The Death of Caucasus Philology: Towards a Discipline Beyond Areal Divides

Rebecca Gould
The Death of Caucasus Philology:
Towards a Discipline Beyond Areal Divides*

Rebecca Gould
Yale-NUS College

Abstract
This essay investigates the challenges facing Caucasus philology, by which I mean the institutional capacity to conduct deep research into the literary cultures of Azerbaijan Republic, Georgia, Daghestan, and Chechnya. I argue that the philological approach to the literary cultures of the Caucasus has been a casualty of the rise of areas studies in the North American academy during the Cold War, and that Cold War legacies continue to shape Caucasus Studies to this day. I conclude by offering three proposals for opening exchanges between the humanities and the social sciences within Caucasus Studies. More broadly, this essay argues for a rapprochement between the social sciences and philological inquiry vis-à-vis the Caucasus.

Keywords
Caucasus, Post-Soviet, Area Studies, Disciplinarity, Literature

Among the many world areas that arose in the context of the Cold War, the post-Soviet sphere traverses the greatest geography. Framed by exchanges with the outside world that have taken place largely in the language of policy interests and geopolitical strategy, Central Asia and the Caucasus have remained terra incognita in the broader humanities, and have not featured prominently in postcolonial critiques of imperial knowledge.¹ Scholars have traced in amplitude the many contortions that area studies maps of the world have inflicted on Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.² In part because scholars of the Caucasus and much of Cen-

---

¹ I would like to thank Bruce Grant (New York University) for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay; any remaining flaws are my responsibility.
² For exceptions, see the essays collected in Eschment/Harder 2004.
³ See Bonine et al. 2011; Wesley-Smith/Goss 2010; Smith 2003. Bonnell/Breslauer 2004 is one of the few works to treat the problem of area studies in relation to post-Soviet studies.
Central Asia continue to inhabit a world informed more thoroughly by Cold War categories than their peers in related corners of area studies, area studies models have received less critical examination in post-Soviet contexts than in other world areas. With respect to the Caucasus, area studies continues to be normative and overdetermining, rather than a tool or object of critique. Meanwhile, the recent turn to “Eurasia” as a means of freeing ourselves from “the limitations of the former reigning paradigms” (von Hagen 2004: 448), has left unclarified how the Eurasia concept can give life either to postcolonial critique or to philological inquiry.

This essay on the malaise affecting postcolonial philology in the literatures of the Caucasus—which is to say Arabic, Persian, Turkic languages, and Caucasus vernaculars—aims in part to call into question the assumption that area studies is the best model for studying the Caucasus (or indeed for studying any world region). In the course of contesting this assumption, I tentatively argue for an alternative disciplinary configuration. Rather than simply critiquing an entrenched form of knowledge without offering an alternative, I want to suggest a few ways in which scholars of the Caucasus can begin to address this field’s limitations, which are the combined results of the overall impoverishment of philological training among scholars of the Caucasus, the colonial legacy of Russian which has fostered ignorance of local languages, lack of access to basic primary sources in the relevant literatures, including critical editions of and translations from Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Georgian, and other Caucasus vernaculars, the absence of any systematic comparative framework (beyond the “post-Soviet” rubric, with all its obvious temporal limitations), and the consequent lack of theoretical awareness that results from these many lacunae. By way of counteracting the ways in which these scholarly voids deform and inhibit and scholarship on this region, I end by suggesting a few strategies for moving beyond Caucasus Studies’ current impasses.

Recognising Crisis

Before proceeding, it is necessary to ask whether Caucasus Studies is in fact suffering from the malaise I have proposed. When the “crisis in the

Said 1978 remains the most influential critique of area studies from a postcolonial perspective. For a perceptive reading of Said as a critic of area studies, see Abu El-Haj 2005.
Caucasus” is discussed, it is nearly always from the point of view of contemporary (or at best 19th century) politics, not with respect to a field of intellectual inquiry. The crisis in the Caucasus is understood externally, as a problem for the region, rather than a problem for those of us who study it. Surely not every Caucasus scholar, perhaps not even most specialists of this region, would agree that our corner of area studies is in the midst of an internal crisis, let alone that it has already died. This is likely to be particularly the case for scholars grounded in the social sciences, where Caucasus Studies is flourishing, even if it has yet to generate discipline-transforming paradigms. Linguists, political scientists, anthropologists, and social science oriented historians have all found the Caucasus to be a fertile ground for their scholarship, and the publication of monographs in these fields is proceeding at a steady rate. Meanwhile, in the humanities, home to a much smaller proportion of Caucasus scholars, stalemate and intellectual impoverishment are pervasive and for the most part unrecognised.

