

CARRYING THE RED MAN'S BURDEN:  
PAVEL LUKNITSKII, OR KIPLING IN THE SOVIET PAMIR

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An expression of the predatory colonial activity  
of English imperialism

The Bolsheviks would never admit to be carrying the white man's burden. Soviet criticism constantly labelled Kipling's work as – to quote the exemplary article from an Encyclopedia from the early Thirties – “an expression of the predatory colonial activity of English imperialism”;<sup>1</sup> yet, much of his poetry (and less of his prose oeuvre, which was already well known before the revolution) was translated and published in Russian during the Soviet period.<sup>2</sup> His poetry, in fact, can be considered the perfect specimen of what was required from the Soviet poet – simple, popular, upbeat, ‘life affirming’ verse; as Dmitrii Bykov put it

[...] since during the XX-th century the Russians marched a lot, they walked in formation and lived in barracks – at construction sites or prison camps, this is no primal difference – Kipling's Barrack-Room Ballads were just about the here-and-now.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding, of course, the formal rejection, the colonialist approach as well was not alien to Soviet official discourse, with its insistence on the – communist, of course – civilizing mission of Russian Bolsheviks in the ‘backward’ Asian republics. Kipling could even act as a substitute for Nikolai Gumilev, the founder of acmeism. Gumilev was a poet in his own right, but his work is filled with exoticism and manly spirit, he travelled to Africa in an

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<sup>1</sup> T. Levit, *Kipling*, in *Literaturnaia enciklopediia*, t. 5, Moskva, Izd-vo Kom. Akad., 1931, col. 203.

<sup>2</sup> See K. Hodgson, *The Poetry of Rudyard Kipling in Soviet Russia*, “Modern Language Review”, 93 (1998) 4, pp. 1058-1071.

<sup>3</sup> D. Bykov, *Portretnaia galereia Dmitriia Bykova: Red'iard Kipling*, “Diletant”, 12 (24) (2013), pp. 88-94, (<http://ru-bykov.livejournal.com/2014/03/09/>, viewed 9 August 2017).

expedition from the Russian Academy of Sciences and served as a cavalry officer in World War I, and was known in his lifetime as “the Russian Kipling”. He was a model, and in many cases a teacher,<sup>4</sup> for many a first-rank Soviet poet (first of all Nikolai Tikhonov, the long-time first secretary of the Soviet writers’ union) but, having been executed in 1921 for purportedly taking part in a purported counter-revolutionary conspiracy, his name simply could not be mentioned until well into the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that well into the era of perestroika another leading Soviet poet (and another translator of Kipling’s poetry), Konstantin Simonov, in his revisionist memoir about the Stalin years, recounts being unjustly accused in his youth of taking inspiration by the fiendish Gumilev, while in fact, as he states, he loved Kipling more: the British imperialist writer was evidently considered a more legitimate object of admiration than his Russian counterpart.<sup>6</sup>

These considerations can solve the apparent contradictions in the picture of Pavel Luknitskii (1900-1973): he is most often remembered nowadays as the author of a memoir about Anna Akhmatova, an icon of the opposition to the Soviet regime, whom he met while researching the life and work of Gumilev, her former husband.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, like an enthusiast Soviet writer, he tirelessly travelled the country, especially its far-off, lesser-known spots, took part in official expeditions in order to document the progress of Soviet civilization throughout the land, and he published travelogues and fiction based on them. At the heart of his literary work are three expeditions in the Pamir in 1930 and 1931; he published travelogues in many different versions and finally the novel *Nisso*, which came out in a dozen editions for a total print run of around one million in Russian alone between 1946 and 2005. Three films and two operas are based on the novel, which should consequently be considered a classic of Soviet literature about the Asian republics.

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<sup>4</sup> In his last years, Gumilev was as a teacher to many young poets – he taught, besides, poetic translation at the Vsemirnaia literatura publishing house; most of Kipling’s translators were his pupils.

<sup>5</sup> See I. Martynov, *Kipling i Gumilev – poety dvuch imperii: K voprosu o sud’be poeticheskogo naslediiia R. Kiplinga v Rossii*, “Vestnik Russkogo Christianskogo Dvizheniia”, 151 (1987), pp. 166-189.

