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Varieties of Ideology Critique in Early Soviet Literary and Oriental Scholarship

Literary studies in the early years of the Soviet Union involved penetrating critiques of the philological perspectives that dominated European scholarship. Although some of the central concepts of Indo-European philology had been subjected to some important questioning in the late 19th Century, much of this had resulted from the dramatically expanded timeframe of historical scholarship through accumulated fossil evidence of early man, rather than from questioning its ideological assumptions as such.¹ Much of the conceptual framework persisted in studies of language and literature even as an evolutionary and often racist perspective came to supplant cultural assumptions of European superiority.² Moreover, as long as researchers primarily regarded language and literature as means by which the ethnological relations in history could be established, the question of the specific nature of literature as such would remain at best of marginal concern. The break with comparative philology was thus simultaneously a disciplinary and an ideological shift, and it was in the early Soviet Union that this was pursued most thoroughly. As we shall see, however, there were two distinctly different kinds of ideology critique that developed, attention to which raises important questions about the development of postcolonial studies today.

¹ Thomas Trautmann, "The Revolution in Ethnological Time," *Man* 27(2) (1992): 379–397.

² See, for instance, Tuska Benes, *In Babel's Shadow: Language, Philology and the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008); Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Aryans and Semites, a Match Made in Heaven* (New York: Other Press, 1992 [1989]); Stefan Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Given that much has been written on the Aryan-Semite dichotomy in the philology of the period, I will not be exploring that matter here.

Indo-European philology had developed in close relation to colonial expansion and, as Thomas Trautmann puts, it assumed “the Genesis narrative of the three sons of Noah, from which the various nations of the world descended” even while it ignored or even denied this this Biblical element in the “official history... which serves as its charter as a true science.”³ What emerged was a “single scheme of classification in which everyone is kin to everyone else, but in varying degrees of nearness.”⁴ The centrepiece was the commonly established Indo-European narrative held that the achievements of European civilisation and culture were attributable to the spread of the uniquely dynamic and productive Indo-European peoples from their putative homeland to the various parts of Europe and India. Max Müller (1859, pp. 14–15) was perhaps most lyrical when argued, the Aryans “have been the prominent actors in the great drama of history, and have carried to their fullest growth all the elements of active life with which our nature is endowed”:

They have perfected society and morals, and we learn from their literature and works of art the elements of science, the laws of art, and the principles of philosophy. In continual struggle with each other and with Semitic and Turanian races, these Aryan nations have become the rulers of history, and it seems to be their mission to link all parts of the world together by the chains of civilisation, commerce, and religion.⁵

Müller’s popular lectures at the University of Oxford and his subsequent publications perhaps did more to popularise these ideas, although there was no shortage of enthusiasts and propagandists across Europe. Nationalist intellectuals from non-Indo-European peoples adopted the same methodology to give their own nations claims to historical legitimacy: the so-called “Finnish Folklore Method,” which sought to trace the origins of Finnic folklore and ended up with constructing the alleged Finnic epic the *Kalevala* was perhaps the clearest example.⁶ This text would serve as the Finno-Ugric equivalent of the Aryan *Vedas* in Müller’s scheme, as marking the closest one could come to an *Urtext* of the Indo-European stock of myths and metaphors, the original meanings

³ Thomas Trautmann, “Constructing the Racial theory of Indian Civilisation,” in *The Aryan Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 90.

⁴ Trautman, “Constructing,” 90.

⁵ Max Müller, *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature So Far as It Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1859), 14–15.

⁶ For an overview see Jouko Hautala, *Finnish Folklore Research 1828–1918* (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science, 1968).

of which had been forgotten with the migration of peoples from their original homeland. By tracing lexical units and motifs back to their origin through comparative methods the philologist could recover their original, prelapsarian meanings, and reverse the descent into verbal idolatry that could most clearly be seen in the turn of Indians to Hinduism.⁷ For Müller and others, it was protestant Christianity that had protected Europeans from the worst aspects of this degeneration, giving them an important imperial mission to rectify Asian degeneration. Philology and colonialism were thus united in a single project.

