



# MARR, NIKOLAĪ YAKOVLEVICH

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**MARR, NIKOLAĪ YAKOVLEVICH**, Russian philologist and archeologist, the founder of the “New Linguistic Doctrine” (ca. 1864-1934; [FIGURE 1](#)).

N. J. Marr was born in Kutaisi, Georgia, between 1863 and 1865, of a Scottish father and a Georgian mother. After attending the gymnasium in Kutaisi, he entered the Department of Oriental Languages at St. Petersburg University in 1884. His student years were devoted to the study of the languages of the Caucasus and the Near East. He graduated with a silver medal in 1888, and passed his Master’s examinations in 1891, upon which he was appointed a Lecturer in Armenian Studies in his alma mater.

The early part of Marr’s career was dedicated to Armenian and Kartvelian [Georgian] studies. The most significant part of Marr’s scholarly legacy is his editions of Georgian, Armenian, and Arab manuscripts, some of which he discovered during expeditions to the monastery of Aphon (Mt. Athos) in 1898, and to Sinai and Jerusalem in 1902. In addition, he conducted pioneering excavations of the medieval Armenian capital Ani (1892-93, 1904-17), the Armenian Hellenistic temple in Garni (1909-10), and the Urartean fortress Toprakkale (1916). His linguistic works include Old Armenian (1903), Laz (1910), and Old Georgian (1925) grammars, as well as an Abkhazian-Russian dictionary. Most of Marr’s works were written in Russian, but some are in Georgian or Armenian.



Although the Iranian languages never played a pivotal role in Marr's work, he contributed, directly or indirectly, to certain aspects of Iranian studies. Yet in his student years (1890), he was able to discover the Georgian version of the so-called "Legend of Varlaam and Ioasaf" (see [BARLAAM AND IOSAPH](#)), an originally Buddhist text, which, as we now know, passed to the Caucasus and then to the Byzantines through Middle Iranian mediation. Being well versed in Classical Persian and Avestan, as well as Sanskrit, he extensively studied Iranian influence on medieval Georgian literature, and, in particular, was able to demonstrate the Persian origin of many proper names occurring in medieval Georgian courtly novels. Marr's article about the Kurdish word *čalabī* "noble" and its Caucasian cognates (1911) is methodologically suspect, but still represents a certain interest in view of the abundant lexical and historical material adduced. Finally, Marr has contributions to the study of the Ossetic lexicon, especially in connection with those of the neighboring languages (*Ossetica-Yaphetica*, 1918, 1919).

The work of N. J. Marr as a Caucasologist brought him widespread scholarly recognition. He was awarded an associate professorship in 1900, and his Habilitation in 1901; he became a full Professor of Armenian and Georgian literatures in 1902. In 1909, he was elected an adjunct of the Historical-Philological Division of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and only three years later, in 1912, he became a full member of the Academy. Between 1911 and 1917, Marr served as the Dean of the Department of Oriental Languages of St. Petersburg University. In 1915, he received the Uvarov Prize, the supreme award of the Russian Archeological Society.

Emboldened by his success, Marr gradually began to shift the focus of his research to comparative linguistics, a field in which he had been interested since his student years, but never adequately trained. In 1908, he published a *Preliminary Report about the Genetic Relationship between Georgian and Semitic* (in Russian, *IR* I, pp. 23-38). Although this work was written in blatant disregard for the comparative method, the complacent attitude of Marr's colleagues, both within and outside Russia, did not allow him to realize his mistakes. In subsequent years, Marr dedicated increasing efforts to proving the relationship of "Yaphetic" (originally synonymous with Kartvelian) languages with Armenian (1910), Abkhazian (1912), Elamite (1914), Urartian (1915), Burushaski (1916), Basque (1920), Etruscan (1921), Pelasgian (1921), Sumerian (1921), Dravidian (1922), Chuvash (1924), and others. In a 1922 article, he tried to prove the "Yaphetic" origin of the ethnonym "Scythian" (*IR*



V, pp. 1-43).

Since the existence of the new “Yaphetic” macrofamily implied large-scale migrations for which Marr could not account, he decided to re-interpret the similarities of “Yaphetic” languages in “typological” terms. According to the 1923 article “Indo-European languages of the Mediterranean”(in Russian, *IR I*, pp. 185-86), “Yaphetic” and Indo-European languages are not related to genetically different families, but rather represent two subsequent stages of one glottogonic process. In a speech addressed to Soviet archeologists on 6 September 1926, he insisted that the originally “Yaphetic” Scythian language acquired Iranian features through historical evolution (Mikhankova, 1949, pp. 383-84). Furthermore, according to Marr, the very notion of a proto-language is a fiction, and today’s national languages and linguistic families came into being through convergence of numerous tribal dialects (*IR I*, pp. 185-86). Marr did not attempt to provide the scholarly world with the refutation of the comparative method in historical linguistics, nor did he try to formally justify an alternative methodology. It is fair to say that by 1923 Marr stopped being a scientist and started being the creator of a myth.