There is no dearth of significant recent publications on the Caucasus in the social sciences. Where there is a severe, and indeed debilitating, dearth of locally-grounded works of Caucasus scholarship is in literary studies, and particularly philology, which I understand for the purposes of this essay as the discipline of making sense of texts, usually although not exclusively in languages that are temporally distant, and which require formal training to accurately understood. From this perspective, it is in-

---

3 “Crisis in the Caucasus”, is the name of a recent special issue of the journal Russian Studies in History 41.2 (2002), that includes contributions on “Forced Evacuation of the Chechens and the Ingush”, “Prisoners of the Caucasus”, and “Russia’s Annexation of the Caucasus”. It is also the title of Crisis in the Caucasus: Russia, Georgia and the West, ed. Paul B. Rich (London, 2009), which includes articles on “the Putin state”, “Media and the Georgian conflict”, “Oil Pipe Lines and the Georgian Crisis”. Finally, Charles King uses the title in his “Crisis in the Caucasus: A new look at Russia’s Chechen impasse”, Foreign Affairs 82:2 (2003): 134-138. Note that in all of these examples, the concept of crisis is exclusively political in nature.

4 A recent sampling of important works in these disciplines include Gammer 2008; Grant/Yalçin-Heckmann 2008; Grant 2009; Karpov 2007; Karpov/Kapustina 2011; Nichols 2010; Marshall 2010; Pelkmans 2006.

5 For a comparable definition, see Pollock 2009.
Indeed the case that Caucasus philology has died, while its limited afterlives surface in the most unexpected of places.

Prior generations of Caucasus philology were sustained by the scholarship of monumental figures, such as the Iranist Vladimir Minorsky (1877-1966), who left Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution and passed much of his career at Cambridge, and the Arabist Ignaty Krachkovsky (1883-1951), who enjoyed a lifelong affiliation with the Russian Academy of Sciences. At present, not a single individual in the European or American academy devotes him or herself exclusively to philological work on the literary cultures of the Caucasus.

In addition to making palpable the crisis that I believe plagues Caucasus scholarship, this essay has a secondary burden: I aim to explain to social scientists who study the politics, anthropology, and sociology of contemporary Caucasus societies why the demise of Caucasus philology shapes and constrains the avenues of intellectual inquiry open to them, and why they too stand to benefit from a revitalisation of Caucasus philology. Given the simultaneous rebirths of social scientific inquiry and philology that have stimulated humanistic inquiry in eras past—and most famously encapsulated in the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico’s “New Science”—such inter-disciplinary cross-pollination should be possible today (Vico 1999).

Stephen Kotkin’s observation that the task of finding “the Caucasus itself in the literature on the Caucasus turns out to be surprisingly difficult” (2007: 519) sounds quite objective. The imbalance in terms of source base for the Caucasus identified by Kotkin has been widely acknowledged, but its causes have not been probed. In my own view, the absence of vernac-

---

6 From among Minorsky’s many significant works (restricting this list to works published in English, and directly pertinent to the Caucasus), see Minorsky 1958; idem 1978; idem 1982. Krachkovsky’s work is not as widely available in English, but see his intellectual autobiography, which was translated into English by Vladimir Minorsky’s wife Tatiana (Krachkovsky 1953).

7 The situation is not quite so dire with respect to Central Asian Studies, where scholars such as Devin DeWeese, Allen Frank, Jürgen Paul, and Paolo Sartori systematically deploy philological methodologies to expand our knowledge of Central Asian literary cultures.

