

CoMe

*Studi di Comunicazione e Mediazione
linguistica e culturale*

Anno V/2020



In collaborazione con
la Scuola Superiore per Mediatori Linguistici di Pisa



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Interpreting in Conflict Zones: The Case of Afghan Civilian Interpreters Serving the United States

Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of interpreters operating in conflict scenarios, with a special emphasis placed on Afghan civilian interpreters involved in U.S. military operations. Afghan interpreters find themselves in an extremely dangerous situation. On the one hand, the U.S. army that considers them as potential traitors; on the other hand, the Taliban who see them as infidels to put to death. The aim of this paper is to make the public aware about the situation of Afghan civilians who worked as interpreters during the years of the war, with a focus on the scarce protections offered by the United States during and after the conflict. Civilians' names are added to a Blacklist, a U.S. database with fingerprints and personal details of troublemakers and terrorists who have committed crimes. First, the analysis will focus on the two different kinds of interpreters working in conflict zones, military and local interpreters, their characteristics, differences and similarities. Furthermore, the role of Afghan civilian interpreters, the conditions and criteria for their recruitment, their relationship with the U.S. army and with their own local community will also be discussed. This paper will finally focus on the three Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) Programs of the United States for Iraqis and Afghans who were employed by the U.S. and their failure, with a transcript of one of the interviews conducted with some of them.

Keywords: *Interpreters; Conflict zones; Afghanistan; United States; Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) Programs; Taliban*

1. Introduction

The idea for this paper was conceived during a meeting with Maya Hess, founder and CEO of *Red T*, a non-profit organization whose mission is to protect translators and interpreters in high-risk settings. After discussing the position of conflict interpreters and the past and current projects of *Red T* to help them, the conversation focused on Afghan civilian interpreters who worked for the United States. The bulk of these interpreters are not professionals contracted by the local administration but by private companies pursuing their own political and economic agendas and not offering them regular work contracts or any kind of protection. As Moser-Mercer clearly describes, “[w]ith few exceptions, notably the International Committee of the Red Cross, humanitarian organizations and non-governmental organizations active in conflict zones engage interpreters locally and do not offer them regular work contracts. This compromises protection, as interpreters are often considered traitors, and find themselves outside the framework of labor law and persecuted by members of their own community” (Moser-Mercer in PÖCHHACKER, 2015: 84). Once the occupying forces and humanitarian organizations on the field

have left, the interpreters are vulnerable and without protection because of their collaboration with their former employers or with the enemy. The situation is no different for Afghan interpreters.

2. Interpreting in Conflict Zones

Conflict situations have become frequent events in the world of the twenty-first century and the weapons used by the players involved are not only of a military nature, but also of a political, economic, ideological, cultural and, of course, linguistic one. At the entry *Conflict Zones of the Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies*, Barbara Moser-Mercer states that "overcoming language barriers in conflict zones may involve different kinds of personnel: 'military linguists' are for the most part embedded in the military; humanitarian interpreters are civilians and are engaged by humanitarian actors to facilitate a variety of relief operations, including efforts to get access to disputed zones in negotiations that sometimes take place under military cover" (Moser-Mercer in PÖCHHACKER, 2015: 83). Interpreters are actively engaged in the preparatory process of the conflict, during the diplomatic meetings, in the warfare phase when they are required to allow communication among the members of the army speaking different languages, interaction with the population, propaganda activities, contacts with prisoners of war, control over the occupied territories, evacuation of civilians, etc., but also in the final phase, once the end of hostilities is recognized and peacekeeping operations need to be carried out.

Two different kinds of interpreters can be employed in conflict situations, i.e., military and civilian interpreters. The former are members of the army, they received military training and, as such, they wear a uniform and carry a weapon. They are required to facilitate military operations by providing interpretation and translation services but they may also be assigned tasks beyond language and culture, such as collecting information or training of other soldiers. The reasons why military interpreters decide to enlist may differ: patriotism is the most common motivational factor, followed by altruism and remuneration. Their role is particularly important in supervising locally hired interpreters and translating classified materials that the occupying power does not want to share with the counterpart and it thus involves huge responsibility. Snellman states that "local population respects a military interpreter, i.e. a person who both knows their language and culture and wears the uniform of a peace-keeper, more than it respects a local interpreter" (SNELLMAN, 2014: 47).

