World Literature as a Communal Apartment: Semyon Lipkin’s Ethics of Translational Difference

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In the years leading up to World War II, Stalin had many opportunities to perfect his skills as a toastmaster. Once, when he pronounced a particularly memorable toast to the ‘long-suffering Russian people’, an eminent general came up to congratulate him after the meal was over. What was Stalin’s accomplishment? That he, as a Georgian, had profoundly penetrated the Russian soul. Far from being pleased by this compliment, Stalin angrily shot back: ‘I am Russian.’ 1 This anecdote sheds light on how the Georgian Soviet leader could soon afterwards engineer the deportations and systematic persecutions of non-Russian minorities across the Soviet Empire.

Stalin’s riposte was recorded by the Russophone Jewish writer Semyon Lipkin (1911–2003) in an attempt to make sense of what he regarded as the greatest, if least frequently invoked, tragedy of Soviet nationalities policies: the brutal deportation of seven Soviet peoples from their homelands in the Caucasus to Central Asia. Keenly attuned to the ironies that governed official Soviet attitudes towards the non-Russian peoples who comprised the majority of the Soviet Empire’s

For both Russian and Persian transliteration, I follow the Library of Congress system, simplified for Russian by the removal of macrons for i (i), ̀i (ii), ts (ts), yu (yu), and ya (ia), in the footnotes, and adopt common English spellings (where they exist) in the body of the text. Additionally, ë has been rendered by ‘yo’. In transliterating into English Russian renderings of Persian titles, I follow the Russian spelling. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.


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population, Lipkin credited Stalin with replacing the old concept of peoplehood with a new Soviet identity. 'We, the Soviet People' was the phrase this poet-translator specifically detested. Of the prospect of 'peoples' being transformed into 'Soviets' Lipkin asked: 'How can an entire people be labelled according to their administrative system?' Lipkin deemed this taxonomy comparable to labelling Americans 'Statists' and Swedes 'Cantonites'. Notwithstanding his hostility to the Soviet version of ethnic identity, however, Lipkin followed Soviet precedent in giving over his life to rendering the literatures of the Muslim, Buddhist, and pagan peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus into Russian.

Since the early 1920s, scholars of Soviet nationalities policies have compared Soviet ethnic particularism with the communal apartments that conditioned everyday life in Moscow and Leningrad for the bulk of the twentieth century. In 1924 the Secretary of the Turkestan Communist Party’s Central Committee described the USSR itself as a communal apartment in which ‘national state units, various republics, and autonomous provinces’ correspond to ‘separate rooms’. These separate rooms were needed in order for the ‘formerly oppressed nations’ to shed their ‘legitimate mistrust of the larger nations’ that governed the Soviet system. More recently, Yuri Slezkine has revived this metaphor, noting that ‘the communist landlords . . . never stopped celebrating separateness along with communalism’, while Svetlana Boym has described the communal apartment as ‘a major Soviet institution of social control and a form of constant surveillance’. Even as Soviet leaders prophesied a future devoid of ethnic difference, they believed that this future could only be achieved by intensifying ethnic particularism. The ironies of the Soviet Union’s mutually exclusive allegiances to nationalism, anti-colonialism, and Great Russian chauvinism have been well documented by political scientists, historians of empire, and ethnographers of the cultural politics of everyday life. But what was the fallout of the Soviet negotiation of ethnic difference for literature, particularly for literary translation? How was it possible for Russian to be at once the language of empire and the language of anti-colonial dissent? ‘In the late 1930s’, Slezkine notes, ‘translation became one of the major Soviet

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2 Lipkin, p. 450.
3 I. Vareikis, Natsional’no-gosudarstvennoe razmezhevanie Srednei Azii (Tashkent, 1924), p. 59.
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industries as well as the main source of sustenance for hundreds of professional writers.” But Slezkine did not dwell on the implications of the coincidence of the Soviet’s state support for literary translation and its promotion of ethnic particularism.

Given that, as Susanna Witt has suggested, ‘literary translation in the Soviet Union may well be the largest more or less coherent project of translation the world has seen to date’, the documentation of how Soviet nationalities policies influenced the scope of world literature is both needful and notably unattempted. By 1928, the Soviet translation project encompassed 2,188 books written in 66 of the languages spoken in the Soviet Union. It was nothing short of an endeavour to reinvent world literature on socialist terms, in keeping with Gorky’s injunction to ‘share our knowledge of the past’. ‘It is important for all Union Republics’, argued Gorky, ‘that a Belorussian knows what a Georgian or an Azeri Turk is like.’ At the very fulcrum of this ideological agenda to facilitate mutual exchange between Soviet peoples stands the life and legacy of Semyon Lipkin. In translating from languages the Soviet administration targeted for preservation (as well as, in the case of Chechen, for destruction), Lipkin fulfilled the Soviet project of honouring ethnic difference. In keeping faith with these traditions after originally tolerant Soviet policies had begun calling for their annihilation, Lipkin revealed himself as a deeper believer in the ‘brotherhood of peoples’ than the original coiners of this phrase.

