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Translating Historical Trans Life-Writing: Aleksandr Aleksandrov (1783-1866)

Abstract This essay presents our reflections on translating historical trans life-writing into English as collaborative work. It is based on our conversations over the last three years, comparing our positionalities and skill sets as educators, activists (Cheryl) and scholars (Margarita). Specifically, it discusses our work on translating biographical narratives by and about a Russian-Ukrainian hero of the Napoleonic wars and celebrated trans author Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova) (1783-1866). In contrast to the emancipatory theoretical impetus of Anglophone trans studies, translation into English is invariably constrained by the language's grammatical limitations in expressing gender. As a result, translating trans biographies into English, creates specific challenges when working with texts originally written in more gendered languages. In this essay, we argue that Aleksandrov's transmasculine self-presentation, obvious in the original Russian, was erased in previous English translations that have embedded him in the canon of nineteenth-century women writers. Below, we reflect on the challenges associated with reclaiming Aleksandrov's gender identity in the process of collaborative translation of secondary sources.

Keywords autobiography, life-writing, transgender, translation, Slavic studies.

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Over the last decade, Anglophone trans studies have done important work in de-centering and overcoming the discipline's linguistic, racial, and geographical bias.¹ In a field still dominated by Anglophone theory, this acknowledged imbalance produces unique challenges when

working with texts originally written in other languages. One of these challenges applies specifically to translating narratives of trans lives into English: as a grammatically non-gendered language, English can erase the intentional gender ambiguity of the source language texts, leaving it to translators and scholars to negotiate between emancipatory theory and restrictive grammatical practice (Rose 2016, Baer 2016). The case study described below charts, first, the role of English translation in erasing a trans identity of a historical subject, and then discusses recovering this identity through collaborative translation of secondary sources.

Aleksandr Aleksandrov (1783-1866) was a Russian-Ukrainian hero of the Napoleonic wars and a celebrated trans author. His autobiography *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden* [Zapiski kavalerist-devitsy] (1836) offered a first-person account of what we would now call gender transition: in 1806, Aleksandrov, who was assigned female at birth and christened “Nadezhda Durova”, joined the Russian army and served in several military campaigns. In 1808, by a special decree signed by the Tsar Aleksander I, he was awarded the Cross of St George and was officially permitted to use the name “Aleksandrov”. Aleksandrov retired in 1817 with the rank of Captain-Lieutenant and lived the rest of his life wearing civilian male clothes. In 1836, an excerpt from *Notes* was published by Russia’s pre-eminent Romantic poet, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837) in his literary journal, propelling Aleksandrov to instant fame. Despite – or because of – Aleksandrov’s obvious gender ambiguity, *Notes*, signed by his deadname ‘Nadezhda Durova’, has maintained an important place in the Russian cultural imagination ever since: re-printed, re-written for children and young adult readers, adapted for stage and film and, most recently, featured in digital protest art.ⁱⁱ

Two separate English translations appeared in the late 1980s (Zirin 1988; Mersereau, Lapeza 1988) and *Notes* is now often included in British and North American university curricula. However, Aleksandrov’s transmasculine self-presentation, evident in the original Russian (an inflected language where gender is indicated by endings) was mostly lost in English translation. As a result, until very recently, Aleksandrov’s texts were read predominantly through the lens of feminist historiography that saw “Durova” as a one of the few successful nineteenth-century Russian women writers (Zirin 1998, ix; Savkina 2007, 196–8; Prikazchikova 2018, 23). A growing body of scholarship, including our own, now argues that this reading erases Aleksandrov’s transmasculinity and misreads his literary oeuvre (Averbach 2022; Vaysman 2022). Aside from theoretical advances in trans studies that allow us to re-read Aleksandrov’s texts in a way that accounts for his transmasculinity, our

knowledge of Aleksandrov's gender identification is now also bolstered by historical proof. Sources found by Russian scholars in the military archives in the early 2000s prove beyond doubt that Aleksandrov consistently identified as male from the time he enlisted in 1808 until his death at the age of seventy-nine in 1866 (Begunova 2011). Recent scholarship in Russian, while understandably affected by the increasingly repressive state policy on gender, also reflects this shift in acknowledging Aleksandrov's gender ambiguity as an important part of his literary legacy (Boiarinova 2016). However, the dominant position of Anglophone scholarship in gender studies globally means that English-language critical readings of Aleksandrov's texts, based on incorrect translations, have by now themselves acquired canonical status in nineteenth-century Russian studies. As a result, 'reclaiming' Aleksandrov from the ranks of women writers has not been an easy task.