On the other hand, civilian interpreters are members of the local population and support the army when conducting military operations. Although not soldiers, they are required to respect and obey the military hierarchy, they are members of the team and usually wear a uniform. Their tasks include patrolling the area, assisting during interrogations, informing the platoon about the history, culture and society of the area where they serve and, most important, they can rely on a network of local contacts, which constitutes a precious source of information about people, places, situations as well as ethnic, religious and political groups. *Use your interpreter* is the recommendation the Captain Michael G. Cummings gave to his platoon before deploying to Afghanistan. The local interpreter is in fact the only connection to the Afghan population and the only tool to communicate with it, acting as cultural advisor, expert on the country, lie detector and intelligence

source. It is worth noting that in such conflicting scenarios the *nuances de sens* of the words used and the way they are perceived by the local counterparts can lead to possible clashes, as they may be considered as provocative to them. A common mistake made by foreign soldiers is raising their thumb for appreciating something positive, while the meaning is completely the opposite in Afghan culture as it is seen as an insult. This is particularly true if religion – a key element in Afghans' life – is concerned, e.g. the use of the right name and title of a spiritual leader or the proper recognition of a religious group can make a real difference. It is therefore inappropriate for foreign soldiers to say they do not believe in God. Furthermore, it is important to respectfully address the elderly, who represent one of the founding pillars of Afghan communities, using titles such as *hajji* and not their names.

In general, as is the case for the interpreters interviewed, they are young students or professionals (teachers, doctors, tourist guides, etc.) who know English and the local languages, they are not married and can adapt to long-hours working over a prolonged period. As far as gender is concerned, they are mostly men, especially in Middle-East countries, since women are not allowed to work before men other than their husband, brother or father. Although they received sufficient education, local interpreters are not highly skilled professionals and they do not meet the highest ethical and professional standards. Moser-Mercer and Bali state that "interpreters are often recruited because the 'know' both the local language/ dialect and English, the language of international relief operations, and not because they have been trained as translators or interpreters. [...] Thus, they lack both essential professional skills to perform adequately as interpreters, as well as the necessary professional ethics to support crisis management and humanitarian efforts in a stressful environment" (MOSER-MERCER & BALI 2008). As a matter of fact, the risk of misunderstandings, incorrect translations and communication breakdowns is extremely high in such contexts.

Nevertheless, governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as private companies providing interpreters for military operations continue to prefer to hire local nationals: they can be paid less, do not need to be insured to cover liability in case of accidents and in most cases they do not claim their rights. In this way, private contractors get out of the cost of providing healthcare, safe working conditions, disability benefits, pensions, etc.

3. The Case of Afghanistan

After discussing the position of conflict interpreters, their status and the relevant obligations, special emphasis is now placed on the situation in Afghanistan and on Afghan civilian interpreters who worked for the United States. As previously mentioned, the large majority of these interpreters are not professionals and are contracted by private companies that do not offer them regular work contracts or any kind of protection.

It is worth noting that the U.S. military has come to increasingly rely on private contractors to provide linguistic services to function effectively in non-English speaking regions, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia where U.S. troops were actively engaged. Contractors are often seen as providing operational benefits to the Department of Defense (DOD). This can also have great economic advantages since local nationals can be hired when a specific need arises and

be discharged when their services are no longer needed. Contractors are also hired to perform non-combat activities and to provide critical support capabilities in specialized fields that DOD may not possess, e.g., transportation, engineering services, construction and, of course, linguistics.

According to a report of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Sustainment, the principal logistics official within the senior management of the DOD, in 2009-2010 and 2012-2013 the number of contractors exceeded 100,000 units. From 2014 there was a gradual decrease in the number of contractors due to the official conclusion of the main military operations in the country: the second quarter of 2020 registered 27,641 contractors actively engaged in Afghanistan, of which 5,853 were local nationals and 1,774 worked as interpreters and translators representing 6.4% of the total.

The services interpreters were required to provide include performing oral interpretation, providing interpretation support at military traffic control points, assisting security personnel in screening the local population at military checkpoints. Private contractors provided three different categories of interpreters: *Category 1* included local nationals with security screening but no clearance and a salary between 10 and 45 dollars per day; *Category 2* was for U.S. citizens with a salary between 70,000 and 140,000 dollars per year; *Category 3* included a restricted number of U.S. citizens working as interpreters with top secret clearance.