Vera Tolz has shown that late Imperial Russian orientologists developed an important critique of the assumptions underlying Western studies of the East and their entwinement with the imperial project.⁸ Indologist Sergey Ol'denburg, historian Vasiliy Bartol'd and archaeologist and philologist Nikolai Marr sought to replace the dichotomies of a progressive, dynamic and rational West versus a stagnant, backward and mystical East with a universal narrative of the evolution of all societies through their interaction. While directed against the vision of Indo-European exceptionalism, this positivist narrative of a universal evolution from myth to scientific thinking, through a series of discrete stages, and of each society being at different points on the unilinear scale was in no sense an anti-Imperialist vision. Bartol'd in particular argued that "the gradual convergence of an ever greater number of separate societies" was the mark of historical advancement and that the sooner those with a "lower" level of culture were incorporated into a state with a "higher" level of culture, by force if necessary, the better it would be for all concerned.⁹ Bartol'd held it was Russia's historical mission to act as the bridge for cultural intercourse between Europe and Asia.¹⁰ The idea was that promotion of what we would now call a multicultural space would disarm separatist tendencies, domesticating the anti-colonial movements rather as multiculturalism developed in the United States

⁷ See Douglas T. McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India's Rebirth in Modern Germany* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009); Robert A. Yelle, *The Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Literalism and Colonial Discourse in British India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸ Vera Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

⁹ Vasiliy Vladimirovich Bartol'd, "Istoriya izucheniya vostoka v Yevrope i Rossii" [1911], in *Sobraniye sochineniy*, Vol. 9, (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 208; Bartol'd "Istoriya kul'turnoy zhizni Turkestana" [1927], in *Sobraniye sochineniy*, vol. 2, part 1 (Moscow: Nauka, 1963), 432.

¹⁰ Bartol'd, "Rech' pered zashchitoy dissertatsii" [1900], in *Sobraniye sochineniy*, vol. 1, (Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 1963), 610.

as a formal policy aimed at disarming the radicalism of the Civil Rights movement. Bartol'd argued that the authorities should support Oriental studies because "the peoples of the east will believe in the superiority of our culture all the more when they are convinced we know them better than they know themselves."¹¹ While such thinkers sought to bolster Russian imperialism, populist Russian and Polish ethnographers like Lev Shternberg, Vladimir Tan-Bogoraz, Waclaw Sieroszewski and Bronisław Piłsudski who developed their work while exiled in Siberia, simultaneously questioned Russian imperialism. Their ideas found a wider reception in the wake of the Russian defeat by Japan in 1905, which had many international ramifications.

1. *Ideology critiques*

After the Revolution the ideology critique of Indo-Europeanism developed quickly. One might rather crudely distinguish two trends depending on the relationship between factual accuracy and methodological rigor on the one hand and interpretation, generalisation or conceptualisation on the other.

a) *ideology critique I*

The first type of critique distinguished between these factors. Typical in this regard were the approaches of fellow-traveller Ol'denburg and the Marxist linguist Yevgeny Polivanov.¹² They held that for all its biases, Indo-European philology and oriental studies did generate valid empirical data and opened access to cultural artifacts through translations, grammars etc, which would ultimately lead researchers to question the ideological assumptions in which studies were embedded. Researchers might discover that supposedly stagnant and mystical cultures were in reality nothing of the sort, and that the job of Soviet researchers was to promote this reevaluation. New methods needed to be developed nevertheless. Polivanov regarded the formal method in linguistics as being excessively abstract and narrow, cutting language off from its wider social conditions and so gravitating towards a concern with dead over living languages. He thus sought to develop alternative perspectives based

¹¹ Bartol'd, "Rech'," 610.

¹² See for instance Ol'denburg's pre-Revolutionary statement to this effect "Ne dovol'no: K vos'midesiatletiyu Grigoriya Nikolaevicha Potanina 21 sentiabrya 1915 goda," *Russkaya mysl'* 1 (1915): 1–11 and Polivanov's 1931 article "Historical Linguistics and Language Policy," in *Selected Works: Articles on General Linguistics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 338–9.

on different methodologies. He also criticised linguists for neglecting some whole language groups and for the Eurocentric assumption that categories designed to describe European languages could mechanically be applied to very different non-European languages such as Chinese or Vietnamese.¹³ This did not, however, invalidate the methodologies through which Indo-European philologists had traced patterns of lexical change and the familial relations between languages.

