in 1958. The aim of the centre was “fulfilling the mission of presenting the Christian message in an objective way in the cultural arena” (“assolvere nel campo culturale il ruolo di presentare in senso oggettivo il messaggio Cristiano”), Bon-giolatti 17. See also Colognesi 13-15, 39-43.

³ “La sera prima di presentarsi dal notaio con la precisa volontà di non trovare alcuna denominazione impegnata”.

⁴ “Una specie di albero del pane”; “Lavorare con l'estero”.

⁵ My research on this topic began in 2018 while working on the project “On both sides of the Iron Curtain: Cultures of Dissent and the definition of a European identity among Italy, France and USSR” under the guidance of Claudia Pieralli, a notable scholar and dear friend with whom I have had the pleasure of sharing numerous scholarly and personal experiences. Claudia Pieralli, together with Marco Sabbatini, has in fact titled the website that gathers the project’s research – which continues to expand with new sections and materials – *Free Voices in the USSR* (see *Voci libere in URSS*). I have endeavored to access the Jaca Book archives. Regrettably, this has proven unfeasible thus far.

In this paper, I will adopt the definition used by Iurii Mal'tsev in the title of his *tamizdat* volume *Vol'naia russkaia literatura* [Free Russian Literature] (1976). In his preface, Mal'tsev sought to give shape and definition to contemporary Russian literature — that is, to the literature of the years 1955–1975 — noting how it was divided into official and “podpol'naia” [underground] or “vtoraia” [second] literature, the latter term recalling Andrei Siniavskii's well-known category (Mal'tsev 5). Of course, to this definition — which also extends beyond Mal'tsev's temporal framework — one might add “neofitsial'naia” [unofficial], “nepodtsenzurnaia” [uncensored], or “literatura dissidentstva” / “inakomysliia” [dissident or nonconformist literature], and the list of qualifying terms could be expanded even further if one considers the different channels through which such literature circulated. One may, in fact, also speak of samizdat and tamizdat literature. In Mal'tsev's interpretation, this broad and complex typology stands in contrast to official literature, both in its aesthetic criteria and in its underlying philosophy and worldview (5).

Paradoxically, although the expression *vol'naia literatura* [free literature] appears in the title, it is never actually used in the text itself, giving way instead to the more common *podpol'naia literatura* (Mal'tsev 5-10, 12, 15). Yet I believe that while the term *podpol'naia literatura* may well apply to a significant portion of samizdat authors — including those who published in clandestine journals in the 1970s and 1980s (such as Viktor Krivulin, Tatiana Goricheva, Boris Ivanov, and Leonid Aronzon) or to authors who were censored in the first half of the twentieth century (for example, Mikhail Bulgakov and Vasily Grossman) — it does not adequately describe other writers analysed by Mal'tsev such as Andrei Platonov — a writer who could be described as “in between,” both official and underground. Many of his stories, such as “Sokrovennyi chelovek” [The Innermost Man], “Epifanskii shliuzy” [The Locks of Epifan], and “Gorod Gradov” [The City of Gradov] — which were in fact translated and published by Jaca Book within the *Di fronte e attraverso* series — were originally issued by a not insignificant publishing house, *Molodaia Gvardiia*. This attests to the fact that Platonov was initially regarded as an official author and well received by critics. The situation changed with “Usomnivshiisia Makar” [The Doubting Makar] (1929) and “Vprok” [For Future Use] 1930), that is, from the moment his relationship with the authorities became more strained and conflictual; nevertheless, Platonov continued to be granted opportunities to publish at various stages of his life. I therefore consider *vol'naia* — “free” or “independent” — to be the most productive definition for this type of literature, distinct from the official canon. It encompasses texts and authors who do not necessarily oppose officialdom, but who shape alternative and more complex values — not necessarily those of dissent, but certainly non-ideological ones. Within the scope of *vol'naia* literature we can include both those who explicitly resisted official culture (Bulgakov, Zamiatin, Solzhenitsyn, among others) and those who challenged authority more subtly or indirectly. It is this broader sense of “free” literature that I will refer to in the present study, while noting, however, that for Jaca Book, “free” literature is presented primarily as literature of dissent, as evidenced by the titles published in the *Di fronte e attraverso*

series, which form the focus of the following analysis.

Jaca Book launched its publishing activity with *Testi letterari e poesie da riviste clandestine dell'Unione Sovietica* [Literary Texts and Poems from Clandestine Journals of the Soviet Union] (1966), an anthology of writings – mainly poems – selected from the *samizdat* periodicals *Sintaksis*, *Feniks*, and *Sfinksy*. This inaugural volume in the Jaca Book catalog embodied the publisher's editorial vision, ideological strategy, and broader cultural engagement. The anthology *Testi letterari e poesie* marked a milestone in the Italian context: it was the first to introduce the phenomenon of samizdat journals, focusing on the genre of Russian poetry and rekindling a tradition interrupted by the Revolution and socialist realism. The anthology reconnected with the highest achievements of twentieth-century verse – from Khlebnikov's cubo-futurist radicalism to Akhmatova's introspection and Pasternak's natural anthropomorphism.⁶ The Italian translators – Jean Ibsen and Nicola Sorin (respective pseudonyms of Giovanni Bensi and Sergio Rapetti) – were well aware of the literary panorama in the historical context of the Soviet Thaw, and had the opportunity to underline the importance of the rebirth of poetry both in the introduction to *Testi letterari e poesie* and in the preface to the subsequent anthology *La primavera di Mosca. Le riviste dattiloscritte sovietiche degli anni '60: prosa, poesia, impegno civile agli inizi del dissenso* [The Moscow Spring. The Soviet typewritten journals of the 1960s: prose, poetry, civil commitment at the beginning of dissent] (1979). The latter may be seen as a re-edition of *Testi letterari e poesie*, whose introduction sought to reframe this perspective, giving particular prominence to poetry, a genre especially favoured by the younger generation:

It is obvious that a country, at the European forefront in the 1910s and 1920s, finds itself almost starting over from that period due to the strong lack of interaction and communication with the external expressive world during the last forty years. [...] Khlebnikov and Russian futurism remain the great masters of many attempts.

