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Soviet Kurdology and Kurdish Orientalismⁱ

Michiel Leezenberg

Introduction

Russian-language studies of the Kurds by scholars from both the tsarist and the Soviet period are arguably among the most important contributions to Kurdology: during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, publications on the Kurds by Russian and Soviet scholars have been both qualitatively and quantitatively predominant. Below, I would like to trace the history of Russian-language Kurdish scholarship in brief. This history, I would like to argue, is not only of interest for the history of Kurdish studies; it also raises questions of a more general and theoretical nature. In particular, it invites us to modify some of the main theses of Edward Said's famous *Orientalism* (1978). It has long been pointed out that Said's argument about the intimate relation between orientalist scholarship and imperialist projects focuses almost exclusively on the English and French experiences in the nineteenth century, and on America in the twentieth; it pays little if any attention to German, Russian and Dutch orientalism, even though all three have been of major importance, especially during the nineteenth century. Especially problematic for Said's claim is that for most of the nineteenth century, German-language scholarship was not linked to any colonizing project or imperialist agenda; likewise, Russian orientalism, though shaped initially by French and – perhaps most decisively – by later German scholarship, can hardly be claimed as an internalization of French or German imperialist influence, the more so as Russia was an empire itself (albeit in the premodern sense as much as in the modern sense of a modern capitalism-driven imperialist power).

A further complication is that Soviet orientalism involved increasing numbers of native, or oriental, scholars. Thus, as I will argue below, considerable numbers of Kurdish scholars who were themselves of Kurdish origins participated in the production of Soviet kurdological knowledge; at first, these were Kurds from Soviet territory, but from the 1960s onwards, they also included Kurds from Middle Eastern States, in particular Iraq. This Kurdish presence raises

more general questions concerning the contributions of native scholars to orientalist knowledge. It is tempting to describe such self-descriptions and self-perceptions as forms of ‘internalized orientalism’, ‘auto-orientalism’, or ‘oriental orientalism’; but I believe such terminology fails to do justice to the agency of local and/or non-Western actors. I will discuss these more general questions after a brief historical overview of Soviet Kurdology and its roots in imperial Russian scholarship.¹

Kurdish studies in tsarist Russia

One may say with confidence that Kurdology, as an autonomous field of study within Iranian studies, was born in imperial Russia; but its birth was made possible by a linguistic claim originating in German scholarship. Kurdology as a discipline was predicated on the thesis that Kurdish is not a Persian dialect, but forms a distinct branch of the Indo-Iranian languages, a claim first defended in detail by the German scholars Emil Rödiger (1801-74) and August-Friedrich Pott (1802-87).² This linguistic distinctness became the basis for the broader claim that the Kurds were a distinct nation or people in the modern, romantic sense; they were seen as endowed with their own ethnic or racial characteristics, and their own folklore and customs that were as distinct from both Muslim and Christian neighboring peoples like Turks, Persians, Armenians, and Assyrians. This romantic-nationalistic perspective refocused research attention on what was distinctive about the Kurds rather than on the cultural materials and practices they shared with their wider environment.

Russian interest in the Kurds (as well as Armenians and other peoples of the Caucasus) increased after the Crimean war (1853-1856), which pitted the Russian empire against both its Ottoman neighbor and its imperial rivals England and France. This context of imperialist war and conquest is especially visible in the collection of texts in the Kurmanji and Zaza dialects

¹ For earlier overviews, with an emphasis on the Soviet period, see in particular Alexandre Benningsen (1960) ‘Les Kurdes et la kurdologie en Union Soviétique’, *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 513-530; Muhammad Mokri (1963) ‘Kurdologie et enseignement de la langue kurde en URSS’, *L’ethnographie*, N.S. 57: 71-105; Jacob M. Landau, ‘The Kurds in some Soviet works’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 11 (1975): 195-198; Rohat Alakom (1991) [1987], *Kürdoloji Biliminin 200 Yüklük Geçmişi (1787-1987)*, Istanbul, Deng (esp. ch. 6).

² E. Rödiger and A.-F. Pott, “Kurdische Studien,” *Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 3, 1840, pp. 1-63; 4, 1842, pp. 1-42; 5, 1844, pp. 57-83; 7, 1850, pp. 91-167

published by the German scholar Peter Lerch (1827-1884), who had gathered his material among Kurdish prisoners of war detained in Smolensk province.

Kurdish studies in tsarist Russia were pioneered by the Armenian scholar Khatchatur Abovian (1809-1848); his works being published in Armenian, however, they gained little if any currency outside Armenian-speaking circles.³ The more influential early kurodological scholarship was primarily the work of Russian diplomats stationed in or near Kurdish-inhabited areas. Thus, during his employment as the Russian consul at Erzurum, Auguste Alexandre Jaba (1801-1894), himself of Polish birth, made contact with a local scholar, Mullah Mahmud Bayazidi, who not only helped him in the acquisition of large numbers of Kurdish-language manuscripts (which were to become the basis of the Kurdish manuscript collection of the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg), but also wrote and copied several important texts himself.⁴ Jaba's Kurdish-French dictionary, one of the earliest and most extensive efforts at Kurdish lexicography, was published in 1879 by Ferdinand Justi. It was also in St. Petersburg that Veliaminof-Zernof's text edition and Charmoy's French translation of the *Sherefname*, Sharaf Khan Bidlisi's Persian-language chronicle of the early Kurdish courts, was published.⁵ Indeed, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg and its Soviet successor may justly be called the center of Kurdish studies worldwide.

The Russian orientalist emphasis on the distinctness of Kurds and Armenians from their neighbors fit in well with Russian expansionist ambitions towards the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia, and with the divide and rule tactics pursued towards that end; but one should obviously not reduce all orientalist knowledge to such imperialist and expansionist goals;⁶ moreover, the suggestion that early Russian Kurdology was merely developed in the service of state-based expansion plans overlooks the role of local actors, in particular the early writings on Armenian

³ For more detailed discussion of Abovian's contributions, see Q. Kurdoev, H. Abovian kak issledovatel'-kurdoved [Kh. Abovian as a Kurdologist Researcher], *Istorija Russkogo Vostokovedeniya* (Moscow 1956).