It should be borne in mind that, aside from braving the usual dangers associated with war such as roadside bombs, ambushes, or sniper fire, local nationals are high-priority targets for the Taliban too and this contributes to increase the – unknown – number of local interpreters who died because of their work. Indeed, American contractors are under no obligation to publicly report the deaths of their employees and they often notify only family members. This means that the great majority of the local nationals hired on site die uncounted. There are no official records neither of the number of local nationals hired as interpreters or translators nor of the number of deaths. Afghan civilian interpreters face thus a high risk of death. On the one hand, the U.S. army considers them as potential threats because of the assumptions that all members of a local ethnic group would share the aspirations of their leaders or could (voluntary or under duress) be leaking information. In fact, civilian interpreters may become the target of violent pressure from insurgent groups (death threats, kidnappings or reasons of personal revenge) and therefore may be persuaded to betray the military unit they work for. In a nutshell, Afghan interpreters can be tainted by the mere fact that they speak Dari or Pashto, that is the very skill for which they are recruited in the first place. On the other hand, the Taliban see them as infidels to put to death. Civilian linguists contracted by U.S. military troops were, and continue to be, denounced as traitors by insurgent groups and singled out for kidnapping and slaughter in retaliation for their collaboration. This is also due to the order issued in 2009 by the mullah Omar, the Taliban's supreme leader at the time, to capture and kill any Afghan supporting the coalition forces: "Our policy is that, whoever protects and supports foreigners as translators, they are national traitors for us and the people of Afghanistan. Like the foreign soldiers and other foreign occupiers, they too will be put to death" (ANDERSON 2014).

Threats against them are delivered in a variety of ways: some interpreters are terrorized over the

phone, others receive anonymous "night letters" warning them and their families of their impending fate. The following text is an extract of a letter received by an Afghan interpreter, published by Al Jazeera: "We know you have been working with the U.S. special forces, and you must stop working and helping these infidels. You must know we have spared and have forgiven those ones who did surrender and obeyed us. So like others, you must also obey and surrender yourself to us. But if you reject and do not obey our directions and rules, your death will be eligible to us according to Islamic Sharia, and we will never let you live in peace in any part of Afghanistan" (FAULT LINES 2016).

These threats are often carried out quickly and with utter brutality, e.g., shootings, explosive devices placed in their vehicles. For these reasons, Afghan interpreters often wear face masks during their assignments with the U.S. troops in the effort to hide their identities, often to no avail. More frequently, they even choose not to reveal their collaboration with the coalition forces to their relatives. Any contact with them is forbidden, since relatives are often targeted, taken hostages and tortured to disclose the position of the traitor, and interpreters are thus forced to leave their homes and hide in an always different secret location.

Despite threats and intimidation, the protections offered by the United States during and after the conflict are scarce: the names of the interpreters are often added to the *Blacklist*, a U.S. database of troublemakers and terrorists who have committed crimes. Therefore, they cannot get a visa and can easily fall into the hands of criminals.

4. The *Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) Programs*

In 2006 the United States established a series of legal dispositions to provide a pathway to safety for Afghan and Iraqi nationals who met certain requirements and who were employed in Afghanistan or Iraq to enter the United States and become lawful permanent residents, authorizing the issuance of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). There are three SIV Programs: (i) Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqis Who Were Employed by/on Behalf of the U.S. Government; (ii) Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans Who Were Employed by/on Behalf of the U.S. Government; (iii) Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqi and Afghan Translators/Interpreters.

The SIV Programs for Afghans and Iraqis employed by/on behalf of the U.S. government requires applicants to have been employed for a minimum of two years, between October 2001 and December 2020, and they must also have experienced or be experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of their employment. The SIV Program for Iraqi and Afghan translators/interpreters authorizes the issuance of up to 50 Special Immigrant Visas annually for nationals who have worked for a period of at least 12 months and have obtained a favorable written recommendation from a General or from the Chief of Mission from the embassy they worked for.

However, due to security review slowdowns and President Donald Trump's travel ban, hundreds of thousands of interpreters are left behind in dangerous and even deadly situations. In fact, according to the official records made available by the U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs, only 1,606 visas were issued to Afghan and Iraqi translators/interpreters under the third Program in the period 2007-2020.