In the lyrics collected here, one can find coexisting the search for the word as such and reflections and polemics expressed directly in an almost journalistic form. Similarly, the same author moves from phonetic research in one poem to existential symbolism in a second (Ibsen and Sorin 12, 15).⁷

The Italian publishing landscape of the sixties and seventies was multilayered, effectively catering to diverse market and economic demands to establish and consolidate a new mass readership.

In 1967, just one year after the publication of *Testi letterari e poesie*, Jaca Book shifted its focus towards disseminating nonfiction underground free literature, particularly emphasised by the

⁶ On this anthology, see also Colognesi 88-91.

⁷ “[...] Ovvvia la considerazione che un paese, all'avanguardia europea negli anni dieci e venti, si trovi quasi a ripartire da quel periodo per la forte mancanza di interazione e comunicazione col mondo espressivo esterno durante l'ultimo quarantennio. [...] Khlebnikov e il futurismo russo restano i grandi maestri di molti tentativi. Nelle liriche qui raccolte, si possono trovare coesistenti la ricerca della parola come tale e ripensamenti e polemiche espresse direttamente in forma quasi giornalistica. Parimenti, uno stesso autore passa dalle ricerche fonetiche in una poesia ad un simbolismo esistenziale in una seconda.”

dissent literature *stricto sensu* and the publication of Alexander Ginzburg's *Il libro bianco* [The White Book] (1967), translated by Sergio Rapetti also in this case under the alias Nicola Sorin (Ghinsburg). This was the first Italian edition of the book, although excerpts from its documentary content had been previously submitted to the editorial board of the magazine *Tempo presente*, under the direction of Nicola Chiaromonte and Ignazio Silone.⁸ *Tempo presente* promptly published these texts, revealing itself as another channel for the dissemination of *samizdat* in Italy (see D'Ambrosi and Pieralli 1007).

In the 1970s, Jaca Book faced a shifting landscape in the publishing market which prompted significant changes. At the start of the decade, the company encountered a financial crisis, leading to a four-month hiatus in its operations. To address these challenges, a new organization – Cooperativa Edizioni Jaca Book [Jaca Book Cooperative Publishing House] – was established in 1971. Notably, the cooperative's partners assumed unlimited liability (Bongiolatti 187). In 1971, the need for a more sophisticated cultural organization became evident and, in order to foster meaningful relationships with Italian institutions, in 1972 a higher institute of science – Comitato Pro Editrice [Pro-Publishing Committee] – was founded. Situated within the Centro Culturale Charles Péguy, from 1958 to 1963 it was headed by Giorgio Feliciani (13), who not only served as the secretary of the cultural center, but also held the position of secretary of Gioventù Studentesca – the youth branch of the Catholic movement Comunione e Liberazione [Communion and Liberation]⁹ – which became a collaborative hub for young professors and assistant professors (187-88). This development represented a significant stepping stone for Jaca Book, providing a foundation for a more defined publishing identity and a strategic approach to maintaining substantive relationships with various organizations. But within the publishing house, the seeds of disagreement began to emerge, pitting those advocating for an overtly religious program for Jaca Book and a younger faction who instead looked with interest at the revolutionary processes at play, including the Russian one, although they did not consider it sufficient or imminent (186, 197). This schism led to a new direction in publishing trends, giving rise to the creation, in the 1970s, of two new series: *Archivi per la Russia e per l'Europa orientale* [Archives for Russia and Eastern Europe], established in collaboration with the Centro Studi Russia Cristiana [Christian Russia Study Center];¹⁰ and *Di fronte e attraverso*. The latter continues nowadays to present philosophical, history and literary texts. All volumes of the series *Di fronte e attraverso* were addressed to broad readership, hence the absence of prefaces, introductions, and explanatory notes. The series became active in 1971 with the publication of a philosophical work, the volume by Vladimir Soloviev *Opere scelte*.

⁸ The journal *Tempo presente* was funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom. On this topic, see Morbi and Carlucci.

⁹ See footnote 2.

¹⁰ The Christian Russia Study Centre was founded in 1957 by Father Romano Scalfi with the aim of sharing across Europe the heritage of the Russian Orthodox spiritual, cultural, and liturgical tradition, fostering ecumenical dialogue through engagement with authentic forms of Christian life and contributing to the renewal of the Christian presence in Russia. See, Colognesi 13-56.

