

A Review of *Ethno-cultural Diversity in the Balkans and the Caucasus* edited by Ioana Aminian Jazi and Thede Kahl

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Edited by Ioana Aminian Jazi, a researcher who focuses on a PhD in Sociolinguistics that compare the identity among the Kalmyk and the Sephardic Jews in Turkey in the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna and Thede Kahl, who serves as the professor of South Slavic Studies at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena and a member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Academia Europaea, the book, in its introduction written by these two authors, highlights the similarity of two regions in terms of *“unusually wide-ranging linguistic, religious and societal diversity”* after underlining the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach which includes subjects such as *“geography, humanities, political sciences, linguistics, comparative literature studies, and social and cultural anthropology”*, heralding the interdisciplinary methodology used throughout its corpus.

As scholars who study the Balkans and the Caucasus are well-aware, the linguistic, religious and social diversity which highlights the uniqueness and difference in similarity of these two regions, are one of the main aspects of these two regions which create a resemblance in one another. However, there is a political actor too, whose presence looms and haunts these two regions, the political actor that is now called Russia. Therefore, it can be said that the book also sheds light on the role assumed by this actor in these two respective regions.

The first article of the book, written by the late historian Keith Hitchins, titled *“On the Edge of Empires: Southeastern Europe and the Caucasus, 18th Century”*, the role of Imperial Russia, which dons the mantle of the dominant power in these two regions as the Ottoman Empire weakens, is especially highlighted in regards to the similarity between the princes of Romania and the king of

Georgia, Erekle II, especially in terms of seeking an international guarantee to their existence and the presence of the Orthodox Church as the religious entity in both of the regions, the latter only further consolidating the looming presence of Imperial Russia in the region. However, despite this presence in both regions and nations, very much resembling the “difference in similarity” of these two regions, the role and the presence of Russia was at best, multifaceted and prismatic.

The looming presence of Imperial Russia, a mantle taken on by its historical successor, the Soviet Union, also establishes itself in the second article of the book titled *“Archaeology, Society and Politics, or How and Why the Ancestors Were Invented in the North Caucasus”* by Victor E. Shnirelman. In his study, Shnirelman focuses on the deportation of the Nakh peoples from their homeland and the subsequent politicization of Alan archeology and history. Drawing from sources such as Soviet historians Krupnov, Kibizov and Abaev, Shnirelman manages to give credit where it is due but also does not shy away from criticism when it is absolutely necessary. Shnirelman, in an article rightfully concerned with the relationship between history and politics in a turbulent time for the intellectual grounding of an ethnogenesis in the Caucasus, underlines the different approaches regarding the linguistic, cultural and ethnic origins of the Alans. As an example of these differentiated approaches during these turbulent times for Caucasus, marked by the exile of the Nakh peoples, which also coincided with the danger of the Third Reich, Shnirelman delves deep into the denomination “Aryan” used by the Nazis to denote the Alan people and the avoidance of this concept by the Ossetians by distancing themselves from their Iranian-speaking ancestors lest they share the fate of the Nakh while Krupnov insisted on such an ethnogenesis.

Another article, which amplifies the focus on the Persian influence on the Caucasus in the shadow of Soviet Russia, follows Shnirelman’s thorough study. In *“Republic of Azerbaijan: Ethnic Identity and Census Categories”*, Babak Rezvani explores the linguistic and cultural relationship between the “North” and “South” Azerbaijanis, the latter being located in Iran. Exploring the

Russian and the Persian influence in the North and the South, Rezvani focuses on the de-Iranization of the Azeris in Soviet Russia in order to sever their ties with Iran. After establishing parallels with the Cold War discourse in regard to the naming of the “North” and “South”, Rezvani delves into toponyms and their relation to politics in an era which Soviet Union was bordered with a Western ally. Rezvani then introduces the censuses on the Talysh, Lezgins, Kurds and Georgians in order to highlight Azerbaijan’s politics on minorities, which chiefly rest on assimilation.

The next article, in regards to Caucasus, is one of the most thought-provoking articles that exist within the scope of this study. In “Identity and Traditional Law in Albania and Georgia”, Stéphane Voell elaborates on the Albanian *Kanun* and the traditional laws that still hold sway in Svaneti. Then, Voell masterfully compares these two traditional laws and drawing from the studies of Brubaker and Cooper (2000), establishes how the existence of these traditional laws contributes to the self-understanding and identity of the peoples who uphold these laws. This particular article shows great promise regarding Caucasus studies, for it could pave way to new visions, conceptualizations, comparisons and contrasts regarding the region.

Another article related to the Georgian identity follows Voell’s study. In “The Diplomatic and Military Relationship between Georgian Highlanders and the Russian Empire: From the 17th Century to the Present Day”, Florian Mühlfried explores the identity and the autonomy of the Tushetan Highlanders in regards to their use of military skill and diplomacy. Identifying the existence of Tushetans as a “form of resistance to being governed” by drawing from the anthropologist James Scott (2009), Mühlfried explores the clan-mentality, martial prowess and diplomatic skill of the Tushetans in regards to defending their own self-governance against other tribes, kings and even Tsars.

Marieta Schneider’s article titled “‘Dancing’ Ethnicity in the Caucasus and the Balkans” deals with the existence of Kosovo Circassians who have migrated to the Balkans during and after Tsitsekun. In this article, drawing from the return of the Kosovo Circassians to their ancestral homeland and how they preserved

their language and dances, debates whether dance could be used as a cultural signifier, Highlighting the fact that one of the most important identifiers regarding the ethnicity of the Kosovo Circassians, was their good command on Circassian Language, Schneider aptly addresses a dilemma which should be a focal point in diaspora studies regarding the Circassians; the possible dichotomy between the dance and the languages in regards to highlighting ethnicity and culture, which she argues that the latter cannot be considered while one is thinking about the former. Delving into the significance of the dance during the time of the Soviet Union and Russia, Schneider establishes different peripheries regarding what the dance can signify for the Circassian Culture.

The last article in the book is concerned with one of the key disciplines that a scholar familiarizes themselves while studying the Caucasus: Linguistics. In “Emphatic Reflexive Particles in the Nakh-Dagestanian Languages”, Diana Forker primarily focuses on the Avar, Bagvalal, Hinuq, Tsez and Bezhta languages and the uses of emphatic particles in these languages before focusing on reflexivization and emphatic reflexives, expressing identity in regard to pronouns, expression of contrast, scalar additives and the emphatic particles which occur with verbs.

Comparing two different regions in regards to ethnicity, geography, linguistics, cultural norms and anthropology, it can be said that *Ethno-Cultural Diversity in the Balkans and the Caucasus* is a book that lives up to its name. The multidisciplinary approach it heralds in its introduction, is thoroughly fulfilled by the works of scholars who are well-versed in their disciplines and research topics. Apart from minor grammatical errors, the skills of the editors of the book are highly commendable and their successful attempt at bringing various disciplines together in regard to two extremely complex regions of the world deserves praise. All in all, it can be easily said that this book is a source that could be used and enjoyed by academics and enthusiasts alike.