8 On early modern exchanges between the social sciences and philology, see Rowe 1965.
ular voices from our histories of Caucasus life worlds has a great deal more to do with the demise of Caucasus philology than is commonly recognised. Among those scholars who have written reflexively about changes in our recent conceptual armoury for invoking the Caucasus (routinely now included in the names of area studies centers and invoked by governments as part of a new “Eurasian” paradigm)⁹, few have attended to the epistemic constraints on the evolution of the disciplines that this areal rubric arguably consolidates. It may indeed be possible to produce high-caliber scholarship on the contemporary Caucasus, even in the aftermath of the death of Caucasus philology. But it does not seem accidental that the major voices that have weighed in thus far on the question of Eurasia and area studies in the post-Soviet space are social scientists of various stripes, rather than philologists of premodern literary cultures. Peter Rollberg (2012: 249) draws attention to the subservient position of the humanities in relation to the social sciences that have presided over the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet Eurasia when he recollects that the “humanities responded to the rapidly transforming political and academic realities [that accompanied the decline of Soviet studies] rather than intellectually accompanying or anticipating them”. That neither the humanities in general nor philology specifically have made any new advances within the landscape of post-Soviet Eurasian studies testifies of itself to the inertia of these disciplines today. And yet, notwithstanding the weak contributions of humanistic thinking to the study of the contemporary Caucasus, philology is foundational to any awareness of the sources, origins, and genealogies of Caucasus forms of cultures and ways of being in the world.

The Indologist Sheldon Pollock connects the ability to “actively make the future” to our knowledge of the past and having “learned the discipline of philology” (2008a: 53). If our ability to intervene in the future is contingent on our philological knowledge of the past, then it follows that our impoverished knowledge of Caucasus pasts internally constrains our ability to imagine alternative futures for societies that, having passed through countless imperial configurations, now seek to combine the most

⁹ For a brief overview of the promises and perils of the Eurasia denominator, see Grant 2012.
relevant aspects of modernity with local realities, and which seek to engage with the Caucasus' manifold presents by accessing their deep pasts.

For the purposes of the present essay, the failure to recognize a crisis is hardly evidence that a crisis does not actually exist. To the contrary, a recognition of a crisis, of the sort that Sheldon Pollock has been vocally drawing attention to in the context of South Asian studies (see Pollock 2011), would be a more certain indicator of this field's health.10 Were more specialists provoked to scratch their heads in bewilderment over the at times astonishing lack of philological rigour in scholarship pertaining to the Caucasus, and to debate the reasons for the death of Caucasus philology, such worrying might bring about change.11 So long as we are persuaded that everything is fine, and that our field is in good health, then the gaps will widen, constraining our work without our even suspecting the pervasive hold it has over our scholarly imaginations. The current indifference to the death of Caucasus philology is, therefore, the surest sign of the crisis that grips us without our even being aware of its existence. The problem is not only that Caucasus philology has died, but that no one is mourning its demise.

BEYOND POST-SOVIET
One of the most common ways of bringing the study of the Caucasus into the present, is by invoking the “post-Soviet” rubric, which is often conjoined to an ecumenical and endlessly malleable “Eurasia”. I take no stance here against “Eurasia” per se, given that the term can be filled with whatever content we wish.12 The usefulness of “Eurasia” as a conceptual

10 For an influential polemic addressed to a more general readership, see Pollock 2008.
11 Rather than name specific titles that exemplify this lack of rigour, the numbers of which are legion, I will cite from Michael Kemper's recent characterisation of one such title, which speaks for many others like it: “the broad historical overview in the beginning of the book is based on a superficial reading of other broad overviews, often flawed and with misspelled names, and should best be dismissed altogether” (Slavic Review 70.1 [2011]: 228). Such works—superficial overviews based on other superficial overviews—unfortunately tend to be more widely published, reviewed, and read than the few world-class works of serious philological scholarship on the Caucasus that have appeared by Kemper, Shikhsaidov, and others in recent years.
12 See Rollberg (2012: 249, n.3) on the fungibility of the “Eurasia” rubric: “At present, there is no scholarly consensus on who (or what) does and does not belong to the Eurasian
rubric is best assessed through its practical applications. Unlike its taxonomic cousin, “post-Soviet”, however, does more than neutrally signify, for it inevitably suggests a conceptual frame of reference, and inculcates a specific organisational logic, derived from Soviet experience. As its best (as well as at its worst), “post-Soviet” is deployed as a universalising and unifying factor that connects disparate realities reaching from Belarus to Kamchatka into a single cogent whole.