In 2020, we – Margarita Vaysman, literary scholar, and Cheryl Morgan, public historian and educator – began working together on a project that aims to “translate” the story of Aleksandrov's life into a series of materials, accessible for Anglophone audiences. Our goal is to reverse the process of misgendering a historical subject, inadvertently aided by incomplete translations. Our project follows a template of knowledge exchange and community outreach common in British universities: a collaboration between academics and specialists in other fields, aimed at communicating research findings to wider non-academic audiences (Wagner et al. 2024; LSE 2023). It brings together Margarita's expertise in Russian literature and the history of gender and sexuality with Cheryl's experience of educating the general public about trans histories, as well as our different positionalities as trans and not trans collaborators. In addition to traditional research outputs like peer-reviewed articles, we are developing a digital adaptation of Aleksandrov's *Notes* and an open access repository of historical sources documenting his life. Translated into English, these sources can then be used to create educational materials that showcase non-western stories of LGBTQI+ lives, in projects like the inclusive education school curricula (LGBTeducation.scot 2024) or community queer history platforms (OutStories Bristol 2023). Below, we reflect on the challenges of producing one of the project's outcomes: translation into English of two Russian popular history articles from the 1890s that explicitly discuss Aleksandrov's transmasculinity. As overlooked examples of nineteenth-century trans life-writing, these two texts demonstrate the surprisingly respectful attitudes to Aleksandrov's gender nonconformity in the Russian Empire of the fin-de- siècle. Importantly, they also offer “external” proof of

Aleksandrov's identification as male, independent from his own literary texts and our contemporary interpretations of them.

Historical evidence demonstrates that Aleksandrov consistently used masculine pronouns in his personal and business correspondence, as well as in a short vitae he produced for a Russian literary dictionary in 1860 (Vaysman 2022). His literary texts, on the other hand, convey a more complicated relationship with binary gender categories. *Notes*, as well as Aleksandrov's other texts published in 1837-39, uses two distinct linguistic strategies to create what we would now call a "non-binary narrative voice".ⁱⁱⁱ The first strategy is to have the first-person narrator, gendered as female, tell the story of a protagonist, gendered as male. In practice, this means that the narrator uses feminine endings of the verbs, adjectives, and participles, but once the protagonist joins the army, most other characters address him as 'sir' [barin] and use masculine pronouns. The second strategy is to indicate gender ambiguity in the very title of the text we now know as *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden*. The original Russian term for "Cavalry Maiden" [kavalerist-devitsa], consists of two nouns, one masculine and the other feminine, rather than an adjective and a noun used in English. This gives both parts of the compound word equal weight, ensures that it can agree with both masculine and feminine endings of other words and makes their order interchangeable. The first full edition of *Notes* was titled *Cavalry Maiden. An Incident in Russia* [Kavalerist-devitsa. Proisshestvie v Rossii] (1836), whereas the second 1839 edition reversed the order of nouns in the title, that can be literally translated as *Notes by Aleksandrov (Durova). Addendum to Maiden-Cavalryman* [Zapiski Aleksandrova (Durovoi). Dobavleniie k Devitse-kavalerist].^{iv} Both of these strategies rely on the highly inflected nature of Russian language and are difficult to replicate in non-inflected languages like English.^v The more popular of the two English translations of *Notes*, Mary F. Zirin's 1998 *The Cavalry Maiden: Journals of a Female Russian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars*, sidesteps this issue entirely by rendering the gender ambiguity of Aleksandrov's original narrative almost invisible for her readers. Zirin's stylistically accomplished translation not only "smooths out" Aleksandrov's irregular use of gendered grammar but also excludes words that underscore his masculinity. For example, Aleksandrov's original *muzhestvo* ("manly bravery"), cognate with *muzhchina* ("man"), in Zirin becomes a neutral "courage" (Zirin 1988, 67).