It is worth noting that most of the visa applications are denied for unknown reasons and the applicant is often added to the so-called Blacklist, a database where the U.S. put fingerprints, iris scans and personal details of troublemakers, terrorists and of Taliban people who have committed crimes. The vast majority of such interpreters have been put on that list, which means when they try to apply for a visa or when they try to get a job or a flight out of Afghanistan, they are marked and their visa is denied, leaving them trapped in their country with no hope, safety and future. For these reasons on 8 March 2019 some senior members of the U.S. Congress addressed an official letter to the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to express their concern and ask for further information about the slow processing of visas for Iraqi and Afghan allies, stating that under the second Program "1,649 Afghan SIVs were issued in 2018, a 60% decrease from the 4,120 visas issued in 2017" and that "the Iraqi program has a backlog of more than 100,000 people due to slowdowns in the Direct Access Program, where only 48 individuals were admitted in a 10-month period in Fiscal Year 2018."

One possible way out of the impasse was reached on 20 December 2019, when President Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, providing additional 4,000 more visas to the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program, increasing the total number of visas available for Afghan interpreters who worked with the U.S. military from 18,500 to 22,500. However, under this Program, only 12,000 Afghan interpreters have been granted visas since 2008, while other 9,000 are still having their application considered. Therefore, following a lawsuit filed by a refugee advocacy group of the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), the White House submitted a new plan to clear the backlog of interpreters waiting for visas and fix the long delays in the Program.

5. Testimonies

During the meeting with Maya Hess in New York, she introduced me to the situation of Afghan interpreters and the way in which they stay in contact. There are several Facebook groups, whose members are all interpreters who worked for the U.S., have been added to the Blacklist and forbidden from getting a visa. They live in hiding and support each other by sharing information or updates. One of the groups is "Combat Interpreters Blacklisted by U.S. Military & Left Behind in Afghanistan." The following is the faithful transcript of one of the four interviews I conducted with them, no typos or mistakes have been removed.

Francesco Ferracci (15/05/2017, 17:47): Hi Zahid. I am a student in Conference Interpreting, from Rome. For my Master Degree thesis I decided to focus on the SIV program for Afghan interpreters. I would like to join the group on Facebook to better understand the situation. Thank you!

Zahid: How I will know your not a terrorist? Yeah you requested to join and I didst add you. Didn't. There are a lot of people they're trying to join the group but later on they're killing afghan interpreters.

FF (17/05/2017, 7:17): Ok you could be right. Well, I'm not a terrorist. I am an Italian student, from Rome. I study conference interpreting, consecutive and simultaneous interpretation into English, French and German. From my Fb page you can see I have a life in Rome.

Z (18/05/2017, 7:55): Ok dude

FF: Thank you very much! And if I have some questions about my thesis, can I contact you? I haven't started writing yet, I'm still reading documents. My objective is to inform the public that there are some Afghans or Iraqis who are risking their lives in their country because they are not getting a visa

Z: No problem. Are u in now?

FF: Yes, I'm reading some stuff and it's shocking. It was Maya Hess who suggested I should do this for my thesis. To do something useful. I talked to her in New York.

Z: Great. I know her too. That is a good group u can get alots of info for your article.

FF: Yes it is! Thank you for all your help and for trusting me. If I have some questions in the next months can I ask you?

Z: Sure. We faced with alots of shitty things in our past that is why we r not adding people in the group unless we find out who r they.

FF: Thank you again. When I have decided how to structure my thesis and what to analyze I will contact you. Thank you dude!

FF (27/07/2017, 12:42): Hi dude! Do you remember me?

Z (30/07/2017, 7:21): Of course I do I'm not American to forget you. Message me if I'm not online, I'll answer you whenever I login to fb

FF: Great! Thanks! I'm texting you because I have started working at my article. Can I ask you some questions about you, your work and the SIV?

Z: Yes ask you're question I'll answer

FF: Thank you! Did you work as an interpreter for the US army?

Z: Yes

FF: How many years?

Z: 6 year's

FF: What was your previous profession?

Z: You mean previous job?

FF: Yes

Z: I studied school, finished my school than learned stupid English than become Combat interpreter with idiots Americans, than after 6 years of services they put me in blacklist for no reason. I had no jobs before that.

FF: Ok, I see. May I ask you how old you were when you started working with them? Just to better understand.

Z: 19 years old.

FF: Ok, and how old are you now?

Z: Here in Afghanistan we have problems with age, our afghan ids says different age but we don't know our real ages. Everyone born on 01/01. According to my passport I'm 29 years old. But in real I don't know my exact date of birth. Our fathers are not educated to wrote our DOB [Date of Birth], that's the problem.

FF: Ok, fine. So you don't know exactly how old you are. And did the USA promise you a visa?

