

Engaged with the Caucasus: Life and Work of Leonid Ivanovich Lavrov

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Leonid Ivanovich Lavrov (1909-1982) was a key figure in the Soviet ethnographic community. [1] His experiences and writings reflect the ideological shifts that took place in the USSR over the course of the twentieth century. Unlike some within his circle, Lavrov successfully navigated the instabilities of the Soviet era and emerged with a strong reputation as a researcher and a colleague. His appreciation for the nuances and complexity of both the milieu in which he lived and the data he encountered help to explain this success. His particular combination of devotion to scholarly excellence, commitment to social progress as the Soviet state defined it, and unwillingness to dismiss the ways of life of the people whose societies were slated for change accorded him respect, both in his day and in later years.

Born into the family of a Russian Orthodox priest on 4 May 1909, Lavrov grew up in the Caucasus, the region between the Black and Caspian Seas in Eurasia that is named for the mountain range that runs across it. [2] The topography of the region has helped to produce an ethnically diverse population representing several language families and religious traditions. Adygs, one of the groups whom the imperial army had displaced in its mid-nineteenth-century war to bring the Caucasus under Russian control, lived near to Lavrov's home village, and as a child he came to know some of them. [3] Lavrov himself descended from Zaporozhian Cossacks, a group of mixed origins whose members had come to function as a border force between the Russian and Ottoman empires until Russia had absorbed their lands in the late eighteenth century. [4]

Lavrov's career trajectory reveals his attentiveness to the time and his skill in negotiating shifting ideological sands. Subjected to scrutiny for his "social origins" as an applicant to the Kuban' Pedagogical Institute in his home region, [5] he instead pursued his academic endeavors in the Ethnography Department of the Faculty of Geography at Leningrad State University. [6] It was in the Caucasus, however, that he began to conduct ethnographic research in 1930, focusing on a community of Adygs living along the coast of the Black Sea. [7]

Lavrov once again encountered ideological opposition at Leningrad State University; in 1931, "concealment of his social origins" and alleged lack of enthusiasm for the socialist cause contributed to ending his tenure at the university. [8] He proceeded to fulfill his required army service and accepted a position as a teacher in first one, then a second military institution. [9] But Lavrov did not curtail his studies, earning his first degree by correspondence from the Leningrad Institute of History, Philosophy, Literature, and Linguistics in 1935. [10] The following year, he left his teaching post to become a junior researcher in the Caucasus Laboratory of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences. [11] He spent the remainder of the 1930s engaged in study of several of the ethnic groups of the Caucasus. [12] As witch-hunts began in the academy at the end of the decade, he witnessed the arrest and purging of his mentor, A. N. Genko, a leader in research on the Caucasus. [13]

When the Soviet Union embarked on the Great Fatherland War in 1941, Lavrov, along with many of his colleagues, joined the army. [14] He served with distinction, earning several military honors. [15] Upon his return from the front, he reentered academic life and earned his Candidate degree, marking completion of the first stage of postgraduate work, in 1946. [16] In the late 1940s, a time when official policy called for the confirmation of ethnic and corresponding territorial boundaries within the USSR, Lavrov engaged in study of ethnogenesis, examining the historical circumstances that had led to the creation of various groups. [17] However, histories of migration and cultural practices of various peoples had been subjects of his earlier work, suggesting that trends were not the only guides of his research. [18]

In this period, many academics, including ethnographers, fell victim to Stalin's condemnation of the linguist Nikolai Marr. Lavrov seems to have responded ably to this situation. Having earlier cited Marr in support of a position, he gave a speech describing Marr's work as "chaotic" at a time when criticism of this figure was de rigeur. [19] At the same time, he spoke fondly of his interactions with Marr in his student days and seems to have been in some ways an intellectual successor to the linguist. [20]

In the 1950s, Lavrov took part in an expedition to Dagestan, on the Caspian Sea coast. [21] Having already begun to write about some of the inhabitants of this easternmost territory of the Caucasus, he further developed his work on the area. However, his scholarly activities in the 1950s were not limited to Dagestan. Several groups in the central Caucasus had been deported from the region during the war and all writings about them, including the results of

some of Lavrov's research, had been suspended at that time. [22] In the late 1950s, he began to publicize his work on Balkars and Karachai, two of these peoples who had by this time been allowed to return to the Caucasus. [23] He thus resumed his scholarly agenda at the first signs that it was politically possible to do so, validating these people's histories in the accepted idiom of ethnogenesis.

Between 1957 and 1961 Lavrov served as head of the Caucasus Section at the Institute of Ethnography in Moscow. [24] In this period, he published the first of his findings on epigraphs, research that was to result in a three-volume text presenting the translations of inscriptions in several scripts on monuments scattered across the region, both extant structures and those existing only in the records of earlier travelers and researchers. [25] He returned in 1961 to Leningrad to become the leader of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Kazakhstan Group at the Institute of Ethnography, and in 1966 he earned his doctoral degree on the basis of his epigraphic research. [26] Other writings from the 1960s dealt with the issues given priority in late Soviet ethnography, namely, contemporary cultural life and the effects of Soviet influence on the peoples living within the USSR. [27] But these topics seem to have been well within the scope of his expansive intellectual palate, rather than simple responses to directives. His biographers indicate that Lavrov's writings fit the parameters established in official discourse but were also true to his interests and consistently reflected his commitment to scholarly excellence. [28] He seems to have walked a fine line, managing to satisfy both his internal motivations and the external prescriptions of his milieu.