The fact that, to borrow Kotkin’s example, “studying the urban design and construction of tiny Albania can allow one to generalise about more than one-sixth of the earth’s surface” (2007: 520), that the post-Soviet rubric encompassed is, indeed, amazing—if one happens to be an historian of urban design. But the uniformity that Kotkin discerns in the material culture and institutions of governance that traversed the Soviet empire does less to explicate literary form, and is particularly irrelevant to premodern textual cultures. Indeed, the incommensurability among the many literatures that were enfolded into Soviet spheres of governance powerfully suggests one explanation for Kotkin’s observation concerning the difficulties of finding the Caucasus in the scholarly literature that supposedly has the Caucasus as its subject matter. The Caucasus does not feature widely enough in scholarship on the Caucasus because the incommensurable textual histories that shaped the many cultures of this region remain unknown, even to specialists. Immersion in the literature of modern Albania will not necessarily assist in sorting out the literary influences at work in a 16th-century Georgian text composed under Safavid rule. Here, philological specificity is needed, and “post-Soviet” as a conceptual rubric does not get us very far.

While acknowledging the obvious fact that grounding in the Soviet context is needed to make scholarly sense of Soviet realities, I also want to stress a point that seems to me lacking from even the most influential works on post-Soviet societies. In analytical terms, “post-Soviet” may usefully frame the entry into a given research question, but it will never satisfy the deepest questions nurtured by scholars who are invested in the comparative—which is to say the global—implications of their research. paradigm...but it is also likely that the term will continue to be used for lack of a viable alternative".
Far from illuminating research on the Caucasus and Central Asia, “post-Soviet” frequently homogenises difference, working at best as a substitute for original thought, and at worst as a euphemism to conceal the colonial forces at work in shaping the postcolonial present.

This is doubly true when the research in question pertains to pre-Soviet realities, and yet “Soviet” remains the paradigm through which even premodern legacies are processed today. Ron Sela (2011: 9-10), for example, has highlighted how contemporary studies of Timur Lane’s legacy in Central Asia rarely inquire into pre-Soviet sources. Even though the fourteenth-century conqueror featured widely in early modern Chaghatay and Persian literature, “the only continuity with Central Asia’s past” that most analysts who study Timur’s legacy from post-Soviet perspectives can identify is “a succession and justification of the authoritarian state”. These fruits of the replacement of philological inquiry by presentist trends in the social sciences illustrate that it is difficult to get beyond the present if we do not know the past.

Soviet categories can only inhibit endeavours to trace the birth of New Persian poetry in 10th-century Central Asia, and yet, if one wishes to engage contemporary Central Asia Studies while examining the literatures of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan before these regions bore such names, the post-Soviet category remains obligatory. Even for such projects as distant from Soviet realities as classical Persian, maps generated within area studies compel scholars to retrofit their research to align with regnant geopolitical paradigms. Kotkin advocates for substituting “a cross-regional approach” for a “classical area studies approach” to the analysis of what he terms the “Mongol commonwealth” and which overlaps with “our” Eurasia (2007:510). Kotkin’s compelling—if hypothetical—gesture must be systematically implemented, to the point of displacing the post-Soviet itself, if we are ever to overcome the epistemic constraints governing Caucasus philology.

Just as “post-Soviet” is irrelevant to the emergence and dissemination of New Persian throughout Eurasia, so too is it of only limited use for understanding the development of the rich Arabic literary culture of premodern and modern Daghestan, and, indeed, well into the Soviet period, when major works of Arabic-language scholarship were still being com-
posed. Why do such archives need to pass through a Soviet paradigm? Framing the field of the Caucasus through the prism of the post-Soviet experience has the effect of closing it off from those scholars who are most necessary to Caucasus Studies: Arabists, Persianists, and Turkologists. In using their philological skills to illumine precolonial worlds, scholars trained in these traditions can give social scientists the material they need to imagine a Caucasus after colonialism.

