Book Reviews


This book represents a valiant attempt to present to scholars, students and other interested leaders the kaleidoscopic histories, (political) cultures, ethno-linguistic characteristics and provenances of the diverse peoples and states in both North and South Caucasus. It especially seeks to explain how these aspects account for the persistent authoritarianism, nepotism, and underdevelopment in the region, and for unresolved “(semi-)frozen” conflicts, such as those in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South-Ossetia, with Russia as either one of the warring parties or a decisive supporter of one of the parties.

The editors Françoise Companjen, affiliated to the Free University of Amsterdam, and László Marácz and Lia Versteegh, both affiliated to the University of Amsterdam, as well as seven other contributors from Amsterdam and beyond, bring their own expertise to bear on particular peoples, states, topics and events in the Caucasus (such as the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008). They succeed in collectively presenting the richly textured Caucasus. They do so through analyses from multiple, mutually enhancing disciplines and perspectives; these range from ethnopolitical history (René Does, Marc Jansen), civil society and democracy building (F. Companjen, Max Bader), state(-and-nation) building, conflict resolution, human rights and international law (Charlotte Hille, L. Versteegh, Oliver Reisner) to (often politicised) linguistics, religion and art (L. Marácz, Michael Kemper, Eva Navarro Martínez).

However, the book’s very attempt to describe and explain the rich cultural and political tapestries of the Caucasus from diverse disciplines and perspectives compounds the problem that a co-edited publication typically faces: how to formulate a common theme to which all contributors adhere, despite their differing specialisms, topical interests and descriptions geared toward either general readers, students, or fellow-scholars. Thus, the book contains advanced yet solitary, self-contained investigations by Marácz on the origins of the Hungarian language
through the example of the works by a late 19th-century Hungarian linguist (Chapter 1), by Kemper on the classical Arabic language and script (marginalised by Soviet persecution, but still surviving) in Dagestan (Chapter 3), and by Martínez on conformist and non-conformist art expressions in Armenia and Azerbaijan (Chapter 11). There are relevant and well-presented but quite “introductory” summaries by Does on the ethno-political histories of the peoples of the Caucasus (Chapter 2), and by Jansen on the recent history of the Russo-Chechen confrontation (Chapter 4), that can be informative only to students and general readers unfamiliar with the region. This multiplicity of contributions is intended to emphasise the complexity of the Caucasus by offering a kaleidoscope of topics and approaches to (the satisfaction of) all audiences. This is fine, if it can attract the interest of scholars and students who until then have paid little or no attention to the region, or so far have studied this or any other region from a single discipline or theoretical approach only. Nevertheless, if the editors have intended to analyse, jointly with all contributors, the Caucasus through a more particular, clear-cut framework, then this eludes me. Or it must be the concepts of transition and transformation of the region’s countries from communist to post-communist societies, which Françoise Companjen introduces and applies on the Transcaucasus, i.e. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Chapter 5)—concepts that most if not all contributors apply or at least refer to.

1 Marácz clearly supports the Turkic-Mongolian origin-thesis of Hungarian by the Hungarian linguist Gábor Bálint de Szentkatolna (1844-1913), who considered Kabardian (like Adyghe a contested dialect or separate branch of Circassian) a crucial intermediary, as opposed to the Finno-Ugrian origin-thesis supported by most (pro-Austria-Hungarian) linguists at the time and arguably today. Marácz also appears to support the contention by Szentkatolna and other Hungarian nationalists that Hungarians are “descendants of the Huns” (pp. 29, 35). Yet, he refrains from explicitly declaring himself an adherent of both propositions.

2 Martínez’ analysis of non-conformist versus social-realist art in Soviet and post-Soviet times is insightful, and her account of the painter Javad Mirjavadov (1923-1992) through his widow and fellow-artist Luvob (‘Luba’) Mirjavadova in Baku is intriguing. However, Martínez’ apparent or partial adoption of R. Barthes’ “pure-and-true-art” thesis—quoting Azeri art critic D. Vahabova (proposing that Time and History are “unyielding phenomena”) that “it’s impossible to lie in art, and... an art object... is the most... truthful document of its time” (p. 237) may lead to misunderstandings, as terms like “truth” and “purity” have quite different meanings and connotations in other disciplines. Social scientists may easily read in those terms essentialist, primordialist or Hegelian propositions, and criticise these accordingly. Thus, one may wonder whether the pure-and-true-art thesis overlooks the unavoidable variety of interpretations on any of work of art—and the artist’s motives, subconscious workings and environmental (Zeitgeist) influences.