<sup>6</sup> K. Simonov, *Glazami cheloveka moego pokoleniia*, “Znamia”, 3 (1988), p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> According to his son, in 1927 Luknitskii was arrested by the OGPU, and set free after two weeks after promising to destroy his Gumilev papers (see S. Luknitskii, *Est’ mnogo sposobov ubit’ poeta (sotsial’no-pravovoe issledovanie)*, Moskva, Russkij dvor, 2002); while a former KGB officer asserted that he informed the OGPU on Akhmatova (see V. Chernykh, *Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestva Anny Akhmatovoi*, Moskva, URSS, 1998).

## There is no such word in your language

Nisso is a poor orphan girl in a mountain village who, at the age of maybe 13 or 14, is sold as a wife to Aziz-Khon, the sovereign of a khanate across the river. When the old man claims his marital right, she runs away, crosses the river alone at the danger of her life and ends up in the settlement of Siatang, where a Russian, Aleksandr Medvedev, known there as Sho-Pir, is organizing the poor peasants to dig a new canal for irrigating virgin land and end up their dependence on the rich and the merchant. Nisso falls in love with Medvedev, but he finds her too young – his young friend Bakhtior, besides, the head of the village Soviet, loves her too. Through the ploys of an imperialist agent disguised as a wandering barber, the khan occupies the village with the pretext of taking back his runaway wife – this should damage the peace talks between the Soviet Union and the neighbour state, but the khan's army is too easily defeated by Red soldiers with the help of the now politically conscious villagers; Bakhtior conveniently dies in the skirmish, and, in the final scene, we assist at the meeting of Nisso and Medvedev, now a legitimate pair travelling to the north to see what real life is, with a big party of Soviet frontier troops on their way to finally seal the southern border from incursions.

In Luknitskii's plot, the pattern of what Peter Hulme has labelled as "colonial triangle"<sup>8</sup> can be easily traced, and the novel can be read as an allegory of the virgin land raped by the wild (southern, 'black', imperialist) man and offering herself to his civilized (northern, white, communist) rival – who initially rejects her because of her age. The book's object is, after all, Kipling's Great Game as seen from the other side of the mountains a few years later, and it contains an explicit reference to *Kim* in the epigraphs, all taken from poems by the novel's author and quoted only by the title, which open each chapter;<sup>9</sup> more than in Kipling's work, the reader here is confronted at every step by depictions of the miserable life and backwardness of the mountaineers, while the Russian hero is explicitly working to bring them to an understanding of what civilized living means. In one of the most striking examples, Medvedev has built for himself and Bakhtior a Russian house, with windows, wooden beds and table – something totally new for Nisso:

<sup>8</sup> See P. Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the native Caribbean, 1492-1797*, London and New York, Routledge, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> According to the writer's widow, "the novel is ethnographic, provided with epigraphs taken from his own poetry – this reminds the characteristic features of Gumilev's work" (V. Luknitskaia, *Nikolai Gumilev: Zhizn' poeta po materialam domashnego arkhiva sem'i Luknitskikh*, Leningrad, Lenizdat, 1990, p. 7).

Nisso had never seen white walls before. All around the ground was flat, of a kind she also had never seen: wooden, and as clean as a bowl just washed in hot water (...) Nisso lays her head on the pillow and sees the ceiling above her – not a black stone smoke-stained ceiling but a clear one, just as clean as the floor.<sup>10</sup>

The table and the bench are so unfamiliar that there is no word to name them in the local language, and Medvedev has to teach the girl how to sit down:

Here, Nisso, – Sho-Pir lightly pushed her, sitting down at the table, – this is called a ‘bench’, a Russian word, there is no such word in your language. Enough squatting on your heels, now you will sit at the table as I do. Choose yourself a place.<sup>11</sup>

This strikes an echo with Kipling, where he writes that “Where a native would have lain down, Kim’s white blood set him upon his feet”.<sup>12</sup> A similar reverberation is manifest in the scene where Nisso breaks a gramophone by pouring milk in the trumpet to feed the singing man, just as Kim had broken a phonograph during his first night at Lurgan Sahib’s by plunging his jacket “in the mouth of the box” to shut down the evil voice.