In Soviet literary studies in the 1920s the first form of ideology critique went along with a reformulation of the comparative method, and the role orientologists played a role in this is often underplayed in accounts today. Aleksandr Veselovsky's comparative literature had already correlated the rise of literature as such and its subsequent development into the stages of cultural evolution, but remained sandwiched between positivist laws of cultural evolution and a post-romantic psychology of culture. I have shown in a recent article that Leningrad literary studies developed by a number of different routes from the legacy of Veselovsky, but it was perhaps historians of oriental literature who did most to correlate the rise of literature with the social and institutional history of Asian societies and then use this as a basis to redefine literary studies itself.¹⁴ At institutions like The Institute for the Comparative History of the Literatures and Languages of the West and East (*Institut sravnitel'noy istorii literatury i yazykov Zapada i Vostoka*, ILYaZV), The Institute of Language and Literature (*Institut yazyka i literatury*, IYaL), and The Institute of Language and Thinking (*Institut yazyka i myshleniya*, IYaM) specialists in European and oriental languages and literatures came together to work on projects that challenged the legitimacy of philology and facilitated a new conceptual framework that viewed literature as embedded in wider social and economic processes, began to emerge out of these interactions.

The comparative method would be broadened to include typological correlations between widely divergent cultures that were not necessarily related genetically. Two such were associated with what is now (not unproblematically) called the Bakhtin Circle: the Japanologist Nikolai Konrad and the Indologist Mikhail Tubyansky, but they are largely treated as marginal in the history of the Circle.¹⁵ This is unfortunate in that it adds a new dimension to the work of the Circle, and these thinkers

¹³ See Aleksey Leont'ev, *Yevgeny Dmitrevich Polivanov i ego vklad v obshcheye yazykoznanie* (Moscow: Nauka), 31–45.

¹⁴ Craig Brandist, "From 'Neophilology' to 'Sociological Poetics': Alternatives to Formalism in Literary Scholarship in Leningrad in the 1920s," *Knowledge Cultures* 3(4) (2015): 17–34.

¹⁵ On Tubyansky see my article "The Eastern Side of the Circle: The Contribution of Mikhail Tubjanskij," *Studies in East European Thought* 67(3–4) (2015): 209–228.

embedded literary history more firmly in a social and institutional analysis than Bakhtin was to do. In an article of 1927 Tubyansky was clear that the study of the cultures of East and West were inescapably entwined:

Nobody has yet written a history of European culture through comparisons with that of the far East or India. Nobody has carried out these comparisons, though it is quite evident that much, very much, in European culture would appear to us in a completely different light if we were able to juxtapose one to the other. This task is inescapable, for the comparative method is the categorical imperative of science. We cannot with any surety pass judgment on any phenomenon of European culture while it appears to us as only one of a kind, with which there is nothing to compare, just as it is impossible to judge a language if one knows only one language—one's own.¹⁶

Throughout the 1920s Tubyansky worked simultaneously on Buddhism and on modern Bengali literature, publishing a series of editions of the work of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore with scholarly introductions. Apart from setting Tagore's writing within its social and intellectual milieu and dispelling the fog of exoticism that interpretations of his work often generated, Tubyansky discussed the relationship between Tagore's ethics and art in ways that might remind one of Bakhtin's early work. Yet while, like Bakhtin, Tubyansky was steeped in neo-Kantian philosophy, he was keen to show that Tagore's ideas derived from Indian sources that were no less philosophically sophisticated than those of modern Europe. Many of Tagore's ideas resembled those of European thinkers from Kant, the German Romantics, and Marx: the "alienation engendered by the politics of the state" as opposed to the "unalienated life-world"; "his juxtaposition of state and politics with society and religion; his critique of the utilitarian basis of modern nationalism; and his insistence that love forms the basis of human nature," but were based on Indian sources.¹⁷

Here Tubyansky followed his teacher, Fedor Shcherbatskoy, who criticised the "philologism" of Western scholars who produced opaque translations of Buddhist sources and argued that scientific study required the imposition of Western paradigms on an essentially diffuse and mystical mass of verbiage. Shcherbatskoy had argued that a careful differentiation between types of text and a systematic philosophical

¹⁶ "Rabindranat Tagor i ego tvorchestvo" [1927] in *Pis'mennye pamyatniki i problem istorii kul'tury narodov Vostoka*, ed. V. S. Sobolev and E. N. Temkin (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), 175–216.