The official name of this myth was “New Linguistic Doctrine,” which was alternatively translated into English as “New Linguistics” or “New Studies of Language.” The temporary success of Marr’s teachings in the Soviet Union owes a great deal to his ability to present his doctrine as the only Marxist alternative to the “bourgeois” comparative linguistics. Thus he has directly, albeit inconsistently, linked his stages of glottogonic development to socio-economic formations, as described by Marx and Engels. According to one of his students, A. A. Kholodovich (*Yazyk*, 1936, pp. 44-45) the “amorphous” (i.e., isolating or analytic) languages naturally correspond to primitive communism, agglutinative languages are typical of clan communities, while inflected languages evolve in class societies. Marr prophesied that the eventual triumph of communism would bring about the genesis of a new universal language “where supreme beauty will be combined with the supreme development of the mind” (*IR III*, pp. 111-12).

Marr’s use of Marxist phraseology helped him to advance his personal career in the Soviet Union. At various periods of time in the 1920s he was placed at the head of the Academy of the History of Material Culture, the Yaphetic Institute, (later renamed the Institute of Language and Thought), the Leningrad Public Library, the Institute of the Study of Ethnic and National Cultures of the East, and the Section of Materialist Linguistics of the



Communist Academy. In January 1934, he was awarded the Order of Lenin. Official mourning was declared in Leningrad after he died on 20 December 1934. The especially well-known part of the late legacy of Marr is his teaching of four diffuse elements SAL, BER, YON, and ROŠ, which constituted the first acts of human speech and combinations of which yielded all the words of attested human languages (e.g., *IR* III, p. 16).

Marr's New Linguistic Doctrine remained a part of the official Soviet orthodoxy till the end of the 1940s, although some of his pupils, notably the Iranologist V. I. Abaev, had already begun to tacitly dismantle many of its elements. On 20 July 1950, however, Marr's teachings were declared anti-Marxist in an article published in the central Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, which was signed and possibly even written by Stalin. Subsequently, traditional historical linguistics was rehabilitated. Among the possible motives that prompted the Soviet leader to interfere in a linguistic discussion, one can mention Stalin's desire, common to many autocratic rulers of the past, to become an authority in the sciences, as well as the incompatibility of Marr's cosmopolitan myth with the increasingly nationalist ideology of post-war Russia.

The late writings of N. J. Marr are now of interest mainly for Sovietologists and historians of linguistics. His earlier works, however, retain their scholarly value and should be of interest to anyone studying the cultures of the Caucasus and their connections with the Iranian world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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[*IR*] N. J. Marr, *Marr, Nikolai Yakovlevich (1864-1934): Izbrannye raboty*, 5 vols., Leningrad, 1933-37. This collection of selected papers mostly contains Marr's later works of rather dubious scholarly value, but it can be consulted for his complete bibliography up to 1933 (vol. 1, pp. XI-XXVI; 507 items).

The following articles by Marr should be of interest to Iranists: N. J. Marr,



“«Mudrost’ Balavara», gruzinskaya versiya «Dushepoleznoi istorii o Varlaame i Ioasafe» (The “Wisdom of Balavar,” a Georgian version of the “Edifying History of Barlaam and Joasaph”), *Zapiski Vostochnogo otdeleniya Russkogo arkheologicheskogo obshchestva* 3, 1889, pp. 223-60. “Persidskaya natsional’naya tendentsiya v gruzinskom romane: Amirandareyaniani” (A Persian national tendency in the Georgian romance *Amirandare y aniani*), *Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnogo Prosveshcheniya*, June 1895, pp. 352-65. “K voprosy o vliyanii persidskoĭ literatury na gruzinskuyu (o Visramiani)” (On the question of the influence of Persian literature on Georgian [about the *Visramiani*]), *Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnogo Prosveshcheniya*, March 1896, pp. 233-37. “Eshche o slove «calabī» (K voprosu o kul’turnom znachenii kurdskoĭ narodnosti v istorii Srednei Azii),” (Again the word *čalabī* [on the question of the cultural significance of the Kurdish people in the history of the Middle East]), *Zapiski Vostochnogo otdeleniya Russkogo arkheologicheskogo obshchestva* 20, 1911, pp. 99-151.

Marr’s contribution to the study of individual languages was discussed in his memorial volume *Yazyki Evrazii v rabotakh N. J. Marra* (The languages of Eurasia in the works of M.), *Iazyk i myshlenie* 8, Moscow and Leningrad, 1937. Therein, the following articles deal with Iranian languages: V. I. Abaev, “N. J. Marr i osetinovedenie” (M. and expertise in Ossetic, pp. 200-7), O. Vilchevskii, “N. J. Marr i kurdovedenie” (M. and expertise in Kurdish, pp. 209-33), V. D. Dondua, “N. J. Marr i problema iranskogo sloya v gruzinskom” (M. and the problem of the Iranian layer in Georgian, pp. 235-41). The authors of these three articles were influenced by the ideas of the New Linguistic Doctrine.

The numerous biographies of N. J. Marr are not uniform in their quality and emphasis. The official Soviet biography, V. A. Mikhankova, *Nikolaĭ Yakovlevich Marr*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1949, belongs to the panegyric genre. A more concise, but objective, account can be found in V. M. Alpatov, *Istoriya odnogo mifa. Marr i marrism* (The history of a myth. Marr and Marrism), Moscow, 1991 (especially pp. 6-111). R. L’Hermitte, *Science et perversion idéologique. Marr, marrisme, marristes*, Paris, 1987, focuses on the infamous second part of Marr’s scholarly career. I. V. Stalin, *Marksizm i voprosy yazykoznaniiya* (Marxism and questions of linguistic science), Moscow, 1950 (reprint) represents the official statement of condemnation of the New Linguistic Doctrine.



July 22, 2005