

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE CAUCASUS AND ITS SOCIAL ORGANIZATION.

Summary

Sergei Arutiunov in conversation with Alexander Formozov

Sergei Arutiunov, an ethnographer born in 1932 who initially specialized in the study of Japan, has worked at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow since 1957. Since 1985, he has been head of the institute's Caucasus Department. Created in 1942, this department currently has a permanent staff of eight researchers, whose interests span the North and South Caucasus. In this interview, Arutiunov discusses the social and institutional organization of the study of the Caucasus since Soviet times.

In the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus was mainly studied by local ethnographers. Especially in Armenia and Georgia (with the exception of Abkhazia), they were encouraged or even required to publish their work in local languages even if it was initially written in Russian. As a result, unlike the literature on the North Caucasus, much of the literature on the South Caucasus has remained inaccessible to Russian scholars. The intensity of contacts between Russian ethnographers and their colleagues from the South Caucasus has varied. An International Congress of Anthropologists and Ethnologists took place in Moscow in 1964, giving a boost to inter-republic contacts within the Soviet Union. In the late 1970s and 1980s, many older scholars in the Caucasus with close ties to Russia died, leading to a decrease in interaction. Some Armenian ethnographers but extremely few Georgians or Azeris wrote their dissertations in Moscow; North Caucasian doctoral students were much more numerous in Russia.

In the early 1980s, Moscow-based ethnosociologists began to study "interethnic relations" in the Caucasus, but due to political constraints, they could only publish studies of harmonious relationships, such as those between Armenians and Greeks, but not Armenian-Azeri tensions. Authors were required to stress the beneficial influence of the Russian people. Arbitrary political intervention sometimes affected scholarly publications in unexpected ways, such as when a Russian party functionary in North Ossetia ordered the entire print run of a book about the medieval Alans seized in 1984 because he thought it contradicted the official history of Ossetia. However, the book continued to circulate in South Ossetia. The party line initially required that scholars focus on the history of the Caucasus, but in the postwar period

began to encourage studies of everyday life in the Soviet Union, including the Caucasus. However, such studies were not allowed to be critical. In general, ethnographers knew which topics were politically sensitive, and chose to avoid them or focused only on legitimate aspects. Thus, the urbanization of rural life needed to be presented as an entirely positive development; religious matters could be discussed under the heading of symbolism, magic, and residues of pagan beliefs, but not in terms of organized church life.

Nowadays, contacts are irregular. They are hampered by the difficulty to obtain locally published literature, by constantly changing institutional arrangements in Caucasian academia, and, increasingly, by a new language barrier that is due to a decline in local students' knowledge of Russian. The institute has regular contacts with Armenia, and Arutiunov lectures there every year. He and his colleagues are less well-informed about the more lively scholarly debates in Georgia, and nothing is known about Azerbaijan.