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Soviet Kurdish Studies and Policies: the Problem of Agents and Agency

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The modern Kurdish national movement since its inception constantly interacted with the regional and global powers and was sporadically instrumentalised by them. The Soviet state interacted especially intensively with the Kurdish political projects, e.g., by creating the Kurdish district known as ‘Red Kurdistan’ in the Caucasus in the 1920s, involvement in the establishment of the so-called ‘Mahabad republic’ in Iran in 1946, and contradictory relations with Mustafa Barzani’ movement in Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s. This policy took its roots in the early Bolsheviks’ attempts to both revise Tsarist Russia’s handling of ethnic groups inside the empire and launch a global revolution by revolutionising the ‘East’. The paper discusses the role of Kurdish and non-Kurdish experts and activists in the history of Soviet Kurdish projects, highlighting the problem of agency which could have taken many forms that avoid easy detection and assessment. The matter is additionally complicated by the interplay between Soviet state policies and the internal dynamics of Kurdish political and cultural projects. The study rests on the method of “collective biography” based on the biographies of eight Soviet experts and activists who were involved in these projects. It relies on archival records from Russia and Armenia, publications of the time, recollections of Kurdish activists, as well as documents and interviews provided by the families of these experts and activists.

Keywords: Kurds, Caucasus, USSR, Iran, Mustafa Barzani, Red Kurdistan, Soviet nationalities policy, Mehabad republic

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Советское курдоведение и политика: проблема агентов и агентств

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Современное курдское национальное движение с момента своего зарождения находилось в постоянном взаимодействии с региональными и мировыми державами и периодически использовалось ими в своих интересах. Советское государство особенно интенсивно взаимодействовало с курдскими политическими проектами, например, в ходе создания в Закавказье в 1920-х гг. Курдистанского района, известного как «Красный Курдистан», участия в 1946 г. в создании курдской автономии в Иране, известной как «Межабадская республика», и противоречивых отношений с движением Мустафы Барзани в Ираке в 1960-х и 1970-х гг. Эта политика берет свое начало в ранних попытках большевиков не только пересмотреть отношение царской России к этническим группам внутри империи, но и начать глобальную революцию путем революционизации Востока. В статье обсуждается роль курдских и некурдских экспертов и активистов в советских курдских проектах, подчеркивая проблему выявления роли различных действующих сил. Эта задача осложнена в связи с взаимодействием между политикой советского государства и внутренней динамикой курдских политических и культурных проектов. Чтобы прояснить траекторию советской политики в отношении курдов, демонстративные аспекты советской политики опущены в исследовании и акцент сделан на анализе этой политики в контексте взаимодействия с жизнью соответствующих ученых и активистов. Исследование основано на методе «коллективной биографии», которое опирается на биографии восьми советских экспертов и активистов, вовлеченных в эти проекты. Для этого в исследовании использованы документы из архивов России и Армении, публикации того времени, воспоминания курдских активистов, а также документы и интервью, предоставленные семьями этих экспертов и активистов.

Ключевые слова: курды, Кавказ, СССР, Иран, Мустафа Барзани, Красный Курдистан, национальная политика СССР, Межабадская республика

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Introduction

Many recent studies of the Soviet nationalities policies, especially the promotion of the so-called national projects and autonomies inside the Soviet Union, are affected by Terry Martin's concept of the USSR as an 'affirmative action empire' [1]. Martin's arguments about Moscow's legitimising, and empowering numerous 'nationalities' was sometimes misinterpreted and politically abused to criticise the Soviet policies for creating 'artificial' nations and ethnic groups. However, his conceptual

framework can be developed through revision of its emphasis on Moscow-driven development of ethnic groups. The latter, at any rate, has already become questionable after some authoritative studies of the history of Central Asia, e.g., of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Turkestan in general by Adeeb Khalid [2], Adrienne Edgar [3], Cloé Drieu [4] and Gero Fedtke [5], respectively, highlighted the agency of ethnic groups in Soviet national projects.