⁴ One of Bayazidi's texts was published over a century later by Margaret Rudenko: Bajazidi, Mela Maxmud (1963) *Nravy i obycai Kurdov [ʿAdat u rusumatname-i Ekradiye]. Perevod, predisloviye i primecanija M.B. Rudenko*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Vostocij literatury.

⁵ V. Veliaminof-Zernof (ed.), *Scheref-nameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, par Scheref, prince de Bidlis (St. Petersburg: Eggers 1860); François Bernard Charmoy (tr.), *Chèref-nâme, ou Fastes de la nation Kourde* (2 vols. in 3; St. Petersburg: Eggers 1868-1875).

⁶ For a more general historical discussion of Kurdish studies along such lines, cf. Scalbert-Yücel, Clémence and Ray, Marie Le (2007) 'Knowledge, ideology and power. Deconstructing Kurdish Studies', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, No. 5; available online at <http://www.ejts.org/document777.html>; for a brief discussion of Russian and Soviet kurdology, see especially para. 24-26.

and Kurdish national identity by non-state-backed Armenian nationalists in both the Ottoman and the Russian empires; about the character of these writings, however, let alone their influence on Kurdish and Armenian self-perceptions as well as later more officially sanctioned forms of scholarship, little is known as of yet.⁷

The two most important early twentieth-century Russian students of the Kurds are undoubtedly Vladimir Minorsky (1877-1966) and Basile Nikitine (1885-1960); both had held diplomatic posts in the Kurdish-inhabited parts of late Qajar Persia.⁸ Minorsky seemed destined for a career as a diplomat, and was a member of the commission charged with demarcating the border between Turkey and Iran; but due to unforeseen and unforeseeable political developments – most importantly, of course, the 1917 Russian revolution – he ultimately became one of the foremost scholars not only of the Kurds but of the Iranian world at large. After studying law at the University of Moscow, he entered the Russian diplomatic service, and among others participated in the international commission responsible for demarcating the border between the Ottoman empire and Iran. Following the Russian revolution, Minorsky settled in Paris; subsequently, from 1933 onwards, he taught Persian at the School for Oriental Studies in London. For the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, he contributed numerous lemmas on the history, language and religious beliefs of the Kurds. Although Minorsky's early work was to an important extent based on ethnography and field linguistics, especially in Northwestern Iran, his later writings shifted attention to the study of ancient manuscripts; based on such studies, he famously argued that Salah al-Din (Saladin), the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, had been ethnically Kurdish, deriving from the Hadbani Kurds of the Dvin area.⁹ According to Bosworth, he was a fervent Russian patriot, witness his dedicating his 1942 edition of the *Tadhkirat al-mulūk* to 'Soviet Kurdologists' in the wake of the German siege of Leningrad. It was not until 1960, though, that

⁷ For an initial overview, see Yektan Türkyilmaz, 'Armenian nationalist literature on the Kurds' (paper presented at the workshop 'Islam, Europe, and the Secular-Religious Divide', University of Amsterdam, December 2009).

⁸ Cf. C.E. Bosworth 2004, 'Minorsky, Vladimir', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (online at http://www.iranica.com/newsite/index.isc?Article=http://www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/ot_grp5/ot_minorsky_20_040720.html). Nikitine has published a book describing his stay in Urumiyeh from 1915 to 1918, translated into Persian as *Irani ke man shenakhtam* (Tehran: Ma`refat, 1329/1950); unfortunately, this text was not available to me.

⁹ Vladimir Minorsky, "Kurds, Kurdistan. History A: Origins and Pre-Islamic History," in *EI2* V, pp. 447-49. Idem, "Kurds, Kurdistan. History B: The Islamic Period up to 1920," *ibid.*, pp. 449-64. Idem, *Notes sur la secte des Ahl-e Haqq*, Paris, 1922; originally published in *RMM* 40, 1920, pp. 20-97; 45, 1921, pp. 205-302. Idem, "Études sur les Ahl-i Haqq, I Toumari'," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 97/1, 1928, pp. 90-105; *Studies in Caucasian History* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press 1953).

he returned to Russian territory, when he was invited by the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and was received as the guest of honor at the 23rd International Congress of Orientalists in Moscow.

Basil Nikitine had worked for some time as Russian vice-consul at Urumiyeh in Iran, where – much like Jaba, he had a local mullah, Mela Se‘id Qazi, write down Kurdish texts for him; after the Russian revolution, he had fled to France. Although he had not received an orientalist education, and was strictly speaking not even an academic, he published a number of influential works on the Kurds, notably a synthetic overview published in France in 1956.¹⁰ According to Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray (2006: para. 6-8) it was especially scholars like Nikitine who were responsible for creating an essentialist view of the Kurds, by focusing on what distinguished them from neighboring peoples, and what was expressive of their distinct ‘national soul’ (Nikitine 1956: 65). This emphasis on folklore (what Nikitine (1956: 255), following Vil‘cevsky, calls a Kurdish ‘hypertrophie de folklore’), while downplaying broader Islamic religious and Persian cultural influences (not to mention cultural practices shared with the Armenians), was but one way of presenting the Kurds as a distinct nation. One may doubt Nikitine’s formative influence on similar essentializing tendencies in Soviet Kurdology (after all, his main work was not published in French until 1956 and translated into Russian in 1964); but there can be little doubt that he either converged with or contributed to a broader scholarly process, which one may call the ‘folklorization of the Kurds’. Below, I will elaborate on the characteristics of this process.