As argued in the inaugural manifesto for the “Future Philology” research project hosted by the Forum for Transregional Studies since 2010, the North American academy during the Cold War transformed “non-Western philology... into ‘area studies’, and the historical study of languages was gradually replaced by training in modern, spoken dialects and social science research”. In its current incarnation, area studies short-circuits the flow of knowledge from the social sciences to the humanities. The peculiarly post-World War II pattern of knowledge production and obstruction that it fosters has caused more than one advocate for a new, critical, philology to regard the rise of area studies as a major factor in the death of philology. The ill fit between the humanities and the social sciences that is inculcated by area studies is perfectly exemplified in the stupendous decline of Caucasus philology, which has moved from having guiding lights such as Minorsky and Krachkovsky to having precisely no one.

Perhaps the most significant drawback of “post-Soviet” as a normative paradigm is that it tends to obscure the actually existing connections between geographies that fall within Soviet borders and those that fall outside those boundaries. In the course of my research on the mediaeval Persian prison poem (ḥabsīyyāt), I was stunned to discover that the poets of 12th century Shīrvān (in the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan) recognised that they had a more in common with their peers from a generation

---

13 See, for example, the biographical dictionary of al-Durgili, now accessible in a German/Arabic and Russian/Arabic editions (al-Durgili 2004 and 2012).
15 In addition to Pollock 2009, which contains the fullest analysis to date of the relation between area studies and the decline of philology, see Pollock (forthcoming); and Gould 2012a.
prior in Lahore and elsewhere in South Asia than with any of their proximate neighbours in Georgia or even Daghestan (Gould 2011, 2012). The poets of Shirvān shared with the poets of South Asia a literary language known as New Persian, which transformed the eastern Islamic world from the 10th century onwards. The cosmopolitan geography I subsequently traced as I explored the dissemination and afterlives of the Persiane literatures of incarceration persuaded me that the transregional mappings afforded by literary languages like Persian and Arabic offer more promising frameworks than area studies for studying the Caucasus before, as well as within, modernity.

Many of the skills with which areas studies are associated in the minds of its defenders—namely immersion in languages, cultures, and places—are, of course, absolutely essential to scholarly rigour of any kind, but there is no reason why such skills should be regarded as the exclusive domain of area studies. Philology has been inculcating immersion in languages, cultures, and places for millennia, and could take up the mantle again if given the chance to reform. Having tried for years to locate the Caucasus within the current area studies divisions that dominate the American academy, I am now persuaded that, when it comes to the Caucasus, the area studies map of the world that enshrines “post-Soviet” for all temporalities past, present, and future and which makes of it the only available analytical framework, is useless at best and pernicious at worse.

For all the trendiness of scholarship on the “post-Soviet” experience, it is notable that very few studies of life in the former Soviet Union engage in extended comparative analysis with contexts outside this confined geography. While the post-Soviet label discourages scholars of Central Asia and the Caucasus to venture beyond Soviet geographies (which is to say beyond Russia), the flow of intellectual exchange is even more decisively short-circuited in the other direction by the deployment of this term. Whether rightly or wrongly, Arabic and Persian specialists who lack ex-

---

16 There are notable exceptions, of course, such as Artemy Kalinovsky’s project on the modernisation of Soviet Tajikistan (“Modernisation in a Forgotten Corner: Development in Soviet Tajikistan”), which includes comparisons with similar processes in Nasserite Egypt. But it strikes me that, within post-Soviet studies, such comparative outlooks are the exception rather than the norm, and that the categories we deploy rather than specific individuals are to blame for this stalemate.
pertise in Russian or the Soviet experience tend to assume that the life worlds and literary cultures of Daghestan and Tajikistan (for example) are closed to them, simply because they are unfamiliar with the Soviet Union. From a philological perspective, it is a mistake to privilege knowledge of the present above training in classical literary languages. But beyond this category error, the hesitance on the part of Arabists and Persianists to engage with the Islamic literary traditions that flourished in formerly Soviet territories, along with similar hesitations in the reverse direction, severely impedes the diversification of scholarship and perpetuates Cold War paradigms. It further seals the nails on the coffin where the corpse of Caucasus philology lies buried.