Scholars have offered various explanations for Aleksandrov's use of this mix of feminine and masculine grammatical forms in his literary texts.^{vi} We can make educated guesses as to why Aleksandrov, who consistently identified as male in all his personal correspondence, used a

more ambiguously gendered narratorial voice in his fiction, but we might never find a definitive answer. What matters, however, is that this ambiguity has historically been resolved by readers and translators in favour of feminine self-identification which allowed them to include Aleksandrov's texts into the canon of nineteenth-century Russian women writers (Averbach 2022). As a result, scholarly arguments about Aleksandrov's transmasculinity now require bolstering with external, "objective" sources – that is, texts *about* Aleksandrov, discussing his gender identity, but not *by* Aleksandrov himself. Luckily, in our work on "translating", or, rather, "re-translating" the story of Aleksandrov's life, we came across a set of previously overlooked materials that accomplish exactly that.^{vii}

Because of Aleksandrov's status as a genuine celebrity in Russia in the 1830s-40s, contemporaries recorded their impressions of meeting him and kept memorabilia connected to his life. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of popular history periodicals meant that these recollections were finding their way into the public sphere, in the form of articles published in journals like the *Russian Antiquity* [Russkaia starina], *Historical Messenger* [Istoricheskii vetsnik] and *Russian Archive* [Russkii arkhiv]. Two articles from the 1890s in particular provide us with an opportunity to learn about late-nineteenth-century Russian views on gender non-conformity, discussed specifically in relation to Aleksandrov's transmasculinity. The two articles in question – now available in English translation [here](#) – were written by local Russian historians, F.F. Lashmanov and N.A. Kutshe.^{viii} Both demonstrate not just a remarkable degree of respect for Aleksandrov's gender identification but also articulate their authors' support for an individual's right to define their own gender. Both articles understandably fall short of contemporary requirements for transgender biographies, especially in terms of consistent use of appropriate pronouns. At the same time, they demonstrate that the practice of respectful trans life-writing did not originate in twentieth-century Anglophone cultures. In fact, it has a rich global past – in this instance, it was successfully practiced in an unexpected genre, time and place of popular history writing in late nineteenth-century Russia.

The article by F.F. Lashmanov, titled "Nadezhda Andreevna Durova. Materials for Her Biography" [Nadezhda Andreevna Durova. Materials for her biography], appeared in 1890 in a popular history journal *Russian Antiquity*. Despite the use of the name "Durova" and a feminine pronoun in the title, the piece itself began with a statement of authorial intent to avoid misgendering his subject:

“At the beginning of the 1840s, the retired Captain-Lieutenant, Aleksandr Andreevich Aleksandrov, left the city of Sarapul to settle in the town of Elabuga, in the Viatka province. To the day she died, N.A. Durova could not bear to be called by her existing female name, and so I will herein after refer to her by the name given to her, or rather authorized, by the Emperor Aleksandr I in 1807” (Farrar 2024).

“В начале 1840 годов, из города Сарапула переехал на жительство в город Елабугу, Вятской губернии, состоящий в отставке штаб-ротмистр Александр Андреевич Александров. В виду того, что Н. А. Дурова до последних минут своей жизни терпеть не могла, когда ее называли настоящим женским именем, я везде буду называть ее именем, данным ей, вернее, утвержденным, в 1807 г. императором Александром I” (Lashmanov 1890, 657).

Lashmanov’s decision to honour Aleksandrov’s gender identification is not an aberration: it follows local customs in the town, where ‘even the street urchins dared not call Durova otherwise’ (Lashmanov 1890, 661). The article then corroborates other sources on Aleksandrov’s preferred clothing (civilian male dress and army overcoats) and, importantly, describes Aleksandrov’s own reaction to intentional public misgendering:

“The police master, regardless of his innate goodness and desire to show kindness to Captain-Lieutenant Aleksandrov, often lost his temper. [...] At such moments, the police master resorted to a cruel method. [...] The police master ordinarily met the Captain-Lieutenant with the words, ‘And, hello, dear Aleksandr Andreevich!... Please, come on in...’; but sometimes, at precisely the same occasion he would say instead, ‘Ah, my esteemed Nadezhda Andreevna, how do you do?’ Then, as if remembering something, he would add, ‘Ah, please excuse me; I mistook you for a woman of my acquaintance...’ Following such a greeting, the Captain-Lieutenant’s face would turn bright red and then deathly pale. A minute later the ‘Captain-Lieutenant’ would stand up... and leave the room” (Farrar 2024).