¹⁷ M. Collins, "Rabindranath Tagore and nationalism: An interpretation," in *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, Working Paper No. 42 (Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, 2008), 11.

analysis would reveal Buddhism to be a systematic thought that could be translated adequately onto the categories of Kantian philosophy. While agreeing with Shcherbatskoy's anti-Eurocentric objectives, Tubyansky did not follow his teacher in translating Buddhist or Tagore's philosophical ideas into the nomenclature of Western philosophy, even if he did draw comparisons when prudent to do so. Here Tubyansky's practice was closer to that of one of Shcherbatskoy's other students, the Buddhologist Otton Rozenberg, who raised concerns that his teacher too hastily drew comparisons with German idealist philosophy and in so doing risked obscuring the specificity of Asian thought.¹⁸ Tubyansky was nevertheless keen to engage polemically with the ethnocentric assumptions of orientalists. Reviewing the monograph *Hinduism, Religion and Society in Contemporary India* by the German orientalist Helmuth von Glasenapp in 1922, Tubyansky attacked the author for presenting contemporary India as a degenerate, mystical environment in which mutually contradictory ideas could co-exist in a single consciousness, noting that engagement with any mode of dialectical philosophy would prevent any thinker free of colonial prejudices to appreciate the multi-faceted nature of truth, of which Indian intellectuals were as aware as Europeans.¹⁹

In the mid-1920s Konrad published a pathbreaking socio-historical overview of the emergence of Japanese literature with translated extracts in which he showed how literature emerged from and drew upon folklore, becoming more systematic as the class differentiation of society proceeded.²⁰ In Japan a generic nomenclature emerged not from scholarship, but as products of specific historical periods and continued as expressions of self-conscious tradition, but Konrad, like Shcherbatskoy, believed he could translate it directly into the nomenclature of Western scholarship. The *monogatari* (extended prose narrative tale) Konrad identified with the *povest*–; *gunki monogatari* (literally war tales) he related to the epic and *yomihon* (literally “reading books”) he designated as the novel.²¹ These were all forms written in high style, but coexisted with so-called *gisaku* texts, verse or prose works often accompanied by graphic art, that

¹⁸ Viktoriya Lysenko, “Shcherbatskoy i Rozenberg o sravnitel'nom metode. Dvoynoy portret na fone epokhi,” *Trudy Russkoy antropologicheskoy shkoly* 4(2) (2007): 100–139.

¹⁹ “Induizm, religiya i obshchestvo v sovremennoy Indii” [1922], in *Izbrannyye Trudy russkikh indologov-filologov*, ed. I. D. Serebryakov (Moscow: Izd. Vostochnoy literatury, 1963) 300–307.

²⁰ N. I. Konrad, *Japonskaya literatura v obraztsakh i ocherkakh* (Leningrad: IZhVYa, 1927).

²¹ Konrad, *Japonskaja*, 522–535. As with Shcherbatskoy it is likely Konrad adopted this strategy in order to make the achievements of Japanese literature accessible to a European audience rather than making European scholarship the “gold standard” of scholarship.

Konrad terms the literature of the grotesque.²² Such works were comic and humorous, but often also parodic, satirical, pornographic in the form of short verses, bawdy stories, anecdotes and the like. Such literature served the cause of realistic portrayal,²³ especially as the barriers between the two types of literature began to break down, with the social changes that accompanied the rise of trade and the beginnings of capitalist development. In this Japanese literature followed patterns that were very similar to the historical works on the rise of the novel that Bakhtin was to develop in the mid-1930s, in which the interpenetration of parodic and serious, high-style forms of literature led to the rise of the novel and the ideology critique of the ruling discourse. At this time Konrad was reticent to make comparisons with literature beyond Japan, but in 1935, he published another volume of extracts with introductions in which he drew comparisons, not only between Japanese and Chinese literature, similarities of which might be explained by the mutual permeation of Buddhist literary traditions, but also with European literature, and he found the epic, chivalric novel, intimate lyric and religious drama to be among the forms common to each society. While conceding that one cannot find Chinese or Japanese analogues for Dante or Rabelais, he asserted that there is nothing in European literature to rival a developed realist novel like the 11th century *Genji monogatari*.²⁴ In the USSR, he noted, “there is no place for bourgeois limitations, that does not want to see anything apart from the West and the ancient world.” The great works of the East needed to be “critically assimilated” just like those of the West.²⁵ Subsequently, in the 1950s, Konrad was to develop this into an (over-) ambitious and controversial philosophy of culture in which disparate movements in Europe and the far East were brought under the paradigm of the renaissance discovery of individuality.²⁶

The vast majority of Marxists in the 1920s who sought to establish a new, holistic type of oriental studies that centred on critical economic and sociological research, recognised the rigor and valued the material made available by traditional the philological research on the region. Thus, Vladimir Gurko-Kriazhin, who was effectively the deputy leader of the association charged with developing the new oriental studies, the All-Russian Scientific Association of Oriental Studies (VNAV), very

²² Konrad, *Japonskaya*, 528.