Volume 1. Sulla divinità e altri scritti [Selected works. Volume 1. On Divine-humanity and other writings], with a preface by Sergio Givone and translated by the members of Russia Cristiana (who are not mentioned in the book colophon). The year 1971 marks a significant turning point in the publisher's catalogue: the largest number of Russian titles (8 in total) were published, covering themes ranging from literature to philosophy, from religion to economic and social politics, and showing a particular interest in neoplatonic and existentialist philosophy, as well as the economic vision of the so-called leftist opposition. As we will see, throughout the 1970s, *Di fronte e attraverso* will be the series that – above all others – promotes what I called “free Russian and Soviet literature”, offering prominent authors such as Andrei Platonov, Lidia Chukovskaia, but also authors of the soviet dissent like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Maksimov, and Nikolai Bokov. In the subsequent decade, the series expands its scope to embrace texts of broader significance, not confined to literature alone. Philosophical and historical texts were also published, translated from various European languages — among them Paul Evdokimov's *La donna e la salvezza del mondo* [Woman and the Salvation of the World] and Alfred Rosmer's *Il movimento operaio durante la prima guerra mondiale: da Zimmerwald alla rivoluzione russa* [The Labour Movement During the First World War: From Zimmerwald to the Russian Revolution].

It is also worth noting that, after the first two decades of experimentation, the 1980s mark a period of greater frequency of Soviet free and independent literature for Jaca Book. This is also influenced by changes in the publishing market, witnessing the emergence of pocket editions, increased competition, and concerted efforts to develop new editorial products that can rival larger publishing houses such as Einaudi, Feltrinelli, Bompiani, and Garzanti. Thus, Jaca Book makes the strategic decision to specialize in the Slavic area, introducing the *Slavica* series, attempting to broaden – at least in title/name – its cultural horizons to Eastern Europe and publishing authors who were not previously featured by other publishers, such as the aforementioned Maksimov and Chukovskaia. Certainly, by the end of the 1980s, there is a discernible shift as the experience of the free and independent Soviet literature enters a new phase.¹¹ The titles published in the period between the late 1980s and 1990s are numerically reduced compared to the output of the 1960s-1970s.

In general, the books published between 1971 and 1991 – encompassing the collapse of the Soviet Union – amount to a total of 19. These include authors such as Rosa Luxemburg and Alfred Rosmer, who, while not part of the Soviet dissent movement, nonetheless represent elements of left-wing European culture and the Communist International. This clearly indicates that Jaca Book, as a publisher, was pursuing a coherent line of titles. Within this context, *Di fronte e attraverso* stands out as one of Jaca Book's series that publishes a more substantial number of authors from the Soviet literary independent movement.

¹¹ As Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky observe, with the years of perestroika (1987–1991) and the collapse of the USSR, a new phase of Russian literature began, in which the weakening and eventual abolition of censorship led to an unprecedented freedom of expression (5).

2. DI FRONTE E ATTRAVERSO: SUBSERIES AND AUTHORS

From an editorial standpoint, two subseries can be discerned within *Di fronte e attraverso*: *Fiction* and *Pocket*. The publication period spans from 1977 to 1981, starting with the release of Lidia Chukovskaia's novel *La casa deserta* [The Deserted House], a *tamizdat* which was a significant editorial case in Europe and beyond,¹² and it concludes with the publication of *La ballata di Savva, Abitiamo la terra: due romanzi brevi di Vladimir Maksimov* [We Make the Earth Livable: two short novels by Vladimir Maksimov]. Within this period *Di fronte e attraverso* undergoes a transformation, shifting its focus from primarily literary texts to works of a more philosophical nature.

This period (1977-1981) saw the publication of two titles per year over a four-year period, a noteworthy accomplishment for its time. This publication record reflects a keen interest in dissent literature and the lively translation culture that flourished around these texts. Such achievements were made possible by the involvement of an expanding circle of collaborators. The *Pocket* subseries features pocket-sized books, a format chosen by Jaca Book for its cost-effectiveness in both printing and portability. This decision aimed to broaden its readership, ensuring wider accessibility with significant financial returns (Genette 21-25; Santoro 401). It is noteworthy that during those years, pocket-sized books were increasingly recognised by publishing houses as a practical means to reach a mass audience and facilitate reprints. In the catalog of the *Pocket* subseries, Jaca Book includes both previously published texts, such as the 1979 aforementioned anthology *La primavera di Mosca*, as well as unpublished titles such as *La mia generazione letteraria. Storia della "giovane prosa" sovietica degli anni '60 e oltre* [My Literary Generation: A History of the Soviet "Young Prose" of the 1960s and Beyond] (1980), the memoirs by Anatolii Gladilin and the edition of Maksim Gorki's *Pensieri intempestivi 1917-1918* [Untimely Thoughts 1917-1918] (1978).

In the *Fiction* subseries, the editorial team decided to publish works by both contemporary authors and those from the past, who, in their view, embodied dissent. For instance, Andrei Platonov's, *La città di Cittagrad. tre romanzi brevi degli anni Venti* [The City of Gradov: three short novels of 20s], an edition which included three different texts of the author – *Gorod Gradov* [The City of Gradov], *Sokrovennyi chelovek* [The Innermost Man], and *Epifanskie shliuzy* [The Locks of Epifan]. Additionally, contemporary writers such as Lidia Chukovskaia, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nikolai Bokov, and Vladimir Maksimov were also featured. Among their works published were the *tamizdat* edition of *La casa deserta* [The Deserted House] (1977), the essay collection *Il mestiere dello scrittore. Tra autoritarismo e sfruttamento* [The Craft of the Writer. Between Authoritarianism and Exploitation], *I nuovi torbidi ovvero Le mirabolanti avventure di Vanja Cmotanov* [The times of troubles of the latest era], and the aforementioned *La ballata di Savva, Abitiamo la terra: due romanzi brevi*.

¹² On this topic, see Klots 106-48.

