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MINORSKY, VLADIMIR FED'OROVICH

MINORSKY, Vladimir Fed'orovich (1877-1966), outstanding Russian scholar of Persian history, historical geography, literature and culture, who worked on a very broad canvas, with contributions of substantial value in the related fields of Turkish, Mongol, Caucasian, Armenian, and Byzantine studies, where they touched on Persian studies in the broad sense. Backed by formidable linguistic expertise in both European and Islamic languages, Minorsky's interests enabled him to range across Eastern Europe to Inner Asia, from the origins of the Rus to Mongol administrative and financial innovations in Eastern Islamic society, on the same scale as such of his predecessors as Josef Marquart/Markwart and Wilhelm Barthold/Vasili Vladimirovich Bart'old; but it was the Persian world, in all its richness and distinctiveness of culture, that remained at the heart of his multi-faceted endeavors. Thus he wrote in the Foreword to a collection of his articles (Minorsky, 1964, p. vii), looking back over a life of eighty-six years, that "Despite the variety of problems which have attracted my attention, Iranian subject stand definitely in the forefront of my interests." The lands beyond Iran, from Anatolia to Central Asia and India, interested him as well, for, he continued, "Iran, its history and its literature have ever been linked with the life of many peoples both near and far, and I have often been tempted to trace these contacts and interactions."

Life. Minorsky was born on 5 February 1877 at Korcheva to the northwest of Moscow on the Upper Volga, a town which has now been submerged in the

Moscow Sea. He was educated in Moscow, entering Moscow University to study law and, after graduating in 1900, entered the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages with a view to following a diplomatic career in the East and, for the next three years, studied with such scholars as A. E. Krimsky, Baron R. von Stackelberg, and V. V. Miller. During this time, he paid his first visit to Persia and this awakened what was to be a special interest of his, the role of the Kurds within Iranian culture. Edward G. Browne's researches on the Bābis and Bahā'is had attracted considerable scholarly interest, and the young Minorsky now became intrigued by another esoteric sect of Iran the Ahl-e Ḥaqq or ʿAli-Allāhis in Kurdistan. In 1911 he produced a monograph on this elusive group for which he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Ethnography Section of the Imperial Society of Natural Sciences in Moscow. In 1903 he entered the Imperial Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and between 1904 and 1908 he served in the Tabriz Consulate-General and then the Tehran Legation. Tabriz was at this time a center for the democratic and nationalist enthusiasm embodied in the Constitutional Movement (see CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION), and it was there that he met and began a lifelong friendship with the politician and scholar Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizāda (q.v.) and, over fifty years later, he was to contribute an article to the latter's Festschrift. In 1908 he was back in Russia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg, and through contacts with the Oriental Section of the Imperial Academy of Science, met Barthold, whose disciple Minorsky was always proud to consider himself. Later in life, he continued the work begun by Barthold on the Tumansky manuscript of the *Ḥodud al-ʿālam* (see below) and, in collaboration with his wife, made available to non-Russophones various works of Barthold in English translations (*Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, 3 vols., Leiden, 1956-62).

He had a year at Tashkent in Central Asia, and then from 1911 to 1914 was back in Persia and eventually served on the Four-Power (British, Russian, Turkish, and Persian) Commission to delimit the Turco-Persian border, from near Mount Ararat in the north to the head of the Persian Gulf at Moḥammera, the present-day Ḵorramšahr (q.v.). This period was of formative importance for Minorsky, since he was able to familiarize himself with the topography and historical geography of this rugged, then little-known mountain region, and material from this storehouse of knowledge went into the work, *Materialï dlya izucheniya vostoka* (Materials for the Study of the East), published by the Imperial Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs (fasc. 2, St. Petersburg, 1915), of which Minorsky wrote the greater part. He also acquired a knowledge of

