

# How Moscow Did Not Become a World Centre of Marxist Anthropology: Liudmila V. Danilova and the Fate of Soviet 'Revisionism' in the 1960s–1970s

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Cet article fait partie d'une série de six articles initialement présentés dans le cadre du panel « *Historicizing Anachronistic Motives* » qui s'est tenu lors de la première conférence internationale des histoires des anthropologies « *Doing Histories, Imagining Futures* » (4-7 décembre 2023, en ligne) co-organisée par le History of Anthropology Network de l'EASA et l'Université di Pisa avec le soutien de Bérose et de dix autres acteurs institutionnels dans le domaine de l'histoire de l'anthropologie. Le panel a été organisé par David Shankland (Royal Anthropological Institute ; University College London, Royaume-Uni), Christine Laurière (CNRS / UMR9022 Héritages, France) et Frederico Delgado Rosa (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, CRIA Centre for Research in Anthropology, Portugal).

“To fly from London to Moscow, from anthropological discussions at one end to similar discussions at the other, is to shift from one climate and atmosphere to another: it is to move very suddenly from a kind of vacuum to a kind of plenum” – wrote Ernest Gellner in his essay “The Soviet and the Savage” (1975), which featured his encounter with Soviet *etnografiia* for two decades (see Skalnik 2003). The “culture shock” Gellner experienced during his six-week stay in Moscow in 1972 had to do with major differences between British and Soviet anthropological traditions. “Briefly and crudely”, he explained, it was a contrast between an evolutionist-historical and a functionalist-static view of society. While British anthropologists were not interested in the history of societies they studied, Soviet ethnographers were “still primarily interested in the history of mankind and the evolution of society” (Gellner 1975: 596). In view of this contrast, it is no wonder that Gellner chose to base his discussion of Soviet anthropological debates on a close reading of an article written by

Soviet historian Liudmila V. Danilova.

Liudmila V. Danilova's "Controversial Problems of the Theory of Precapitalist Societies" (1971) – originally published in Russian in 1968, "Дискуссионные проблемы теории докапиталистических обществ" – was an introduction to an edited volume titled *Problemy istorii dokapitalisticheskikh obshchestv* (*The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies*) and consisted of 17 chapters by leading Soviet historians and ethnographers on topics ranging from the earliest stages of human history to antiquity and the formation of states in Africa, Eurasia, and medieval Europe. The volume became a kind of manifesto of a new approach to Marxism in the USSR. The present article is an attempt to provide a historical account of the emergence and thorny path of this kind of "revisionist" thinking among Soviet historians, ethnographers and philosophers. Since Liudmila Danilova came to symbolize this intellectual phenomenon, at least outside the USSR, I will concentrate on her work as a scholar, publisher and organizer.

Since Этнография – literally, ethnography, the Russian/Soviet term for sociocultural anthropology – had been part of historical science since the 1930s, ethnographers participated in a wider movement initiated mainly by historians. The headquarters of this movement was the Department of Methodology of History at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences [1] which existed from late 1963 until the division of the Institute of History into two institutes (the Institute of Russian History and the Institute of World History [2]) in 1968. Its head was Mikhail Gefter (1918–1995), a student of Russian nineteenth- and twentieth-century economic history, who later became a prominent dissident. Australian historian Roger D. Markwick sees the history of the department as part of the revival of non-conformism among the "official" intelligentsia during the Khrushchev's Thaw (Markwick 2001: 20–37). Like many reformers before them, these intellectuals considered their efforts as a return to a "true" Marxism, based on more competent reading of the whole corpus of Marx and Engels' writings. Their adversaries, as Danilova put it in her interview with Markwick, knew Marxism only from textbooks, particularly from «История Всесоюзной коммунистической партии (большевиков). Краткий курс» (*The History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, 1938). Their ambitious project was launched at the very moment of Khrushchev's downfall and the beginning of the so-called period of stagnation.