THREE PROPOSALS
Having documented the death of Caucasus philology—which is to say the disappearance of the very possibility of rigorously engaging with the literary cultures of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Circassia, Daghestan, and Georgia from within the context of Caucasus Studies—what can I offer in the way of a solution? I have three proposals. First, the current area studies model that dominates scholarship on the Caucasus in the North American academy should be replaced or at least be enabled to coexist with organizational rubrics that make better philological sense, which are grounded in the circulation of literary cultures from premodern times, and which draw more extensively from knowledge forms cultivated within the humanities. These rubrics need not be confined to literature in the sense of belles-lettres, for “literary culture” encompasses forms of textuality as diverse as court records, personal correspondence, memoir, and historiography.

Impervious as it is to contemporary borders or policy interests, philology’s areal rubrics often diverge from current political norms. Rather than being seen as a drawback or argument for the discipline’s irrelevance, this disjuncture should be seen as a virtue that has the power to unsettle normative paradigms. The way we divide the Caucasus ought to reflect its historical and cultural complexity rather than the categories into which it is too often simplified. To state the task facing us in philological terms: because they belonged to a single cultural space, the Persian epigraphy of Derbent ought to be studied alongside the Persian inscriptions of Shir-
To restate this proposition in terms of the social sciences, we must learn how to think and feel beyond the nation.\textsuperscript{18}

The challenges facing philology and the social sciences, respectively, are intimately implicated in each other, and it is a mistake to consider them separately. There is no intellectual justification for siphoning off Persian literary legacies into separate rubrics, as area studies asks us to do, because Derbent happens to be situated to the north and Azerbaijan happens to be situated to the south of the colonial-era dividing line between the north and south Caucasus. Philology enables us to remember a world before the colonial, and later national, divide. At its best, it can empower us to activate pre-Soviet and pre-tsarist ways of being in the contemporary Caucasus. By contrast, area studies ties us to the present, naturalising present categories for all eternity, and making the Caucasus a true prison house of nations.

Scholars of the Caucasus who are textually inclined and who wish to rigorously study the languages and literatures most relevant to this region would be better off with no areal rubric at all than with one that aligns the Caucasus unproblematically with Russia. Why should the study of early modern Daghestan and mediaeval Shirvan necessarily place one within the force field of the Russian empire? Such an areal logic is indefensibly presentist. And yet it continues to dominate the North American academy. Hence my first proposal with respect to reforming Caucasus Studies is to do away with the current partitioning of this region across area studies centres in the academy. As Kotkin importantly reminds us, for premodern peoples who passed their lives under the Mongol ecumene that traverses the spaces we now refer to as “Eurasia,” language “was communication, not identity” (2007: 504). Surely at least this mobile aspect of the Mongol ecumene is preferable to the Soviet ethno-territorialisation of language and identity. Instead of imputing transcendent value to specific national geographies and the static identities they are perceived to generate, those tasked with apportioning regions into rubrics should consider exchange—of languages, customs, material and visual cul-

\textsuperscript{17} For compendia of such inscriptions, see Lavrov 1966-68; Šixsaidov 1984; and Neymatova 1968.

\textsuperscript{18} As announced in the subtitle of a recent publication (see Cheah/Robbins 1998).
tures—as the foremost factor in making sense of space. Within such a framework, objects would be given lives of their own. Foretastes of an areal configuration structured around processes of exchange already animate the discipline of art history (see for example Flood 2009; Davis 1999), and are gradually enriching other divisions within the humanities (as seen in the essays collected in MacLean 2005). Because identities formed in the process of exchange are porous and more elusive to research, they are even more hermeneutically useful for breaking apart categories ossified by areal modernity.

