

Received: 19 September 2021 Accepted: 19 September 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ks.v9i2.655>

BOOK REVIEWS

V.V. Naumkin, I.F. Popova (academic advisors), **The Kurds. Legend of the East**. Moscow: Arbor Publishing Group, 2019. ISBN 978-5-900048-94-9. 456 pp.

Reviewed by Martin van Bruinessen

This handsomely produced coffee table book celebrates the Russian contribution to Kurdish studies and was produced as a public relations gesture by the Russian oil industry, apparently in the context of the signing of significant investment contracts with the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government. Gazprom Neft, one of the two companies involved (the other is Rosneft) asserts copyright. What makes the book of more than incidental interest is the involvement of Russia's academic establishment. Vitaly V. Naumkin and Irina F. Popova, who put their names on the book, are the directors of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Oriental Studies (Moscow) and Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (St. Petersburg) respectively. The authors of the seventeen chapters in the book are members of the academic staff of these two institutes, specialists on Kurdish language and literature, history and culture. Many of the illustrations are from various Russian archives and have, to my knowledge, not been published before.

The history of Russian and Soviet Kurdology is discussed in two long chapters at the beginning and end of the book. Zare Yusupova, the senior Kurdish linguist at St. Petersburg, provides a detailed overview of Russian and Soviet studies of language, literature and oral tradition, from the first scientific studies of Kurdish grammar and Kurdish dialects by Peter Lerch (1856) to her colleagues' most recent publications. The emphasis is on the works by the Kurdish Research Group in Leningrad/St. Petersburg but she also discusses studies by Kurdish authors based in Iraq and the West European diaspora and, less systematically, major works by Western scholars.

The closing chapter 'Russian explorers – pioneers of Kurdish studies' begins with an overview in which Irina Popova places the emergence of Russian Kurdology as a branch of Orientalism against the background of Russia's imperial expansion, voyages of exploration, establishment of intelligence-gathering consulates and religious missions. Consuls like Auguste Jaba systematically collected the Kurdish manuscripts that were later to constitute a major asset for the work of the Kurdish Research Group, which was established in Leningrad in 1959 under the leadership of the linguist Joseph Orbeli. With Qanat Kurdoev, Isaak Tsukerman, Margarita Rudenko, Jacqueline Musaelyan and Evgeniya Vasilyeva as full members of the group and Iraida Smirnova, Zare Yusupova and Karim Eyyubi as postgraduate students, this was the golden age of Soviet Kurdology. Historiography meanwhile flourished in Moscow, where Naftula Khalfin, Mikhail Lazarev and Manvel Gasretyan wrote major monographs.



Another major resource for Russian Kurdology consists of the copious diplomatic correspondence and travel notes of nineteenth and early twentieth-century consuls, military officers and missionaries, discussed by Kirill Vertyayev. The information is richest on the highland zone between Lake Van, the Black Sea and the southern Caucasus, sometimes called 'Lesser Kurdistan' in these sources. As examples of the kind of information to be found there he narrates several episodes on which these sources throw new light. The Russian consuls and travellers apparently perceived a more developed spirit of nationalism among their Kurdish interlocutors than recent academic studies generally give credence to. An interesting case, discussed at some length, is that of the cleric Mela Selim in Hizan who in 1914 led an uprising with Kurdish nationalist and anti-Armenian overtones. His followers briefly occupied the town of Bitlis; when they were defeated by Ottoman troops, Mela Selim took refuge in the Russian consulate and stayed there until Russia was drawn into the World War and the consulate was taken over by the Turks, who captured and then hanged Mela Selim.

The Russian vice-consul at Van, Sergei Olferyev, left extensive notes on his travels in 1912 and meetings with the Kurdish leaders Abdurrazzaq Bedirkhan, Sayyid Taha and Simko, who gave him the impression they favoured a semi-independent Kurdish emirate as a Russian protectorate. The book reproduces a selection of Olferyev's photographs and his notes on Kurdish tribes, which nicely complement those of the British traveller Mark Sykes. The chapter ends with brief biographies of prominent Russian Kurdologists.

Between these two long chapters that focus on Russian and Soviet diplomacy and scholarship, we find chapters on a wide range of subjects, from religion and folklore to politics and cinema. The historian Kirill Vertyayev takes care of most of the chapters on post-1920 history and his colleague Lana Ravandi-Fadai writes on Kurdish cultural traditions, clothing, housing and traditional weapons, as well as the 'mystery of the Kurdish woman'. The last-named chapter owes much to Western literature on the social and political role of women in Kurdish society but contains some additional information from Russian / Soviet publications, including a recent author, Xalida Fenar, on the PKK's women warriors.