Kurdish studies in the Soviet Union

It has been claimed that Soviet orientalist scholarship reproduces the categories of pre-revolutionary scholarship, and especially German traditions of orientalism;¹¹ but it remains an open question in how far the clear political rupture marked by the 1917 Russian revolution also

¹⁰ Basile [Vasilij] Nikitine, *Les kurdes: Étude sociologique et historique* (Paris: imprimerie nationale 1956; translated into Russian in 1964). The texts written down by mela Se‘id Qazi were published as B. Nikitine, ‘Les Kurdes racontés par eux-mêmes’, *L’Asie française* no. 231 (Mai 1925), 148-157; idem, ‘Kurdish stories from my collection’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 4 (1926), 121-138). See also ‘Une apologie kurde du sunnisme’ *Rocznik Orjentalistyczny* 8 (1933); ‘The Tale of Suto and Tato’ (*BSOS* 3 (1923): 69-106, written jointly with E.B. Soane; regrettably, lack of space precludes a detailed discussion of links between Russian, English and other scholars.

¹¹ Michael Kemper, *Studying Islam in the Soviet Union* (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA, 2009).

constitutes an intellectual or ideological break in Russian-language Kurdish studies. Specifically, it is not clear at present what traces of the work of the earlier imperial Russian – or in Soviet terminology ‘bourgeois’ – scholars like Minorsky and Nikitine may be found in later generations of Soviet kurdologists. My general hypothesis here is that a number of problematic nationalistic assumptions, in part related to the idea of language as constitutive of nations and in part related to the abovementioned folklorization of the Kurds, were inherited from pre-revolutionary kurdological scholarship; but one should postpone firm conclusions until after more extensive investigations have been carried out.

The fate of Kurdish studies – and of the Kurdish population groups – in the newly formed Soviet Union varied with the vicissitudes of Soviet nationality policies, and with the power struggles both in the Kremlin and in the local administrative centers. In the early 1920s, the Kurds were recognized as a distinct nationality (*narod*) by the Soviet authorities; although this status did not entitle them to an autonomous region (*oblast* or *okrug*) of their own, it did give them the right to elementary and advanced education in Kurdish, and allowed for the flourishing of Kurdish literary activity. In 1923, a small Kurdish administrative unit or *uyezd* was established in Azerbaijan around the town of Laçin, which lasted until 1929. In 1922, an Armenian alphabet was developed for Kurdish, but this did not gain a very wide circulation; more influential was the Latin alphabet developed in 1927 by Aisor Margulov and Ereb Shamilov (Shemo), an alphabet comparable, and in some ways superior, to the Latin alphabet developed by Djeladet Bedir Khan around 1919, which had gained currency among Kurds in Mandate Syria by the late 1920s and in Turkey from the 1960s onwards.¹² It was in Soviet Armenia that the first elementary and high school text books in Kurmanji or Northern Kurdish were produced; but also the first substantial steps towards a modern prose literature in Kurdish primarily occurred here, through the novels and short stories of Ereb Shemo and others. Thus, it was in Yerevan that Shemo published the first novel in Kurdish, *Sivanê kurmanj* [The Kurdish shepherd], in 1935.¹³

¹² For a more detailed comparison of these alphabets, cf. A. Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985*. San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press 1992, ch. 8.2, esp. pp. 374-6.

¹³ Shemo's most important novel, *Sivanê kurmanj* [The Kurdish shepherd], which originally appeared in 1935, was recently republished in Turkey, in both the original Cyrillic alphabet and in Latin transcription. In 1989, the Kurdish Institute of Paris published a bilingual Kurdish-French edition *Sivanê kurd/Le berger kurde*, based on Nureddine Zaza's edition of the Kurdish text published in Beirut in 1947; at many points, this text diverges from the original in

From the 1920s onwards, several major centers of Soviet Kurdology emerged. First among these was undoubtedly Leningrad, where Kurdological work was pursued both in the university and at the Academy of Sciences. It was especially A.A. Freiman (1879-1968), a specialist in the comparative study of ancient and modern Iranian languages, and Iosef Orbeli (1887-1961), who established Kurdish linguistics as a distinct and legitimate field of study at Leningrad University 1931. Orbeli taught Kurdish at the University of Leningrad from 1916 to 1937; in 1959, he founded a Kurdish section (*Kurdsky Kabinet*) within the Institute of Asian Peoples at the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Leningrad; in 1961, he was succeeded as chair of this section by Kurdoev. In his founding statement requesting a separate Kurdish section, Orbeli wrote:

“Taking into consideration the necessity to work out a schedule of academic work for the Department of Kurdish Studies, ... from March 1, 1959 the group of Kurdologists, belonging now to the Iranian Department, should be selected so as to form an independent unit under my leadership and with the following members: K.K.Kurdoev, I.I.Zukerman, M.B.Rudenko, J.S.Musaelyan, E.I.Dementieva (Vasilieva) and the doctoral students I.A.Smirnova, Z.A.Yusupova, K.R.Eyubi and J.Jalilov.¹⁴

Thus, although no separate chair or professorship of Kurdish was ever established, Soviet Kurdology thus became more solidly institutionalized than it had ever been before, and entered into what one may perhaps call its highest blossoming during the relative thaw of the political climate of the 1960s and 1970s. In the literature, there is some ambivalence as to the precise institutional status of these kurdological studies; thus, some sources refer to chairs in Kurdology, whereas others only speak of professors with a chair in Iranian languages or oriental studies pursuing studies on language or history of the Kurds. I have not seen any archival evidence confirming the existence of an actual institutionalized chair of Kurdish in Petersburg.

A second important center of Soviet Kurdology was Soviet Armenia, where academic knowledge was produced, and also simplified and put into practice through journalism, literature, and especially the production of Kurdish-language textbooks for elementary and high school education of local Kurds. It was also in Yerevan that the first pan-Soviet Congress of Kurdology

vocabulary and syntax; reportedly, Zaza's Kurdish version was based on Nikitine's French rendering of a Russian translation of the Kurdish original.