As customary for a Soviet novel, the book is loaded with what is intended to be considered first-hand information. As often stated on the back covers of Soviet editions, “the action takes place in a mysterious, apparently fantastic, but in fact absolutely real mountain country”.<sup>13</sup> The Pamir is never mentioned, only the High Mountains are, but nobody the least familiar with Soviet geography, or indeed Luknitskii’s previous work, could be mistaken; the “Great Border River”, consequently, cannot be but the Pianj or Oxus, marking the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The depiction of the life of the mountaineers is therefore presented as ethnographic information collected by the author during his travels. Much of this information, however, appears highly arguable.

The locals’ point of view does not seem to be available in European languages but, for instance, what Luknitskii writes about “their strange religion”, ismailism, hardly matches with what is known about it.

[...] their strange religion is such, that it does not require any prayer from them; in the old times the *pir* alone prayed for the whole village, all that was needed was to bring him the last little goat, bring him everything his commanding look would stop on in the offering days. God is faraway, god has no need to listen to the lamentations and

<sup>10</sup> P. Luknitskii, *Nisso*, Moskva, Geleos, 2004, pp. 98-99.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> R. Kipling, *Kim*, London, Penguin, 2000, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> P. Luknitskii, *Nisso: roman*, Moskva, Molodaia Gvardiia, 1962, p. 2.

prayers of worthless fellows, – he listens only to the *pirs*, the only ones who know how to talk to him.<sup>14</sup>

This sounds surprising enough, if we consider that ismailism, through complex and highly differentiated, is known to be a basically mystic, initiatory religion.

What's more, throughout the novel the conservative party in the village is named that of "the followers of the Established", implying a set of immutable rules connected to, if not derived from, religion. One of the leading scholars on ismailism,<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Ivanov (coincidentally, a Russian educated, just as Luknitskii, at the Faculty of Oriental Languages of St. Petersburg University, who however after the revolution left the Soviet Union to live and work first in India, then in Iran), writes:

Stagnation which is inseparable from many great religions which preach 'eternity' and unchangeability of their eternal principles, works as a powerful brake on every form of advance in all aspects of life. The priceless advantage of the Ismaili system is its doctrine of Imam and ta'wil. Both these together imply an ample means of what resembles automatic regulation. The doctrine of the obligatoriness of the ta'wil authorized by the Imam removes the effect of obsolescing, of lagging behind the progressing life. In many other religions every 'innovation', however legitimate, is bound to be the source of fierce accusations of 'altering the eternal law given by God'; this leads to dissensions, fights, hereticism, etc. In Ismailism, if properly used, the system of authorized ta'wil explains the application of the basic religious principles to the ever-changing forms of life in the society, and guides the community in its attitude to all that is of advantage for its progress.<sup>16</sup>

This, according to Ivanov, is connected to an egalitarian social doctrine:

Ismailism, as it developed a thousand years ago was not only a religion, i.e., a system of organized inner life of an individual, but also an ideology, a system of social organization. Its great ideal was surprisingly modern: equality in what is now called a classless society, based on a thorough and effective system of cooperation.

The society depicted by Luknitskii is all but egalitarian, and the connections between religion and social order are implied rather explicitly:

These people were divided into castes. The upper caste, 'shan', was the caste of the khans, the local lords. The second in order was the caste of the *seids*. The *seids* were servants to the living god, the *pirs* and the *khalifas*. The people of Siatang offered their

<sup>14</sup> P Luknitskii, *Nisso*, cit., p. 243.

<sup>15</sup> See F. Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007, p. 310.

<sup>16</sup> W. Ivanov, *The Importance of Studying Ismailism*, Ismaili Web Intro Page – <http://www.amaana.org/ISWEB/ivanow1.htm> (viewed 9 august 2017).

prayers and sent their tributes though the *pir*, who lived together with the khan in Siatang village. To Duob, Zarkhok and other villages the *pir* sent his substitute, the *khalifa*, to collect tributes. The *seids* were considered “the shade of god on earth”, and consequently each request of the *pir* and the *khalifa* was just a request from god himself. In each village there lived also substitutes of the khan, from the caste of *mirs*. The fourth caste, the *akobyrs*, constituted the khan’s militia, and to the fifth, lesser caste of the *rayats*, or *fakirs*, were ascribed all peasants. They worked their little stony fields just to give to the upper castes all their harvests of wheat, barley, millet, peas, mulberries and apricots. And they always stayed hungry.<sup>17</sup>

We have no definitive argument to confute this statement; it strikes, however, for its similarity to the rough-cut scheme of class relations in the Russian countryside presented by Soviet propaganda when campaigning for collectivization, where economic categories – *kulak*, *seredniak*, *bednota* – *kulak*, middle peasant, poor (maybe not so incidentally, the meaning of the Arab word *fakir*) were raised to absolutes (castes?).