The intent of Jaca Book, therefore, was to convey a concept of dissent that transcended contemporary boundaries, reflecting on the evolution of the phenomenon throughout the entire twentieth century. This, however, as in the case of Platonov, did not take into account the specificity of the author, who, by virtue of his aesthetic qualities, cannot be categorised as a dissident writer but rather as part of what we have defined as free and independent literature. Essentially, Jaca Book's editorial initiative sought to show that Russian literature – irrespective of its diversity, had offered an alternative canon to officialdom not only in the 1960s-1970s or after 1934, but also much earlier, notably in the 1920s during the post-revolutionary period when the subordination of literature to power was already evident. For Jaca Book, free and independent Russian literature was synonymous with Russian literary dissent, which was conceived by Jaca Book as a hallmark of the entire twentieth century, exploding in the second half of the century but manifesting much earlier. The inclusion of Platonov in the series thus forms part of a specific reception of the author, who, although not strictly a writer of dissent, came to be perceived in the same way as the others.

An essential consideration in the selection of texts and authors revolves around the censored literature, particularly *tamizdat* works, which represented the “virtually uninterrupted traffic of clandestine manuscripts from the Soviet Union to the West” (Klots 9). These manuscripts held significant editorial potential, facilitating a more direct reception and dissemination of dissent literary works in Europe, where they often saw their initial publication. Jaca Book thus benefited from the invaluable collaboration of Sergio Rapetti (1947-), who, between the 1960s and 1970s, maintained contact with prominent voices of Soviet dissent and was a contributor to the *tamizdat* journal *Kontinent*, edited by Vladimir Maksimov (Larocca and Pieralli). Rapetti played the role of mediator across national boundaries and his literary sensitivity was crucial in bringing many of Solzhenitsyn's texts to Italy, including his essays collected in the aforementioned anthology *Il mestiere dello scrittore. Tra autoritarismo e sfruttamento*, translated by Rapetti himself and included in the series *Di fronte e attraverso*. However, the volume had already been published in 1968 and also edited by the same Rapetti – although the name of the translator was not indicated in that edition – in the series *Libertà espressive. Europa Orientale* [Expressive Freedoms. Eastern Europe]. The 1979 edition was a revised and updated reissue, which represents one of the very few exceptions of a text preceded by a preface since the *Di fronte e attraverso* series, addressing a broad audience, usually refrained from introductory notes which contextualised the work and the author. I consider Solzhenitsyn's case to be a distinctive one within the series catalogue, as the edition – although a reprint – was issued five years after the author's expulsion from the Soviet Union, indicating the editors' and the publisher's intention to keep public attention focused on him.

Significantly, in his preface Rapetti recounts significant events of the author's personal and artistic life, describing with particular emphasis the story of the submission of Solzhenitsyn's short novel *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* to the editorial board of the Soviet literary mag-

azine *Novyi mir*, as well as that of the letter he sent to the Soviet leaders in 1973 for contesting the publishing ban against the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*. In this introductory essay, Rapetti aims to underscore two key elements that he considers crucial for understanding Russian literature in general, not just Solzhenitsyn's prose:

In his own native country, Solzhenitsyn has, naturally and authoritatively, established himself as part of a high [intellectual] tradition, summarised by one of his readers as follows: "In Russia writers have always occupied a special place. Despite the worst-case scenarios, life has always seemed to us more bearable when we had someone like Turgenev, Tolstoi, and Chekhov. It was not enough for us to have a good writer, or even a great. We needed to love him. You are as such: we have been fond of you since You embody this for us: we have cherished you from the very beginning. [...] If you betray the profound truths [of life], you inflict pain onto all of us. (Rapetti 8-9)¹³

Here, Rapetti underscores the central place that literature occupied in everyday Soviet life, a concept extensively investigated by Mark Lipovetsky under the term *literaturochentricnost'*, and consequently, the position of the writer within Russian society as perceived by readers and the broader public. A slightly different publication, but nonetheless pivotal for *Di fronte e attraverso* series, was the previously mentioned *La casa deserta* by Chukovskaia, published in Giovanni Bensi's translation in 1977.¹⁴ Significantly, this marked the first-ever translation of the Russian author into Italian, thereby introducing Chukovskaia to the Italian reader and the publishing market.

The original manuscript of the novel, titled *Sofia Petrovna*, faced challenging editorial circumstances in the Soviet Union, receiving several rejections from various literary magazines – such as *Novyi mir*, *Sibirskie ogni*, *Moskva*, *Znamia* – and from the publishing house *Sovetskii pisatel'* (Klots 108-15). Thus, this work – written in the winter of 1939-1940 – was released for the very first time in 1965 in Paris by the *Librairies du Cinq Continents*, a small French publisher that acquired the work copyright and decided to publish it in its original language. Unbeknownst to Chukovskaia, the text found its way out of the USSR and underwent significant changes to its title, style, and character names (Klots 118-19). For example, the Russian title chosen by the Parisian publisher for the first *tamizdat* edition of the work in the original language – *Opustelyi dom* [The Deserted House] – resonated with the seventh part of Akhmatova's poem *Requiem* – "The Sentence" – and "the change in title was, no doubt, also meant to help raise the sales of Chukovskaia's book" (Klots 120). This edition became the foundation for many translations into foreign languages, such as the Italian one released by Jaca Book, which, in the colophon, referred precisely to the

¹³ "Il fatto è che Solzenitsyn s'era autorevolmente e naturalmente inserito in un'alta tradizione del suo paese, così riassunta da un lettore: "In Russia gli scrittori hanno sempre occupato un posto particolare. Per male che andassero le cose, la vita ci è sempre parsa più sopportabile quando avevamo un Turgenev, un Tolstoj, un Cechov. Non ci bastava che lo scrittore fosse di buon livello, persino un grande. Avevamo bisogno che lo si potesse amare. Lei è così: le abbiamo subito voluto bene. [...] Se lei tra-disse le grandi verità arrecherebbe dolore a noi tutti".