“Городничий, не смотря на свою врожденную доброту и желание быть любезным в отношении штабс-ротмистра Александрова, часто выходил из себя [...] В такие минуты городничий прибегал к жестокому средству. [...] Обыкновенно городничий встречал штабс-ротмистра словами: «А, здравствуйте, многоуважаемый Александр Андреевич!.. Прошу покорно...»; в эти-же минуты он говорил: «А, мое почтение, Надежда Андреевна, как поживаете?» Затем, как-бы спохватившись, прибавлял: «ах, извините пожалуйста; а я было принял вас за одну свою знакомую...» После такого

приветствия, лицо штабс-ротмистра обыкновенно сначала покрывалось густым румянцем, а затем делалось страшно бледным. Через минуту «штабс-ротмистр» вставал и... уходил” (Lashmanov 1890, 662).

The final part of the article returns to the use of the name “Durova” to describe the first stages of the historical erasure of Aleksandrov’s trans identity:

“And so the Captain-Lieutenant passed his time in the town of Elabuga. He maintained this lifestyle until his death. [...] in 1863, the poor ‘captain-lieutenant’ was no more... [...] This remarkable person left only a memory of himself behind. Before the end of her life, Nadezhda Andreevna Durova requested that she be buried under the name Aleksandr, but the priest did not find it possible to fulfil this dying wish. And so, the name of captain-lieutenant Aleksandr Andreevich Aleksandrov disappeared with him who bore it honestly and sacredly until the last moments of his life!” (Farrar 2024).

“Так проводил время в городе Елабуге штабс-ротмистр Александров. Этот образ жизни он сохранил до конца своей жизни. [...] в 1863 г. бедного штабс-ротмистра не стало... [...] Только одно воспоминание оставил по себе этот замечательный человек. Перед концом своей жизни, Надежда Андреевна Дурова просила похоронить ее под именем Александра, но священник не нашел возможным исполнить это завещание умирающего, и таким образом имя штабс-ротмистра Александра Андреевича Александрова исчезло вместе с тем, кто его носил честно и свято до последних минут своей жизни!..” (Lashmanov 1890, 662-663).

Another account, produced by N.A. Kutshe, appeared in *Historical Messenger* in 1894. Kutshe followed Lashmanov’s lead in honouring Aleksandrov’s own gender identification, this time also in the title of the article: “Durov-Aleksandrov. Biographical Note” [Durov-Alekasandrov. Biograficheskaja zametka] (Kutshe 1894, 788). Kutshe explained his rationale for using Aleksandrov’s chosen name at the end of his article:

“In conclusion, I must say that the title of my biographical note, Durov-Aleksandrov, was chosen for a reason. Durova always considered herself to be a man, wore male clothing, aspired to imitate the male manner, voice and gait, and did not permit herself to be addressed otherwise, particularly since Tsar Aleksandr I ordered her to call herself Aleksandrov. Let her be remembered in posterity as Durov-Aleksandrov, according to her own desire” (Thomas 2024).

“В заключение, должен сказать, что название моей заметки «Дуров-Александров» сделано не без цели. Дурова считала себя всегда мужчиной, носила мужской костюм, старалась подражать манерами, голосом, походкой, мужчинам и не позволяла обращаться к себе иначе, тем более, что император Александр I приказал называться ей Александровым. Пусть же в потомстве слывет она, по ее желанию, под фамилией «Дуров-Александров»” (Kutshe 1898, 793).

The article itself does not follow the use of the name postulated in the title. Throughout the text, which includes a short discussion the critical reception of Aleksandrov’s work in the 1840s, Kutshe, perhaps unintentionally, recreates the ambiguously gendered space of Aleksandrov’s own literary narratives. For example, he uses the name “Durova”, or “Durova Aleksandrova” and feminine pronouns to discuss Aleksandrov’s transmasculinity:

“She was always in male attire: a long black frock coat and narrow trousers, a tall black hat on her head and a cane in her hands [...]. She always conducted herself as a man and was offended if she were addressed as a woman; if this happened, she would get angry and respond harshly” (Thomas 2024).