¹⁴ Quoted in http://kurdica.orientalstudies.ru/eng/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=196&Itemid=86.

was held in 1934, which called for the creation of a Kurdish dictionary and historical grammar, for the further development of the study of the Kurds in Leningrad and Moscow, and for the establishment of an Orientalist section including a working group on Kurdology in the Armenian Academy of Science. It was also at, or in the context of, this congress that the term ‘Kurdology’ started gaining currency; although the term had already been used by Nikitine,¹⁵ earlier writings, like those of Rödiger and Pott, had generally used the term ‘Kurdish studies’. Other centers of Soviet Kurdology were the University of Moscow, where it was in particular the linguist B.V. Miller (d. 1958) was in charge, and a center in Baku in Azerbaijan, which was not formed until 1959. I will leave these centers out of my consideration here, as well as the Kurdological activities in Georgia and Central Asia (most importantly, Kazakhstan).

The influence of Stalin’s less tolerant nationalities policies of the 1930s and 1940s on academic Kurdology remain to be assessed; but especially in the Caucasus, the consequences were dramatic. The autonomous Kurdish region (*uyezd*) of ‘Red Kurdistan’ in Laçin had already been transformed into an *okrug* in 1930, and quickly disbanded altogether on the orders of the Kremlin. In 1936, the Transcaucasian federation was dissolved, and in 1937, large numbers of Kurds were deported from Armenia and Azerbaijan were deported to Central Asia; in 1944, Kurds from the republic of Georgia underwent the same fate. The cultural consequences are clearly visible: according to Hassanpour, book publishing in Kurdish came to a standstill between 1938 and 1945, and Kurdish broadcasting resumed only in the 1950s.¹⁶

Although the number of books in Kurdish decreased, the number of works continued to rise, especially after the Second World war and Stalin’s death in 1953. Qanat Kurdoev (a russified form of Qanatê Kurdo) (1909-1985) merits attention as perhaps the most important Soviet kurdologist who was himself of Kurdish extraction.¹⁷ He was born in the Ottoman-held province

¹⁵ Cf. B. Nikitine 1932 ‘Où en est la Kurdologie?’, *Annali del Reale Istituto Orientale di Napoli*.

¹⁶ Cf. Hassanpour (1992: 139-143) for more detailed information on the changing linguistic policies towards the Kurds in the Soviet Union; for an oldish assessment of Stalin’s nationality policies as a whole, see Robert Conquest, *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* (MacMillan 1971).

¹⁷ Q. Kurdoev 1973 *Grammatika kurdskogo jazyka na materiale dialektov kurmandzhi i sorani* (Moscow: Nauka), a Latin-alphabet Kurdish edition of this work was subsequently published in Sweden. *Gramera Zmanê Kurdî (Kurmancî-Sorani)* Stockholm: Wesanên Roja Nû 1990. See also his *Tarîxa edebiyeta Kurdî* [History of Kurdish

of Kars, from where his family fled to post-revolutionary Russian territory in 1918, and then settled in Tbilisi in 1921. Kurdoev belonged to the first generation of Kurdish students sent to Leningrad to pursue an academic education in 1928; here, he studied with Freiman and Orbeli, but also with Nikolay Marr (1865-1934), who had been the dean of Oriental Languages of the university of St. Petersburg since 1911. Famously, Marr was also responsible for the theory of the Japhetic languages, which was the scientific orthodoxy, not to say virtually a state doctrine, during the 1920s and 1930s, until Stalin personally attacked Marr's work in his famous June 1950 Pravda article on Marxism and linguistics. In 1955, Kurdoev, who had been teaching in Leningrad since 1946, published a critique of Japhetic hypotheses in the work of earlier linguists working on Kurdish, notably Miller, Vil'cevsky, and Cukerman. Thus, Soviet kurdology appears to reflect wider academic – and political – developments and controversies; more specifically, Kurdish linguistic research in the Soviet Union was clearly colored by Marr's doctrines and their subsequent purge.¹⁸

In general, it appears that Kurds or Kurdish scholars working in Leningrad or Moscow were less likely to be affected by changing nationality policies. In Soviet Armenia, one of the most prominent scholars to carry out research on Kurdish folklore had been the Kurd Hacıyê Cindî (1908-1990). Like Kurdoev, Cindî was born in Kars province, and had fled with his family in 1918. Having joined the philological faculty of Yerevan University in 1930, he subsequently headed the Kurdish Pedagogical Academy in Armenia, until he was arrested and imprisoned as an imperialist agent in 1938, at the high point of Stalin's terror.¹⁹ Two later important Soviet scholars of Kurdish extraction who did important work were Ordikhanê Celil (1932-2007) and Celilê Celil (b. 1936), who collected and published large amounts of folkloric material, in particular among Yezidis living in Soviet Armenia. After graduating from Yerevan University, Ordikhan joined the Kurdish staff at the University of Leningrad; Celil headed the Kurdish

Literature], written explicitly for 'rural workers and peasants' (2 vols., Stockholm: Roja Nû, 1983-1985. For more biographical information, see Joyce Blau's In memoriam, *Studia Iranica* 15 (1986): 249-256.