## World History

One of the major tasks of the new Department of Methodology of History was writing a conclusion for *Всемирная история* (*The World History*). Originally conceived in the 1930s and completed in 1965 with the release of the tenth and last volume, *The World History* was a huge project whose actual implementation lasted from 1955 to 1965. In the course of this work, the Soviet "five-stage scheme" was materialized in monumental volumes that gave it weight in all senses of the word and an abundance of data. In a paper read at the 11th International Congress of Historical Sciences in 1960 in Stockholm, the editor-in-chief of *The*

*World History*, academician Evgenii M. Zhukov summarized – and defended – the official reading of world history by Soviet historians in the following terms: “The successive unfolding of socio-economic formations – primitive communal, slaveholding, feudal, capitalist and socialist– represents the unshakable basis of a unified and natural historical process” (Zhukov 1960: 29).

The personal archive of Elena V. Danilova holds a draft of the conclusion to *The World History* by her mother Liudmila Danilova, a manuscript containing a detailed discussion of theoretical problems. This document allows us to assume that L.V. Danilova was the main or sole author of this fundamental text, which put forward a critique of the five-stage theory:

... the development of science has led to the conclusion that there are too many exceptions and atypical things, much more than there are rules. [...] Thus, it becomes obvious that the transition from a classless society to a class society was by no means accomplished according to the unilinear scheme that prevailed during the period of Stalin’s personality cult. [...] The assumption about the existence of transitional early class societies leading either to slavery or feudalism is more than reasonable. [3]

Unsurprisingly, Zhukov did not consent to the publication in his “World History” of a conclusion that casts doubt on the whole concept of the project. This episode might be seen as establishing an unfortunate pattern for Danilova’s attempts to rejuvenate Soviet Marxism: a lot of her works, including a monumental monograph titled Теоретические проблемы феодализма в советской историографии (Theoretical Problems of Feudalism in Soviet Historiography), remained unpublished. [4]

## “Liusia with burning eyes”

In his memoirs, historian Aleksandr Zimin recalled the atmosphere of the Department of Methodology of History in its early days: “In the Department’s overcrowded auditorium, the most complex theoretical issues were discussed and edited volumes prepared. With burning eyes, Liusia [a diminutive for Liudmila] Danilova and some orientalists returned to the question of what the classics had meant when they spoke of the Asiatic mode of production” (Zimin 2015: 247). So, who was this woman with “burning eyes” who was able to discuss “the most complex theoretical issues” in a predominantly male milieu and suggest unorthodox ideas?

Liudmila Valerianovna Danilova (1923–2012) was born in a village in the Smolensk region. Her father, the son of a priest, was repressed, , exiled to Kazakhstan and never returned to his wife. The girl was raised in the family of her grandparents and was only reunited with her mother in Moscow at the age of eight. Upon returning to Moscow after the WWII evacuation, she entered the history department of the Moscow State University and graduated with honors in 1948. In 1952 she defended her PhD thesis, published in 1955 under the title «Очерки по истории землевладения и хозяйства в Новгородской земле в XIV–XV веках» (“Essays on the history of land ownership and economy in the Novgorod

land in the 14th–15th centuries”). In 1951, Liudmila Avduevskaia married Viktor Petrovich Danilov (1925–2004), a future famous agrarian historian, expert on the Soviet pre-collective farm village and collectivization (Zhuravel 2014). By the early 1960s she was a researcher at the Department of Feudalism [5] of the Institute of History with a number of publications and an unpublished monograph «Современная историография США о средневековой России» (*The Modern historiography of the United States on medieval Russia*).

After joining the Department of Methodology of History, she immediately immersed herself in several theoretical discussions. In August 1964, she participated in the 7th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (ICAES) [6] in Moscow, namely by intervening at a symposium – or roundtable – dedicated to L.H. Morgan’s periodization of primitive society in the light of modern ethnography («Учение Л.Г. Моргана о периодизации первобытного общества в свете современной этнографии»). In March 1965, the Department of Methodology of History together with the Department of the Ancient World held a three-day discussion on the Asian mode of production, the results of which were published in the Soviet journals *Вопросы истории*, *Вопросы философии*, *Вестник древней истории*, *Советская этнография* (*Questions of History*, *Questions of Philosophy*, *Bulletin of Ancient History* and *Soviet Ethnography*). [7] Similar seminars were held at the Institute of Philosophy and the Institute of Asian Peoples [8], and Danilova published an article summarizing and commenting the discussions that took place at the Institute of Philosophy. She suggested the similarity of early medieval European and ancient Eastern societies and reiterated the need to revise the “established concept of world historical development” (Danilova 1965: 155). In June 1965, she was part of a group of young and ambitious historians of Russia who prepared a joint paper titled “Переход от феодализма к капитализму в России. Материалы Всесоюзной дискуссии” (“Russia’s transition from feudalism to capitalism”) which was published together with a discussion. They challenged the predominant dogma that the “roots” of capitalism in Russia went back to the Middle Ages, and claimed that its actual development could be dated no earlier than the second half of the nineteenth century (Shunkov *et al*, 1969).