“Одета она была всегда в мужской костюм: длинный, черный сюртук, узкие брюки; на голове у нее была высокая черная шляпа, а в руках трость [...]. Держалась она всегда, как мужчина, и не любила когда обращались к ней в речи, как к женщине, сердилась и делала довольно резко замечания” (Kutshe 1894, 789).

Considering how few secondary sources about Aleksandrov’s life have been translated into English, making these two articles accessible for Anglophone audiences became one of the goals of our project. The process of translating the texts, however, came with its own set of obstacles – ethical, linguistic and political – which we tackled by expanding our team to make the translations more collaborative. To maximise the educational potential of these sources, the first drafts of the English translations were produced by two undergraduate students of Russian at the University of St Andrews, Charlotte Farrar and Charlotte Thomas. These drafts were then reviewed and workshopped by the project’s two trans sensitivity readers: Cheryl Morgan in the UK and Lev Nikulin in the US. Finally, the translations were edited by Connor Doak, scholar of Russian queer culture, and Esther Jones Russel, copyeditor with specialisation in Russian, in relation to Margarita’s peer-reviewed article on Aleksandrov published in *Avtobiografiia. Journal on Life-Writing and the Representation of the Self in Russian Culture* in 2022.

The main ethical problem we encountered concerned the obvious misgendering of Aleksandrov in both articles. How could we reconcile our goal to restore Aleksandrov's own gender identification with an inconsistent use of masculine pronouns by Lashmanov and Kutshe? The established principles of queering translation (Epstein, Gillet 2017) in this case clashed with our commitment to historical accuracy when presenting these unusual sources to an Anglophone audience. In the end, we settled on faithfully reproducing the dynamic of using both masculine and feminine grammar forms in relation to Aleksandrov in the original Russian, in order to open these texts up for further discussion. Why did both authors oscillate between honouring Aleksandrov's choice and misgendering him within the space of a single article? One possible answer is that they followed Aleksandrov's own use of both feminine and masculine grammar forms in his published fiction (the consistent use of masculine forms in his private communication would have been unknown at the time, as these documents resurfaced only in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). In addition, in a highly gendered language like Russian, where inanimate objects have a grammatical gender unconnected to their function (for example, masculine for "chair" (*stul*) and feminine for "bench" (*skam'ia*)), the use of pronouns to indicate gender would be less significant than in English. Therefore, grammatical gendering of the subject can be less important for defining their gender identity than, for example, the use of proper names.^{ix} Editing these inconsistencies out and smoothing them over in translation would erase the openness and genuine sympathy for gender ambiguity that both articles represent. In our view, negative misgendering in these texts is balanced out by the positive support for Aleksandrov's transmasculine identity, producing a grammatical subject which is gendered as both male and female.

Linguistically, the main challenge we faced was preserving the cultural context of these nineteenth-century Russian texts through the use of language rather than explanatory footnotes. One example is our attempt at rendering Aleksandrov's military rank and social class visible to Anglophone audiences. As a decorated soldier, who enjoyed private audiences with the Tsar Aleksandr I as well as brief career as a celebrity, Aleksandrov outranked almost everyone in his immediate surroundings. His family of high-ranking civil servants had an important standing in the provincial towns where he lived. The tone of the two articles is noticeably deferential in that regard in the original Russian: Aleksandrov is often referred to specifically as "Captain-Lieutenant" and as a close friend of other high-ranking members of the local society. This suggests that Aleksandrov's high status had some bearing on how accepting the provincial public was of his transmasculinity. To address this issue, we have

translated, rather than transliterated (a more common practice in translating nineteenth-century Russian texts) the ranks and titles throughout, using their closest equivalents in English (Captain-Lieutenant for *shtabs-rotmistr*, Police Chief for *gorodnichii*, etc.)

