

OBITUARY:

Prof Dr Ol'ga Zhigalina (1946–2013)

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Professor Ol'ga Ivanovna Zhigalina, the well-known Russian Kurdologist and Iranist and director of the Kurdish Cabinet at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Science (*Institút vostokovédénija Rossíjskoj akadémii náúk*) in Moscow, sadly passed away at her place of work on 23rd October, 2013. Over four decades Professor Zhigalina made an immense contribution to the field of Kurdology and the modern history of the Kurds, and her work continues to resonate in this field.

Russia is often considered the cradle of Kurdish studies (*kurdovédenie*), which developed in Leningrad,¹ Yerevan and Moscow. One might, however, not realise that Kurdish studies in the Soviet Union was founded and developed as an independent interdisciplinary field. The USSR then ranked first in the world in Kurdish studies; no other country had as large and as qualified team of specialists.

Most readers outside of Russia are unlikely to have ever heard of Ol'ga Zhigalina, since her works are practically not available in any language other than Russian.² She was, however, one of the prominent Kurdologists who contributed greatly to the survival of Kurdish studies in Russia,³ particularly in Moscow.

Ol'ga Zhigalina completed her degree in *Romano-Germanic Philology* at M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University (*Moskóvskoj gosudárstvennoj universitét imeni M.V. Lomonósova*) in 1969.⁴ In the same year she began to work at the Institute of Oriental Studies and the following year was appointed as a junior research fellow in the Central Asia Division of the Institute, led at that time by

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¹ As of 6th September, 1991 the city became known as Saint Petersburg again.

² Just a few of her short articles and book chapters have been translated into other languages, e.g. Lazarev et al., 2007. There is also an article on an uprising among the Kurds of Khorasan available in Kurmanji (Jigalina, 1990). A series of her short articles, e.g. “Iran and the Iranian Kurds”, “The Kurds on the way to national and political solidarity”, etc. are available in English at <http://journal-neo.org/author/olga-zhigalina/> (last accessed: 16 May 2012).

³ For other prominent Kurdologists in Russia read more in, e.g., Bennigsen, 1960; Leezenberg, 2011; Mokri, 1963.

⁴ The information here is mainly based on the author's personal communication with Ol'ga Zhigalina in 2012-2013, Moscow, and on an article written on her 65th anniversary in 2011 by Mossaki, N.Z. (2012).

Professor N.A. Khalfin⁵, who was a renowned scholar in the field of historiography. Under his supervision Zhigalina prepared the memoirs of the Russian General Johann von Blaramberg for publication, which to this day continue to be a significant source for the study of Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 19th century. Her annotated translation of the memoirs from the German original appeared in 1978 (Blaramberg, 1978). A few years after the work on Blaramberg's memoirs, Zhigalina commenced her work on the Central Asian question in British historiography of the 19th century, drawing on both the Moscow archives as well as the archives of the Foundation of the Academic *Semënov* in Dushanbe. In 1973, she defended her doctoral dissertation dedicated to the Central Asian question in British historiography between the 1860s and 1890s and was granted the degree of doctor of historical studies (*kandidát istoricheskikh nauk*). The majority of Zhigalina's scientific works focus on Iranian Kurdistan, an understudied area even today. It was an extended stay in Iran, where she accompanied her husband in the 1970s, that turned her attention to the Kurds, especially those in Iran.⁶

After returning to Moscow in 1979, Zhigalina began work in the Group of Kurdologists established in 1979 by the renowned Turkologist and Kurdologist Prof. Manvel Arsenovich Gasratjan⁷ (1924–2007). The creation of this group of scholars in the Department of Near and Middle East, directed by Professor Ju.V. Gankovskij, was the initiative of Yevgeny Primakov, a member of the Russian Academy. The group's research focused mainly on modern Kurdish issues. In 1984, the Group was transformed into the *Cabinet of Kurdish Studies and Regional Problems* and in 1990 another prominent Kurdologist, M.S. Lazarev⁸ (1930–2010) replaced Gasratjan as the director. In 2004 Zhigalina took over from Lazarev as the director of the Kurdish Cabinet in Moscow, and held this position until her death in 2013.

Besides her outstanding scientific achievements and valuable contribution to Kurdish studies (see below), Zhigalina supervised a number of Ph.D. students, among them Kurds from Iran and Kazakhstan.⁹ Unfortunately, the conditions of post-Soviet Russia did not allow this generation to find employment as researchers in the field of Kurdish studies. Institutionally, the

⁵ Professor Khalfin is known to Turkish readers by his book *Bor'ba za Kurdistan* translated into Turkish. See Halfin, 1976.

⁶ She was in Iran between 1974 and 1979 with her husband, who had been working as the head of the Agency of Printing the News (APN). They were able to travel throughout the country where Zhigalina had the opportunity to get to know Iran and the situation of the Kurds.

⁷ He is known to Turkish speaking readers by the Turkish translation of his book. See Hasretyan 1995.

⁸ Lazarev is known to Turkish speaking readers, e.g., by his translated book, see Lazarev 1993.