#### Try to pronounce it on your tongue

The plot of *Nisso*, in fact, can be read as composed by the “colonial triangle” story discussed above and a ‘collectivization’ story strongly reminding of Soviet novels about the countryside. Many plot turns parallel those in the principal specimen of this kind, Mikhail Sholokhov’s *Virgin Soil Upturned*.

Here, too, the hero – Davydov – is stranger to the place: he is a factory worker from Leningrad sent to the far-off Cossack lands to help the collectivization campaign (oddly enough, taking into account that Sholokhov himself was – or the Soviet myth pretended he was – a Cossack) and trying, from one side, to understand the peculiar customs he meets, and from the other to enlighten the backward peasantry. There is an enemy agent – the former officer Polovtsev – living underground in the village; even the funny characters – Old Shchukhar in Sholokhov, Kharashir in Luknitskii – share a similar function and many characteristic traits. What’s more, both novels share one of the central plot turns – the enemies agitate the peasantry not to deliver their wheat to the Soviet institutions collecting it for the following seeding campaign. In *Virgin Soil Upturned* the enemy agent receives this letter from his organization:

We obtained reliable information that the Bolsheviks’ CC is collecting wheat from the peasantry, nominally for the kolkhos seeding. In fact this wheat will be sold abroad and peasants, kolkhos peasants included, will condemned to cruel hunger. [...] Your

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<sup>17</sup> P. Luknitskii, *Nisso*, cit., pp. 69-70.

orders are to campaign between the population of Gremiachii Log, where you represent now our Union, against the collection of wheat.<sup>18</sup>

In *Nisso*, when a Soviet caravan brings flour to the village and the local Soviet is distributing it in exchange for wheat seed, Karashir confesses why he has no wheat to give:

Listen, Sho-Pir! The merchant told everyone: “The caravan won’t come, you’ll have no flour. Bakhtior and Sho-Pir are cheating you. The wheat you collected they have sold to new, Soviet merchants; Bakhtior has gone to bring them here: they’ll come with rifles, they’ll take the wheat. Before they come, go to Bobo-Kalon on the sly, he’ll open the mill for you, grind your wheat, bake yourself flatbreads, bring me what’s left [...] Every time you’ll need to bake flatbreads come to me, I’ll always give you what you need. And in spring I’ll go to the domains of Aziz-Khon and I’ll bring here wheat as I did the last five years.<sup>19</sup>

This striking similarity can be best explained by Alexander Etkind’s theory of “internal colonization”:<sup>20</sup> Luknitskii could use Sholokhov as a model for his colonial novel because Sholokhov himself, following a long tradition, shared much of a colonial attitude towards Russian peasants. His peasants are, in fact, Cossacks – as such, of uncertain status: after much debate, they were classified as a separate nationality in the 1926 census, but not in the following;<sup>21</sup> but the attitude would have been the same had the location been the central Russian countryside.

One of the most striking examples of this common attitude concerns linguistic peculiarities: Medvedev is known between the natives as Sho-Pir (the *pirs*’ Shah, his enemies used the loftiness of the name for irony); this is how he explains to Nisso the origins of the nickname:

There is the Russian word ‘*shofior*’ – added Sho-Pir at the end of a long tale. – You call that a man that rides... well, say – iron horses and drives them. When I came here – Bakhtior, you should remember, – Bobo-Kalon asked me: “Who are you?” I answered: “A chauffeur”. And try, Nisso, to pronounce on your tongue: ‘ff’. It won’t come out, you see? On your tongue it will come out as ‘pp’, and they called me ‘Sho-Pir’, it’s not my fault that in your language this means ‘the lord of the *pirs*’... We don’t have such a word... they laughed at me, Nisso, that’s why they called me this...<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> M. Sholokhov, *Sobranie sochinenii. V 8 t. T. 6. Podniataia celina: Kniga pervaiia*. Moskva, Gos. izd-vo chudozh. Lit., 1958, pp. 186-187.