Lipkin was hardly the only poet in his milieu to critique the brutality of Soviet rule. Nor was he the only critic to protest the racism undergirding Stalin’s nationalities policies. Lipkin was however the translator who, more than anyone else, turned the Soviet canonization of cultural difference into a literary programme. He was the first to argue, publicly and provocatively, through his poetry, prose, and critical writings, that the Soviet account of ethnic difference failed to realize its promise of bringing about a brotherhood of peoples. When he reported negatively on Stalin’s Russian chauvinism, Lipkin still internalized a Soviet vision of ethnic difference. Considering the paradoxical encounter between ethnic particularism and a

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5 Slezkine, p. 226.
7 Gerhard Simon, Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society (Boulder, CO, 1994), p. 46.
8 Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei. Stenograficheski otchet (Moscow, 1934), p. 45.
cosmopolitan world literature in Lipkin’s approach to translation, the present essay explores the relation between a major literary translator’s aesthetics and his political allegiances. Lipkin’s career as a translator offers an extreme case of how, in the Soviet Union, the politics of world literature constituted, even as it constrained, its poetics.

Central to the Soviet project from the beginning, literary translation was a viable vocation for individuals over most of the Soviet Union’s history. In contrast to literary cultures in which translation tends to be subordinate to more financially remunerative modes of writing, in the earliest years of the Soviet experiment a well-funded space was created for translation as a literary vocation. ‘Whereas in 1918 only 134 translations were published’, notes Maurice Friedberg in his history of literary translation in Russia, ‘by 1927 their number had risen to 782.’ The majority of these translations were sponsored by the private and often avant-garde publishing houses that flourished under Lenin’s New Economic Policy in 1921–8. This flowering of translations meant that translation was at once a socially respectable career and an aesthetically valued way of life.

This brief resurgence of literary translation was all too soon replaced by the opposite trend. When Stalin became the supreme leader of the USSR in 1927, he set about crafting the First Five-Year Economic Plan. This programme replaced the New Economic Policy and coincided with the rise to power of the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), an organization that persecuted writers in ways Lipkin details in his autobiography. RAPP insisted that all writing, translated and original, be demonstrably proletarian in content. For the non-Russian literatures of the Soviet Union which had experienced industrialization in much more limited ways than Russian urban centres, these new ideological constraints rendered entire literary traditions obsolete. All writing that could not be justified in terms of the Five-Year Economic Plan – and this of course meant the majority of writing from the non-industrialized Caucasus and Central Asia – came under ‘a virtual ban’.

This essay explores Lipkin’s life and work from three points of view. First, through his public life as a literary figure, a subject Lipkin himself explored in the autobiographical sketch translated as a supplement to this essay. Second, through his wide-ranging translations of mostly

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10 See Lipkin’s autobiography in his *Dehada* (Moscow, 1990), pp. 5–10, and translated by the present writer in the supplementary online material for this issue of *T&L* (see http://www.euppublishing.com.toc/tal/21/3).
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poetry texts from Persian and Turkic as well as from the indigenous languages of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Third, through his original works, which offer, as one scholar has recently stated, a ‘mirror to be carried along the path of the last empire on earth’.12 Although I am primarily concerned to make Lipkin’s work as a translator better known outside the Russophone world, it is evident that his work as a translator can be divorced neither from his public life nor his original writings.

Two episodes from Lipkin’s biography set the tone for his literary endeavours and attest to the intimacy of politics and poetics in the Soviet Union. The first is a scandal occasioned by a poem of Lipkin’s which bore the title ‘Soiuz’, meaning both ‘union’ and ‘conjunction’. The poem involved a people Lipkin had recently read about: the Yi of southwest China. Propelled by sheer curiosity, Lipkin pondered:

I found out: far away in Asia
There is a people called ‘Yi’.
Just think: both death and conception,
The everyday routine of childhood, the allotment, the courtyard . . .
All has its place and is mightily fused
In this small tribe ‘Yi.’13

Needless to say, such imaginings for Lipkin were the product of pure poetic fantasy. He had no investment in the ‘Yi’ beyond the stimulus they afforded his imagination. But in the politically charged atmosphere of Soviet literary culture, no construct of the imagination was permitted political neutrality. Immediately following the publication of Lipkin’s poem in a poetry magazine in 1968, it was reprinted by the literary journal Moskva. Shortly thereafter an article appeared in the newspaper Leninское знамя attacking Lipkin as a Zionist (this was soon after Israel’s controversial 1967 War) and accusing him of political agitation: he was questioning the Soviet ideology that stressed the ‘brotherhood’ of peoples over their cultural distinctiveness. The newspaper accused him of ‘fascism under a blue star’ and he became persona non grata in Soviet literary circles. As he affirms in his autobiographical memoir, the Jewish theme could not have been further from his mind when he wrote a poem in honour

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of the mysterious people named ‘Yi’. And yet, because his name incorporated the Jewish patronymic ‘Israelovich’, Lipkin’s poem to a people on the Chinese borderlands was read as Zionist.

At the late date of 1968, at the peak of Lipkin’s career as a translator, the attention excited by his writings could hardly have come as a surprise. And yet Lipkin was stung. This incident persuaded him that his words would never be taken at their face value, and that he would forever be judged in terms of his racial origins. But a second major episode in Lipkin’s public life as a poet and translator tainted his relations with his fellow writers even more deeply. This began when in 1979 the Writers’ Union forbade further publication of the recently launched miscellany *Metropol’* (1979), and expelled Evgeny Popov and Victor Erofeev for contributing to it. Lipkin had been a member of the Writers’ Union since its foundation in 1934, but the exclusion of these young writers on the grounds that they had published in this miscellany prompted his resignation.