Second, scholars of the Caucasus (from all disciplines) should take steps to promote the publication and popularisation of primary sources in their original languages and in translation. In some cases, given the enormity of the labour involved, it would be appropriate to honour such work even more than original scholarship. We may not need another study of ethnic violence in the post-Soviet space, but we most definitely require editions of the histories, chronicles, and compilations of Abū Bakr al-Darbāndī, Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Qudūqī, Ḥasan Alqadārī, Nadhīr al-Durgūlī, and Mirzā Tālibof Tabrizī, to name just a few of the writers and intellectuals who have substantially contributed to world history and literature from the Caucasus. Not everyone who studies the Caucasus can be or will want to be a philologist. Yet, Caucasus philology is necessary to all scholars and all disciplines. There can be no advances, even and especially in the social sciences, if we cannot construct a coherent map of the world that preceded Soviet modernity.

At present, Michael Kemper at the University of Amsterdam is the only scholar outside Russia who is seriously engaged in advancing our knowledge of the Caucasus through non-Russian textual sources. Kemper has produced two editions to date of significant Daghestani Arabic texts that were unknown and unstudied prior to his contributions: a brief treatise against customary law by Ghazi Muhammad (Kemper 2009), the first imam of the Caucasus Imamate, and a Soviet-era biographical dictionary by the Qumyq (Turkic) scholar al-Durgūlī (2004, 2012). These contributions to Caucasus philology advance our knowledge of Caucasus cultures

---

19 For reasons of space, I do not discuss here Kemper’s equally important philological contributions to the study of Islamic cultures in Tatarstan.
with a precision and insight that no postpartum analysis can offer. Together with Kemper’s analytical work, these editions constitute the most monumental contribution to Caucasus philology in European languages since the death of Vladimir Minorsky. And yet the uses and potential of Kemper’s work remain largely untapped. Particular striking is the fact that so few social scientists have built on the groundwork Kemper had laid for rethinking colonial history, for example by using Daghestani archival material to question Soviet historiographic norms (see Kemper 2005: 64 and passim).

With the respect to the contrast I have drawn between philology and area studies, and my argument that the latter has contributed to the death of the former, Kemper’s work presents an interesting exception. Trained as an Arabist, Kemper has produced a substantial body of work that is explicitly and deliberately situated within post-Soviet studies. However, Kemper, as I have noted, is the only person outside Russia who has managed this feat. At most, Kemper’s achievement demonstrates that philology and area studies are not intrinsically incompatible, even if historical and political factors have made them such. Even granting this important exception, a strong case can be made that post-Soviet area studies in its current incarnation has contributed and contributes to the death of Caucasus philology. At the very least, it is evident that area studies is unequipped to stop the demise of this discipline.

Furthermore, even if Kemper has managed to transcend the divide between social-science-oriented area studies and Caucasus philology in his own work, the fact that his achievements are vastly underrated substantiates my hypothesis. Kemper’s many original contributions to Caucasus history—original in the literal sense that they make available texts that even Caucasus specialists did not know to have existed prior to their translation into English, German, and Russian—should be the first that

---

21 Consider that only one review of the German edition of al-Durgili’s biographical dictionary was ever published (namely, DeWeese 2006). Similarly, only one substantial review of Kemper 2005—the most important history of the 19th century anti-Russian jihad and one of the most important works on Daghestan ever published—appeared in the journals that include the Caucasus within their mandate (see Gammer 2007). I regard these lapses as evidence of the demise of Caucasus philology.
any would-be student of the Islamic Caucasus turns to in order to make sense of the field. However, Kemper’s work is more commonly approached at the end of a scholarly journal towards the Caucasus, rather than at its inception. Kemper’s method is simply too “philological” for many who have passed through the prism of area studies to easily process or comprehend. Just as would-be philologists of Caucasus cultures must seek to reform past ways of doing philology if they wish to counteract the death of their discipline, so should social scientists of the Caucasus turn to philology to nuance and deepen their social-theoretical projects. But if the texts most poised to enrich social scientific inquiry are to be made relevant to our postcolonial present, they must first be edited and published by scholars who have the knowledge to make them legible.