<sup>19</sup> P. Luknitskij, *Nisso*, cit., pp. 230-231.

<sup>20</sup> See A. Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Cambridge and Maiden, Polity Press, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> See F. Hirsh, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca and London, Cornell UP, 2005, pp. 123, 133.

<sup>22</sup> P. Luknitskii, *Nisso*, cit., p. 122.

‘Chauffeur’ is of course no Russian word. And the sound ‘f’ – exactly the sound ‘f’ – is met in Russian only in foreign words, the inability to pronounce it very often characterizes country people in Russian novels – in *Virgin Soil Upturned*, for instance, we find one character pronouncing *oshtrakhoval* for *oshtrafoval* – fined – and another one using *galikhve* for *galife* – riding breeches.<sup>23</sup>

### There lived a nationality

These colonial relations notwithstanding, in *Virgin Soil Upturned* the feeling of national solidarity is one of the fundamental motives for the Cossacks not to join the uprising the enemies are planning. The basic reason for this failure is of course Stalin’s article *Dizzy with Success*; but, when confronted with the evil officer Polovtsev, an old Cossack explains his refusal in national terms:

You told that the allies, in the case of an uprising, they’ll send us in a minute guns and every kind of military equipment. All we have to do is just to shoot the communists down. And later we started thinking, and what comes out of it? Guns they’ll bring us, this is no expensive commodities, but what if they’ll want to get into our land? And if they get here, how we’ll get rid of them? Or we’ll have to throw them out of the Russian land with fire, too. The communists, they are of our kin, so-to-speak, locals, natural, but those, they speak the devil knows how, they go around proud, and they won’t give you snow in winter, and if you find yourself in their hands, don’t ask for mercy!<sup>24</sup>

Exactly the same scheme is at work in *Nisso*, this time with no other motive present. Here what Sholokhov’s Cossack feared actually takes place – Siatang is occupied by Aziz-Khon, the khan of Iakhbar, and his men. Bobo-Kalon, the grandson of the last khan of Siatang, is named khan; but the brutality shown by the occupants causes him to react:

I did not call you, Aziz-Khon. You came by choice. You said: “Be a Khan. I’ll come and destroy the infidels, I’ll glorify the light of truth, and go”. I believed you, Aziz-Khon, although my ancestors did not believe your ancestors that came to conquer our country. I thought that now the times are different and the old disputes between the faithful ones will be forgotten! I accepted and I stayed silent when you, Aziz-Khon, held your judgment! I thought: the Established will shine again. But you came, and cries are heard over Siatang, like the rocks themselves had fallen on our hearts.<sup>25</sup>

The hostility between the local people and the occupants is therefore what makes the imperialist plot to fail; the people of Siatang turns away from the

<sup>23</sup> M. Sholokhov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, cit., pp. 33, 286.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, pp. 224-225.

<sup>25</sup> P. Luknitskii, *Nisso*, cit., p. 339.



invaders from Iakhbar and helps the Red soldiers who come to liberate them. What in *Virgin Soil Upturned* was an accessory motive, here has become the key. Even former class enemies are redeemed by their patriotism: the real enemies are the people from across the border.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Luknitskii's novel is a typical expression of Stalinist culture, where, according to Vladimir Paperny, "the border [...] assumes the meaning of the border between Good and Evil", where "the axis [...] turns by 90°, and the border is now located in the geographical space and no longer in the social one".<sup>27</sup> The frontier guard was one of the main cultural heroes of the era; in 1931, Luknitskii acted as a guide for the detachment that came to secure the border (the same the heroes meet in the novel's epilogue). According to his widow,

During the march he became a big friend of the frontier troops, and this friendship lasted up to his death. Naturally he became the first writer on the frontier theme, at least of this mountain region.<sup>28</sup>

The border concerned is the one that runs between Soviet Tajikistan and Afghanistan; but we can be more precise. Siatang corresponds surely enough to the former khanate of Shugnan, at the time part of the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region of the Tajik Soviet Republic. Shugnan is described in one of the most fortunate parts of Luknitskii's travelogue, *Searching for the Blue Stone of the Pamir*, and the reader of the novel will surely recognize the place;<sup>29</sup> in 2013, the last of the films based on *Nisso*, a three-part mini-series produced by Tajik television, has been translated into 'Shughni' with the help