This paper builds upon their studies and investigates the history of the Soviet Kurdish projects. It differs from the Uzbek or Turkmen cases: the Kurds had an even weaker modern identity, were fragmented, and there were few of them within the Soviet boundaries. That is, the Soviet government had no apparent reasons to promote Kurdish national projects. Moreover, encouragement of Kurdish emancipation threatened to cause conflict between Soviet Union republics and undermine Moscow's relations with then relatively Soviet-friendly Turkey and Iran. That the Kurdish projects still were promoted, is probably the result of the Kurds' agency in them. To clarify the trajectory of the Soviet Kurdish policies I leave out the demonstrative aspects of Soviet policies and explore how these policies interacted with the life of respective scholars and activists. The result is a "collective biography" based on the lives of eight Soviet experts and activists involved in these policies.

The choice of these Kurdish and non-Kurdish researchers has been based on the availability of sources in archives and elsewhere. To explore the issue, I have examined publications of the time, official records in archives¹, memoirs, family documents and collections, as well as interviewed relatives of these scholars and activists.

Cultural Construction in Soviet Kurdistan

Kurdish studies, which were advanced in Russia already before the October revolution, in the 1920s gained prominence in Soviet academic institutions as Moscow came to require expertise on the Kurds — both to govern the Kurdish minority inside the USSR² and to revolutionise "the East." At first glance, it seems that the non-Kurds shaped and ran the Kurdish projects in the USSR — among them Kazimir Vasilevsky³, Oleg Vilchevsky⁴, Fedor Rostopchin⁵, and Isaak Tsukerman⁶.

While Vasilevsky was a pre-revolutionary Bolshevik activist, the rest were less politically engaged — some being offsprings of Tsarist high-rank officials (Vilchevsky's father was the Baltic Fleet's

¹ For example: Archive of the Federal Security Service of Russia in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region (hereinafter A FSB SPb LO), Scientific Archive of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography named after Peter the Great (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (hereinafter NA MAE RAN), Scientific Archive of the Institute of the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences (hereinafter NA IIMK RAN), National Archive of Armenia (hereinafter NAA), Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (hereinafter RGASPI), St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (hereinafter SPbF ARAN), Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense (hereinafter TsAMO), Central State Archive of Historical and Political Documents of St. Petersburg (hereinafter TsGAIPD SPb), Central State Archive of Literature and Art of St. Petersburg (hereinafter TsGALI SPb), Central State Archive of St. Petersburg (hereinafter TsGA SPb), Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg (hereinafter TSGIA SPb).

² According to the All-Union population census, the Kurdish population in Transcaucasia was 66,695 in 1926 and 39,401 in 1939.

³ Kazimir Gabrielovich Vasilevsky (1896-1937) — Soviet scholar of modern Turkey and Kurdish studies. He produced a number of academic publications on Kurdish issues which were perceived by some Soviet government agencies as undermining good relations between the USSR and Turkey.

⁴ Oleg Ludvigovich Vilchevsky (1902-1964) — Soviet Orientalist specialising mostly in Iranian and Kurdish history, anthropology and literature. Son of a naval officer, he graduated from the Leningrad Institute of Oriental Studies, and became a Kurdish language teacher at its Kurdish department, where Kanat Kurdoev was one of the students. In 1936 he became the author of the first Soviet grammar of the Kurdish language together with Arab Shamilov and Kurdoev.

⁵ Fedor Borisovich Rostopchin (1904-1937) — Soviet scholar of Iranian and Kurdish history and literature. The son of a count, comes to study the East thanks to his work with the Comintern. He began translating the history of the Kurds of Sharaf-Khan Bidlisi into Russian.

⁶ Isaak Iosifovich Tsukerman (1909-1998) — Soviet linguist who mostly studied Iranian languages, especially the Kurdish of Armenia and Turkmenistan.

military prosecutor, and Rostopchin's grand-grandfather was Moscow governor rumoured to have burned down Moscow in 1812). One can even suspect that Rostopchin and Vilchevsky chose their "Exit to the East," fleeing from violent politics by engaging in Kurdish studies. Vilchevsky derided official ideology even in the 1960s, asking how many Lenin's quotations must be inserted on one page of a scholarly work for it to be accepted for publication⁷. Was it a genuine escapism from Soviet reality or a search for a meaningful occupation in a new world where their social background had become a handicap?