The discussion about the Asian mode of production was undoubtedly the most significant aspect calling into question the Soviet “five-stage system” and giving impetus to Danilova’s statements about the need to revise it. This was the core of an international discussion among Marxist scholars. Hungarian sinologist Ferenc Tökei, British historian Eric Hobsbawm, French Africanist Jean Suret-Canale and anthropologist Maurice Godelier spoke in favour of that challenging hypothesis by the “revisionist” group (Nikiforov 1975: 6–9). The latter two were expected at the Moscow International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. They did not come, but their papers were published in Russian in the journal *Народы Азии и Африки* (*Peoples of Asia and Africa*). It is telling that the contributors to Danilova’s edited volume on *The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies* were, besides Gefter and the ethnographer Vladimir M. Bakhta, supporters of the theory of the Asian mode of production, namely Sinologist Leonid S. Vasiliev and Marxologist Norair B. Ter-Akopian.

## Laws of History

As is obvious from the indication “Book I” on the title page, *Problems of the History of Precapitalist Societies* was supposed to be a multi-volume publication. It was part of the series “Laws of History and Concrete Forms of the World Historical Process”, launched by the Department of Methodology of History. The following quote from the series annotation conveys both its general scope and the intended content of the volumes:

The purpose of the series is formulated in its title. The main task of the publication is the identification of general patterns in the process of social development and specific historical formations in the manifestation of these patterns, showing the real diversity of paths and forms of social evolution. In this regard, much attention is paid to the analysis of facts determining, on the one hand, the progressive change of social structures, and on the other, the presence of various models and variants within the same structure.

Currently, work is underway on four issues of the series. The first two issues are devoted to the debatable problems of primitive and early class societies, the third to the cardinal problems of feudalism, the fourth to the general theory of social formations and analysis of the logical apparatus used by historians. [9]

The first volume of the series – the only one that was ever published – was ready by the summer of 1966. In July, it was approved by the Academic Council of the Institute of History. During the discussion of the volume, speakers emphasized the novelty and controversial character of its many theories. The prominent ethnographer Sergei A. Tokarev, who wrote positive reviews, emphasized that the theme of community was the focus of ethnography in general and of the articles presented by ethnographers, and that “the question of the Asiatic mode of production obviously comes down to the question of the role of the community”. He also expressed confidence that it was necessary to give the discussion “a broader publicly organized form, because until now many such heretical points of view simply did not have a forum for publication”. [10] The volume contained two series of articles, one devoted to primitive societies, the second to early class and ancient societies.

Danilova’s introduction, “Controversial Problems of the Theory of Precapitalist Societies”, became perhaps her most famous work. Approaching Marxism as a developing theory and not a set of dogmas, she called Soviet Marxism of the 1930s a “scheme” that no longer corresponded to the modern state of scholarship. While the idea of the universality of the slave-owning formation had already been discarded, disputes about the relationship between clan and community split scholars of primitive society into two opposing camps. The issue of the role of the “economic factor” at this stage of human history was not resolved. Societies arising from the decomposition of the primitive communal system also did not fit into the standard picture of the slave-owning and feudal formations. Social inequality arose long before the concentration of ownership of the means of production in the hands of the ruling classes. This led to “raising the question of the existence of a single pre-capitalist class formation, within which individual options should be distinguished: feudal, slaveholding,

Asian” (Danilova 1968: 46). In addition, she wrote, “the emergence of social stratification precedes property differentiation” (ibid.: 51–52), which contradicted the vulgar economism of the five-stage scheme. In pre-capitalist societies, the producer was “organically” tied to the material conditions of their work (the land), whereas under capitalism the producer was alienated from them. Consequently, “the connections that dominated in all pre-capitalist structures were non-economic”, as, for example, under the caste system (ibid.: 59).