¹⁴ In the period 1970-75, the publishing house Mondadori took into consideration this novel several times for publication, but always rejected it. On this topic see Sicari, "Ital'ianskii Tamizdat" 271-73. Moreover, Bensi, one of the members of Russia Cristiana, had been a colleague of Rapetti since their collaboration on the 1966 translation of Testi letterari e poesie, and the two met regularly at the weekly gatherings organized by the Centre. See Colognesi 41-43.

Cinq Continents' *tamizdat* edition. Like several other European publishing houses, Jaca Book adopted the so-called "Parisian" title. As Klots observes, however, "the non-Russian reader was introduced to Chukovskaia's work under the wrong title" (124), an editorial choice that shaped the early Western reception of the text. A development of particular relevance for the publication history of *Sofia Petrovna* occurred in 1966, when the Russian émigré periodical *Novyi zhurnal* (New York) issued the *povest'* in its entirety and under its original title (124).¹⁵

Another equally intriguing aspect to consider for understanding the profile of *Di fronte e attraverso* and, more broadly, Jaca Book's editorial policy regarding Soviet literary dissent in the 1970s and 1980s, is the establishment of the *Slavica* series in 1982. This entire series, evolving from *Di fronte e attraverso*, was founded with the aim to provide a more specific focus on censored Russian and Slavic literature in general and was dedicated to the most representative voices of dissent. However, *Slavica* did not expand its scope to cover other Slavic cultural areas and remained anchored to censored Russian literature, thus becoming a sort of mirror of the other series: it published works by two authors whom *Di fronte e attraverso* had already introduced to the Italian reader in the 1970s. The first author released in the *Slavica* series was Lidiia Chukovskaia, whose work *Il processo: memoria sul costume letterario* [The Trial: Memory on Literary Customs] (1982) was published in 1982 in the translation of Carla Degli Ippoliti. The other Soviet dissident author included in the series was Maksimov, whose *L'arca dei non chiamati* [The Ark for the Uninvited] was published in 1982, translated by Sergio Rapetti. Shortly afterwards, *Slavica* series would host another significant *tamizdat* edition which was a literary case: Vasily Grossman's *Vita e destino* [Life and Fate] (1984), published for the first time in Italian, in the translation by Cristina Bongiorno. The "unusual bestseller", as characterised by Italian critics (Calusio), achieved significant success in Italy and was translated in other languages.¹⁶ However, the Italian version was a reduced form of the original Russian text, which, such as Chukovskaia's *The Deserted House*, had also undergone complex editorial journeys (Calusio).

The analysis of the chronology of *tamizdat* published in the *Di fronte e attraverso* series¹⁷ prompts reflections on the editorial policy of Jaca Book, marked a discernible evolution in publisher's interests towards Soviet free literature: while in the late 1960s the interest of the publishing house was directed mainly towards *samizdat* periodicals (such as *Feniks*) and documents (such as Ginzburg's *White Book*), in the subsequent decade it published predominantly Soviet literary *samizdat*. This endeavor sought to provide a distinct and broader reception of these works by the Italian readership: *Di fronte e attraverso* represented an early attempt to systematize a form of literary dissent distinct from that promoted by other publishers such as Einaudi, Mondadori, Feltrinelli, and Garzanti.

¹⁵ See Chukovskaia.

¹⁶ On these translations, see Ponti 64-65.

¹⁷ For the chronology of books published in the *Di fronte e attraverso* series (1971-1991), see the Appendix.

3. JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER: “LA CITTÀ DI CITTÀGRAD. TRE ROMANZI BREVI DEGLI ANNI ‘20” BY ANDREI PLATONOV (“DI FRONTE E ATTRAVERSO”, 1980)

As observed in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* entry “Livre”, every element that makes up a book – from typography and layout to illustration and binding – can serve to evoke values that either enhance or obscure its communicative function (Breton et al.). Additionally, Genette underscores the significance of the cover and editorial peritext as the “lieu du label,” constituting “un trait explicite et localisé” (26). This involves presenting specific indications to the public, including not only the author’s name and the title of the work but also, crucially, an illustration. Since the cover, considered part of the peritext, falls under the publisher’s responsibility (in the case of Jaca Book, under the care of its graphic office), it becomes a visual presentation strategy, conveying a particular message and thus, in the context of translated literature, helps shape a precise reception that aligns with the publishing house’s interpretation of the work. Examination of the covers and flaps of the aforementioned books of Russian literary dissent published in the *Di fronte e attraverso* series, reveals a noticeable tendency to use colors such as red and white, and in some cases, black. This chromatic choice clearly evokes either the communist experience, albeit from a divergent perspective, focusing on literature of dissent and denunciation, as seen in Chukovskaia’s *La casa deserta* and Solzhenitsyn’s *Il mestiere dello scrittore* (figs. 1 and 2); or it alludes to the artistic avant-garde represented by figures like El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, encompassing the pictorial experimentation of the 1910s and suprematism (as evident in Maksim Gorky’s *Pensieri intempestivi 1917-1918* and Nikolai Bokov’s *I nuovi torbidi* (figs. 3 and 4). In the case of Gorky, Jaca Book explicitly opted for El Lissitzky’s renowned image *Of two squares* (1920), directing attention to the artistic avant-gardes. By doing so, they situated Gorky within the context of the 1910s—a period not only rejected by socialist realism but, in many ways, alien to Gorky himself. The cover, featuring Lissitzky’s artwork, offers the reader an interpretation that diverges from Gorky’s canonisation within Soviet iconography, portraying him not as a precursor of socialist realism but rather as an avant-garde figure. Indeed, *Untimely Thoughts* – a series of articles written for the newspaper *Novaya zhizn’* beginning in April 1917, that is, after the February Revolution – not only reflected the profound transformations taking place in Russian society but also offered a meditation on the historical significance of the revolution itself (Tarasova).