²³ Konrad, *Japonskaya*, 460.

²⁴ N. I. Konrad, *Vostok: Literatura Kitaya i Japonii* (Moscow: Academia, 1935), 9–10.

²⁵ Konrad, *Vostok*, 12.

²⁶ Collected and published as N. I. Konrad, *Zapad i Vostok. Stat'i* (Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura 1966).

positively reviewed the first issue of *Vostok*, the journal of the Petrograd “old” orientalists in 1922, particularly praising the entries by Ignatii Krachkovsky, Nikolay Marr, and Ol’denburg.²⁷ Moreover, Marxists recognised that European orientalists generated important empirical data in their historical research even while challenging its conceptions and principles of generalisation. A typical example would be the wide-ranging debate that took place in the second half of the 1920s in which various thinkers explored ways of reconceptualising Middle-Eastern economic formations from a Marxist perspective and discussed how this might cast light on the origins of Islam. Non-Marxist scholarship was taken seriously enough for the young Marxist orientologist Yevgeny Belyaev to publish a critical anthology of Russian and western scholarship about the origins of Islam as late as 1931.²⁸ Belyaev’s anthology is remarkable only to the extent that it is such a late work of its type, and one that generated a hostile response from advocates of what we will see as the ascendant second type of ideology critique of the period.²⁹ While there are certainly legitimate questions to be asked about the extent to which these nascent Marxist approaches had been freed from the unilinear narrative of historical development typical of the positivism that predominated in Russian social and historical thought, these works are of a predominantly exploratory nature.³⁰ Indeed, the diversity of the arguments presented makes recent claims that they together constitute a unitary and “orientalist”

²⁷ V. Kryazhin, review of “*Vostok: Zhurnal literatury, nauki i iskusstva*, 1, 1922,” *Pechat’ i revolyutsiya*, 8 (1922): 154–156. It must be said that the authors of *Vostok* did not reciprocate when it came to reviewing the publications of members of VNAV, often scoring points about technicalities of transliteration in works on contemporary politics and social science. See for instance V. Alekseyev, review of, *inter alia*, *Novy Vostok* 1, 1922, in *Vostok*, 2 (1923): 151–153.

²⁸ Yevgeny Belyaev (ed.) *Proischozhdeniye Islama. Khrestomatiya* (Moscow and Leningrad: OGIZ, 1931).

²⁹ Kh. Naumov, “Protiv popularizatsii burzhuznogo islamovedeniya (K voprosu o proischozhdenii islama),” *Revolutsionny Vostok* 3–4 (1932): 325–339. Naumov also attacked the publication of a collection of articles by Marxist thinkers on the same topic, Valentin Dityakin, *Islam. Sbornik statyey* (Moscow: Bezbozhnik, 1931) and another work on the topic published in the Tartar language, on the basis that they drew upon and provided references to “bourgeois” scholars on the topic.

³⁰ Marx made considerable advances in freeing himself from this positivist narrative in his later works, on which see, especially, Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nisancioglu make a strong case that Trotsky’s principle of combined and uneven development made further progress in this direction in their *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015). See also Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden etc.: Brill, 2010) and Vasant Kaiwar, *The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincialising Europe* (Leiden etc.: Brill 2014).

(in the Saidian sense) “Soviet discourse on Islam” look like a particularly clear case of backshadowing from the 1930s.³¹ One might here note Said’s discomfort with Foucault’s assumption that “the individual text or author counts for very little,” and the former’s insistence that “individual writers” do leave a “determining imprint” on an “otherwise anonymous body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism.”³² Rather than assimilating every utterance to a closed discursive circle, it is of crucial importance to focus on the “dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the... great empires,”³³ of the period, if the formation of something like a “Soviet orientalism” is to be understood.