In cutting his ties with literary officialdom, Lipkin declared in an open letter: ‘I leave the Writers’ Union knowing that you have no need of me . . . Russian literature was always my holy of holies, and I will continue to serve it until my dying day.’ Lipkin’s wife and lifetime companion Inna Lisnianskaia even more boldly contrasted membership in the Writer’s Union with literary integrity in her resignation letter, asking rhetorically: ‘Shall I remain a Union member or a human being? I chose the latter, for in ceasing to be a human being I could not remain a writer.’ Although Lipkin underscored his debts to Russian literary culture in breaking with the Writers’ Union, his less public statements concerning the Soviet treatment of non-Russian literatures even more daringly contested the orthodoxies of his day.

Such episodes attest to Lipkin’s endeavours to keep his distance from the institutionalization of literary culture. They do not, however, reveal what is arguably the most striking aspect of his legacy: the range and depth of his engagements with the peoples whose literatures he translated into Russian. Lipkin’s reflections on the fate of the peoples of the Caucasus, found in his unpublished and lesser-known writings, set him apart from the Russian poets who dominated Soviet literary culture. It is to these lesser-known aspects of Lipkin’s literary legacy that I now turn.

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14 In addition to Lipkin’s autobiography (n. 10 above), see on this incident John Gordon Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers’ Union* (New York, 1990), pp. 189–90.
In few cultures have translators been as central to mainstream literary culture as they have in modern Russia and the Soviet Union. As the foremost translator of classical Persian and Turkic literatures into Russian during his lifetime, Lipkin was a direct beneficiary of Russian literature’s dependence on translations for innovation and inspiration. He was only seven years old when the ‘most ambitious single venture in the annals of literary translation’\textsuperscript{15} was inaugurated by the novelist Maxim Gorky and the Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharsky. Ultimately, this project, called \textit{Vsemirnaia literatura} (‘World Literature’), led to 70,000 translated volumes and employed an entire generation of intellectuals. Although, like all literary activities, translation has often been a casualty of Soviet politics, the rendering of literary texts into Russian was an esteemed and viable profession even during the darkest days of Soviet rule. Inasmuch as it helped to unite the disparate peoples of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and European Russia into a cohesive whole, this work was understood to provide an important service to the Soviet state as well as to literature. In contrast to the United States, where the proportion of translated items within overall published output has averaged a mere 3% in recent decades, a full 70% of titles printed in the Soviet Union during the early 1970s were translations.\textsuperscript{16}

In his biographical memoir, Lipkin dwells on those poets who, regardless of their temporal and geographic provenance, extended his conception of poetry: Mandelstam, Pasternak, Tarkovsky, and Akhmatova (with whom he later edited an anthology called \textit{Classical Poetry of the East}, 1969).\textsuperscript{17} It should be pointed out here that all four produced monumental translations as part of their poetic activities. Tarkovsky, the least known of this quartet, but the one possessed of the most extensive knowledge of oriental literary traditions, rendered the philosophical musings of the blind Syrian poet Abū ‘Ala’ al-Ma’arri (d. 1058), the allusiveness of which had defeated many translators before him.\textsuperscript{18} Lipkin’s own translating endeavours encompassed many genres, languages, and time periods, but his most sustained focus was on texts from Persian and Persianate (Persian-influenced) traditions. From the classical Persian tradition, Lipkin translated Rūdākī, Ferdowsī, Gurgani, Hāfez, and Jāmī, conventionally regarded

\textsuperscript{15} Friedberg, \textit{Literary Translation}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{16} For the percentages of American and British publications, see Lawrence Venuti, \textit{The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation} (New York, 1995), p. 12.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Klassicheskaiia poezia vostoka}, edited by Anna Akhmatova and Semyon Lipkin (Moscow, 1969).
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Abū’l-‘Ala’ al-Ma`arrī: stikhovopovēnia} (Moscow, 1979).
as the last great classical Persian poet. From the Turkic Persianate tradition, he translated from Chaghatai (Old Uzbek) two verse narratives by 'Ali Shīr Nawā'ī: *Laylī Majnūn* and *Seven Planets*. In the realm of contemporary literature, Lipkin was responsible for two translations of modern Persian poetry: an anthology produced in collaboration with A. M. Shoitov, and *The Voice of Asia*, by the Tajik poet Mirzo Tursunzoda (1911–77). In contrast to his translations of modern Persian, the majority of Lipkin’s translations of classical texts were originally published in Central Asia rather than Moscow or St Petersburg.

During the most intense period of Stalinist censorship Lipkin, like many of his fellow poets, was prevented from publishing original poetry. In marked contrast to his prolific career as a translator, Lipkin’s publishing career as a poet was not officially inaugurated until he was allowed to publish *Witness* (*Ochevidets*, 1967) in Moscow at the age of fifty-seven. Also thanks to censorship, Lipkin’s two other collections of poetry were published in the United States, a country he never visited, by the Michigan-based publishing house Ardis, to which Lipkin had been introduced by Joseph Brodsky. A few years after her husband’s death in 2003, Lisnianskaia published a posthumous collection of his poetry under the title of Lipkin’s first collection, *Witness*. Translators such as Daniel Weissbort have helped to confer on Lipkin’s poetry gradually increasing recognition in the English-speaking world. Meanwhile, however, Lipkin’s achievements in the realm of translation, together with his important work as a prose writer and critic, remain little known in English, and under-appreciated in Russian, scholarship. We will concentrate here on one aspect of his translations.