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<sup>26</sup> In the novel, the word for Aziz-Khon's soldiers is *basmachi*. In one of his most fortunate travelogues, first published in 1931, and known in different versions as *At the Feet of Death* or *The Basmachi on the Alai*, Luknitskii tells the story of how he was held prisoner by a group of *basmachi* in Eastern Pamir together with the members of the 1930 geological expedition, and defined the word as follows: "In Central Asia everybody knows this word. The *Basmachi* are active counter-revolutionaries. They are those enemies of Soviet power who stand up against it with guns in their hands" (P. Luknitskii, *Izbrannoe*, Moskva, Chudozhestvennaia literatura, 1971, p. 470). In *Nisso* the term is not defined – by the time of the publication of the novel, it was already in the dictionaries of Russian. The *basmachi* in the 1931 travelogue, however, are insurgent Kirgiz nomads living in Soviet territory. In *Nisso*, they come from across the border.

<sup>27</sup> V. Papernii, *Kul'tura dva*, Moskva, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006, p. 78

<sup>28</sup> V. Luknitskaia, *Pered toboi zemlia*, Leningrad, Lenizdat, 1988, p. 139.

<sup>29</sup> The travelogue is the story of a travel to Shugnan with a geological expedition in search of a vein of the rare lazurite; the Russians, consequently, visited the country in order to *take* its resources, while in the novel their only purpose is to help the Asian 'younger brothers'.

of a grant by the Foundation for Endangered Languages.<sup>30</sup> It is taken for granted that it is a translation in the language of the place where the action is set; the translator, Firuz Sabzaliev, presented the work on youtube as translated into the “Pamir (Shugnan) language”.<sup>31</sup>

A Pamiri nationality, comprising the Shugnans, Vakhans, and Ishkashims that were included in the list of nationalities used for the 1926 census, was conceived in the mid-thirties by the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography as “new *natsional’nost*’ that had formed through the ‘mutual assimilation’ of the inhabitants of Gorno-Badakhshan”.<sup>32</sup> The list of nationalities submitted by the Census Bureau to the Soviet of Nationalities in 1936 “amalgamated the Iagnobs, Iazguls, Shugnans, Vakhans, and Ishkashims *all* into the Tajiks – on the grounds that the growth of Tajik culture in the region made their future ‘Tajikification’ inevitable”.<sup>33</sup> Notwithstanding an attempt by the IAE to restore them as separated nationalities, this was the choice for the 1939 census. In 1975, the last edition of the Soviet Encyclopedia – where an entry for *shugnantsy*, the nationality, refers to a complex *Pamir nationalities*, states that

In the USSR in connection with the transformations of economy and culture of the P. n. their separation is being overcome and a gradual consolidation with the Tajiks in a unified nation is taking place (according to the 1970 census the P. n. ranked themselves with the Tajiks).<sup>34</sup>

Data about nationalities in Soviet Census were usually not collected according to self-declarations by the respondents, but rather to a centrally established list; we do not have precise information about the 1970 campaign, but it is very probable that the choice to register members of the “Pamiri nationalities” as Tajiks should have come from the centre, no matter what could they have been declared themselves to be.

The definition of Shugnan as a nation, therefore, was not unproblematic. In the opening pages of the novel, in fact, Luknitskii introduces his characters as a ‘nationality’ (*narodnost*’ – the term used in the 1926 list):

The information about the Siatang river available in the years we are talking about – old years now – were of course very poor compared to what we know now. But let us

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<sup>30</sup> Foundation for Endangered Languages, *OGMIOS newsletter* 50: 30 april 2013 – [http://www.ogmios.org/ogmios/Ogmios\\_050.pdf](http://www.ogmios.org/ogmios/Ogmios_050.pdf) (viewed 9 august 2017).

<sup>31</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcJw-awOC0A>.

<sup>32</sup> F. Hirsh, *Empire of Nations*, cit., p. 279.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 282.