Few Russian Marxists had illusions about the limitations of the primary research carried out by inexperienced exponents of the new, Marxist oriental studies, especially since most Marxists had concentrated on the revolutionary movement in Europe, and respected the expertise of pre-Revolutionary and non-Marxist scholars to generate valid empirical data. The establishment of a unitary “Soviet discourse” on the Orient, to the extent that such a conception really has historical validity, required the dissolution of organisations like VNAV, aimed at carrying out “purely scientific-laboratory work on developing the right methods for the study of the socio-economic structure of the countries of the Orient (imperialism).”³⁴

b) *Ideology critique II*

The other form of ideology critique collapsed the distinction between factual accuracy and methodological rigor on the one hand and interpretation, generalisation, or conceptualisation on the other. It was to be found in numerous statements by belligerent advocates of “proletarian culture” from the mid-1920s and the various ideological hatchet-men who were encouraged and given free reign during the early 1930s. For these thinkers it was the genealogy of a particular thinker, and his or her expositions, that determined their acceptability, for what was

³¹ Michael Kemper, “The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class Character of Islam, 1923–1933,” *Die Welt des Islams* 49 (2009): 1–48.

³² Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003 [1978]), 23.

³³ Said, *Orientalism*, 14–15.

³⁴ Cited in A.O. Tamazishvili, “Vladimir Aleksandrovich Gurko-Kryazhin: Sud’ba boitsa ‘Vostokovednogo fronta’,” in *Neizvestnye stranitsy otechestvennogo vostokovedeniya* 3, ed. V.V. Naumkin et al. (Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 2008) 32–136, 63.

occurring was a struggle between socially positioned wills to power, with evidence merely serving to establish a “truth” that was to one’s advantage. One particularly prominent and aggressive advocate of proletarian culture was Il’ya Vardin, who was associated with the group *Na postu* [On guard] and, under the pseudonym of I. Visanov, did not hesitate to attack representatives of the new oriental studies for employing material gathered from thinkers who did not proclaim themselves communists.³⁵ Such attacks were restrained by Party policy until 1929, from which time they were, for a time at least, encouraged.

The scholar who most clearly developed this approach in oriental studies and linguistics in the 1920s and early 1930s was Marr when, responding to attacks by comparativist linguists on his attempts to demonstrate the existence of a Japhetic family of languages, he proclaimed that comparativist methods should be rejected because they were “flesh and bone the expression of moribund bourgeois sociality” that had been “built on the oppression of the peoples of the East by the murderous colonial policies of European nations.”³⁶ Marr held that in the USSR at least the “distinction” (*gran’*) between East and West as an economic and cultural reality, as well as an intellectual construct, was seen to be “melting away,” to be replaced by a “distinction between social layers.”³⁷ Typological comparisons of widely disparate languages and literatures were encouraged and semantic transformations of meaning could be uncovered through a paleontological method. In the works of scholars like Izrail’ Frank-Kamenetsky, Ol’ga Freydenberg and others, subtle and significant work on the prehistory and emergence of literary forms from myth and folklore was produced and had a significant influence.

By not distinguishing between factual accuracy and methodological rigor on the one hand and interpretation, generalisation or conceptualisation on the other, but seeing no clear distinction between these factors, Marr rendered it impossible adequately to consider their inter-relationships. Thus, the formal methods that the comparativists developed solely to establish genetic relationships between languages were *themselves* rejected *because* linguists assumed the validity of the idea of the proto-language and limited their attention to Indo-European languages and those with a written “culture.” It was undoubtedly important to identify the ideological and institutional factors behind biases in selection and in generalisation –for instance, that linguists had generated a large amount of factual

³⁵ Tamazishvili, “Vladimir,” 92–94, 120–121.

³⁶ N. Ja Marr, “Ob yafeticheskoy teorii,” (1924) in *Izbrannye raboty*, vol. 3 (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoye sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoye izdatel’stvo, 1934), 1.

³⁷ N. Ja. Marr, “Predisloviye,” *Vostochny sbornik* 1 (1926): iv.

data on Sanskrit, but much less on Dravidian or Kartvelian languages.³⁸ Yet instead of highlighting the qualitative importance of the limited data available in the latter cases, or providing new data based on those languages by means of the comparative methods, and arguing that this required a paradigm shift, Marr sought to find other methods to establish the genetic relationships that he wanted to prove: that “Japhetites” had been the original inhabitants of Europe and that Indo-European invaders had subdued, “crossed” with and culturally plundered their legacy.³⁹ For Marr those who partook of what would now be termed the “discourse” of Indo-Europeanism were inescapably complicit in furthering and obscuring this colonial project.