Lavrov's work is characterized by support for the Soviet modernization project, on one hand, and a certain appreciation for the practices of the people who were the subjects of that project, on the other. Traditional ways of life, notably religious practices and family and communal relations, were widely condemned in ethnographic literature of the 1930s and 1940s. Lavrov's first publication in 1936 referred to "survivals of paganism," suggesting that this belief system was fading into memory among members of the group he presented. But the article was not otherwise critical of the legends or other ethnographic material that it presented. [29]

By the 1960s, ethnographic texts described some practices as "obsolete" [30] but deemed others compatible with a Soviet lifestyle, [31] and Lavrov's writings reflected both impulses. A 1962 article criticized a number of the practices of one group but praised its members' respect for elders and hospitality as valuable contributions to Soviet norms for behavior. [32] In another piece from 1964, Lavrov unquestionably based his argument on the notion of development by stages and presented a society quite different from the dominant one. But he deemed aspects of that society worthy of positive comment not because they were changing to be more like an ideal socialist form, but, rather, because they were valuable in their own right. [33]

Over the course of his career, Lavrov's writings were notable for their relative neutrality. His oeuvre, drawing on imperial Russian and earlier sources as much or more than it did those of Soviet scholars, celebrated both Soviet achievements and, at least to a certain extent, the life

ways of non-Russian peoples.

Lavrov's inclusiveness and commitment to the study of the Caucasus were reflected in his mentorship of younger colleagues. Indeed, the development of a cadre of ethnographers from the Caucasus was among the Soviet legacies to which he contributed . [34] He also established a series of conferences in Leningrad, first at the Institute of Oriental Studies, and then at the Institute of Ethnography. These meetings, which outlived his death on 7 April 1982, [35] continue to be held annually at the Institute of Ethnography as the Lavrov Central-Asian Caucasian Lectures, testimony to his contributions to the ethnography of the Caucasus. [36]

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[1] The University of Illinois Summer Research Laboratory on Russia, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia provided support for the research on which this article is based.

[2] Reshetov 1998:106, cited in Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:3, *Stranitsy* 1992:160, Gardanov 1983:169

[3] Lavrov 1982:4-9

[4] Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:3, *Stranitsy* 1992:160, Gardanov 1983:169, De Madariarga 1990:8, Koznarsky 2001:92, Alexander 1989:238

[5] Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:3; the phrase evidently refers to his father's profession.

[6] Tsulaia 1990:107, Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:3, *Stranitsy* 1992:160

[7] Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:6

[8] *Stranitsy* 1992:160, Arkhiv muzeia antropologii i etnologii imeni Petra Velikogo Rossiiskoi akademii nauk (MAE RAN) (Archive of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of the Russian Academy of Sciences), f. 25, op. 1, ed. khr. 98, l. 80-1, cited in Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:3

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[10] Gardanov 1983:170, Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:4, *Stranitsy* 1992:161

[11] Gardanov 1983:170, *Stranitsy* 1992:111, 113, Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:4

[12] *Stranitsy* 1992:27, Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:4

[13] *Stranitsy* 1992:28, Gardanov 1983:170

[14] Volkova 1986:78, Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:4, *Stranitsy* 1992:161, Gardanov 1983:170

[15] Gardanov 1983:170, 172, Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:4, *Stranitsy* 1992:161

- [16] Bgazhnokov and Abazov 2009:4, *Stranitsy* 1992:30
- [17] Volkova 1986:80-1, *Stranitsy* 1992:161
- [18] Tsulaia 1990:108-9, *Stranitsy* 1992:26-7
- [19] Lavrov 2009a:33; Lavrov 2009b:62, *Stranitsy* 1992:31-2
- [20] *Stranitsy* 1992:38-9, Tsulaia 1990:107-8
- [21] *Stranitsy* 1992:33, Gardanov 1983:170, Volkova 1986:81-2
- [22] *Stranitsy* 1992:32, Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:7
- [23] Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:7; these authors note that as early as 1949 Lavrov hinted at his findings about Balkars and Karachai in a piece on another group in the region, Tsulaia 1990:109
- [24] Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:4, *Stranitsy* 1992:161, Gardanov 1983:172
- [25] Gardanov 1983:171, Volkova 1986:84, *Stranitsy* 1992:135-6, Tsulaia 1990:110-111; e.g., Lavrov & Autlev 2009
- [26] *Stranitsy* 1992:161; Bgazhnokov and Abazov 2009:4
- [27] Triumph 1960:4, *Stranitsy* 1992:33, 46-51, Bgazhnokov and Abazov 2009:5-6, Volkova 1986:82
- [28] e.g., Tsulaia 1990:109, 112, Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:5-6, *Stranitsy* 1992:135-6, Volkova 1986:77, 83, 84, Gardanov 1983:171-2
- [29] Lavrov 1936
- [30] Smirnova 1962:34; Smirnova 1977:80
- [31] Aliev 1968:212-258
- [32] Lavrov 1962
- [33] Lavrov 2009c
- [34] Bgazhnokov & Abazov 2009:5; see also Gardanov 1983:172, *Stranitsy* 1992:161
- [35] Bgazhnokov and Abazov 2009:5, *Stranitsy* 1992:161
- [36] *Stranitsy* 1992:35

