



OWRI AHRC Workshop “World Literature in the Soviet Union”, Queen Mary  
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### **Abstracts**

*(In alphabetical order by surname)*

#### **Katerina Clark**

##### **“Stalin, Moretti, Lahuti: The Calibration of Form and Content in World Literature”**

The idea of a world literature was central to the Soviet literary platform of the 1930s. But, in contrast with our notion of world literature today that has been formed in the context of post-colonial literature, Soviet “world literature” of that time included in practice very little non-European literature in its purview. Literary officialdom was nevertheless committed in theory to a truly “world” literature. Were literature to become truly “world” in the specific sense of “one”, however, literary traditions generated by very different culture systems would have to be reconciled. Clark’s paper looks at two similar formulations for how this might occur – one that was canonical in the Soviet 1930s and contained in Stalin’s 1925 address to the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), and the other the formulation of Franco Moretti to be found inter alia in *Distant Reading* (2013). She uses their formulations as a frame for her case study: the prominent Soviet writer of the 1930s Abolqasem Lahuti, an official delegate to the great international literary talkfest, the Congress for the Defense of Culture held in Paris in 1935, who in his poetry written in Tajikistan attempted to incorporate both formal and discursive elements from the classical verse of his native Persia.

#### **Rossen Djagalov**

##### **“The End of the Affair: On the Ruins of Soviet-Third-World Literary Engagements”**

In the late-Soviet period, translations of African and Asian literature could be seen in many Soviet bookstores, literary guests from these continents were frequently sighted in Moscow and Tashkent, and the USSR underwrote (and participated in) a whole Afro-Asian Writers Association. Little is left today of these once-thriving engagements, except for library books that few now read, area studies academic institutes that are a pale shadow of their former selves, and sharply contested memories of different types of readers. For some of them (for example, inakomyshliashchie intelligenty), these engagements, if not Afro-Asian literature as a whole, amounted to an unwelcome imposition by the state, while for others (Central Asian writers and readers), they comprised the main form of internationalism available to them under the Soviet division of cultural labor. Beyond ruins, however, we have to think of the intellectual legacies

of these engagements: from a civilizational dismissal of non-Western cultures one can all too often encounter in Russian cultural production and scholarship to postcolonial studies in the Anglo-American academy, which took off precisely at the moment when Third-Worldist and Soviet-aligned anti-colonial discourses were fading away. As a whole, this Third-World perspective can help challenge some of the standard narratives of Soviet and post-Soviet literary history.

**Susanne Frank**

### **“Multinational Soviet literature as/and World literature: A Question of Heritage”**

In some of my recent articles I developed the idea of understanding „multinational soviet literature“ – a term that came up in the mid 1930ies after the 1st Allunion Writers Congress – as a project of world literature. There my focus was, firstly, on the integrative claim of this project in terms of territory and geocultural space, its inclusiveness or, in other words, its (imperial) expansivity, and, secondly, on the Marxist-Leninist (Hegelian) model of world history according to which any (national) literature/culture is part of the universal process of world history and therefore represents a certain phase or level of it. Today I would like to focus on yet another important aspect that also contributes to the fact that “multinational soviet literature” in a certain and very specific way has been conceptualized as world literature: the aspect of heritage (“наследие“ or “наследство“) that seems to me a key notion of the whole project.

Whereas the term “heritage” in the years of revolution had at first no positive connotations at all – cf. V. Shklovsky who called «great Russian literature – bad luck for our times”, it was revalued rather quickly in the course of the 1920ies and became crucial for the Stalinist reconceptualization of culture and literature during the 1930ies. It is a matter of fact that starting from the term “socialist realism” itself – that Stalin chose a.o. because of its implicit hint to “succession” (“preemstvennost”- “Nachfolge”) – the self-conception as heir became crucial for this period. In my contribution I investigate the very specific conceptualization of heir, heritage and inheritance in the context of Stalinism (the concept of “legitimate heir”, the demand for “critical appropriation”) and will demonstrate that this aspect decisively contributes to the understanding of “Multinational Soviet Literature” as world literature and is connected to the concept of *translatio* as a fundamental strategy of imperial self-legitimation.

**Edmund Herzig**

### **“Persian Poetry, Literary Canons and Soviet Nation-Building: Case Studies from Azerbaijan and Tajikistan”**

From the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Persian was a *lingua franca* of literary culture and government over a wide area including much of South and Central Asia, in addition to the Persian-speaking lands of the Iranian plateau and adjacent territories. As such it was used by many peoples whose mother tongue was not Persian. In the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the place of Persian in most of this extended ‘Persianate’ world was challenged by the twin processes of vernacularisation and nationalism, while in Iran itself, exclusive claims to the Persian linguistic and literary heritage became one of the planks of modern Iranian nationalism. The Caucasian and Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union shared in this Persianate literary and cultural

heritage and responded to it in a variety of ways in their own nation-building projects. This paper explores the place of pre-modern Persian poetry in the formation of literary canons in the Caucasus and Central Asia, with particular reference to Azerbaijan and the Tajikistan.