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21 *Sovremennaia persidskaia poezia: perevody s persidskogo* (Moscow, 1959); *Golos Azii* (Moscow, 1957).


Lipkin’s achievement as a translator of Persian poetry into Russian has been compared to that of Edward FitzGerald in English. The modernist British poet Basil Bunting once praised FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859) as a translation of a poem that ‘never existed’. Fitzgerald’s success, Bunting felt, was a matter of assimilation, and he used the traditional (or Drydenian) characterization: Omar Khayyâm is made to speak ‘as he would himself have spoken if he had been born in England’. We might compare Lipkin’s comments on another translation of FitzGerald’s era. In 1844 the Russian poet Vassily Zhukovsky translated a section of the *Mahābhārata*, relying on a recent German version by Friedrich Rückert. While acknowledging Zhukovsky’s poetic skill, Lipkin complains that he ignores the descriptions of Indian life in order to concentrate in modern romantic fashion on the lovers’ saga. ‘The everyday life, the vision, and even the beauty of the language’ of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, writes Lipkin, are reduced in Zhukovsky’s rendering to secondary matters. The divergences between the Zhukovsky-FitzGerald approach and Lipkin’s suggest different conceptions of translation: Lipkin privileged the foreignness of the translated text, whereas Zhukovsky in his view suppressed cultural difference through assimilation.

By contrast with the Zhukovsky-FitzGerald assimilative method, when he approaches the Persian text with deeper if not perfect comprehension, Lipkin foregrounds its distance from his Soviet present. Consider the following example from Jāmī’s poem *Yūsuf and Zuleikhâ*, evoking the protagonists’ biblical milieu and setting the stage for their ensuing love:


For a modern translator, the key challenge in rendering this distich is to find an adequate translation for the term *sharī’a* (a term which, it should be noted, projects an Islamic onto a pre-Islamic context,

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27 *Nal’s Dumat warns indeshkai javes*’, translated by Vasilii Andreevich Zhukovskii (St Petersburg, 1844).
and thereby itself enacts a kind of translation well before it reaches the modern translator). As noted by Norman Calder, the root *sharāa* has a ‘primary range of meaning in relation to religion and religious law’.29 While *sharāa* is often glossed by ‘law’ in contemporary contexts, its signification in premodern texts is very much at variance with the dominant meaning of ‘law’ in the modern sense of a state-based judicial system.30 When deployed in poetic texts, and particularly when used by a poet like Jāmī who tended to layer his worldly poetry with spiritual significations, *sharāa* is less a set of legal regulations than a social symbiosis which in turn sustains a divinely sanctioned social order. Unlike *qānūn*, *farmān*, or *hukm*, all of which precisely correspond to various aspects of ‘law’ in the modern sense, *sharāa* references a higher order that exceeds the law even as it contains the law within itself.

There is no ready equivalent for *sharāa* in modern European languages, because there is no cultural counterpart to the way *sharāa* conjoins legal and sacral belief systems. The word’s resistance to translation is reflected in the oscillations of Jāmī’s German translator, Vincenz Rosenzweig von Schwannau. In his first version of *Yūsuf and Zuleikha* he uses the word ‘Richterspruch’ – ‘judgement’: ‘Zu jener Zeit galt bey den Gläubigen | Ein Richterspruch, der also lautete.’31 But he was dissatisfied with this, and in a revised version chose to translate the problem term by *Strafgesetz* (‘criminal code’).32 This still misses the term’s transposition of a legal discourse into a spiritual one.

When Lipkin came to translate this passage he adopted another approach. Faced with the impossibility of finding an adequate rendering for *sharāa*, Lipkin opted not to translate it at all: he retained the foreign term, fully aware as he must have been of the extra intellectual effort this would require from his Russian readers. Thus Lipkin’s version reads:

> V te dni zakony sobliudalis’ sviato
> Reshalis’ po zakonu shariata.33

(In those days things were done piously.
Matters were decided according to *sharāa*’s laws.)

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This is not, however, a case of 'resistance to translation' tout court: there is a partial compromise. Lipkin has clarified the term’s meaning by qualifying, and writes ‘shari‘a’s laws’ (po zakonu shari‘ata). This phrase returns the reader to Jam‘i’s original expression, hukm-i shari‘at, which defined a worldly concept (hukm) in term of a spiritual one (shari‘at). Perhaps we might say that Lipkin has effected a partial rapprochement between foreignizing and domesticating methods of translation.

Alongside work from Persian and Persianate traditions, Lipkin engaged in translating the literatures of the Soviet Union’s resettled, marginalized, and otherwise poorly treated peoples. The ethical dimension of Lipkin’s translating work is clear in his multifaceted engagements with minorities, in particular the Chechens and Ingush. In 1938, when, according to Friedberg, literary translation in the USSR was experiencing a decline, Lipkin co-edited and published an anthology of Chechen poetry.34 Encompassing folklore and the little-known poems of the early twentieth-century writers Jamal al-Din Iandiev, Belkan Anzorov, and Ahmad Nuchaev, this collection was the first of Lipkin’s many volumes dedicated to the oral and written literary traditions of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus. Later work in this vein includes a translation of the Kalmyk epic Dzhangar, an anthology of Kalmyk folk poetry, the Kyrgyz epic Manas, and a volume on Kabardin legendary heroes (narts), followed by one on Kabardin epic poetry.35 Among contemporary poets of the Caucasus, Lipkin translated the (Turkic) Balkar poet Kaisyn Kuliev (1917–85).36 Finally, he dedicated himself to Tatar, the Turkic lingua franca of the Caucasus, translating the poets Gumer Bashirovich Bashirov and Gennady Paushkin, organizing a conference with the latter on the subject of translation, and editing an anthology of modern Tatar poetry.37 In one of his more trenchant critiques of contemporary translation practices, Lipkin indicted Soviet translators whose concentration on ‘national’ (as opposed to European) literatures led them to deploy the ‘easiest and most superficial literary forms’ in their translations (Lipkin, ‘PiS’, p. 26). Not finding any difference in