Kurdish and of the Kurdish people, and the study of this people and their language were to be a major interest of his all through his life, culminating in the detailed sections he wrote on Kurdish history for the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. He was able subsequently to draw upon topographical, ethnological, and linguistic materials recorded at this time. Thus over forty years later, he was able to identify the fortress Paswē with the ancient Parsua, towards which the Assyrian King Sargon II states that he had "descended" (1957, p. 79). Likewise, the linguistic material he had gathered in northwestern Persia when he was attached to the Russian Legation in Tehran as First Secretary and then Chargé d'Affaires (1915-17) went, over two decades later, into his article on the dialect of the Khalaj. It was a pioneering study of this isolated archaic Turkish dialect that paved the way for the subsequent important linguistic studies on Khalaj language by Gerhard Doerfer. Accompanying him on this survey work was his wife, Tatiana Shebunina (d. 1987), the granddaughter of the Turkish scholar V. D. Smirnov; in later life Mrs. Minorsky was to be her husband's helpmate in his academic work as collaborator, translator, proof reader, compiler of indexes and amanuensis, especially when, in his last years, his sight was failing.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 made it impossible for him to return to war-torn Russia, and in 1919 the Minorskys settled in Paris, where his expertise in Middle Eastern and Caucasian affairs was much in demand during the drawing-up of the Versailles and Trianon peace settlements. He produced a stream of articles on contemporary topics in the field of international affairs, while maintaining his strictly academic interests. These rventually led him in 1923 to take up teaching Persian and then Turkish and Middle East history at the École Nationale de Langues Orientales Vivantes, and this marks formally the transition from his career as a man of public affairs in Russia and France to that of the academic scholar in France and England. He now began producing a series of articles in the first edition of the *Encylopedia of Islam*, many of considerable length and often embodying his on-the-spot topographical knowledge of Persia and the Caucasus; their authoritativeness has meant that many were reprinted, with minimal updating and modification in the second edition of that *Encyclopedia*.

Minorsky's connection with Britain, where he was to spend the last, most productive thirty-four years of his life, began in 1930, when he was appointed Oriental Secretary to the International Persian Art Exhibition that was held in London in early 1931 under the patronage of the then ruler of Persia, Reżā

Shah Pahlavi. As part of his duties, he enlarged his sphere of interest, lecturing and writing at this time on Persian art, since Persian art and book production and codicology, though never in the forefront of his interests and sphere of competence, were for him an integral part of the continuum of Persian culture, one closely connected, through manuscripts and book illustrations, with Persian history and literature. Later in his career, he produced a catalogue of the Turkish manuscripts and miniatures in the Chester Beatty Library (1958) and a translation of *Golestān-e honar*, an important work on calligraphy by the Safavid artist Qāżi Aḥmad b. Mir Monši (tr. as *Calligraphers and Painters*, Washington, D. C., 1959).

The first Director of the School of Oriental Studies in London, Eward Denison Ross (q.v.), had met the Minorskys on the continent of Europe and in the Middle East on several occasions (see Ross, pp. 183, 191, 225), and in 1932 he invited Minorsky to take up a post at the School, where, from 1933 until his retirement at the statutory age of sixty-seven in 1944, he was successively Lecturer, Reader and then Professor of Persian. At the outbreak of the Second World War, the School was evacuated to Cambridge, and it was there that the Minorskys chose to spend their retirement, apart from a year (1948-49) spent at Foʾād al-Awwal University in Cairo as visiting professor. Although Minorsky's own academic standards were austere and uncompromising, he was always happy to impart and share his vast knowledge with those who sought his assistance or advice. The Minorskys' house in Bateman Street became a mecca for visiting scholars and students. He had always been especially helpful to Persian scholars whom he had met in France and then Britain; the late Mojtabā Minovi recalled how he first met Minorsky in Paris in 1929 at the house of the great scholar Mirzā Moḥammad Qazvini (q.v.) and how Minorsky then initiated him into the mysteries of using the Bibliothéque Nationale and introduced him to Western classical music by taking him to a performance of Borodin's *Prince Igor* and explaining the opera to him (Minovi, p. 9; Boyle, p. 89).