¹⁸ Q. Kurdoev 1955 Kritika osibočnyh vzgljadov na kurdsky jazyk [Critique of erroneous opinions on the Kurdish language]. *Kratkie soobščeniya instituta vostokovedeniya* XII: 43-61. An English translation of Stalin's 1950 ('Marxism and problems in linguistics') is available online at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1950/jun/20.htm>

¹⁹ Cf. Cewarî, Firîda Hecî (2007) *Hecîyê Cindî, jîyan û kar*, Yerevan: Wesanxana "Asoxik".

cabinet at the Academy of Sciences from 1963 to 1993; following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, he emigrated to Austria.²⁰

It was also in Leningrad Kurdish cabinet that Margaret Rudenko (1928-1977) worked; among others, she published the first (and thus far, only) critical edition of Ehmedê Khanî's *Mem û Zîn*, widely seen as the national epic of the Kurds, as well as editions of more folkloric-inspired forms of classical Kurdish literature, like Mela Batê's *Zembilfrosh*, Faqiyê Teyran's *Shaykh San'an* and Haris Bidlisi's *Leyla û Mecnûn*, as well as Mahmud Bayazidi's manuscript on the '*Adat u rasumatname-ye Akradiye*, (Letter on the Customs and Habits of the Kurds), itself written at the request of Jaba. A transcription of oral Yezidi laments, based on field work among Yezidis in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, was published posthumously.²¹

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991, this time around for economic rather than ideological reasons, - with the exception of the nationalist explosion in the Caucasus. In 1992, Laçin was occupied by Armenian forces, and local Kurds declared a 'Kurdish Republic of Laçin' which turned out to be a rather short-lived adventure; until the present, Laçin, a vital corridor between Armenia and the self-declared republic of Nagorno-Karabach, remains firmly in Armenian hands. In Russia itself, at what is currently called the Russian Academy of Sciences in Petersburg, Kurdish studies continue, in particular at the hands of Zare Alievna Yusupova (born 1934), a linguist who focuses on the Sorani and Hawrami dialects; it seems, however, that Kurdish studies have dwindled since the end of the Soviet Union. In a 2005 reorganization of the

²⁰ Cf. Dzhaliil, Ordikhane and Dzhaliil, Dzhaliile (1972) *Kurdskiye posloviy i pogovorki. Na Kurdskom i Russkom yazikakh*, Moskva: Glaviaya redakciya vostojsioj literatury. See also Celil, Celilê (1985) *Jiyana rewsenbîrî û siyasî ya Kurdan (di dawîya sedsala 19'a û destpêka sedsala 20'a de)*, Uppsala: Jîna Nû. Celil, Celilê and Celil, Ordîxanê (1994) *Destanên Kurdî*, Istanbul: Zêl Yayinlari. Celil, Celilê, et al. (1998) *Yeni ve yakin çağda Kürt siyaset tarihi*, Istanbul: Pêrî Yayinlari.

²¹ M.B. Rudenko, *Mam u-Zîn / Aḥmed Xānī ; tekst kritik, taḡama u-pīšxhabar M.B Rudenko* (Moscow: Akademiya Nauka 1962); *Nravy i obyčai kurdov: kurdskij tekst s russkim perevodom / Mela Machmud Bajazidi ; perevod, predisl. i primeč. M.B. Rudenko* (Moskva : Izd-vo vostočnoj lit. 1963); *Kurdskije Narodnije Skazki* [Kurdish national], Akademija Nauk SSSR. Institut vostokovedeniya 1970; *Kurdskaya obryadouaya poeziya* [Kurdish Poetry of Lamentation], Moscow: Akademija Nauk 1982. Rudenko's student Musaelyan has continued these editing activities: Musaelyan, Zh S. (1983) *Zambil'frosh. Kurdsкая poema i ee fol'klornye versii. Kriticeskij tekst, perevod, primecanija, predislovie, prilozhenie Zh.S. Musaeljan*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Nauk".

Oriental Institute, the Kurdish cabinet was absorbed into the Near Eastern department chaired by O.F. Akimushkin.²²

Some general features of Soviet Kurdology stand out. One which has already been observed before is the influence of political or ideological factors on the selection of topics for research; thus, Landau (1975: 195) notes the absence of political studies among Soviet works on the Kurds; likewise, Bennigsen observes that there are relatively few works on ethnography and contemporary history. The lack of ethnographic work can be attributed at least in part to the difficulty of securing permission to conduct fieldwork in Iraq or Iran, while the relative lack of attention to contemporary political and historical issues, according to Landau, may be due to a desire on the part of the Soviet authorities not to alienate its political allies.

In linguistic studies, there is a marked preference for dialect studies and works of historical grammar.²³ Soviet research on Kurdish literature betrays a preference for oral traditions over written traditions of high literature intended for recital at courts or study in medreses. Moreover, when texts of classical Kurdish literature are discussed, this is done as often as not within a context of typological studies of the heroic epic or national literary monuments rather than in more genetic or areal terms, e.g., as part of a broader Islamic, Persian or Persianate literature. Thus, the published version of Margaret Rudenko's 1955 dissertation, a critical text edition of Ehmedê Khani's *Mem û Zîn* (1695), was significantly published in a series *Pamjatniki literatury narodov vostoka* (Literary Monuments of the Oriental Peoples).

²² Cf. http://kurdica.orientalstudies.ru/eng/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=196&Itemid=86 (last accessed November 17, 2009). The latest major efforts of Russian-language scholars working in the (post-) Soviet tradition have been two collective works on Kurdish history, Sherko Mixoyî (Sh. Mgoj): *Sovremennyj Kurdistan. Problemy natsional'nogo dvizhenija*, Moskva: Kurdsij naucno-prosvetil'skij tsentr / Navenda Lêkolînên Kurdî, 1995 and Lazarev, M. S. and Mgoj, Sh X. (ed.) (1999) *Istorija Kurdistana*, Moskva; translated into Turkish as *Kürdistan tarihi*, Avestakitap 2007).

²³ Apart from Kurdojev's works mentioned above, these are, most importantly: Bakaev, C. X. (1965) *Yazyk Azerbaydzhanskix Kurdov*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka"; Farizov, I. O. (1957) *Russko-Kurdsij slovar'*, Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Inostrannyx i Natsional'yx Slovaroj; Jusupova, Z. A. (1985) *Sulejmanijskij dialekt Kurdsogo jazyka*, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka"; Smirnova, I. A. and Ejjubi, K. R. (1998) *Kurdsij dialekt Zaza (Dersim)*, Moskva: Tsentr Kurdsix Issledovanij; Tsabolov, R. L. (1976) *Ocerk istoriceskoy fonetiki kurdsogo jazyka*, Moskva: Akademiya Nauk SSSR Institut Vostokovedeniya; and Eyyubi, K. R. and Smirnova, I. A. (1968) *Kurdsij dialekt Mukri*, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka". These studies, in fact followed a pre-revolutionary Russian tradition of descriptive linguistics, witness early texts like F. Justi's 1880 *Kurdische Grammatik* (St Petersburg: unknown).