34 Poeziia Checheno-Ingushetii, edited by Semyon Lipkin in collaboration with Sof‘ya Mosesova Khitarova (Moscow, 1938).
35 Dzhangar: kalmytskii narodnyi epos (Moscow, 1940) and Poeziia kalmykii (Moscow, 1940); Manas, in collaboration with E. Mozol’kova (Moscow, 1941); Nartyi: kabardinskiaia epos (Moscow, 1951); Kabardinskaiia epicheskaia poeziia: izbrannye perevody (Na‘chik, 1956).
37 For the conference proceedings, see Ot znakomstva k rodstvu: Materiały Vserossiiskogo soveshchaniia po khudozhestvennomu perevodu, Kazan’, iaunov’ 1962 g., edited by G. Paushkin, S. Lipkin, et al. (Kazan, 1963); for the anthology see Poety Tatarii: 1941–1944 (Moscow, 1945).
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terms of literary merit or technical complexity between Persian courtly poetry and Chechen folklore, Lipkin applied the same genre standards to his renderings of both literatures.

Unlike many of his fellow translators from Caucasus and Central Asian vernaculars, Lipkin gained a measure of expertise, if not full fluency, in these languages as his work progressed, but he also adopted the common Soviet practice of using cribs or ‘literals’. These could be produced by the original author, or, more frequently, by an anonymous and uncredited assistant. This practice intensified the ‘communal’ dimensions of literary translation in Soviet literary culture. As Susanna Witt has noted, the widened field of ‘anonymous co-authorship’ that was the upshot of such practices made opaque ‘the distribution of “responsibility for the word”’ and offered ‘new perspectives on such key concepts as source language, target language, authenticity, and translational agency’.38 Perhaps defensiveness is not always appropriate here, though: while Soviet translators’ heavy reliance on cribs has been criticized as a source of errors and infelicities, without these linguistic crutches poets such as Mandelstam, Pasternak, and Akhmatova would never have been able to enrich world literature by translating Georgian, Korean, and Chinese poetry into Russian. For Lipkin, the key quality any translator worth the name had to possess was not so much fluency in the source language – that was the concern of those who created the cribs – as sympathy with the peoples whose literature was being translated. Perhaps the bitterest of all the complaints against Soviet politics that resonates through his autobiographical memoir is Lipkin’s remark that his translations were removed from circulation following his resignation from the Writers’ Union, and that ‘new translations were hastily commissioned based on cribs, without the translators knowing anything of the languages or cultures of the peoples whose literary masterpieces they were “translating”, or having any sympathy for their authors’ souls’. So deeply was Lipkin persuaded that spiritual affinity was a necessary precondition for translation that he went on to add: ‘a poet should only translate a text when it appeals to his soul, when, like life itself, the foreign text dictates to him: translate me’ (Lipkin, ‘PiS’, pp. 50–1). If this seems overly romantic or idealistic, we might remember that translators of earlier periods sometimes spoke not only of a sympathetic bond, but even of the transmigration of souls.

Alone among Stalin-era texts concerned with Chechen culture, Lipkin’s anthology of Chechen-Ingush poetry includes a folk ballad for the anti-Tsarist outlaw Zelimkhan (d. 1913), a figure remembered

38 Witt (n. 6), pp. 164–8.
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in most Soviet sources of this period in highly tendentious terms. In contrast to his contemporaries, Lipkin portrayed Chechen and Ingush culture – two closely related ethnic groups that are not distinguished in his anthology – in such a way as to reject colonial paradigms. Beyond the specific choice of texts, the timing of its publication deserves mention. The anthology was published only six years before the soon-to-be deported peoples – Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachais, Kalmyks, Crimean Tatars, and Meskhetian Turks – were accused of betraying the Soviet cause and punished with relocation. Although ballads such as those to Zelimkhans are sandwiched between more conventional texts praising the Caucasus Bolsheviks Ordzhonikidze, Yezhov, Kirov, and of course Stalin, this anthology is one of the few contemporary documents of Chechen life under Stalinist rule that in any way attests to a world beyond Soviet propaganda.

In sharp contrast to Lipkin’s translations of texts from the classical Persian and Chaghatai, the task of correlating his translations from Chechen and Ingush to their originals will in all likelihood never be accomplished owing to lack of archival preservation. The vast majority of the poets included in Lipkin’s anthology were unable to publish the original versions of their works, and Chechen folklore was much more widely distributed in Russian than in the original languages, to the extent that the originals for folkloric translations are in many cases lost. Lipkin’s anthology lacks any bibliographical information that would facilitate the task of locating the Chechen and Ingush source texts. These may sometimes, indeed, have been imaginary, but in other cases the way sources are ignored or discarded is standard practice for the time. While the impulse to render into Russian the literary languages of the former Soviet Union bespoke a nominal recognition of cultural difference, such recognition was frequently accompanied by an impulse to erase the non-Russian original in the act of rendering it into a foreign language.