**Maria Khotimsky**

### **“The Treasure Chest of World Literature’: Shaping the Concept of World Literature in Post-Revolutionary Russia”**

Founded by Maxim Gorky shortly after October Revolution of 1917, World Literature publishing house pursued an ambitious goal of creating a canon of world literature for the young Soviet state. The publishing house employed leading writers, scholars and translators who worked together to develop new approaches to translation and to provide textual commentaries. While only part of the grandiose plan came to fruition due to economic hardships and increasing political pressure, World Literature defined significant trends for the development of literary translation in the Soviet Union. Seen in broader theoretical context, the history of this publishing house reveals various ways in which institutional and ideological boundaries shape the notion of world literature. While the history of this literary institution has drawn considerable attention, specific approaches to defining world literature in the context of post-revolutionary cultural changes have not been discussed in detail. The goal of my study is to explore early Soviet attempts in defining the concept of world literature and introducing the world literary heritage to the Soviet readers. I will compare and contrast the approaches to critical commentary in the introductory articles and commentaries included in the Main Book Series and in the People’s Book Series released by the publishing house, as well as its broader appeal to the public in the *Sovremennyi Zapad (Contemporary West)* literary magazine published in the early 1920s.

**Anne Lounsbery**

### **“Where is Russia in World Literature?”**

Western models of “World Literature” tend to leave writers and national literary traditions with two options: you can be cosmopolitan, or you can be provincial. In order to arrive at such a binary, these systems often leave out Russia altogether. This paper examines why, taking as a case study Pascale Casanova’s influential *World Republic of Letters*. Casanova’s work, like most such models, depends on a center-periphery worldview—but when it comes to Russia’s relationship to “the world” (including the “world” of literature), center and periphery are not easy to locate. Russia and the Soviet Union are peripheral to Europe but they are themselves highly centralized; they are possibly “white” but they are also Asian; they are behind but maybe sometimes ahead, Christian but perhaps not exactly Christendom in the sense of “the West.” Finally, they are large, and in the world literature scheme of things, peripheral places tend to be figured as small. Such ambiguities complicate the assumptions underpinning arguments like Casanova’s. In the end, world literature’s inability to accommodate Russia—a tradition that can be pigeonholed neither as “modern” nor as straightforwardly “backward”—are due to Russia’s disruption of what Arjun Appadurai calls “Eurochronology.”

**Elena Ostrovskaya**

**“Isaac Babel from ‘International’ to ‘World Literature’”**

Isaac Babel was “perhaps, the first Soviet prose writer <...> to enjoy a wide-ranging international reputation as a grand master of the short story” (Freidin 1990: 1885). His world renown is usually ascribed to his being a cosmopolitan and part of Paris’ literary life in the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, his English translations are much more numerous than the French ones. The paper traces Babel’s contributions to *International Literature* magazine (an English version of a multi-language Moscow-based periodical for the international communist and left-wing audience published in the 1930s) in 1933-1937 to demonstrate how one of them made way into Macmillan’s anthology, *A Book of Contemporary Short Stories* (1936), a venue of world literature of a kind, and discusses the *International Literature* facet of Babel- the world literature author. The theoretical focus of the paper is the dichotomy of world literature as a canon and as a literary network and the role of translation and translator for canon and network formation, or making a (Soviet) literary work and author part of world literature.

**Maria Rubins**

**“Literary Culture of the Russian Diaspora in the Context of World Literature: Problematic Circulation and the Pitfalls of ‘Repatriation’”**

This paper will examine how the key concepts articulated by the World Literature discourses, as well as diaspora studies and translation theory, are problematized by literature of the Russian Diaspora. I will focus on several representative locations and time periods over the last century to ponder the uncertainties of circulation, translation/untranslatability, and reception of émigré literature.

As opposed to the primary object of diaspora studies (immigrant narratives written by postcolonial authors in the language of the former colony), most Russian diasporic literature has been written in the authors’ native tongue. This does not mean that all this production was strictly monolingual: some writers remained loyal to the “pure” (pre-Soviet or Soviet) linguistic idioms and national master narratives; others explored creolized forms, writing across languages and transnational trends. This complicates the notions of the “original language” of Russian diasporic literature, its presumed “home” and “original” cultural context, as well as the binary of “center/periphery” (some authors continued to write for a hypothetical readership in Russia, while others tried to engage with the broader world). With the notable exception of successful bilinguals or prominent emigres known abroad prior to exile, most authors did not circulate in translation in any significant way before they were belatedly published in Russia, generating a vibrant reception. Their opportunity to transcend the homeland was paradoxically facilitated by their integration into the “national fold.” The “repatriation” itself was not without pitfalls: in many cases the critical reception was guided by ideas of reunifying the metropolitan and foreign literary branches, the national canon, and its continuity. This process often led to limiting the range of cultural and aesthetic meanings of the diasporic texts.

In addition to earlier émigré writers, I will briefly examine the limits of translation and (un)translatability, focusing on Andrei Makine’s novels, and discuss transcultural pluralistic practices of contemporary Russian Israeli writers. The latter case demonstrates self-reflexive

strategies of authors who depend on the Russian publishing industry yet reject Russian national identity and try to position themselves in a broader, if imprecisely-defined, “world.”