These years at Cambridge continued to be ones of intense academic productivity (see below), in which many academic honors came to him. But especially gratifying to one who had never ceased, through all his years of exile, to be a fervent Russian patriot (his *Taḏkerat al-moluk* edition and translation [see below] had in 1942, the time of the siege of Leningrad, been dedicated to "The Soviet orientalists in their ordeal") was an invitation in 1960 from the Soviet Academy of Sciences to attend the meeting of the Twenty-

Third International Congress of Orientalists in Moscow, where he received a triumphant welcome after an absence from Russian soil of over four decades. After his death, almost a nonagenarian, on 25 March 1966, Mrs. Minorsky took his ashes for interment in the historic Novodevichy Monastery cemetery in Moscow, one reserved exclusively for outstanding artists, literary men, composers, scholars, etc., and the greater part of his rich personal library went to Leningrad, whose oriental holdings had suffered much loss during the siege of 1942-43.

Achievements. Minorsky's academic output was prodigious, stretching from a Russian translation of part of Theodore Nöldeke's *Die semitische Sprachen, eine Skizze* (Moscow, 1903), when he was still a student, to the posthumous "A Greek Crossing on the Oxus" (*BSO(A)S* 30, 1967, pp. 45-53). The bibliography, prefixed to his *Iranica: Twenty Articles*, runs to 209 items going up to 1962, and these include some eleven books and monographs, most of them of seminal importance. His translation of the anonymous Persian geography, written for the author's patron, a local ruler of Guzgān in northwestern Afghanistan, the *Ḥodud al-ʿālam*, with Minorsky's immensely detailed and erudite commentary (1937), would alone have made the reputation of a great scholar. It involved dealing with a work whose purview extended far beyond the Islamic world, to Western Europe, East Africa, Central Asia, Siberia and China, a circumstance that would easily lead copyists to introduce corruptions when dealing with names alien to them. These Minorsky set himself to correct as far as possible and to elucidate, and it is relevant here to quote the words of Ilya Gershevitch (q.v.), a noted scholar of Iranian studies: "It was in this book that he displayed for the first time on a massive scale his unique skill in emending corrupt place names. There was a touch of magic in the emergence of a suitable toponym from an incomprehensible sequence of letters after his deletion, addition, or shifting of a dot or two, the coaxing of a *dāl* into a *rā* position, the eversion of a *ḡayn* to *ḵā* or the straightening of a *kāf* to *lām* (p. 53). Minorsky noted that he had spent six or seven years on it, and that his wife had prepared some 4,500 cards for the indexes and had typed revised texts of some chapters up to four or five times. A new edition, edited by Clifford E. Bosworth (London, 1970), incorporated two series of *Addenda* by Minorsky plus comments and suggestions by Manučehr Sotuda in his edition of the Persian text (Tehran, 1961). The twelve maps in the work remain especially valuable for the historical geography of the Pamirs region and for Transoxania and the Turkish lands further north.

The horizons opened up by this book were extended by Minorsky, once more employing his techniques, this time for the felicitous interpretation of difficult, little-known Arabic texts dealing with the historical geography, ethnology, and religions of Inner Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Far East. In his *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marvazī on China, the Turks and India* (London, 1942), Minorsky utilized part of the recently-discovered manuscript of the *Ṭabāeʿ al-ḥayawān* of this early 6th/12th-century author, editing the relevant parts of the text, and reproducing them in his own attractive Arabic calligraphy. In the very detailed commentary, he was again dealing with parts of the world beyond the Islamic world (Dār-al-Eslām), whose personal, tribal, and place names must have tried the patience of copyists sorely. Minorsky did not hesitate to contact specialist colleagues, such as Gustav Haloun on Chinese history and Larry D. Barnett and Harold W. Bailey for Indian ethnology and faiths, the result being once more remarkably impressive. He continued to be interested in the cultures and faiths of the subcontinent, and a few years after this he dedicated to Barnett a translation and commentary of the section on India in the *Zayn al-aḵbār* by the Ghaznavid author ʿAbd-al-Ḥayy Gardizi ("Gardīzī on India," *BSO(A)S* 12, 1948, pp. 625-40). On a slightly lesser scale, but equally displaying his erudition and intuitive powers of making sense of difficult and corrupt texts, was his edition, translation and commentary of the *Second Resāla* of the extravagant Arabic littérateur and traveler, Abu Dolaf Yanboʿi Ḵazraji (as *Abū Dulaf Misʿar ibn Mulhalhil's Travels in Iran [circa A. D. 950]*, Cairo, 1955). The *Resāl* (Treatise) deals with the writer's journeys across northwestern Persia, giving an impression of veracity and first-hand knowledge absent from his first *Resāla*, purporting to describe the author's travels through the lands of the Turks to China. In his wide-ranging commentary, Minorsky followed the model established in the commentary to the *Ḥodud al-ʿālam* translation.