Anyway, all of them but Tsukerman became active in Comintern-linked structures alongside doing scholarly research. The Comintern or the Communist International coordinated activities of radical movements worldwide; it frequently collided with the policies of the Soviet government. Vasilevsky's case illustrates this current in the Soviet Kurdish studies. He fought in the Soviet-Polish war, and when the Soviets lost it, he took an interest in other regions. Through self-education and practical jobs, he became an Orientalist⁸. He studied Turkestan and Turkey, which, the Kremlin hoped, could get closer to the USSR under Mustafa Kemal. He also investigated Kurdish tribes and uprisings. This was the time of large-scale Kurdish rebellions in Turkey and they drew the attention of the Soviets: in the wake of the Sheikh Said Uprising, which engulfed the areas on the Soviet border, Vasilevsky published in 1930 as many as thirteen papers, and even when he wrote about Turkey in general, he highlighted the role of the Kurds⁹.

Some avenues of Kurdish studies did not involve the Comintern. Among them were studies of the Kurdish population of the Soviet Union — dispersed in the Caucasus and Central Asia and divided into three major subgroups — the Yezidis of Armenia, the Shi'ite Kurds of Azerbaijan, and the Sunni Kurds of Turkmenistan. Much research aimed to identify and canonise the Kurdish identity and culture as a base for Kurdish national development. The Yezidis soon became a prime focus — probably because of their socially marginalised status [6, p. 292] and integration with Soviet Armenian society.

Soviet Kurdish scholars who delved into these topics relied on the support of Nikolay Marr — a somewhat eccentric Soviet linguist and historian [7, 8]. Vilchevsky and Tsukerman were employed at Marr's Institute of Language and Thought. Marr let colleagues specialising in Kurdish studies work relatively freely. Vilchevsky enjoyed Marr's support¹⁰, prepared and defended his 1938 doctoral thesis on the sacred texts of Yezidis¹¹. While working on Yezidi liturgy, Vilchevsky contributed to the Soviet one, helping to Shamilov¹² to produce Kurdish pseudo-folklore texts praising Soviet leaders [9].

By the mid-1930s, the Kremlin reassessed the role of the Comintern, and its activities were suppressed with personnel persecuted. Vasilevsky, who did not hide his radical beliefs and vision of the Kurds as drivers of revolution in the Middle East, could publish ever less, and his last *opus magnum* — a strategy of mobilising the Kurds to revolutionise the Middle East — failed to attract any attention of respective agencies. As early as 1933, Vasilevsky was excluded from a delegation dispatched to Turkey because the foreign ministry did not want to antagonise Turkish authorities by sending them

⁷ Interview with Andrew Cherkayev, grandson of Vilchevsky O.L., 10.11.2019 [10, p. 111].

⁸ Vasilevsky K.G. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 65a. D. 3400. L. 18-19.

⁹ See more details [11].

¹⁰ According to Tsukerman, "*Marr was a shield for us, under the cover of which we could do what we wanted*" [12, p. 28].

¹¹ The study of Yezidi texts had theoretical and practical significance in understanding mediaeval Kurdish history. Also, on these materials provided arguments for Soviet authorities' fight against the Yezidi clergy in the context of Soviet anti-religious propaganda and confrontation with European researchers and Kurdish politicians. See more details in Vilchevsky O.L. Stenogramma zaschity dissertatsii «Yezidskiye teksty» 16.07.1938 [Minutes of Defence of the Thesis 'Yezidi Texts'] // SPbF ARAN. F. 77. Op. 2. D. 5. L. 20.