Memories of the deportation were not too raw for Lipkin to evoke them in his fictional masterpiece, forty-five years after the publication of his anthology of Chechen folk poetry. Lipkin’s novella Dekada was published in 1982 in the Soviet publication Druzhba Narodov (‘Friendship of Peoples’), one of the more daring literary venues at

39 Interestingly, the poem is dated 1916, over twenty years prior to the publication of the Russian text, and is attributed to the ‘storyteller [skazitel]’ Ahmad Nuchaev, a factory worker from the village of Avruta, in the region of Shali’. See Poeziia Checheno-Ingushetii (n. 34), pp. 27–31.
that time, and the journal most intensively engaged in promoting non-Russian literature. While historical events condemned Lipkin’s translations from indigenous Caucasus languages to obscurity, Dekada’s chronicle of the deportation of the Karachay and Balkar peoples from the Caucasus to Central Asia gave this narrative a second life when the text was published abroad in 1983. Although it was serialized in Druzhba Narodov, Dekada was only first published in Russia as an independent volume in 1990, the year preceding the fall of the Soviet Union – a delay no doubt reflecting its pioneering and controversial account of historical events which inflicted still unhealed wounds.

Dekady were events celebrating the cultures of individual Soviet peoples. In Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan they were intended to contribute to the melding of Soviet presents with indigenous pasts. Most immediately, Lipkin’s title evokes the performances of the folkloric customs of non-Russian indigenous peoples of the Soviet Union that were carried out annually in Moscow and in the Soviet republics from 1936 until 1941. Lipkin has left a description of a 1940 Kyrgyz dekada that included a performance of Manas, the Kyrgyz epic he translated that same year. The Kazakh translation theorist Zhovtis has described how dekady served as a source of new cribs, generating new translations by those with limited contact with the source language. But even more to the point, Jeffrey Brooks’ analysis of the dekada in terms of the economy of the gift lays bare the ironies attending Lipkin’s title. ‘Expressions of indebtedness’, writes Brooks, ‘confirmed the economy of the gift and the Russians’ preeminence’:

The press presented the dekady as offerings to the state and Russian people, and, in that sense, as a consumer good. TASS’s reporter noted of the Uzbek festival, ‘Uzbekistan supplies the country with beautiful cotton textiles and other goods. Now Uzbekistan has given us something else – beautiful art.’ The official sanctioning of national performances locked non-Russians into the social order . . . Pravda commended Uzbeks but ascribed their success to the state rather than to indigenous pre-Soviet Uzbek traditions. ‘With what marvelous speed the Uzbek theatre has flourished and blossomed under the gentle sun of Soviet nationality policy!’

40 The New York edition of Dekada was published by Chalidze in 1983.
41 Lipkin, ‘Stalin, Bukharin, i “Manas” ’ (n. 1), pp. 442–86.
Brooks notes that although the discourse attending the *dekada* festivities implies reciprocity, the reciprocity implied was asymmetrical. Edward Allworth, the preeminent English translator of Uzbek literature, has shrewdly described the *dekada* as one of the tools ‘Soviet Russia has used to control minority cultural life’ and ‘a Russian device to affirm the compartmentalization of Soviet Central Asian Culture’. 44

Inasmuch as a deportation, which persecutes difference (cultural, ethnic, or otherwise), is the precise inversion of a *dekada*, which claims to celebrate this difference, Lipkin’s choice of title for his allegory of the Chechen-Ingush deportation is courageous. It is as if in equating a *dekada* with a deportation, the author wished to suggest that, notwithstanding their contrary significations and associations, the two events were somehow interchangeable, with the *dekada* being a consequence – even arguably a celebration – of deportation, and deportation being but a prelude to the *dekada*. As Michel Heller has observed, Lipkin used the concept to ‘present the major characteristics of the system: the role of the Party, the leader, and, finally, of Soviet culture. In Moscow, the party, under the initiative of the leader, decides to celebrate the development of a particular national culture. At the local level, the party determines what constitutes local culture and who is to be involved in its representation.’ 45 Through practices such as *dekady*, the Soviet house of culture rearranged, refurbished, and renovated world literature, making it provisionally – and only provisionally – habitable for multitudes of otherwise unrelated peoples.

In Lipkin’s novel, Balkars are called Tavlars and Karachays are called Ghulars. But in all its details the novel’s plot parallels the 1944 event that wiped Kabardino-Balkaria and Checheno-Ingushetia off the map. 46 Not only were toponyms changed; even the encyclopedia entry for ‘Chechen’ and ‘Ingush’ was removed from *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. The deported peoples were piled into cattle cars against their will and transported they knew not where. Tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands died along the way from starvation and disease. Lipkin describes the guilt experienced by his Russian protagonist, Stanislav Yurevich Bodorsky, an officer shocked by the violence he has been instructed to inflict on an innocent people. Notwithstanding his ethical reservations, the officer obeys his orders and becomes an accomplice to the deportation. When he arrives in Kyrgyzstan