Finally, another issue that needed contextualization in translation was the political significance of locations where Aleksandrov's spent most of his life. The towns of Sarapul, where he was born, and Elabuga, where he retired, are now located, respectively, in the neighboring republics of Udmurtia and Tatarstan in the Volga Federal District of the Russian Federation. In Aleksandrov's time, Russia was a contiguous land empire that included territories colonized at different stages of its history. Udmurtia and Tatarstan were colonized during Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan in 1552 (1530-1584) and both regions still have sizable indigenous populations who speak Uralic (Udmurt) and Turkic (Tatar) languages. The local population's views on gender non-conformity would have been informed by frames of reference that were different, historically, culturally, and linguistically, from those employed in European Russia. Local folklore featured prominently in Aleksandrov's fiction (Marsh Flores 2003) and undoubtedly played a role in his own understanding of gender as a conceptual category.^x This local specificity might also explain the acceptance that Aleksandrov experienced in these provinces in contrast to the hostile reception in St Petersburg, Russia's European capital, that he described in his 1838 novella *A Year of Life in St Petersburg, or the Trouble with Third Visits* [God zhizni v Peterburge, ili Nevygody tret'ego poseshcheniia]. In addition, the settler colonial history of Russia's relationship with these locations, coupled with Aleksandrov's own Ukrainian origin, places these texts alongside other sources that are now re-examined in Slavic studies through the prism of post-colonial theory.^{xi} To address this, we have hyper-linked the locations mentioned in the two texts to accessible articles on their political history.

The ethical, linguistic, and political problems discussed above are typical, rather than unique, for translations of non-anglophone trans history (Rose 2016). Working out solutions for these problems specifically for translations from Russian into English highlights the importance of the continuous de-centering of Anglophone perspectives on global trans histories. The history of the reception of Aleksandrov's work in English shows that translations can sometimes erase historical trans identities because of the target language's grammatical limitations. By making the two articles, discussed in this chapter, available in English, we aim to achieve two things. Firstly, to correct the past injustices in translations of texts by and about Aleksandrov that took no account of his linguistically complex gender presentation. Secondly, to expand

the chronology and geography of the known examples of trans life-writing, offering an alternative to more widely known restrictive attitudes to gender-nonconformity in nineteenth-century Western European sources. Incorporating these sources into comparative studies of historical trans life-writing allows us to showcase the plurality of attitudes to gender non-conformity in the past and offers hope for a more tolerant future.

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ⁱFollowing the trailblazing “Decolonising the Transgender Imaginary” issue of the *Transgender Studies Quarterly* in November 2014, this process of reflection crossed disciplinary boundaries into international relations (Weerawardhana 2018), critical pedagogy (Aguilar-Hernández, Cruz, C. 2020), urban education studies (Zaino, Bell 2023) and other fields.

ⁱⁱAs a canonical writer, Aleksandrov has been a subject of continues academic research in Russian and other languages since the 1880s. For the most recent comprehensive study see Prikazchikova 2018; for the latest biography see Begunova 2011, for list of adaptations up to 1988 see Zirin 1998, xxviii–xxix and further in Prikazchikova 2018, 555-570; Vaysman 2022, 34, 56.

ⁱⁱⁱSimilar discrepancies in non-Russian language sources have recently been discussed in Pellegrini 2022.

^{iv} Even though Aleksandrov did not choose this title himself, he appreciated its “vaudeville” nature, which he thought was going to increase the sales of his book (Durova 1983, 423-424).

^v For more on gender in Russian in terms of inclusive usage, see Kirey-Sitnikova 2021.

^{vi} See Savkina 2007, 196 for narratological readings; Schoenle 2001 on Aleksandrov’s use of Gothic tropes; Vaysman 2022, 50-55 on *Notes* as queer autofiction; Averbach 2022, 981 on editorial interventions into Aleksandrov’s work.

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^{viii} Although well-known in Russian-language Aleksandrov scholarship, these two articles are often dismissed as secondary to other accounts that described new archival findings. For a comprehensive list of early posthumous accounts, see Prikazchikova 2018, 9-11.

^{ix} On the semantic category of gender in Russian in a historical and comparative perspective, see Rojavin 2010.

^x Prikazchikova notes that Aleksandrov’s choice to join the army might have been inspired by a local legend about a highwaywoman Felisata (Prikazchikova 2018, 45). As other scholars demonstrate, the Ural region was consistently presented in nineteenth-century Russian travel writing as a “place of co-habitation of Turkic, Finno-Ugric and Slavic peoples” (Firsova 2023, 166).

^{xi} For an application to nineteenth-century Russian sources, see Bojanowska 2022, and for notes on Aleksandrov’s “metapoetic fantasies of empire”, see Hacıoglu 2022.