¹² Vilchevsky and Shamilov met during Vilchevsky's research trip to Transcaucasia in 1930 and corresponded thereafter [State security files on Vilchevsky O // A FSP SPb LO. Arch. P-10180. L. 3]. After Shamilov moved to Leningrad and both scholars became engaged in various Soviet cultural construction projects among the Kurds, they established a close personal relationship and visited each other [State security files on Shamilov A.Sh. In 2 vols. Vol. 1 // A FSP SPb LO. Arch. P-22556. L. 38].

an outspoken proponent of Kurdish liberation¹³. A few years later, both Rostopchin and Vasilevsky were executed, while Vilchevsky — who was only marginally linked to Comintern activities and protected by his links to Marr — survived by keeping a low profile. His competencies were not needed by the authorities anymore, not only because they gave up the global revolution but also because radical nationalities policies in the USSR were gradually wrapped up in the late 1930s with only larger autonomous units remaining and most affirmative action programs halted. The tiny “Red Kurdistan” district was dismantled, too¹⁴.

The 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union almost finished Vilchevsky off. Being a unique expert in the Soviet system, he nonetheless was dispatched to the deadly frontline as a company commander in a kind of militia near Leningrad¹⁵. Meanwhile, in August 1941, operating together with the British, the Red Army invaded Iran and occupied some Kurdish-populated areas. The Allies were concurrently worried about a possible clash with Turkey which would involve Kurdish-populated areas. Nevertheless, the few Kurdish experts the USSR had not shot were drafted and deployed on the German front. At the end of 1941, Vilchevsky was moved from one deadly assignment to another. The Soviet military command finally took account of his qualifications: he became an instructor of a company of destroyer dogs¹⁶. He was a known specialist on dogs before the war and dealt at Marr’s institute not only with Kurdish studies but also with research on the “dogs’ intellect”¹⁷.

World War II: Who Was the Mastermind behind the Mahabad Republic?

Among known scholars specialised in Kurdish studies, it was Tsukerman who in early 1942 was the first to be deployed to Iran, namely the Kurdish areas of Khorasan, as deputy chief of the Intelligence department of a riflemen division¹⁸. In the spring of 1942, Soviet authorities also sent Vilchevsky to Iran¹⁹. He immediately visited Kurdish areas, especially Mahabad, meeting future leaders of the Kurdish autonomous republic²⁰. Vilchevsky’s work there has remained secret till now, although he revealed some details of it in an essay published with huge censorship cuts in 1957 [10].

Judging by available records, Vilchevsky became the key expert providing advice on the establishment of the Mahabad Republic. Without dismissing the Kurdish agency or the Kremlin's decisions on the matter, I insist that he shaped some crucial aspects of it. Jalal Talabani complained of “*Professor Filjefsky*” providing guidelines that doomed Mahabad [16, p. 63]. In particular,

¹³ In August 1932, Deputy People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs L. Karakhan wrote: “*We are extremely interested in using the authority of Soviet science to strengthen our cultural and political influence in Turkey.*” Later, he rejected Vasilevsky, proposed by the commission, as a “*completely unacceptable candidate*” [15, p. 98, 105].

¹⁴ Kurdistan district was established 16 July 1923 between the Armenian Republic and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAR) of Azerbaijan. See more details [13, 14].

¹⁵ Spisok zaschitnikov Leningrada, Odessy, Sevastopolya i Stalingrada, rabotayuschikh v Otdel Kadrov Politicheskogo upravleniya Zakavkazskogo Voennogo Okruga [List of defenders of Leningrad, Odessa, Sevastopol and Stalingrad working in the Personnel department of the Political department of the Transcaucasian military district]. TsAMO. F. 47. Op. 995. D. 312. L.1.

¹⁶ Spisok zaschitnikov Leningrada, Odessy, Sevastopolya i Stalingrada, rabotayuschikh v Otdel Kadrov Politicheskogo upravleniya Zakavkazskogo Voennogo Okruga [List of defenders of Leningrad, Odessa, Sevastopol and Stalingrad working in the Personnel department of the Political department of the Transcaucasian military district]. TsAMO. F. 47. Op. 995. D. 312. L. 1.