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42 Heller (n. 13), p. 495.
46 Just one English-language commentator on *Dekada* has accurately identified the people with whom the Tavlars are associated: only Natasha Kolchevska in her review (*Slavic Review*, 44 (1985), 589) correctly identifies the Tavlars with the Balkars.
(in actuality the majority of Chechens and Ingush were deported to Kazakhstan), Bodorsky befriends a young Tavlar named Mansur (a Turkic Balkar in Lipkin’s verbal camouflage). Mansur, as it turns out, is an aspiring artist. Full of dreams, he functions as a cameo for the author himself. Bodorsky and Mansur initiate a voluminous correspondence: letters follow about art, life, and especially about the Tavlar’s dream of matriculating to the Moscow Academy of Art. Mansur discerns from Bodorsky’s scepticism that he will never live the life he yearns for. He will never become an artist because he is a Tavlar (i.e. Balkar) and therefore a member of a repressed and despised nationality. For that reason alone, Mansur will not be admitted to an institution of higher learning in Moscow. The correspondence between Bodorsky and Mansur is destined not to continue – how, in the end, can a Russian officer console the boy whose family he deported? Mansur’s unfulfilled aspirations are etched on Bodorsky’s memory as a reproach, testimony to what might have been thinkable had not the Soviet state crushed so many dreams.

The asymmetric reciprocity registered in the dekada performance is one of the first things that Lipkin’s French and German translators emphasized when translating his novel. In selecting a title for his German translation, the Slavist Wolfgang Kasack concentrated on the text’s multivalent politics. Although Dekada has a richly ironic resonance in the Soviet context, its irony must have seemed untranslatable to Kasack, who instead grafted a new layer of meaning onto the Russian text. Dekada became Das Volk der Adler – ‘The Eagle People’. Kasack’s title relies on the popular association of Chechens with eagles, as reflected in their folkloric traditions, and, perhaps most famously, in a line from the song that has come to be known as the Chechen national anthem, ‘In eagles’ nests our mothers nursed us’, composed by the Chechen writer Abuzar Aidamirov on the basis of ancient Chechen folklore. Although this association is missing from Lipkin’s original Russian text, where Chechens are never mentioned by name, the title speaks to Lipkin’s success in recovering the historical memory of the deported Chechen and Ingush people. Kasack’s translational choices elucidate how Dekada ‘documents a myriad of details about a comparatively obscure region as well as the workings and dynamics of the Soviet system’.

In contrast to the German rendering of the text as a documentary artefact, the title chosen by Nina Kéhayan for the French translation

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47 Das Volk der Adler: die Schicksale ein Kaukasusvolkes (Hamburg, 1984).
48 Quoted from Yuri Vidov Karageorge’s review, World Literature Today, 959 (1985), 117.
Rebecca Gould/Semyon Lipkin’s Ethics

that followed the German a quarter of a century later in 2010 – L’Histoire d’Alim Safarov, écrivain russe du Caucase – underscores the metafictive dimensions of Lipkin’s text. The title makes of Alim Safarov, a Tavlar chronicler who rarely appears in Dekada and is by no means central to its plot, the text’s framing device. It also associates Lipkin’s work with contemporaneous metafictional French texts. In its French rendering, Dekada’s metafictionality matters more than its politics. Less clear is why a writer carrying the Muslim name Alim Safarov (renderable in terms of its Perso-Arabic roots as ‘scholar’, or ‘son of a traveller’) is described in Kéhayan’s title as Russian (granted that russe can mean Russophone as well as ethnically Russian). Alim Safarov is not quite Russian, although, like his creator, he writes in Russian and knows how to function in Russian-dominated Soviet society. Both the German and the French versions of Dekada suggest the lesson that can be drawn from Lipkin’s translational œuvre as well. They indicate that translations can draw out meanings not apparent in the original.

In his study of the ‘scandals of translation’, Lawrence Venuti, building on the work of Antoine Berman, who in turn draws on a long history of German Romantic criticism, examines how translation’s reconstitutions of relations between domestic and foreign contexts bear the imprint of geopolitical transformations, including colonialism and anti-colonial resistance. Beyond the domesticating practices for which translations and translators are often taken to task, Venuti outlines how translation can invert ‘the hierarchy of cultural discourses that pre-exist that text in the target language’. At its best, a translational ethics of difference can bring about a ‘recognition of cultural difference’, and enable readers in the target culture to engage with rather than prejudge what is foreign. Even more crucially, translations can, Venuti claims, induce change in the target culture by pursuing an ethics of difference.

Venuti’s examples – drawn largely from Anglophone literatures – show translation as more a mediation among cultures than a search for correspondences across languages. Lipkin’s legacy illustrates how this project of translation as the recognition of cultural difference was pursued by translators who dedicated themselves to classical and vernacular Islamic and Asian literary traditions. With consummate literary acumen and fidelity, leaving ample room for his texts’


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distance from their target languages while also resisting the literalist straitjacket, Lipkin rendered works from Chechen, Persian, and the Turkic languages indigenous to the Caucasus and Central Asia. His translational method, together with his choices of texts, confounded Nebrija’s oft-cited postulate that language is the companion of empire.50 In the Soviet house of world literature, language accompanied the imperial project, but in Lipkin’s hands, translation allowed its inhabitants to arrange their homes in local terms.

Like Schleiermacher and Goethe, and more so than many of his fellow Orientalists such as Rosenzweig von Schwannau or his fellow poets such as Zhukovsky, Lipkin sought vigorously to retain the translated text’s distance with respect to its target culture. Following Schleiermacher, Lipkin moved the reader in the direction of the text rather than the text in the direction of the reader. Following Goethe, he adapted the reader to the source text’s linguistic horizons. Albeit in circuitous fashion, Lipkin’s translational ethics eventually bore political as well as aesthetic fruit. More than homages to indigenous cultures, Lipkin’s translations resisted the Soviet tendency to homogenize diversity under the banner of Russian culture. Although, as detailed above, these translations participated in the erasure of their non-Russian originals, his choice of texts, and his decision to transmute the knowledge gleaned from his translational activities into his fictional accounts of the deported peoples, shows how Lipkin intervened in Soviet ideology.