There is a particularly singular case within *Di fronte e attraverso* that warrants special attention and stands out from all the other visual choices adopted by Jaca Book for the volumes of the series: the cover of the 1980 edition of Andrei Platonov’s *La città di Cittàgrad. Tre romanzi brevi degli anni Venti* (fig. 4), for which Jaca Book reproduced a particular detail from an Eighteenth-century Russian popular print, namely the so-called *lubok*. Contrary to what one might think judging by the cover, the novellas included in this volume are not folk tales, nor can they be ascribed to the genre of *byliny*. Instead, they are pieces which reproduce very different historical contexts united, however, by Platonov’s distinctive poetic of recovery and continuous reference to popular

culture. They range from the 18th-century Russia (*The Locks of Epifan*) to the Civil War (*The Innermost Man*) and, more generally, to the post-revolutionary period (*The City of Gradov*), in which the grotesque tones close to satire, far from representing the idyllic construction of communism (Hodel and Wermuth-Atkinson). What unites the three short novels is Platonov's adept portrayal of the *chudak* – the foolish – or the *iurodivyi*. In *The Innermost Man*, the figure of Foma Pukhov embodies the role of the “natural fool,” whereas in *The Locks of Epiphany* the story follows the adventures of the Gogolian official Ivan Shmakov. Through these figures, Platonov introduces a markedly different dimension from the triumphant imagery of the worker and peasant that was being constructed in the 1920s. These narratives portray eccentric and extraordinary individuals, but ones endowed with exceptional goodness. This character type, drawn from folklore and nineteenth-century popular literature, particularly from the prose of Nikolai Leskov, transforms the *chudak* into the *pravednik* – the just.

Platonov consciously reconnects with this multifaceted tradition by crafting eccentric characters who spark continuous disruptions within their surrounding reality, invoking a laughter-through-tears response. The ragged array of characters he presents, however, serve as a poignant commentary on the backdrop of hardships and constraints in which they live. These characters, misunderstood by the socialist society, find themselves in a *milieu* incapable of listening to them. This is why Jaca Book opted to characterize Platonov with an image rooted in Russian folklore, aligning closely with the initial Italian reception of Platonov. The first work translated into Italian is the collection of stories *Ricerca di una terra felice* [In Search of a Happy Land] (1968), edited by Renata Archini and Clara Coisson, opened by the millenarian novella “The Soul” [“Dzhan”], defined by Vittorio Strada as “the quintessence of Platonov's fantastic world” (Strada).¹⁸ In the year immediately following, thanks to the enthusiasm of Mariia Olsuf'eva,¹⁹ a translation of *Kotlovan* [The Foundation Pit] was published in Milan by Il Saggiatore under the title *Nel grande cantiere* [In the Great Workshop] (1969). Shortly thereafter, came the translation of another significant Platonovian novel – or *povest'*, as the author himself defined it – *Chevengur*, released by Mondadori in a shortened edition in 1972 and again translated by Olsuf'eva, under the title *Il villaggio della nuova vita. Romanzo* [The Village of the New Life: A Novel] (1972), later republished in 1990 by Theoria with the title *Da un villaggio in memoria del futuro* [From a Village in Memory of the Future]. In short, Platonov was taking his first steps in the Italian cultural landscape, and in 1973 he captured the attention of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who reviewed *Il villaggio della nuova vita. Romanzo* with these words:

¹⁸ “A quintessenza del mondo fantastico di Platonov”.

¹⁹ On the transnational role of Mariia Olsuf'eva as translator of Soviet *tamizdat*, human rights activist and socio-cultural mediator, see Sicari “Mariia Olsuf'eva” and her very rich papers at Alessandro Bonsanti Contemporary Archive at Gabinetto Vieusseux in Florence.

The village described by Platonov is entirely enveloped in this mysterious dust, which screens the entire visible reality, houses, sky, steppe, river, people. [...] What is miraculous is that Andrei Platonov seems to have arrived in that village from above, already possessing the privilege of culture and the most absolute stylistic rigor. [...] It is difficult to find a page where one does not feel, as vivid and present, the same narrating voice [...] of that adorable poet who is Platonov. (1739)²⁰

In that same review, Pasolini placed Platonov in direct continuity with the famous Russian text *The Way of a Pilgrim* by an anonymous author, which Pasolini had read in the Italian translation of 1972 by the Milanese publisher Adelphi. Pasolini, in fact, acknowledges having concluded the reading “of the anonymous Russian pilgrim, with his religious journeys through the steppe and villages of 19th-century Russia” and found in Platonov “the same story: the style - poor and primitive, full of popular innocence” (1739).²¹ The attributes of “popular innocence” and the “poor and primitive” style were the hallmarks through which Platonov was received and continued to make himself, notably through the platform of *Di fronte e attraverso*. The cover of *La città di Cittagrad* thus emphasizes Platonov’s popular dimension and serves as a tool which establishes, for the reader, an association between visuality and literary composition, visual and written text.