Z: Well they gave us awards to get to US, that means promised. They told us on mouths that we should go to US because of our services. They called us teammates. Hero's. Veterans. Now we are nothing. Americans are traitors.

FF: Ok, so they asked you to work for them. What were your tasks?

Z: Yes. Everyday missions with Americans outside of the bases.

FF: So you put your life at risk every day to work for them. And I guess you applied for the SIV program?

Z: Watch this for blacklisted interpreters. These are all my friends. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxVeKCn4vdc>

FF: Yes I watched this video. It's shocking.

Z: I applied for SIV they Approved me after my visa interview they denied me back because of blacklist bullshit

FF: Have you been denied a visa?

Z: More than five times.

FF: Ok. And when did you apply for the first time?

Z: At 2012. They denied me at 2013. They said do appeal I did Appeal they denied my appeal too. I applied over and over they denied me over and over.

FF: Ok I see. When was the last time they denied you the visa?

Z: Few months ago. I gave up on America brother they're not helping blacklisted interpreters. I am not trusting Americans anymore. They're worse than isis. And daesh.

FF: Speaking about isis. Have you been threatened because of your work for the USA?

Z: Who do u think ISIS are? They are Americans and They are getting support from America.

FF: And have you been threatened?

Z: So many times.

FF: What did they do?

Z: On phones. On Facebook on email aNd such. They said they will kill me n my family if they find me.

FF: So now you're living trapped and hidden in Afghanistan.

Z: Yes.

FF: Ok, thank you again. If I have further questions, I'll write you. I will try to contact some other interpreters to have more data.

Z: Hmm. Add [Interpreter's name] in facebook he may tell u more. He is posting on the group too.

FF: Can I tell him you gave me his name?

Z: Sure.

FF: Thank you! One last quick question. You told me you applied for the SIV. So I guess you have all the requirements and the documents they requested. You had your interview at the US embassy? But you don't know why they denied you.

Z: I have all the docs and the reason is this Termination or blacklist. But we worked for MEP company and MEP is not giving u info y ur blacklisted. Which is fucked up.

FF: Ah ok, so MEP contacted you to work as an interpreter and it's not giving you any information. What do they mean by "termination"?

Z: Fire from ur job that is termination but they take it so serious. Mep is a company hiring terps for US Amry. Army.

FF: Yes. And do you know, more or less, how many terps have been hired by MEP? And how many terps are in your same situation?

Z (31/07/2017, 07:01): Mep has thousands terps and Thousands are Blacklisted.

FF: Ok, thanks again!

Z: Np.

FF (08/08/2017; 10:47): Hey dude, here I am again. Sorry to bother you. I wanted to ask you a question to better understand the CI test issue and the polygraph. Did you do both?

Z (17/08/2017; 16:36): Yes I do both. They're fake things just to make you fail than blacklisted you.

FF: Ok. And what were the questions in the CI test? I'm trying to contact your friend to ask him some questions but he didn't answer.

Z: He probably sad or upset. CI tests questions. Do you know terrorist. Do you know where are terrorists living? Do you know anyone who has contact with terrorists, do you think light is on or off in the room, why you wanted to be a translator...etc.

F: Okay! Thanks again.

6. Conclusions

This paper provides an overview on the situation of civilian interpreters who served the United States during the war in Afghanistan, whose consequences are still being felt today. According to the midyear report 2020 of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) on protection of civilians in armed conflicts, Anti-Government Elements – including but not limited to the Taliban and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – continue to be responsible for the majority of civilian casualties. The security situation remains in fact highly volatile: UNAMA documented 5,939 civilian casualties (2,117 killed and 3,822 injured) from 1 January to 30 September 2020, making the Afghan conflict one of the deadliest in the world. Ground engagements, improvised explosive devices, targeted killings but also airstrikes are the leading causes of civilian casualties. The targets include members of the security forces, government officials, religious leaders and civilians.

Humanitarian needs continue to rise owing to ongoing violence, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which further damaged the country's fragile healthcare system, drastically reduced the ability of victims to recover from the impact of the armed conflict and increased the vulnerability of the population to further threats.

This is the situation in which Afghan interpreters live, hunted by Taliban and left behind by the United States. It is self-evident that the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa Program is an instrument which is inadequate for addressing the Afghan population's needs and coping with the current difficult circumstances in the country. Nonetheless, it represents a privileged channel of access to the U.S., that not all countries engaged in the war in Afghanistan have. In 2013, Australia launched a program for interpreters at risk because of their work for the Australian Defense Force, but since then only 900 visas have been granted to both Iraqis and Afghans. Furthermore, according to the association of the French army's Afghan interpreters, France granted only 260 visas to interpreters recruited between 2002 and 2014. Where available, the numbers are in most cases very low compared to magnitude of the phenomenon.