¹⁷ Marr equally positively assessed Vilchevsky’s fascination with cynology and Kurdish studies: “*graduate student Vilchevsky, being a well-known dog expert on the use of this animal as a means of transportation, has a thorough acquaintance with the literature of the subject and, most importantly, personal observations on the language and intellect of the dog, reflected in its behaviour. Nevertheless, O.L. Vilchevsky’s main area of expertise is the Kurdish language.*” [Vilchevsky O.L. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // SPbF ARAN. F. 222. Op. 2. D. 79. L. 3]

¹⁸ Tsukerman I.I. Nagradnoy list, 01.08.1943 [Award list] // TsAMO. F. 33. Op. 686044 D. L. 97.

¹⁹ Prikaz № 26, 26.01.1942 [Order No. 26 of 26.01.1942] // TsAMO. F. 8312. Op. 301962. D. 38. L. 241.

²⁰ Vilchevsky O.L. Raport o poezdke v Iran, August 1942 [Report on a trip to Iran] // NA MAE RAN. F. 17. Op. 1. D. 95.

Vilchevsky reportedly wanted the Mahabad Republic to rely more on the tribal nobility and bazaar merchants rather than on radical left wing activists. Vilchevsky's role was not limited to the matters related to the Mukri Kurdistan itself. His later contacts reveal that he also dealt with Iraqi Kurdish leftists like Mustafa Khoshnaw and followers of Mustafa Barzani. The latter fled to Iran and provided the military force of the Mahabad Republic.

The republic fell. The Soviet experiments with Kurdish and Azerbaijani separatism in Iran remained limited endeavours. So, while Vilchevsky was involved in them, Tsukerman's expertise remained largely ignored. After operations in Iranian Khorasan²¹, he was sent to fight against Germany, immediately dismissed from the army in 1945, and returned to scholarly work. The Soviet Kurdish projects remained on low burning, with Barzani biding his time in the USSR since 1947 and Kurdish uprisings being expected for some more years²². All this time, Vilchevsky served in the Soviet army in the Caucasus, next door to Kurdish areas, consulting the Soviet command on the Middle East and taking notice of unrest in Kurdish areas. During the Korean War, accompanied by instability in Iran, the expectations of Kurdish rebellions in the Middle East rose to the highest. After this, Moscow reduced its foreign policy ambitions, and in 1954 Lieutenant Colonel Vilchevsky, was finally dismissed from the Soviet army and returned to his scholarly activities at the Ethnography Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences²³.

One more time, he and his colleagues got active after Barzani and his followers in 1958 returned from the USSR to Iraq and galvanised Kurdish politics in the region. Soviet Kurdish experts then produced a flurry of publications and engaged in politics with Vilchevsky meeting Kurdish emissaries sent to Moscow²⁴. To no avail, the Barzani-led rebels did not become Soviet allies in Iraq, and Moscow ultimately preferred to deal with the central government in Baghdad. Vilchevsky died just as the Iraqi-Kurdish movement was switching sides to ally itself with the US, Israel and Iran. It left Soviet Kurdish policies in shambles for more than a decade.

Kurds in Soviet State or Who Advised Barzani?

If we finish the story here, we stay with a one-sided, effectively colonialist and Orientalist narrative of Soviet Kurdish policies and studies. What did **the Kurds** do when these Orientalists wrote Kurdish grammars and histories and constructed political projects? Where were Chingiz Yildirim²⁵, Arab

²¹ Tsukerman I.I. Pismo Meshchaninovu I.I., 1942 [The Letter to Meshchaninov I.I.] // СІБФ АРАН. F. 969. Op. 1. D. 559. L. 2-2(ob).

²² One of these students was Kerim Eyyubi who held a high leadership position in Mahabad. In 1946 he was sent to Baku to study at the party school. After Baku, Eyyubi went to Leningrad, where he worked at the Institute of Linguistics (former Institute of Language and Thought) doing research on the Kurdish language — however, autonomously from other Kurdish scholars working then in other Leningrad institutions. Interview with Suar Eyyubi, son of Kerim Eyyubi, 2023.01.20; Eyyubi K.R. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // TsGAIPD SPb. F. 24. Op. 247-3. D. 1055. L. 81.