Neither Russia nor Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus were exceptions to the axiom that in modernity ‘translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism’.51 Translation, argues Tejaswini Niranjana, has consistently been perceived in the European context as a purely humanistic enterprise, unaffected by the politics of power. This narrative is belied by translators’ historical sponsorship of colonial enterprises, and by the many ways in which translation has facilitated imperial rule. In the aftermath of successive colonial projects harnessing the skills and knowledge of an army of translators, an approach that inculcates an ethics of difference constitutes an exception to the rule of translation as a legitimation of ethnographic violence. When Translation Studies can take fuller account of those translators who

50 Antonio de Nebrija, Gramática de la lengua castellana, edited by Antonio Quilis (Madrid, 1981), p. 97. Nebrija’s full statement on the matter reads: ‘Language was always the companion of empire [compañera del imperio] . . . together they began, together they grew and flourished, and later together they fell.’

responded to colonialism by translating the works of the conquered peoples, it will be possible to see how the politics of world literature has historically shaped its poetics, and how the poetics of literary translation has historically extended the possibilities of the political.

Soviet ideology figured world literature as a communal apartment that could accommodate ethnic difference so long as all Soviet peoples agreed to live in proximity to each other, and be collectively enfolded into a common destiny. Cohabitation was not always possible or desirable, but the fictional Soviet premise was that it was always in place, and that Russian was its *lingua franca*. Lipkin discerned the tenuous foundations on which the Soviet house of world literature had been erected, and he was forced to witness these foundations crumble during the last years of his life. The Chechens’ experience of deportation afforded this Russian Jew a good vantage point for viewing the impact of the Soviet experiment over the *longue durée*.

Lipkin was hardly the only Soviet poet whose work was enriched through his translating activity. As noted earlier, nearly all the poets Lipkin cites as sources of inspiration devoted much of their creative lives to producing literary translations. Under the conditions of Soviet rule, a poet who was not also a translator was an anomaly. Although the Soviet concept of the brotherhood of nations was in many contexts more constraining than liberating, world literature was imagined and realized in terms that make European and Anglophone cultures appear provincial by comparison. This contrast was underscored by Lipkin, who cited Gorky to the effect that ‘nowhere in the countries of Europe are so many books translated from foreign languages as . . . in the Soviet Union’ (‘PiS’, pp. 13–14). Lipkin further took pride in the fact that the Soviet experiment inaugurated the translation of texts from Eastern languages on a larger scale – and certainly the print-runs of Soviet editions are unprecedented in world history – than world literature had yet witnessed. Thanks to Lipkin, Ferdowsī and Jāmī became as obligatory and as accessible as Pushkin for any educated Russian reader. Thanks to Lipkin, the *Mahābhārata* and the epic of Gilgamesh entered mainstream Russian literary culture as texts deriving from independent literary traditions, and not simply (as with Zhukovsky and FitzGerald) as pallid reflections of contemporary aesthetic norms. Moreover, as the memoirs of Brodsky and Solzhenitsyn attest, Lipkin’s legacy extended well beyond his own literary works and into the writings of his contemporaries.52

52 ‘These memoirs are collected in *Ugl’, pylaishchii ognyom: Vospominaniiia o Mandel’shtame, Stikhi, stat’i, perępiska* (‘Fire-Blazing Coal: Memories of Mandel’stam. Poems, Articles, and Correspondence’), edited by P. Nerler, N. Pobol’, and D. Polishchuk (Moscow, 2008).
As the most prolific translator of the literatures of Central Asia and the Caucasus into Russian, Lipkin walked through the Soviet house of nations on tiptoes. For twenty-five years he refrained from publishing his own poetry, and produced only translations, from Persian, Turkic, Chechen, Kumyk, and numerous other languages brought together within the Soviet house of culture. We are now in a position to see, perhaps better than Lipkin himself, how the poet-translator’s mediation of Persian literary forms and his engagements with the literary traditions of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia anticipated configurations of world literature towards which contemporary literary studies strive. More than any European model, Lipkin strove through his translations to craft a true republic of letters. Unwilling to allow the masterpieces of Jāmī, Hāfez, and Nawā’ī to be ghettoized as texts relevant only to specialists, Lipkin worked to attain for non-European literary texts the status that, prior to his endeavours, Soviet protocols had reserved for French, German, and English literatures. His choice of texts was sometimes provocative, at other times dangerous, but always reflective of the courageous imagination of a poet prepared to sacrifice everything for his vision of a world literature grounded in the recognition of cultural difference.

Venuti’s prescription for the ambitious translator wishing to intervene in world literature was fulfilled by Lipkin decades ago. Lipkin’s translations helped to realize the Soviet ideal of world literature as a habitation made to accommodate multiple literary cultures. That the family ultimately outgrew the communal apartment built to house these traditions, so that all its members could no longer inhabit a single home, makes the magnificence of Lipkin’s achievement in sustaining a vision of a true plurality of literary cultures – against so many odds and in the face of so much bloodshed – all the more instructive.