Ruling out the comparative method *tout court* rather than seeking to criticise its shortcomings or improve it, meant that Marr had to develop his own *ad hoc* comparative methods to answer the same genetic questions. As Lawrence Thomas characterised Marr’s argument, immanent factors of development were now replaced by environmental ones, through which language, as an organism “begins as a multitude of ‘mollusc-like embryo languages’ and... develops by ‘crossing’, ‘hybridisation’ and ‘mutation’, in a constantly upward direction until a perfect, single language will be achieved.”⁴⁰ This “single glottogonic process” through which languages develop from polygenetic origins, converge and finally merge cleared away all *linguistic* barriers to the full participation of colonial peoples in the process of social evolution. Marr did not explore the economic and political forces underlying the process of convergence. Marr, Bartol’d and Ol’denburg had all argued since the 1880s that social evolution was towards the ever-greater convergence of different societies, but for Marr in the 1920s this did not stop with the creation of a pan-Russian identity. Rather, it became what is today called the project of globalisation, and the resulting narrative of convergence, merger and mixture bears striking resemblance to the postcolonial theorists’ valorisation of migration, decentring and “hybridity” as a positive value in and of itself.

³⁸ Marr, “Ob jafeticheskoy,” 1.

³⁹ N. Ja. Marr, “Yafeticheskyy Kavkaz i tretiy etnicheskyy element v sozidanii srednizemnomorskoy kul’tury,” [1920] in *Izbrannyye raboty*, vol. 1 (Leningrad: GAIMK, 1933). Marr here was recasting what Trautmann calls the Sanskritists’ racial theory of Indian civilisation according to which India “was formed by a big bang, caused by the conquest of light-skinned, Aryan, civilised invaders over dark-skinned savage aboriginal Indians, and the formation of the caste system which bound the two in a single society, at once mixed and segregated” (Trautmann, “Constructing,” 99–100) and applying it to European civilisation.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Thomas, *The Linguistic Ideas of N. Ja. Marr*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 143.

The similarity between Marr's attitude to comparativist philology and today's Foucauldian postcolonial theorists insistence that political economy does not need to be improved, revised, or supplemented, but removed from consideration and replaced with their own brand of cultural studies is striking. The result is that just as Marr's critique on Indo-European "discourse" became an unlikely support for Stalinist imperialism, so Foucauldian post-colonial theorists have become, as Tim Brennan puts it, "globalisation's unlikely champions."⁴¹ In both cases belief in the promise of a single, hybridised world culture deflects attention from the economic and geopolitical forces that are driving social change on an international scale. In postcolonial theory we see problems of imperialism and racism continually return, but often in obtuse and metaphorical forms.

2. From "Bourgeois Orientalism" to Postcolonial Studies

The resemblance between ideology critique II and postcolonial contemporary studies is at least partially explained by the fact that there was a genetic connection between these intellectual trends. The critique of Indo-Europeanism as a discourse of "power-knowledge" was coopted by Stalinism and transformed firstly into a rhetorical opposition between "bourgeois" and "Soviet" orientology. It was now that it begins to make sense to speak of a Soviet *orientalism* in Said's sense, according to which we have a supposedly unitary discipline aimed at serving Soviet foreign policy in the East. As Tolz has shown, this then became a structural feature of Said's eclectic notion of orientalism, mediated by the work of the Egyptian Marxist Anouar Abdel-Malek.⁴² A typical transitional text is the anonymously published programmatic text "Urgent Tasks of Soviet Orientalist-Historians" published in *Voprosy istorii* the year before Stalin denounced Marr's "Arakcheev regime" in linguistics. Here it was claimed that "bourgeois oriental studies serve imperialism in an extraordinarily vigorous manner and strive 'to prove' the historical inevitability and even the 'necessity' of the rule of the western colonial powers over the multi-million masses, who are lagging behind in their progress and, therefore, 'incapable' of independently deciding the fate of the East themselves."⁴³ Such scholars produce "false, pseudo-historical 'theories' and 'conceptions',"

⁴¹ Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 126.

⁴² Vera Tolz, "European, National and (Anti-)Imperial: The Formation of Academic Oriental Studies in Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Russia," in *Orientalism and Empire in Russia*, ed. Michael David-Fox et al. (Bloomington: Slavica, 2006), 127.