4. CONCLUSION

In light of this analysis, it may be argued that *Di fronte e attraverso* was among Jaca Book’s series that most effectively contributed to the dissemination of free and independent Russian-Soviet literature in Italy. It is equally evident that the series reflected a distinct editorial policy, one which inevitably evolved over the years in response to changes within the Italian publishing market (Larocca 1-10) and to broader dynamics surrounding the reception of Soviet unofficial literature in general. In its early years, the fledgling Jaca Book took particular interest in *samizdat* during the late 1960s. However, it was in the following decade that the publishing house truly began to experiment and display a marked commitment to the vast universe of Russian clandestine literature, encompassing not only *samizdat* but also *tamizdat*. Within this context, the figure of Sergio Rapetti emerged as a crucial cultural mediator, serving as a bridge for the dissemination of Russian-Soviet independent literature from beyond the Iron Curtain. His contacts and involvement in editorial projects of Russian emigration in Germany (Posev) and France (*Russkaia misl’*, *Kontinent*, YMCA Press) brought him into close proximity with Soviet unofficial literary works, many of which were published later mainly in Europe. The cultural initiative undertaken by *Di*

²⁰ “Il villaggio descritto da Platonov è tutto, sempre immerso in questa polvere misteriosa, che schermo l’intera realtà visibile, case, cielo, steppa, fiume, persone. [...] ciò che è miracoloso è che Andrej Platonov sembra giunto in quel villaggio dall’alto, già in possesso del privilegio della cultura e del più assoluto rigore stilistico. [...] È difficile che non ci sia una pagina dove non si avverta, come viva e presente, la stessa voce narrante [...] di quell’adorabile poeta che è Platonov”.

²¹ “[D]ell’anonimo pellegrino russo, coi suoi viaggi religiosi per la steppa e i villaggi della Russia del secolo precedente”; “la stessa storia: lo stile – da povero e primitivo, pieno dell’innocenza popolare [...]”. For a detailed analysis on the Italian readers reception of Platonov’s works, see Discacciati and the article by Parisi in this issue.

fronte e attraverso – facilitated in part by Rapetti – went beyond mere translation; its aim was not so much the canonization of free Russian literature in general, as more explicitly, that of literature of dissent. The editorial choices made in the selection of works contributed to shaping a representation of the literary system to which each published text belonged. The vision proposed by *Di fronte e attraverso* was that of a continuum of dissent spanning the entire twentieth century, encouraging deeper reflection on the historical and cultural roots of the phenomenon. It adopted a complex perspective, encompassing different periods and authors who – often unintentionally – found themselves in conflict with power. This was, perhaps, the very aspiration animating those university students who worked passionately at Jaca Book (such as Rapetti and Bensi): the conviction that through *free and independent Russian-Soviet literature*, including *literature of dissent*, it was possible to understand, disseminate, and share the reasons for dissent across Europe and in Italy. This took place within a lively yet intricate intellectual climate – one in which, as Platonov would say, “glory and freedom are the only results of human creative capacity”²² (Platonov, “Anna Achmatova” 341).

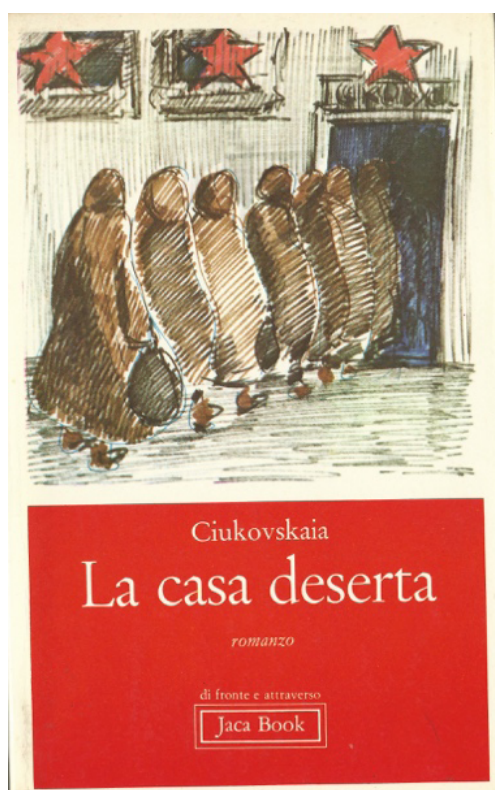


Fig. 1 L. Ciukovskaia, *La casa deserta*, transl. by Giovanni Bensi, ed. by S. Dubrovskij. Jaca Book, 1977.

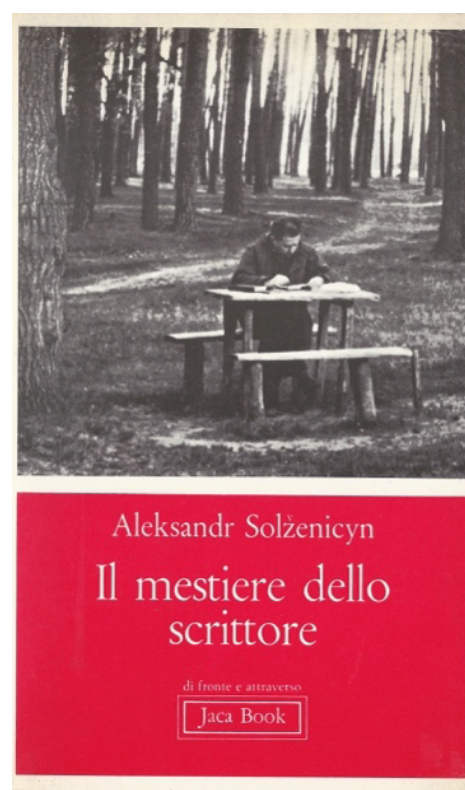


Fig. 2 A. Solženicyn, *Il mestiere dello scrittore*, transl. by Giovanni Bensi, edited by Sergio Rapetti. Jaca Book, 1979.