My third proposal is related to the first, but pertains specifically to the training of future Caucasus specialists. Caucasus scholars who are concerned with the current limits of their field and with the implications that flow from the death of Caucasus philology should work to transform graduate education in such a way that the extensive constellation of disciplines and expertise needed to become a specialist in the Caucasus incentivizes intellectual development rather than an obstruction. Arguably more than most world regions, the Caucasus is inherently interdisciplinary. It is also inherently multilingual. Mastery in merely one foreign language will never be adequate to the study of the Caucasus, and there is no way around this. A minimum of two Caucasus languages and one non-Caucasus language relevant to the study of the region, such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or Russian, should, therefore, be required for a PhD.

Only with such linguistic training can a student of the Caucasus embark on the internal comparisons that are so urgently needed if the Caucasus is to emerge from its philological stagnation. Those who find this requirement daunting are not well-suited to study a region such as the Caucasus, as they could never trace the complex levels of linguistic inter-

---

I am omitting discussion of the much richer assortment of Arabic texts that have been published in recent years in Russia. This corpus—by M. S. Saidov, A. R. Shikhsaidov, N. Tagirova, M. A. Musaev, Kh. A. Omarov, V. O. Bobrovnikov and others—is groundbreaking and deserves separate study. Here, however, my focus is on the death of Caucasus philology within the North American academy, and I take it for granted that there is a need for editions of these works in European languages, as well as in Russian.
action that mark this mountainous region. Instead, they would better advised to focus on a region marked by less linguistic complexity. The requirement to master two or more Caucasus languages should be applied across the board, and not be limited to the textual disciplines. In this way the social sciences would be brought into conversation with philology and vice-versa. With respect to the language question, competence is much more important than mastery; what is necessary is to be access sources, not to fetishise them. Beyond attaining fluency in at least one Caucasus language, students should target their language skills to their research needs. All domains of discourse need not be mastered for any given language; more desirable than this is competence in those domains that will most effectively elucidate a specific research question.

But even more imperative than the need for linguistic training is the need for intellectual guidance. In a field where there are almost no faculty to advise the would-be philologist of Caucasus literary cultures, what is an aspiring student of Persian, Arabic, and Turkic literatures who wishes to focus on the Caucasus to do? In my case I did what I think was the only rational decision when I embarked on a PhD: I wrote a dissertation on a subject that was related to the Caucasus but not specifically about it, on a genre of poetry that traversed the Caucasus, as well as many other Persian peripheries. Had Caucasus philology not been dead by the time I arrived in graduate school, the options open to me would have been quite different, and I might well have written a dissertation that made a more direct and obvious contribution to Caucasus philology.

This essay has been written in the hopes of helping to reconstruct a field so as to enable it someday to nurture and train prospective philologists of Caucasus literary cultures, and to make it possible for scholars of the future to advance the frontiers of philological knowledge while also adding to the possibilities of Caucasus Studies in the social sciences. Philological scholarship on Caucasus textualities and social scientific scholarship on Caucasus societies ought to be carried out in intimate conversation with each other. To overcome the impasse in the relations between Caucasus area studies and Caucasus philology, we will need to train an entirely new generation of Caucasus scholars. Only when this happens will it be possible to envision a philology that can overcome what Franz Fanon called “devaluation of precolonial history” that is naturalised by the
colonial dispensation (Fanon 2002 [1961]: 201). Such a discipline would correspond to a philology of the future, which the famous lapsed philologist Friedrich Nietzsche envisioned as “the art of reading well...the most fateful events ...without losing caution, patience, and subtlety in the effort to understand them” (Nietzsche 1980: 6:233). Only then will it be possible to write an essay bearing the title I would have liked to give the present one: “The Lives of Caucasus Philology.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Cheah, Ph. / Robbins (eds.) (1998), Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation, Minneapolis.


Eschment, B. / Harder (eds.) (2004), Looking at the Colonizer, Wurzburg, Ergon.


Grant, B. (2009), The Captive and the Gift, Ithaca, NY.

—/ E. Kapustina (2011), Gory posle gor, St. Petersburg.
—/ R. Motika; St. Reichmuth (eds.) (2009), Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States, London.
MacLean, Gerald (ed.) (2005), Re-Orienting the Renaissance, New York.
—(1978), The Turks, Iran and the Caucasus in the Middle Ages, London.
—(forthcoming), Liberation Philology, Cambridge, MA.