Typical of all these studies of both high literature and oral folkloric traditions is a focus on structural and formal dimensions and a lack of attention to performance aspects. Significantly, the appendix to Rudenko's *Kurdskije narodnije skazki* (pp. 243-5) contains a typological analysis of subjects in motifs in the Kurdish folk tales involved, suggesting a background in Propp's morphological approach and other comparable formalist or structuralist methods. The aspect of recitation or performance has not received as much attention; thus, as far as I have been able to ascertain, no detailed Russian-language studies have appeared of the recitation of folk tales and other forms of poetry as a musical event performed by a local bard or *dengbêj*.

Paired with this formalist lack of attention to performance dimensions is a nationalist and comparative reframing of Kurdish oral and written literature of the Kurds as a distinct 'Oriental people'. Thus, Ehmedê Khanî's poem, *Mem û Zîn*, is consistently treated in the context of national epics rather than of a broader tradition of Persianate mathnavi poems. Already in 1938, Orbeli linked Khani's poem with Rustaveli's *Vepkhistqaosani* (Knight in the Panther's Skin), likewise framed as the Georgian national epic: like Firdowsi for the Persians and Rustaveli for the Georgians, he elaborates, Khani qualifies as the national poet of the Kurds.²⁴ Although it obviously makes perfect sense to treat Khani's epic within a framework of comparing national epics, this framing does in fact reflect a late nineteenth-century nationalist reappraisal of Khani's poem: it was only in the late Ottoman period that authors like Haji Qadiri Koyi elevated *Mem û Zîn* to the status of the Kurdish national epic. Consequently, this reframing led to a steady de-emphasizing of Khani's affinities with other premodern oriental literatures, most importantly, the classical Persian mathnavi poetry that Khani explicitly mentions as his model.

It may be that this formalistic and comparative approach rather than a more historical-genetic approach to both folk tales and national epics is inspired by such typically Soviet formalist and structuralist approaches like Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folk tale; but I have not yet found any substantive evidence to back this claim. The rise and fall of Japhetic hypotheses concerning Kurdish clearly reflects Stalin's changing policies (or whims); but other features of Soviet Kurdological scholarship cannot be explained directly from the politics of internal and international relations. Thus, there is a persistent, and remarkable, lack of attention to the Islamic aspects of Kurdish culture, often paired with a clear – and at times explicit – anti-religious

²⁴ Quoted in Kurdoev (1983: 107).

attitude. One reason for this relative lack of attention for Islamic learning and the more orthodox or fundamentalist Sufi orders was undoubtedly a generically anti-religious attitude among Soviet scholars. Significantly, Ereb Shemo published his autobiographical account of the Sufi practices he had witnessed in his youth in the openly anti-religious journal *Ateist*.²⁵ In the 1930s, this attitude was reinforced by attempts – especially in Soviet Armenia – to reinforce the distinction between Kurds of Sunni Muslim backgrounds and Yezidis, who also speak Kurdish but have a distinct religion. Remarkably, however, the folk theory, popular among secularized and nationalist Kurds, that the Yezidis are Zoroastrians and thus continue an alleged ancestral Iranian religion of the Kurds does not seem to have gained much currency in the Soviet Union. As a result, notable for its absence in Russian and Soviet Kurdish scholarship is attention to the prominent Sufi reformer of Kurdish extraction, Mawlana Khalid Naqshbandi (1779-1827), despite his obvious relevance for the later development of the Khalidiyya movement in the Caucasus.²⁶ This may reflect political sensibilities of the time: considerable numbers of Khalidi Sufis had fled from the new Republic of Turkey after the repression of Shaykh Sa'id's revolt in 1925; apparently, many of them were deported to Kazakhstan on Stalin's orders in the 1930s.

It would perhaps be an overstatement to speak of a generic anti-Islamic bias in Soviet Kurdology, however. Moreover, this imbalance cannot simply be explained in ideological terms, e.g., as resulting from Lenin's and Stalin's anti-religious policies, or from generic Soviet representations of Islam (and especially Sufism) as backward: as argued above, the first steps in this folklorization and de-islamization of the Kurds had already been taken by pre-Soviet scholars working in the later nineteenth century.

Combined with the folklorization mentioned above, I would suggest, this lack of interest in matters Islamic led to a systematic downplaying or neglect of premodern Kurdish religious learning. Thus, early works by premodern Kurdish religious scholars, like Eli Teremaxi Kurdish-language *Serfa kurmanci* (Morphology in Kurdish), were already noted by Jaba and his informant Mahmoud Beyazidi around 1860 but not published until 1971, and not in Moscow or

²⁵ E. Shemo 1930 *Kurdskie dervishi*, *Ateist* no. 59 (December 1930): 41-46.

²⁶ For the Khalidiyya movement in the Caucasus, see e.g. M. Kemper, 'The North Caucasian Khalidiyya and „Muridism”: Historiographical Problems. In *Journal for the History of Sufism* 5 (2006), 111-126.