As a consequence, it is evident that all the countries involved should take significant steps towards meeting the needs of their former allies, in addition to beginning to build awareness and bring attention to the protection of individuals who have proven to perform a key function in conflict scenarios.

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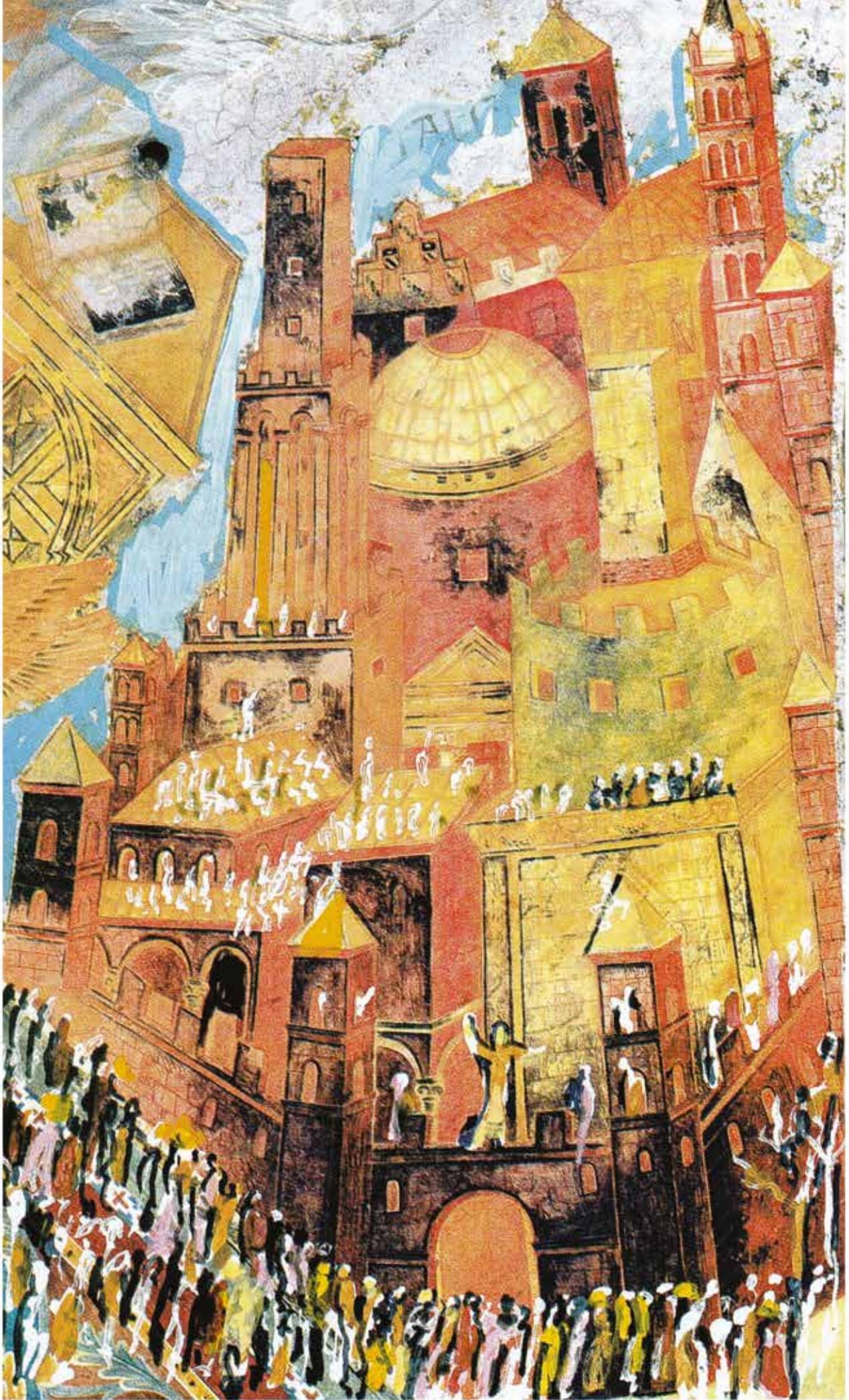
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