²² “слава и свобода есть только результат творче-ской способности человека”.

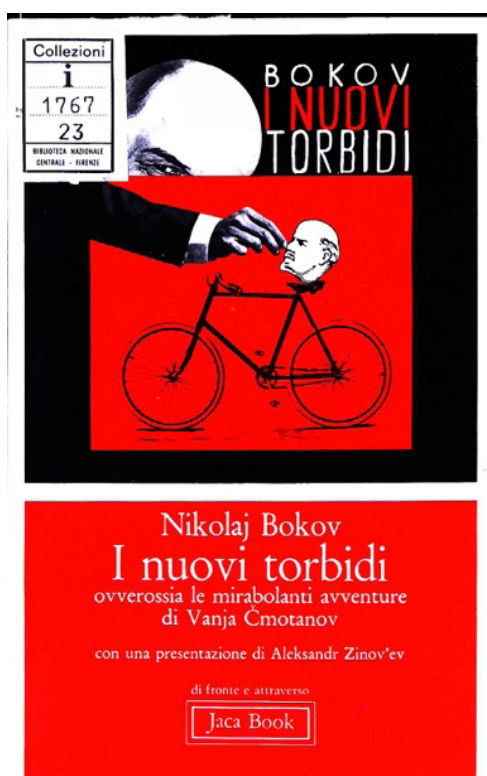


Fig. 3. M. Gorkij, *Pensieri intempestivi* '17-'18, preface by Boris Suvarin. Jaca Book, 1978.

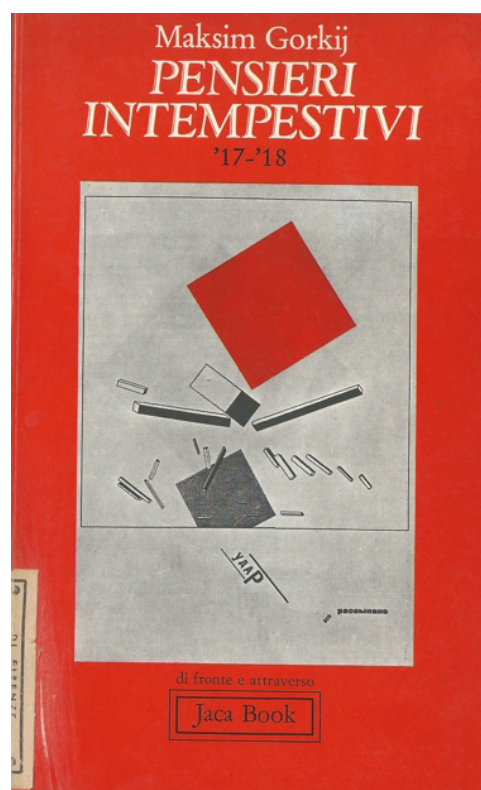


Fig. 4. N. Bokov, *I nuovi torbidi ovverossia le mirabolanti avventure di Vanja Chmotanov*, transl. by Sergio Rapetti. Jaca Book, 1980.

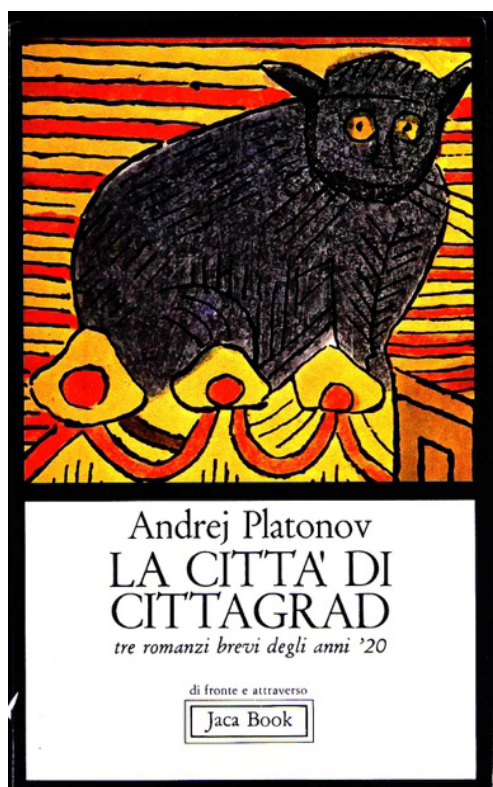


Fig. 5 A. Platonov, *La città di Cittagrad. Tre romanzi brevi degli '20*, transl. by Sergio Rapetti and Igor Sibaldi. Jaca Book, 1980.

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6. ANNEX 1. CHRONOLOGY OF THE WORKS PUBLISHED IN THE JACA BOOK'S *DI FRONTE E ATTRAVERSO* SERIES (1971-1991)

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- Cukovskaja, Lidija Korneevna. *La casa deserta*, translated by Giovanni Bensi, Di fronte e attraverso. Fiction.
- 1978 Poggio, Pier Paolo Poggio. *Comune contadina e rivoluzione in Russia: l'obščina*, Di fronte e attraverso 24.
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