²³ Vilchevsky O.L. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // TsAMO. K. B-887. In. 1625153. L. 7; Vilchevsky O.L. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // NA MAE RAN. F. K-1. Op. 7. D. 16. L. 5.

²⁴ During a conversation with Vilchevsky, Hamza Abdullah, a Kurdish activist who visited the Soviet Union as part of a delegation of the Iraqi Society for Friendship with the USSR, said, with regret that “*Mulla Mustafa did not learn anything during his stay in the Soviet Union and he remained just the same tribal chieftain he had been earlier, and therefore his current [political] stance causes many active participants in the democratic movement from among the Kurds to distance themselves from the movement.*” Vilchevsky O.L. O sovremennom kurdskom voprose. Zapiska N.A. Mukhitdinovu, 1960 [On the modern Kurdish question. The Note to N.A. Mukhitdinov] // NA MAE RAN. F. 17. Op. 1. D. 47. L. 12-13.

²⁵ Chingiz-han Yildirimovich Sultanov (Chingiz Yildirim) (1891-1937) — engineer-metallurgist, politician. He was born in Zangezur district of the Elizavetpol (Ganja) province of Azerbaijan.

Shamilov²⁶, Qanat Kurdojev²⁷, and Samand Siabandov²⁸?

From the beginning, we see the non-Kurdish experts and proponents of Kurdish projects in the USSR interact — by cooperating, competing, and quarreling — with ethnic Kurdish activists and scholars. For many years, conflicts between Soviet scholars and activists have been dismissed as personal quarrels. It is time to examine the probable political and ideological base of such squabbles. We can note several conflict lines here, one between ethnically Kurdish experts on the issue and non-Kurds. These conflicts indicate the Kurdish agency in Soviet Kurdish projects because they mattered and shaped respective policies and human lives.

All the principal Soviet ethnically Kurdish experts on Kurdish issues were Yezidis from mostly Armenian-dominated areas. Yildirim constitutes an exception: he was born into the Shi'ite Kurdish family of Kubatli (Azerbaijan)²⁹, in 1916 he became an accomplished engineer³⁰ and was a Bolshevik activist from pre-revolutionary times [17, p.6]. Yildirim enjoyed a high standing in the Bolshevik party and occupied important jobs in the new Soviet state, e.g., he was one of the managers of the famous Magnitka development plan [18, p.44].

At any rate, such a configuration of Kurdish experts and activists led to several consequences. One had to do with a competition between the Soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan over the leadership of Soviet Kurdish policies. While most of the Kurds in Soviet Armenia were the Yezidis, it was in Soviet Azerbaijan that the Soviet authorities established an administrative territory for the Kurds³¹. The so-called Red Kurdistan was established in an area where mostly Muslim Kurds lived, and the latter had a complicated relationship with the Yezidis. Yildirim could attain the establishment of autonomy, but leading Soviet Kurdish experts were geographically, socially, and culturally detached from the project and ambiguous about it. The disputes of the time reflect attempts by Soviet Armenian authorities to prevail politically by introducing a kind of categorisation which at least highlighted the Yezidi type of Kurdish identity and sometimes even divided the Kurds into several groups. Such policies were complemented by cultural measures — so, Armenia tried to introduce a Kurdish alphabet based on its writing system.

Problems of Agents and Agency

Central Soviet authorities did not accept Yerevan's line and preferred to make their conclusions from the results of numerous ethnographic studies. Yezidi Kurds were assigned to "Kurds,"³² with religiously linked distinctions expected to be erased. The alphabet was Latinised. Yet the discrepancy reemerged — Yezidi Kurds from Armenia rose to prominence in the Soviet Kurdish community, and

²⁶ Arab Shamoyevich Shamilov (Erebê Şemo) (1897-1978). He was born in the family of a Yezidi sheikh in Kagyzman district of Kars region. He claimed to be the first and "the only" Kurdish communist of the USSR. He made a significant personal contribution to shaping Soviet nation-building policies among the Kurds.