<sup>34</sup> L. Monogarova, 1975, *Pripamirskie narodnosti*, in *Bol’shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*, t. 20, Moskva, Sovetskaia enciklopediia, 1975.

get back to those years and we'll see: regardless of any geographical report the Siatang river, born between glaciers, runs down through the canyon it dug in tens of thousands of years and gives life to a little nationality of mountaineers. They speak their own Siatang language,<sup>35</sup> they have their own history, full of events, and together with all the immense Soviet land after the October revolution they started their life anew.<sup>36</sup>

By choosing the word *narodnost*' the writer both assumes that the people from Siatang are part of an ethnically defined group and retains from speaking of a fully accomplished *nation*. And if the national status of Siatang remains problematic, the national hostility between Siatang and Iakhbar on which the resolution of the plot is based on cannot be taken for granted without further discussion.

According to Russian sources from the imperial period, Shugnans turned to the Russians for rescue when suffering the hardships of Afghan occupation, and they celebrated their annexation to the empire as a liberation: a report by the military engineer A. Serebrennikov includes a letter received by a Russian scientific expedition:

All the people of Shugnan and Roshan, from the first to the last, explain to You, that the Afghans want to bring us into subjection, but our desire is to give ourselves to the Russians. [...] Ask to send troops, please, please!<sup>37</sup>

(Once again, a sexual metaphor can be easily traced in the text). In Luknitskii's text this motive is repeated almost literally:

Once they had become Soviet, the High Mountains looked like a juicy titbit to the imperialists that ruled over the neighbouring khanates. The mountaineers from the High Mountains did not have weapons for self-defense. And then from the District a delegation headed on horses and feet towards the other side of the High Mountains, to the Russians: "Help us hold our land, that we liberated from the khans..."<sup>38</sup>

Although the novel is set in 1930, its plot appears to come straight from the Nineteenth century. The resolution had come in 1895 when an agreement was reached between Russia and Great Britain to set on the Pianj river the border to their respective ambitions; according to the tsarist officer

1895, the year when Shugnan joined Russia, will be the era of a new, happy life for the country's population, which always had a propensity for the Russians, loved them,

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<sup>35</sup> The word rendered here with 'language' is in the original *narechie*, neither language nor dialect, but a rather ambiguous solution – maybe a way to avoid a choice. In the following, however, the term *iazyk* (language) is often used.

<sup>36</sup> P. Luknitskii, *Nisso*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> A. Serebrennikov, *Ocherki Shugnana*, "Sbornik geograficheskikh, topograficheskikh i statisticheskikh materialov po Azii", vol. LXX (1896), pp. 1-52.

<sup>38</sup> P. Luknitskii, *Nisso*, cit., p. 37.

waited as the best of luck to become subjects to the Great White Tsar<sup>39</sup> and whose

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<sup>39</sup> The expression ‘White tsar’, according to David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, “was still used in dealing with Asian nomads into the nineteenth century”, although it dates back to the fact that “the color white indicated the West in Mongolian geography, and Sarai’s chief Russian Appointee was therefore known as the ‘White Prince.’ When Muscovy’s rulers began to view themselves as the khan’s equal, they restyled themselves as the ‘White Tsar.’” (D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration*, New Haven&London, Yale Univ. Press, 2000, p. 246.) It is no hard guess that, in the later use of the locution, a connection to pigmentation, originally absent, was added. — Differences in pigmentation, in *Nisso*, are underlined in an all-but-neutral way, and even constructed – do Pamir people differ much from Russians in terms of physical appearance? Kendyri, the enemy agent in the village, is visited by a representative of the power he is working for, a man he calls “my dear *ferengi*” (“European”, in Arab); their dialogue is symptomatic:

– What else would you like now? - quoth the *ferengi* with a smile.

– A bathtub, my friend... A white enamelled bathtub with hot water and a shower... By the way, how did you manage to turn your knees to such an honourable state? You look as you were totally covered in hippo skin!

– The recipe is simple: clay, a little ash. A splash of molten mutton fat with sand also helps. Rub it on your skin each day. You only need to build the general background first. An even simpler solution is to get a good tan for two or three months in good sun... And how do you arrange things?