In these and similar works, Minorsky applied to Islamic texts the principles familiar from Greek and Latin scholarship; his judgments, though often inspired and strikingly original, were always firmly based on what was a reasonable interpretation of Islamic authors' knowledge in their times. With these three books alone, he vastly enlarged our knowledge of the historical geography and ethnology of the fringes of the medieval Islamic world and beyond, for which, it had been assumed, there was no reliable Islamic information and which were, in the case of the early Turkish and Mongol peoples of Inner Asia, doomed largely to remain *terrae incognitae* and *gentes incognitae*. Minorsky's techniques in these works and in those on Persian

history, illustrate how in general he followed the positivist methods of Barthold, and, like his great predecessor, he had a mistrust of grandiloquent, continent-ranging explanations for historical phenomena, holding that there was far too much spadework to be done before meaningful syntheses and generalizations could be made; in this sense, Minorsky was the antithesis of an Oswald Spengler or Arnold Toynbee.

From the regions covered in these first two works, Minorsky, in the 1950s, turned his attention to another obscurely-known region on the edge of the Islamic ecumene, the Caucasus, again proceeding from a basis of either recently-discovered or hitherto little-known and unexploited texts. His *A History of Sharvān and Darband* (1958) was built around a section in the late Ottoman Turkish author Monajjem-bāši's *Jāmeʿ al-dowal* on the history of the eastern Caucasus, including the highland region of Daghestan and the valleys of the Kur and Araxes (Aras) rivers, and their petty dynasties, Muslim and Christian, for which the 18th-century author apparently drew on a lost *Taʾrik̲ al-Bāb* of about 1100 C.E. Again, Minorsky provided an edited Arabic text, translation, and detailed commentary on the historical geography and ethnology of the region; it is largely from this work of his that we know at least something of the history and chronology of the (originally Arab) Yazidi Šarvānšāhs, hitherto known only sketchily from the Persian-language *Darband-nāma* (for which see DĀḠESTĀN i). This book of Minorsky had been preceded by his *Studies in Caucasian History* (London, 1953), in which Minorsky first utilized material from Monajjem -bāšipertaining to eastern Armenia, Arrān and northern Azarbaijan, and their local Muslim dynasties, and especially on the Shaddadids of Ganja and Āni in Arrān and their relations with adjacent Armenian princes and the Byzantine Empire. These Shaddadids were of Kurdish origin, and the third study in the book is devoted to uncovering the hitherto little-recognized origins of the Ayyubid Ṣalāḥ-al-Din/Saladin, in the Haḏbāni Kurds of the Dvin district; accordingly, we must now view Ṣalāḥ-al-Din as undoubtedly culturally and politically Arabized, but ethnically a Kurd. Further aspects of Caucasian history, specifically with information on Georgian and Armenian vassals of the Muslim presence in eastern Anatolia and Caucasia, were covered in a series of articles to which he gave the general title of "Caucasica I-IV" (*BSO(A)S* 13-15, 1949-53).