²⁷ Qanat Kalashevich Kurdojev (Qanatê Kurdo) (1909-1985). He was born in Kagyzman district of Kars region. Graduated from school No. 103 in Tbilisi for Kurdish orphans. He studied at the Leningrad Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History. Researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

²⁸ Samand Aliyevich Siabandov (1909-1989). He was born in Kagyzman district of Kars region. He went to the same school No. 103 in Tbilisi as Kurdojev, and later studied in Leningrad, Tbilisi and Moscow before achieving high-level party posts in Armenia.

²⁹ Chingiz-bek Ildrym-bek oğly Sultanov. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // TsGIA SPb. F. 478. Op. 1. D. 2046. L. 10(ob)-11.

³⁰ Chingiz-bek Ildrym-bek oğly Sultanov. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // TsGIA SPb. F. 478. Op. 25 D. 1175. L. 1.

³¹ The "korenizatsiya" policy was applicable to the Kurds as a large national minority. The systematic development of national culture, political, economic and cultural institutions and national consciousness of the non-Russian peoples of the USSR at that time was undertaken according to the "territory-elite-language" scheme [9, p. 185]. The Kurdish population of Azerbaijan was more than 40 000 and lived historically and predominantly in Kurdistan District.

³² Usharov K.A. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // TsGAIPD SPb. F. 1728. Op. 1-38. D. 298298. L. 5-5(ob).

their representatives — Shamilov³³, Kurdoev³⁴ and Siabandov³⁵, were trained in Leningrad till the mid-1930s. After that, Shamilov and Kurdoev became leading experts on Kurdish issues. Siabandov became an important official in the Kurdish areas of Armenia and, by the late 1930s — from first secretary of the District Committee of the Communist Party³⁶ to a member of the Soviet Armenian parliament in 1938 [19, p.49]. The repressions of the late 1930s struck them relatively less than the non-Kurds among Soviet scholars and officials dealing with Kurdish issues. Yildirim was shot, confirming that the closer one was to the radical revolutionary current in the Soviet regime³⁷, the more probably one would be killed. Shamilov was exiled as a Trotskyite³⁸ to Kazakhstan³⁹. The German invasion in 1941 made Moscow focus on fighting the war and drop the last revolutionising policies. The Soviet troops entered Iran and Iranian Kurdistan, but no extensive measures supporting separatism were undertaken. Sure, Kurmanji-speaking Soviet Yezidi Kurdish activists and scholars were no perfect experts on Sorani-speaking Sunni Muslim Kurdish regions of Iran or Iraq. These Soviet Kurdish experts and activists were not deployed to Iran but sent to fight the Germans. Siabandov received the highest degree of military distinction for his bravery and became the Hero of the Soviet Union [19, p.47].

Both Siabandov and Kurdoev were demobilised after the victory in Europe. Siabandov, however, was urgently sent from the army to Yerevan on the Iranian border, and, according to one account, he was assigned to Barzani as a military advisor. There is no trace of his work with Barzani in archival records I could check so far, nevertheless, it seems probable because of the timing of his urgent transfer from Austria to the border with Iran and his subsequent rise in Soviet hierarchy — he became a deputy in the Soviet Union parliament. Despite his extensive fighting experience and bureaucratic routine, Siabandov, till the end of his life, wrote scholarly and literary works on Kurdish themes [19, p.50].

Kurdoev after returning from the army resumed scholarly activities, as well as worked with Kurdish activists and politicians from abroad. He enjoyed high standing among them, and Talabani described his meeting “*a Hero of the Soviet Union, general, professor Kurdoev*” [16, p.91] in Moscow — Kurdoev was then nothing of it⁴⁰. Shamilov returned from exile in the early 1950s, resumed writing fiction in Kurmanji and became a prominent Kurdish writer.