These ideas clearly did not fit into the orthodox version of Soviet historical materialism, and the reaction to them followed immediately. In 1969, historian, minister of education of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic RSFSR, and Danilova’s namesake Aleksandr I. Danilov published the article “К вопросу о методологии исторической науки” (On the Question of the Methodology of Historical Science) in *КОММУНИСТ* (*Communist*), the journal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The main object of his attack was the structuralism of historians M.A. Barg and A.Ya. Gurevich. However, Danilova’s article in *The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies* was mentioned as “in the most consistent form” expressing the idea that the role of production economic relations in pre-capitalist societies was not decisive (Danilov 1969: 74–75). Danilova immediately responded to these accusations in a detailed letter to the editors of *Communist*. She distanced herself from structuralism and concentrated on the problem of the role of economics in pre-capitalist formations. Drawing on numerous quotations from classics, she argued that “the article does not in the least doubt the determining role of production in social life. [...] The point is only that at pre-capitalist stages this role manifests itself differently than under capitalism”. [11] The letter was not published, and the prospects of the publication of the following volumes were doomed. They were meant to include contributions by foreign scholars, namely: Jean Chesneaux, Charles Parain and Jean Suret-Canale from France, Timoteus Pokora and Jan Pečírka from Czechoslovakia, and Ferenc Tókei from Hungary. Danilova’s papers indicate her plans to contact Eric Hobsbawm and Zigmund Bauman, among others.

## An Uneasy Dialogue

While a letter to *Communist* was not even expected to be published, it is more difficult to explain why *Current Anthropology* did not publish Danilova’s comment to Gellner’s “The Soviet and the Savage”. Danilova’s archive preserves several versions of her commentary and a telegram indicating that it was sent to the editor-in-chief of *Current Anthropology* Cyril Belshaw. There is also a translation of Belshaw’s letter to Yuliia P. Averkieva, in which he expresses his wish: “We, of course, would like to have a commentary from you, Bromley, Danilova, Leo Klein, Olga Akhmanova and others”. [12] The article was published with comments (from the Soviet side) by Olga S. Akhmanova, Yulian V. Bromley, Aleksandr I. Pershits, Yuliai P. Averkieva and Yuri I. Semenov. Danilova’s archive contains more than ten versions of her answer in Russian and English, some of them marked as “original?”, “second version”, “Bromley’s edition” and “compromise I”. Danilova’s comment, however, was not published. The reasons for this are not clear, especially since this text was devoted to explaining the fact that Gellner, who was a proponent of a multifactorial explanation of

history, misinterpreted her preface to *The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies* as evidence that Soviet scholars were coming to similar conclusions. In her own words, her article “does not express the slightest doubt about the primacy of the economy, the method of producing material life”. The point is that different modes of production predetermine different types of social relations. The inextricability of the connection between the direct producer and the land due to the underdevelopment of the means of production and the predominance of “exchange with nature compared to exchange in society” in pre-capitalist societies determines the fact that the ruling class expropriates the very personality of the producers. Since the ruling class does not participate in production, its relations with small producers of peasant communes are “personal” and non-economic in nature. Thus, Danilova concludes, “raising the question of the dominance of non-economic, personal connections not only does not remove the question of the primacy of the economic basis in social evolution, but, on the contrary, presupposes it”. [13]

In the late 1980s, Gellner returned to his discussion of Danilova’s article in *The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies* and published the article “The Theory of History: East and West” (Gellner 1990). He compared the Soviet five-stage scheme with a certain basic understanding of history that is dominant in the West. Paradoxically, it turned out that the “Western” three-stage scheme (hunting-gatherer, agrarian and industrial societies) turned out to be more “materialistic” than the Soviet five-stage one, in which changes in material modes of production are not so clearly tied to formations. In addition, Marxism underestimated the political factor: both the emergence of exploitation and the state is again not strictly connected to means of subsistence. There is every reason to believe that Danilova intended to publish this article in her country: in her archive there are several copies of its translation into Russian, as well as a note from Gellner regarding the formatting of footnotes. However, the question arises of where and how this article should have been published.