Leningrad but in Baghdad.²⁷ Teremaxi's grammar is of obvious intrinsic interest, as it is not only the oldest extant specimen of Kurdish prose, but also contains the earliest preserved remarks on the grammatical structure of Kurdish; but remarkably, and perhaps tellingly, the commission in charge of publishing the materials gathered by Jaba summarily dismisses this text as of 'secondary importance'.²⁸

The Soviet genealogy of Kurdish studies in Iraq

Soviet Kurdology had an important international role during the Cold War. A new phase in this international dynamic began when Kurdish students started coming from abroad, most importantly, post-revolutionary Iraq. As noted above, in 1961, Kurdojev had become director of the Kurdish cabinet established by Orbeli. From the early 1960s onwards, this center attracted Kurdish students, not only from Soviet republic of Armenia but increasingly also from Iraq, where in the 1958 revolution, the pro-British monarchy had been overthrown, and a revolutionary and pro-Soviet republic had been established by general Qassem. As a result of the warming of Iraqi-Soviet ties, and of a new prospect for a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish question in Iraq, reflected in the 1959 agreement between the new Baghdad government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party led by Mila Mistefa Barzani, a first generation of Iraqi students was sent to the Soviet Union for the pursuit of higher education in 1960. Among these student were several Kurds who were to become dominant in the field of Kurdish studies in Iraq. The two most influential of these are undoubtedly Izzeddin Resul (b. 1931) and Maruf Khaznadar (b. 1930).²⁹ Khaznadar is perhaps the most influential Iraqi Kurdish student to have studied in the Soviet Union. In 1961, he went to Leningrad to study with Kurdojev; in 1967, his dissertation was published in Russian; it dealt with modern Kurdish literature as an expression of class struggle and national liberation. Later, he was the chairman of a number of the Kurdish academy and wrote numerous works, many of which were also used in high school education. Currently, he is engaged in writing a projected 7-volume autobiography, of which at the time of writing the

²⁷ Eli Teremaxi, *Destûrê zimanê 'erebî bi kurdî* [The rules of the Arabic language in Kurdish], ed. by M. Khaznadar; Baghdad: Dâr al-zi'amân 1971).

²⁸ Jaba (1860: vii).

²⁹ My biographical information concerning this generation is mostly based on interviews conducted with Ezeddin Resul, Arbil, October 1992 and with Maruf Khaznadar, Arbil, July 2009.

first two have appeared. Unfortunately, these do not yet take us to Khaznadar's crucial formative years in the Soviet Union.³⁰

From early on, Resul had been active in the Iraqi Communist Party; reportedly, he single-handedly wrote all items on Kurdish culture and politics in the ICP newspaper during his editorship of the Kurdish section of that journal. In 1963, Resul received his PhD from the University of Baku with a dissertation on realism in Kurdish literature; in 1977, he was awarded the DSC degree at the Institute Oriental Languages Moscow Academy of Sciences, with the Russian translation of a book on Ehmedê Khanî's *Mem û Zîn* originally published in Arabic in 1975; typical of this study is a modernist view of Khani as a philosopher in the secular – even Marxist – sense of the word.³¹ In later years, Resul was to become the leader of the Kurdish Academy in Baghdad, eventually ousting Marouf Khaznadar from his position.

The predominance of Soviet-trained and Marxist-inspired scholars in the newly established Kurdish departments in the universities of Baghdad and Sulaimaniya, and in the Kurdish Academy, marks a significant (and quickly institutionalized) shift from the earlier, hujra- or madrasa-educated generation of Iraqi Kurdish scholars like, most importantly, the literary historian Ala'uddin Sajjâdî and the linguist Tawfiq Wahby.

The Soviet and Marxist background of present-day Kurdological research (and Kurdish language and literature education) in Iraqi Kurdistan is a topic for a paper of its own. Here, suffice it to say that this institutionalized form of learning displays an uneasy balance between Marxist and Kurdish-nationalist elements; in the Iraqi context, there was a particularly pressing need to reach some form of accommodation with the Arabic nationalism of successive regimes since 1958, all presenting themselves as revolutionary and as allies of the Soviet Union (in particular that of the pan-Arab Baath party, which had been in power since 1968). To a lesser extent, this Marxist-tinged Kurdish nationalism also had to position itself with respect to the Iranian nationalism of Pahlavi Iran. Thus, Khaznadar (p.c.) holds that on religious grounds, the – predominantly Sunni – Kurds display a closer affinity with, and have undergone more cultural influence from, Arabs

³⁰ Marouf Khaznadar, *Rozhgarî min* (My Memoirs), vol. 1, *Peydabûn, 1930 -1949* [The Beginning, 1930-1949] and vol. 2,, 1949-1958 [...19..-19..] (Arbil: Chapkhaney Haji Hashim 2009).

³¹ Ref Rasul Arabic, Russian, Turkish.

(apparently likewise presumed to be Sunni) than with a Persian tradition he sees as specifically Shi'ite and itself derivative from Arabic religious and literary culture anyway. As in the Soviet Union, kurdological knowledge has had to come to terms with an often conflictuous and repressive constellation.

Internalized orientalism?

The orientalist knowledge produced by Kurds originating from, or educated in, the Soviet Union, has obviously been ideologically shaped or affected. As a result, it is tempting to dismiss it as a case of 'internalized' or 'oriental' orientalism, i.e., as involving the unwitting or deliberate production of distorting categories and doctrines of foreign scholarship germane to – if not subservient to – colonial domination and imperialist power politics.. The term 'internalized orientalism' appears to have been used first by Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan in the context of postcolonial Singapore.³² For as far as I am aware, the concept has not been elaborated theoretically; but it clearly carries echoes and associations of Marxist (and perhaps more specifically Gramscian) ideology critique. More specifically, it carries suggestions of an inevitable Western imperialist cultural hegemony and of false consciousness among those non-Western actors who unwittingly or uncritically employ Western notions and concepts; a similar notion is that of 'oriental orientalism', which appears to have gained currency particularly in authors dealing with the Arab world.³³ Despite this obvious appeal, the notion of internalized or oriental orientalism is rather problematic, as it suggests the mere passive recipient of hegemonic Western conceptions, values, and ideals. Thus, it risks depriving non-Western actors of all independent or autonomous agency, and presenting Western imperialist ideology as rather more monolithic, pervasive, and inevitable than it actually was. A more systematic focus on the German and Russian experience of the nineteenth century, and the Soviet of the twentieth, and

³² Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, 'State fatherhood: The politics of nationalism, sexuality, and race in Singapore.' In A. Parker a.o. (eds.) *Nationalism and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge 1992), pp. 343-364, esp. p.