Stanislav M. Ivanov writes on the Kurds of the Russian Empire, USSR and Russian Federation, mentioning several Kurdish personalities who made successful careers, especially in the army, and showing that in the Russian-Turkish wars of the nineteenth century there were Kurds fighting on the Russian as well as the Ottoman side. The various voluntary and involuntary migrations of the Soviet and post-Soviet period (Stalinist deportations to Central Asia, expulsion of Sunni Kurds from Armenia) and policies varying from cultural autonomy to forced assimilation (in post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan) are briefly surveyed. A brief chapter on two early Kurdish republics supported by the Soviet Union – Red Kurdistan, which for a brief period (1923-29) was a buffer between Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet Republics, and the Republic of Mahabad – complements what is generally known about these episodes with some material from Russian sources.

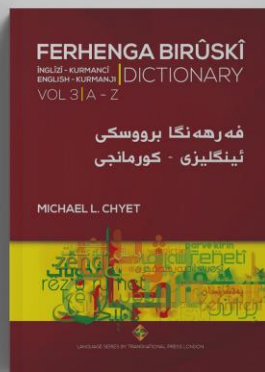
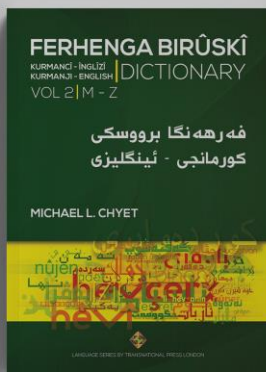
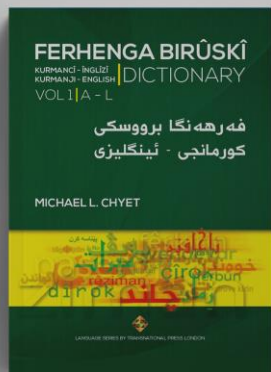
There are no separate chapters on the Turkish, Iranian and Syrian parts of Kurdistan but two on Iraqi Kurdistan. The chapter on recent history of the region cautiously steers clear of all sensitive issues and lavishes much praise on Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Barzani family. The author (S.M. Ivanov) emphasizes the strong bilateral relations between the Iraqi Kurds and Russia but gives no concrete information. One would have wished to read something here on the period of 1961-1975, especially the years after 1968, when the Baghdad government tilted towards the Soviet Union and Barzani, leading a guerrilla war for autonomy,

was increasingly seeking (and ultimately receiving) support from the United States and its regional allies. Soviet diplomats were known to have repeatedly travelled from Baghdad to the north to meet with Barzani during those years. They allegedly handed him money but it remains a mystery what the trade-off was. Russian archives no doubt contain interesting information about those negotiations as well as the role of the Iraqi Communist Party and its many Kurdish members.

The other Iraqi chapter, titled 'On the Front Line' (by Nikolai Plotnikov and Aleksei Marinin), contains some interesting information on the KDP and PUK *peshmerga*, although it passes over in silence all that could be contentious and does not even mention the PKK in the section about the fight against ISIS. The authors single out the female *peshmerga* for special praise, attributing the founding of the first women's regiment to Talabani in 1996, and again refraining from mentioning the PKK's famous women fighters. (These are mentioned in other chapters, however.)

In a brief postscript Vitaly Naumkin succinctly describes the geopolitical context of the Russian-Kurdish oil deals, and affirms that Russia continues to stand for the territorial integrity of the Middle Eastern states (i.e., against Kurdish independence), while being in solidarity with the Kurdish people and 'welcoming the attempts of the Kurds to unite with other forces opposing terrorism, including the Syrian government forces'.

This book would be of interest to many colleagues but unfortunately it is not commercially available. Its target audience appears to be the Iraqi Kurdish political and economic elite and their relations, as well as selected libraries and scholars. E-book and online versions appear to be in preparation, however. The original Russian version can already be downloaded free of cost (from <https://aegitas.ru/books/643750>), and the English version is due to follow in 2022. Besides these English and Russian versions, Kurmanci and Sorani editions have also been printed in smaller numbers (see also Gazprom Neft's announcement of the book at https://ir.gazprom-neft.com/news-and-events/news/2021/gazprom_neft_launches_an_electronic_encyclopaedia_on_the_history_and_culture_of_the_kurds_5539482).



www.tplondon.com

FERHENG A BIRÛSKÎ Kurmanji – English Dictionary | Volume One: A – L

By Michael L. Chyet

Published: 7 January 2020

FERHENG A BIRÛSKÎ Kurmanji – English Dictionary | Volume Two: M – Z

By Michael Chyet

Published: 29 January 2020

FERHENG A BIRÛSKÎ English – Kurmanji Dictionary | Volume Three

By Michael Chyet

Published: 29 January 2020