⁹ Afrasiab Hawrami (d. 2011) was granted his Ph.D. in 1996 from the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Science. His dissertation was dedicated to the Mahabad republic. Another Ph.D. candidate was a Kurd from Kazakhstan, Amin Mustafaeu, who was also granted his Ph.D. in 1996 for a dissertation on the Iranian-Iraqi war (1980–1988) and the struggle of Iranian Kurds for autonomy.

position of Russian Kurdology, in Moscow as well as in St Petersburg, was dramatically weakened.

Zhigalina participated in many conferences worldwide and organised a large number of workshops and symposiums dedicated to various Kurdish issues. Under her initiative, the annual sessions dedicated to Prof. Lazarev were organised and she edited the “Lazarevskije Chtenija” collection of articles (Zhigalina, 2012). Zhigalina was continuing the long tradition of Russian and Soviet Kurdology and in particular the classical Moscow school of Kurdology, which basically aimed to investigate historical and political studies; in contrast to the Saint Petersburg school of Kurdology which specialised mainly in the fields of philology and literary studies. The strength of both schools, however, can be said to be their work on archival documents. What is probably most valuable in Zhigalina’s work is that a considerable amount of her scientific work was based on the analysis of Russian and Soviet archival documents. This archival material is mostly consular notes, reports, and different reviews from Tabriz, Kermanshah, Khorasan and Mashhad. The archives also contain military reports. Her field of study includes Kurdish studies in general and the Kurdish question in Iran, Central Asia, and English historiography in connection with the Middle East in particular. Her knowledge of different European and Oriental languages facilitated access to a variety of sources and enabled the appreciation of the issue from different perspectives. It is especially difficult to investigate problems of modern Kurdish history in Russia, since the number of new publications appearing in the libraries is extremely limited and there is practically no access to electronic publications.

Zhigalina is the author of more than one hundred scientific publications, among which are a number of monographs. From the 1980s onwards her scientific publications appeared in the fields of Kurdish studies, especially on Iranian Kurdistan. In 1988, she published her book on the national movement of the Kurds in Iran 1918–1947 (Zhigalina, 1988). It is written mostly on the basis of the archival sources of the National Foundation of India, the foreign policy archives of the Russian Empire, the private archive of the famous Russian Kurdologist O.L. Vil’chevskij, and the materials of the Archive of the Institute of Ancient Manuscripts. In her important book, among others Zhigalina analyses the uprisings of the Kurds, the centralising policies of the Shah, and the political situation in Kurdistan in the 1930s. Two years later in 1990 Zhigalina’s monograph based on her doctoral thesis, “Great Britain in the Middle East (19th and early 20th centuries)”, was published (Zhigalina, 1990). In 1996, Zhigalina completed her habilitation (*dóktorskaja dissertácija*) on the ethno-social processes in Iran in the 19th and 20th centuries (Zhigalina, 1996). On the basis of the historical material Zhigalina analysed tendencies of development in Iranian society and the dynamics of ethno-social transformations. The special focus of the work is on the escalation of the ethno-political situation and conflict in Iranian Kurdistan.

In 2002, she published another monograph, this time on the Kurdish khanates of Khorasan during the late Qajar period (Zhigalina, 2002). Four

years later, Zhigalina published a monograph on the Kurdish question in Western Asia at the beginning of the 21st century (Zhigalina, 2006). In 2008, based on extensive Russian archival material, she produced a unique monograph on the Kurds of Kermanshah (Zhigalina, 2008). In 2011 “The Kurdish question in the politics of the modern Iran. The problem of the resolution of the Kurdish ethno-political conflict in Iran” was published in Germany by Lambert Academic Publishing¹⁰ (Zhigalina, 2011). The book studies the politics of Iran towards the Kurdish question after the overthrow of the Shah’s monarchy in 1979 up until 2010, examining the Kurdish national movement in Iran during the period of the revolution from 1978-1979 and the policy of Iran towards the Kurdish population after the death of Khomeini. In the book, Zhigalina also analyses the evolution of Kurdish political organisations in Iran. She emphasises the impossibility of solving the Kurdish question by the use of force, and posits the possibility of a peaceful political solution through interlocution of representatives of the Kurdish opposition with the Iranian leadership. Moreover, she gives emphasis to the active participation of the Kurds in the socio-political life of the region and their contribution to revitalising the region’s economy (Zhigalina, 2011).

Based mostly on archival material, the works of Professor Zhigalina are novel and crucial not merely for Russian Kurdology, but also for Kurdish studies in general. The majority of Zhigalina’s works are innovative and introduce significant new data to the scholarship. Over the past 43 years Zhigalina worked at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, with 34 years spent focusing on Kurdish issues. With her passing Kurdish studies suffered a great loss. Ol’ga Zhigalina was a remarkable person and she will always be remembered not only by her colleagues, but by everyone who was fortunate enough to know her personally.

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¹⁰ The publication of this book by LAP reflects the difficulty of publishing in Russia. Many works written by Russian Kurdologists languish on their tables for years because of the financial difficulties of publishing works in the field of Kurdish Studies, which usually receive no external financial support.

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