On May 26, 1992, when historian Roger Markwick interviewed Danilova, she gave the following account of the continuation of *The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies* project: “When Perestroika began, twenty years later, I consulted with Gefter and through the Institute of World History we tried to publish this second volume. [...] the most interesting articles were so revisionist, that the authors could not publish them. They were not accepted into any other collection”. Danilova also gave Markwick a handwritten piece of paper with the contents of volume II, allegedly submitted to the editors in 1967 and planned for publication in 1968. While the second part featured the same foreign authors mentioned above, the first part, to which she obviously referred in the interview, contained articles that were written in the late 1980s, including the piece by Gellner.

A text which is particularly representative of this part was written by an established Soviet Sinologist Vasilii P. Iluishechkin. It was titled “Проблема происхождения сословий, государства, эксплуататорской собственности и общественных классов” (“The problem of the origin of estates, the state, exploitative property and social classes”).

Iliushechkin argued that

during the transition from a community-tribal to an estate-class society, the state does not necessarily arise only after the emergence of private property and the split of society into antagonistic classes, but in a number of cases it develops even under the conditions of the dominance of communal ownership of the main means production – cultivated land, i.e. before the emergence of private, especially exploitative, ownership of it, and therefore, even before the emergence of the latter and the system of private exploitation and antagonistic classes. [14]

Thus, early statehood was not a “machine for the oppression of one class by another”, but a natural mechanism that arose during the transition from a communal-tribal to a territorial system of governing society against the background of the emergence of farming and cattle breeding. Historically, the primary form of exploitation, Iliushechkin believed, was not private property or slave ownership, but the one based on patriarchy and taxing. The stratification of society was carried out not on a class, but on an estate principle. In fact, Iliushechkin, like a number of other contributors to the volume, adhered to the theory of a single precapitalist formation, which also made his theory of history a three-part one (excluding socialism-communism) and in a way similar to Gellner’s.

## Petr Skalník and the East–West Dialogue

An important role in establishing international relations was played by the Czech anthropologist and Africanist Petr Skalník, who studied at Leningrad University in the 1960s. Danilova’s correspondence with ethnographer Vladimir R. Kabo preserved evidence of their acquaintance:

Recently, Skalník visited our department and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. In my opinion, he is a very serious person with interesting ideas. In the future, after graduating from university, I think he will be able to successfully collaborate with the sector. In the meantime, Skalník promised us his help in establishing connections with Suret-Canale, Godelier, Pechirka and Pokora. [15]

Judging by Danilova’s archive, correspondence between her and Skalník resumed in 1974–1975, when the Czech scholar began preparing their edited volume *The Early State* (Claessen, Skalník 1978) with Henri Claessen. Seven of the twenty-two contributors to the volume were from the USSR, reflecting both Skalník’s social circle and the role of Soviet scholarship in the field. In 1978 Claessen visited Moscow. The internal memo, prepared at the ИНСТИТУТ ЭТНОГРАФИИ АН СССР (Institute of Ethnography), characterized him positively: “In his scientific researches, he adheres to quite progressive views. Thus, on a number of occasions he underlined the importance of scientific heritage of the founders of Marxism for modern ethnography, and he tries to take into account researches of Soviet ethnographers and historians”. [16]

Danilova agreed to participate in the book project: “The problem of state formation among



the Eastern Slavs is directly related to the topic of my current studies. Therefore, I willingly accept your offer to write an article for a collection on early class states”. [17] She wrote a summary that was accepted by the editors, but her article was not published in the book. The reasons for this are not yet entirely clear, but a certain tightening of international communication and the rules for publishing abroad could well be one of them. It is hardly accidental, for example, that the volume *Toward Marxist Anthropology*, published as a result of the section “Problems and Prospects of Marxist Ethnology” of the 9th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Chicago (1973), featured only one article by an author from the USSR. It was written by the director of the Institute of Ethnography, Yulian V. Bromley, and titled “Problems of primitive society in Soviet ethnology” (Bromley 1979). Although it cited *The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies* and the works of ethnographers of the “new direction”, it is obvious from the text that Bromley relied on supporters of orthodoxy from the Moscow branch of the institute.