– Well, I am no European, you know! - Kendyri burst into a laugh. - The colour of my skin is natural. I use something too, though. And I dream of a bathtub, of a good bathtub!” (P. Luknitskii, *Nisso*, cit., p. 226)

Once again, we are reminded of Kim, who, as the reader of Kipling’s novel learns at the very first page, “though he was burned black as any native... was white”. (R. Kipling, *Kim*, cit., p. 49). (Pursuing the parallel, one might conclude that, if the *ferengi* is Kim, Kendyri might be Hurree Babu, but, of course, this would mean taking the analogy to the point of very limited usefulness). The conversation carries on to include an exchange about one “mutual friend” who cannot join them in Siatang, once again, because of his visual appearance:

– His eyes are keeping him from coming.

– Did he start to see poorly?

– He still possesses an excellent sight, you know! But did you forget? His eyes are not like mine or yours, they are too fair.

– Ah! You’re right... But between the local natives too, sometimes, there happens someone with grey eyes... Sometimes you can even take them for Russians.

– In any case, he has been acknowledged unfit” (P. Luknitskii, *Nisso*, cit., p. 227).

Ambiguously enough, although no concrete physical trait can be mentioned that would enable to tell a local from a European at first sight, the difference is stated in bureaucratic terms. In the English version of Serebrennikov’s report of his visit to Shugnan, published in 1900 in the Royal Geographical Society journal, this is plainly stated: “Barred from any but

feelings towards Russia never shook a bit, notwithstanding the fact that they were the main reason for all the misfortunes that this hard-suffering and gracious people underwent.<sup>40</sup>

There is no need to comment on the colonialist attitude of the writer – this “gracious” (*simpatichnii*) people “waited as the best of luck to become subjects”...

This agreement, in fact, had cut Shugnan in two; Luknitskii’s Iakhbar is nothing but the portion of Shugnan on the left bank of the Pianj, that from 1895 found itself definitively in Afghanistan. The border, which symbolic function is so important for the novel’s meaning, was traced by an agreement between two colonial powers. The meaning of the border becomes in *Nisso* almost magical, so important that it is strengthened by the legend of the dragon Ashtar-i-Kalon, living in the river and devouring those daring to cross it unprotected by the proper spells: once again, we are not able to prove that this is the author’s invention, but everything seems to suggest it. By means of this legend the divide between two empires’ spheres of influence becomes the site of the locals’ ancestral fears. Thus, Luknitskii’s text constructs this colonial border as the ground for Shugnan’s “national self-determination”,<sup>41</sup> which the power of the Soviets “brought” to the land: to become a nation for the local people was a fundamental step on the path they had to walk in order to become part of the Soviet family.

#### Abstract

Carrying the Red Man’s Burden: Pavel Luknitskii, or Kipling in the Soviet Pamir

Kipling’s work in the Soviet Union was heavily criticized as an expression of imperialism; yet, it was widely read and translated – it was clearly more acceptable than that of Nikolai Gumilev, “the Kipling from Tsarskoe Selo”, a purported counter-revolutionary whose name itself was forbidden.

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casual intercourse with the surrounding countries by almost untraversable mountains and the neighbouring desert, the Tajiks of Shugnan were forced to intermarry among themselves, and thus to keep pure, though debilitated, their original Aryan blood.” ([A. Markoff], *On the Afghan Frontier: A Reconnaissance in Shugnan (Notes from a Russian Officer’s Journal*, “The Geographical Journal”, vol. 16, n. 6 (1900), pp. 666-679, 672).

<sup>40</sup> A. Serebrennikov, *Ocherki Shugnana*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> P. Luknitskii, *Izbrannoe*, cit., p. 588.

This explains the apparent contradictions in the image of Pavel Luknitskii – from one side, a scholar of Gumilev, from the other, an official Soviet writer. His novel *Nisso* (1946), based on his travels in the Pamir, is a classic of Soviet literature about the Asian republics.

The novel's plot is built around a classic Colonial triangle, mixed with a typical Soviet collectivization story. The setting purportedly reconstructs the Shugnan region that the author described in his travelogues; many traits in the depiction, however, appear to be highly arguable and expose Luknitskii's colonialist attitude. The border between Soviet Tajikistan and Afghanistan, carrying the novel's fundamental symbolic weight, in particular, is nothing but the border between the respective spheres of influence the Russian and the British Empires agreed upon in 1895. The Soviet writers thus needed to construct the Shugnans as a nationality in order to find a place for them inside the Soviet family.

Keywords: Luknitskii, Kipling, Pamir, Colonialism, Soviet literature.