³³ Thus, a notion of 'oriental Orientalism' appears explicitly, but once again without any theoretical elaboration, in Muhammad Ali Khalidi, *Orientalisms in the Study of Islamic Philosophy*, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 135 (2006): 25-33, esp. pp. 29-31; implicitly, similar arguments concerning the alleged internalization of the norms and values of colonizers appear, implicitly or explicitly, in e.g. Khalid al-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab World* (Chicago 2007), and Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago 2008).

on the central role played by Kurds in producing Soviet orientalist knowledge, considerably complicate this convenient picture of imperial hegemony.

It is a serious oversimplification to speak of the Soviet Union as an imperialist power, or to describe the Soviet role in Central Asia and the Caucasus as colonial in character, Soviet policy being more generally geared towards the modernization and emancipation of its subject peoples. More central than orientalist notions about colonies and the Islamic world, however, may be a number of remarkably tenacious romantic and nationalist notions of the unique soul or character of the various Soviet peoples, as embodied and expressed in their languages or dialects, folklore, and national epics. It was the persistence of nineteenth-century romantic ideologies celebrating purified folkloric traditions allegedly free of foreign admixtures that supported the academic and other folklorization of the Kurds, and undoubtedly of other Soviet nationalities. This process of folklorization may have helped in representing the Kurds as a distinct people or nation; but it has involved the downplaying or denial of the premodern and early modern cosmopolitan and multilingual environment.

Conclusions

The importance and influence of imperial Russian and Soviet scholars for the development of Kurdology can hardly be overestimated. Thus, it was due to the efforts of Soviet scholars, Kurdoyev argues, “Kurdology, which used to form a secondary branch of Iranian studies, has become an autonomous branch of orientalism” (quoted in Bennigsen 1960: 530). In the wake of the 1917 revolution, Soviet scholarship became more explicitly geared towards the education and emancipation of the Soviet Union’s Muslim peoples. Remarkably, however, the anti-imperialist dimensions of Marxist thought are rather less visible in Soviet Kurdology than those of class struggle and national liberation. More specifically, Soviet authors appear to reproduce various problematic categories of ‘bourgeois’ orientalism, such as a focus on ethnic or national identity rather than class consciousness. Most importantly, I have argued above, Russian-language studies have been instrumental in the folklorization of the Kurds. A systematic attention (or overattention) to folkloric traditions implicitly assumed or explicitly stated to be purely and timelessly Kurdish, at the expense not only of folkloric commonalities with Arab, Turkish, Armenian and other neighbors, but also of its background in the high literate culture of Arabic

learning and Persian literature. Even the important critical editions of classical literary texts tended to reproduce and reinforce the nationalist reading of Kurdish literature by emphasizing its national significance rather than the Persianate literary tradition from which they derive much of their themes and vocabulary.

The Russian or Soviet-based term ‘Kurdology’, as distinct from ‘Kurdish studies’, not only carries distinct nationalistic connotations; it also reflects the earlier folklorization that was especially carried out by imperial Russian and Soviet scholars. The nationalism reflected in the imagery of an essentialized Kurdish nation or people, characterized by its own folklore and spoken dialects rather than any broader contacts with other Muslim and non-Muslim neighbouring peoples, however, may owe less to any specifically orientalist preconceptions than to romantic nationalism. This may in part reflect a broader scholarly indebtedness to German, rather than French or British traditions in the humanities, and, especially, to German philological work in historical-comparative linguistics. After all, it was the German scholars Rüdiger and Pott who had first characterized Kurdish as a distinct language. Subsequent Soviet linguistic research on Kurdish primarily concerns historical grammar and dialect studies in the German tradition, apart from the temporary influence of Marr and the Japhetic hypothesis. A more typically Russian feature of folklore research, visible in the work of Rudenko and others, is a preference for Propp’s and others’ morphological – as opposed to genetic – approach to the folk tale.

Another feature of Soviet Kurdology appears to be a persistent secularism, reflected in a remarkable lack of attention to the topic of Islam among the Kurds, often paired to a linear view of modernization as involving the end of religion and the steady disappearance of ethnoreligious diversity. The latter may reflect the wishful thinking of later Soviet nationality policies; but the former seems to be another inheritance from pre-Soviet times. From Minorsky onwards, research in Russian (and, it must be added, in other languages) tended to pay relatively much attention to heterodox groups like, most importantly, the Ahl-e Haqq and the Yezidis. In the Soviet era, this bias was reproduced in a predominance of studies on folklore, which to some extent led to the downplaying of Islamic religious learning and madrasa culture.

It would be an unjustifiable oversimplification to dismiss the mass of Kurdological work carried out in the Soviet Union as merely the product of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the scholarly value of which is further jeopardized by politically motivated academic fashions like Marr’s Japhetic

theory. Rather, in so far as it reproduces romantic nationalist preconceptions, it reflects problematic aspects of the humanities (and specifically, linguistic and folkloric research) more generally.³⁴

A further complication for traditional accounts of orientalism is the important role played by both local and foreign Kurdish actors in producing Kurdological knowledge. In short, the experience of Soviet Kurdology may lead to substantial revisions and refinements of widely-held views of orientalism; in particular, it invites us to pay greater attention to the imperial Russian and revolutionary Soviet contributions, which – much as German contributions – have received less than their fair share in studies of the creation of to orientalist knowledge.

ⁱ Initial research for this paper was carried out within the framework of the NWO-funded project on Cultural Innovation and the Foundations of the Humanities, which is gratefully acknowledged. The final draft was written while enjoying the support and stimulating environment of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Wassenaar.

³⁴ On these broader questions, cf. R. Bauman & Ch. Briggs 2003 *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Creation of Inequality*. Cambridge University Press