Fig. 1

Liudmila V. Danilova, late 1950s-early 1960s.

From the personal archive of Elena V. Danilova.

## Conclusion

George W. Stocking once remarked: “If one were to list what could be called the ‘hegemonic’ national traditions, the list might include those same countries that are or have been dominant in the history of modern science: Britain, France, Germany, the United States and the Soviet Union – the latter less for its place in the development of the anthropology of the center than as the most strongly institutionalized anthropological embodiment of an orthodox Marxist viewpoint” (1982). The case of Danilova shows that in the late-Soviet period there were at least two kinds of Marxism: one was indeed orthodox, the other was once called “creative”. This means, firstly, that it did not take “the classical” texts as a dogma, and, secondly, that it tried to go beyond a number of most common quotations from Marx and Engels to digest the whole corpus of their writings with all its complication and contradictions. Marx’ *Foundations of a Critique of Political Economy*, published in the Soviet

Union only in 1939, was especially relevant for the study of precapitalist societies. It is ironic that, as the orientalist Leonid B. Alaev observed, while Soviet orthodox Marxists disappeared after the USSR was no more, creative Marxists stood up in defence of this theory (Alaev 1995: 41).

The story of Danilova and her *The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies* project, as it is told here, might seem a chain of failures. She did not see the publication not only of this collection in full, but also of her most ambitious monograph *Theoretical Problems of Feudalism in Soviet Historiography*. The publication of all the volumes of the series, judging by the responses to the first issue, would have aroused enthusiasm among Soviet and foreign Marxists and would have made Danilova an internationally acclaimed theorist. This was clearly not the intention of the leaders of the academic establishment who were interested in promoting Soviet Marxism abroad only on the condition that they had a monopoly on the presentation of its achievements. Inside the country, dogmatic Marxists within the academic establishment went to great lengths to guard their monopoly on theorizing. Nevertheless, a historian of anthropology might find relief in the fact that, while the writings of Soviet official Marxists collect dust in libraries, *The Problems of History of Precapitalist Societies* became, as Nikolai N. Kradin, one of leading theorist of political anthropology in Russia today put it, “a kind of guiding light for our generation” (Kradin 2022: 12).

It could be said that the idea of anachronistic motives and surpassed paradigms both presupposes and challenges an “evolutionary” view of the history of anthropology as a succession of stages or paradigms, in which the next one is in some relation more advanced than the previous. While it is historically correct to observe theories and paradigms being surpassed or forgotten by later generations, historicizing them should prevent us from incorporating presentist triumphalism in our analysis, however implicitly. The case of Danilova and other unorthodox Soviet Marxists shows that their ideas, censored during their lifetime, survived the pressure and, instead of being forgotten, gained recognition from the next generation of political anthropologists. While they did not usually consider themselves Marxist, they engaged with similar problems and explored alternatives within the concept of social evolution (Kradin, Korotaev, Bondarenko 2011). This line of research was hardly the mainstream of current world anthropology, but it is certainly relatable to such approaches as world-system analysis – or, for that matter, to recent attempts at global historical synthesis, such as D. Graeber’s and D. Wengrow’s *The Dawn of Everything* (2022). In this light, the history of anthropology itself echoes the history of the world in that it should definitely not be considered as a succession of stages but as a complex entangled process, each “line” of which never fully disappears and can bear fruit even when generally considered obsolete and anachronistic.

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[3] EDPA 1: 12-14.

[4] Forthcoming: Данилова, Людмила Валериановна. Теоретические проблемы феодализма в советской историографии // Ред., сост., вступ. ст. и коммент. С. С. Алымов, А. В. Журавель. М.: ЛЕНАНД, 2024.

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[7] Departments within the Institute were called sectors. The department (or sector) of the methodology of history (of which Danilova was a member) held a joint discussion with the department (or sector) of ancient history.

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[9] EDPA 2.

[10] ARAN 1: 191–192.

[11] EDPA 3: 12.

[12] EDPA 4.

[13] EDPA 5: 5-6.

[14] EDPA 6: 10-12.

[15] EGPA 1.

[16] ARAN 2.

[17] EDPA 7.