## Schamma Schahadat

### “World Literature and Ideology: The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934”

At the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 Maxim Gorky and Karl Radek held programmatic speeches where they defined Soviet and Proletarian literature as a very specific form of world literature. Their approach to world literature was genuinely political and had a temporal as well as a spatial dimension, since their world literature would encompass all socialist or proletarian literature from the past well into the future, and the literature of all Soviet republics and of the Socialist countries all over the world. Later essays coined the term “multinational Soviet literature” for this special (ideological) type of world literature.

Gorky’s and Radek’s presentations were part of the big aesthetic and cultural project of the congress. The congress itself pursued three objectives: First, it propagated a concept of Soviet literature in the narrow aesthetic/political frame of Socialist Realism. Second, it mirrored and represented Soviet national policy. And, third, the forming of a multinational reading program – a Soviet and proletarian canon of world literature – was an educational project to create the Soviet reader.

Gorky and Radek envisioned a “world republic of letters” (Casanova) where Moscow was not only the political center, but also the center of the literary universe where the literary and the political field were in perfect harmony.

## Sergey Tyulenev

### “The Birth Pangs of a Future: Translating the World Literature into *Vsemirnaia Literatura*”

The early Soviet translation project “*Vsemirnaia Literatura*” (VL) (1918–1937) was initiated in the early days of the young Soviet Russia. The group was led by Maksim Gorky and several prominent literary figures of the time. The significance of the project was that it attempted to develop principles of literary translation as a literary activity approached from a new ideological and political perspective – masterpieces of the world literature were transformed into the literary treasure house fit for a state of workers and peasants. In this sense, the VL was meant to be an organic part of the proletarian ideology aimed at destroying the past and building a radically new future (cf. *ves’ mir nasil’ia my razrushim do osnovan’ia, a zatem my svoi, my novy mir postroim* as was sung in the Russian version of “International”). The transformation was, however, not always a rupture as it was desired. Rather it was a complex process of negotiation as can be observed in the case of the VL.

While the predominant tenor of the discourse at the time was to start from scratch, the VL turned out to be a compromise from the beginning. As a literary activity, translation had to return to the pre-revolutionary tradition of Russian literary translation: both practitioners and practices came from there. The first generation of the VL translators were necessarily translators who had begun their careers well before the 1917 revolution and the newly formed

Soviet state: there were simply no proletarian translators as yet. The selection committee which defined the repertoire of literary works for translation and who educated new generations of literary translators were themselves representatives of the pre-revolutionary literary generations and, of course, they were selecting pieces from the old world which was supposed to be “destroyed to its foundation.” The challenge was to forge a new tradition recycling ‘old materials’. The VL, a translation project, became the site of translating not only literature, but also of transforming the past into the future. I will examine the VL and translation in it as a series of negotiations between continuities and discontinuities, ideological problems and suggested solutions, challenges and compromises played out in shaping a new Soviet school of literary translation.

**Annette Werberger**

### **“Concepts of Yiddish Literature as an institution of Diaspora and World Literature”**

I want to focus on different and intertwined historical concepts of Yiddish literature in literary theory and historiography. The first concept is the idea of Yiddish as a “small literature” in the original understanding of Kafka’s “Kleine Literaturen”. Representatives of the Yiddish cultural movement conceptualized Yiddish literature as a surrogate territory (for example B. Rifkins “kmoy-teritorie”) and important political institution of the Jewish Diaspora. In this way was Yiddish literature regarded partly like other small literatures of “people without history” (F. Engels) in the European Continental Empires and Soviet Union, but had also some characteristics of an old world literature (Ancient Hebrew).

Due to the migration of Yiddish speakers after the year 1881 Yiddish literature developed from an old-new regional literature into a transnational literature. Yiddish culture was challenged by the geographical extension of this new diaspora in the Americas, Palestine, Africa or Western Europe. Yiddish became in this sense the first European example of a folk-literature without national territory as world literature, with distinctive and universal, local and global features (Niger, Leyvik).

In the Soviet Union Yiddish literature could at first develop this distinctiveness, but had afterwards to negotiate with the normative idea of Soviet World literature and engage in socialist internationalism (Bergelson, Glatshteyn, Der Nister). A very interesting aspect is the solidarity with other small literatures within the system of Soviet world literature.

**Elena Zemskova**

### **“Brecht and Lukács in English Translation in the *International literature* magazine”**

The paper deals with biographies of two foreign communists who lived in Moscow in the in the mid-1930s and contributed as translator from German into English to the English edition of *International literature* magazine. Among translations performed by American Leonard Mins (1990-1988) was the first English publication of two articles by George Lukács. Irishman Nail Goold-Verschoyle (1915-1987) was the first who translated into English one of the Bertolt Brecht’s plays.

The paper aims to discuss the historical and cultural context of these translations, the figure of translator as an agent of cosmopolitan leftist culture and the role the first English translations of German-language leftist writers and thinkers played in their canonization in the world literature.