To sum up, contrary to Edward Said’s opinion that Russian Orientalism was ‘different,’ in some respects, it was not, as proven by these cases of Soviet scholars not only involved as consultants in government policies but deployed in their expert capacity in the military or other government agencies — sometimes in uniform, sometimes not. So one can speak, at least, of **some agents** in the narrow meaning of the word. It explains a lot in their *modus operandi* as scholars — their minimal

³³ Shamilov A.Sh. Aspirant. Lichnoe delo [Personal file of a postgraduate student] // NA IIMK RAN. F. 2. Op. 3. D. 739. L. 42.

³⁴ Kurdoev K.K. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // TsGALI SPb. F. 328. Op. 2. D. 891. L. 2.

³⁵ Siabandov S.. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // TsGA SPb. F. 4363. Op. 1. D. 478. L. 3.

³⁶ Siabandov S.A. Lichnoe delo [Personal file] // NAA. F. 1. Op. 123. D. 8937. L. 1 (ob).

³⁷ Yildirim as a Bolshevik party member from the pre-revolutionary times was heavily involved in factional infighting inside the Communist Party like other such ‘Old Bolsheviks’. His exact factional affiliation still remains to be clarified, yet he was known to be a close friend of Sergei Kirov [17, p. 54-55]. It may indicate his being a member of the “rightist” current close to Stalin. If so, it still does not mean he was guaranteed against being persecuted, the political repressions of the 1930s sometimes were chaotic and frequently the Bolshevik activists of any political colours were targeted, especially if they tried to express their independent critical opinions.

³⁸ During the defence of his thesis, Vilchevsky called Shamilov “*trotskistskiy avanyurist*” after the latter’s arrest in 1937. Shamilov, who not only was born into a family which belonged to the Yezidi traditional caste of Sheikhs, but was also a Yezidi Kurd with university education, first agreed to provide Vilchevsky with the Yezidi oral religious texts necessary for his thesis, but the next day refused, saying “*it is improper [neudobno] to tell such things to an outsider.*” Vilchevsky O.L. Stenogramma zaschity dissertatsii «Yezidskiye teksty» 16.07.1938 [Minutes of Defence of the Thesis ‘Yezidi Texts’]. // SPbF ARAN. F. 77. Op. 2. D. 5. L. 16.

³⁹ According to Articles 58-10 (part 1) and 58-11 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR in 1937 and 1942. State security files on Shamilov A.Sh. In 2 vols. Vol. 1 // A FSP SPb LO. Arch. P-22556. L. 74.

⁴⁰ Kurdoev ended the war with the rank of lieutenant-technician [19, p.89].

communication with foreign colleagues, a penchant for pseudonyms (even when publishing scholarly papers), non-transparency and secrecy of their biographies and activities, etc.

To solve the problem of the **agency**, it makes sense to study specific driving forces, interests, concrete groups and persons involved in the implementation of respective policies. This way, we can make more sense of such notions as ‘Soviet Kurdish policy.’ It can be done by zooming in and out on actors in the Soviet policies towards the Kurds. It will clarify connections, alliances, patronages, animosities and cleavages of Kurdish politics inside and outside the USSR. Those are not of purely historical interest because some seem to remain operative for prolonged periods, and even till now. I have discussed the Yezidi role in Soviet Kurdish policies since the 1920s, but in the late 1970s, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan used its own Yezidi members to link up with their Soviet brethren to have an extra secured channel of communication with Moscow while the PKK since the early 1990s is rumoured to rely in Russia on the predominantly Yezidi Kurdish activists.

The role of Kurdish activists and scholars needs further investigation but their agency in Soviet policies is undeniable. Soviet Yezidi Kurdish activists, scholars, party and state officials — linked to the Soviet Armenian establishment — shall be recognised as the most influential and effective actors in shaping Soviet Kurdish policies, first inside the Soviet Union, and, later, abroad. Sometimes their agency was destructive for respective Kurdish projects of the USSR, but they were major drivers of these projects. It is time to rethink the applicability of the constructivist paradigm in studying such topics without returning to primordialism. However, even the Soviet Kurdish policies show that a nation is never *creatio ex nihilo*, and it cannot be constructed this way. The Soviet Kurdish projects seem controversial to some, but they were not opportunist moves by Moscow; they relied on the expertise and the agency of a respective ethnic group.

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