⁴³ "Neotlozhnye zadachi sovetskikh istorikov-vostokovedov," *Voprosy istorii* 4 (1949): 3–8, 5.

which may “differ in details and on particular points but they bear a testimony to a complete unity on the principal and fundamental question.”⁴⁴ This involves the propagation of a particular type of exoticism about “the special type of ‘Eastern soul’,” relishing “unimportant details of the religious cults or repeating entertaining palace-anecdotes about dynastic histories.”⁴⁵

The same sentiments, with softened rhetoric, appear in countless programmatic statements of the 1950s and 1960s, after the fall of Marrism. Important coordinates in what followed were the victory of the Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War in 1950, followed by the April 1955 Bandung Conference which eventually led, in 1961, to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement. As the USSR attempted to utilise decolonisation for its own ends, the characterisation of “bourgeois orientalism” was taught to generations of intellectuals from the decolonising parts of the world at institutes like as the Patrice Lumumba Peoples Friendship University in Moscow, founded in 1960, the same year that the USSR hosted the 25th International Congress of Orientalists. At the opening of the congress senior Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan declared that henceforth the peoples of the East will be transformed from the objects to the creators of their own history, culture, and economy, and the dichotomy of Soviet and bourgeois orientalism surfaced a number of times during proceedings.⁴⁶ One such occasion was the interesting exchange following the US orientalist Stephen Hay’s paper about Tagore’s view of the complementarity of East and west, which attracted criticism from a series of Soviet scholars.⁴⁷ Hay, they charged, neglected and indeed obscured Tagore’s relationship to the Indian national liberation movement. After Hay came a paper by the Bengali scholar Kalidas Nag, in which the same issues raised by Soviet scholars were highlighted.⁴⁸ This exchange, it should be noted, took place at the time of heightened cooperation between India and the USSR during the Cold War.

It was, however, the post-Saidian generation of postcolonial theorists who closed the circle of a unitary orientalist discourse by adopting what Said called Foucault’s “flawed attitude to power [which] derives

⁴⁴ “Neotlozhnye,” 5.

⁴⁵ “Neotlozhnye,” 6.

⁴⁶ “Rech A.I. Mikoyana na XXV mezhdunarodnom kongresse vostokovedov,” *Problemy vostokovedeniya* 5 (1960): 3–6.

⁴⁷ Stephen N. Hay, “The Development of Tagore’s Views on the Meeting of ‘East’ and ‘West’,” in *Trudy dvatsat’ pyatogo mezhdunarodnogo kongressa vostokovedov*, vol. 4 (Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 1963), 201–211, the comments by Soviet scholars are at 211.

⁴⁸ Kalidas Nag, “Tagore and South-East Asia,” in *Trudy*, 211–213.

from his insufficiently developed attention to the problem of historical change.”⁴⁹ Alienated by the attempts of pro-Moscow Communist Parties to subordinate liberation movements to Soviet interests, many post-colonial thinkers followed post-1968 French intellectuals in turning to the ideas of two of the most Eurocentric and anti-democratic thinkers, Nietzsche and Heidegger, to replace the distorted Marxism that the USSR officially espoused. Such intellectuals rationalised their withdrawal from collective politics by reshaping academic discourse according to the agenda of multiculturalism and giving it a superficially radical veneer. As Said concluded, “many of his [Foucault’s] readers” used his ideas “to justify political quietism with sophisticated intellectualism, at the same time wishing to appear realistic, in touch with the world of power and reality.”⁵⁰ It seems there are important contemporary lessons to draw from the variety of ideology critiques developed in the early USSR.

Abstract

This article discusses the importance of the ideology critique of Indo-European philology for the development of literary and oriental studies in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s. It shows how two distinct types of critique were developed, one which accepted the validity of factual data generated by the formal methods of philology while rejecting the principles of generalisation and conceptualisation that accompanied them, and another which rejected previous forms of scholarship in their entirety as expressions of a bourgeois will to power. Representatives of each trend are considered, with particular attention given to the Indologist Mikhail Tubyanskiy, the Japanologist Nikolay Konrad, and the controversial philologist Nikolay Marr. It is also shown that early Soviet approaches have exerted a formative influence on contemporary postcolonial theory and that consideration of the contours of the former have significant lessons for the latter.

Key words: postcolonial theory; Soviet Union; Marxism; ideology critique; literary theory

⁴⁹ Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 222.

⁵⁰ Said, *World*, 245.