Minorsky's interest here in a Kurdish dynasty, the Shaddadids, illustrates another of his wider concerns in the history of the Iranian world: an interest in its transition periods, often neglected in comparison with the more splendid

and eye-catching achievements of states and empires. Hence he conceived one of his tasks as being that of bringing into the light of critical examination lesser-known peoples on the fringes of the Persian heartland, above all, these Kurds and the Jilites and Daylamites of the Alborz region. Quite early in his career he had produced a short monograph, *La domination des Daïlamites* (Paris, 1932), which threw into relief what he called "the Iranian intermezzo," the period of the 10th and 11th centuries, when local powers from peoples like Kurds, Lors and Daylamites dominated western and northern Persia, where Arab domination had preceded and Saljuq Turkish domination was to follow. He held that this interlude had a significance in the formation of Persian national culture and ethos which deserved to be highlighted as much as the better-known renaissance of New Persian language and literature under dynasties of the Iranian East like the Samanids, to which it was a sequel (see the section, "The Iranian *Intermezzo*," in his *Studies in Caucasian History*, pp. 110-16).

Nevertheless, the well-known New Persian renaissance in Khorasan was not neglected by him, and in an important article on the old preface to the *Shāh-nāma* (1956a), he highlighted the role of the mid-10th century "marcher lord [of the East]" (*kanārang*) of Ṭus, Abu Manṣur Moḥammad b. ʿAbd-al-Razzāq (q.v.), who apparently commissioned translations of the Iranian national epic from the Pahlavi into New Persian, which Ferdowsi (who certainly in his early years knew Abu Manṣur) worked up into his *Šāh-nāma*. Minorsky's view of Iranian culture was a whole one. His forays into art history have been mentioned above, but he had a great empathy for Persian literature, especially its poetry, and his publication in the field of literary history were not felt by him as marginal to his main concentration on history and historical geography but as part of a whole, the elucidation of the unfolding of Iranian life and culture in the widest sense. He wrote the article on ʿOmar Ḵayyām for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and wrote and important study on the notoriously difficult poet Afżal-al-Din Ḵāqāni Šarvāni of the late Seljuq period, whose verse Minorsky nevertheless found provocative and highly stimulating ("At the risk of being accused of heresy I confess that, after this full-blooded speech, the mellowed but emasculated vocabulary of the followers of Ḥāfiẓ loses some of its lustre"; Minorsky, 1943-46, p. 553). One can readily deduce that Minorsky liked a challenge and was attracted by authors and works that were away from the well-trodden mainstream of literary history, often thereby bringing fresh insights into the culture of the times in question. Thus in two articles he rescued from near-oblivion the obscure, mid-13th century

satirist of Jām in Khorasan, Tāj-al-Din Pur-e Bahā, whose poetry shows how new Mongol administrative and financial practices affected the everyday life of the Persian people; also, their reflection of the ferment of new ideas and elements entering the Persian language of the time made these poems significant, so Minorsky thought, in that they were "a discreet warning against too abstract an approach to Persian poetry" (Minorsky, 1956b-c). Most important of all, however, in this literary field was Minorsky's studies (which may be characterized as detective work) of the long narrative poem by Faḵr-al-Din Asʿad Gorgāni on the love between the queen Vis, wife of the king of Marv, and her brother-in-law Rāmin. The poem (which is vaguely reminiscent of the Celtic romance of Tristan and Isolde set in Cornwall and Brittany, but can hardly have any connection with it) has a background of the northern parts of Persia, and by a detailed and searching analysis of the poem and its setting, Minorsky concluded that, from its generally pre-Islamic atmosphere, the geographical background and the personal names in it, the tale went back to Parthian times and that its characters had origins in known personages of the Arsacid royal house and nobility.

Moving onwards chronologically and into the mainstream of Persian history, he added two further articles on the period of Mongol domination in Persia (13th and early 14th centuries) to his two articles on Pur-e Bahā poetry, collectively called "Mongolica 1-4"; the first of these, "Mongol Place-Names in Mukri Kurdistan," drew, as noted above, on topographical material collected in the field four decades previously.

The domination of the Mongol Il-Khanids merged into that of the Timurids and various provincial powers across Persia. Minorsky devoted particular attention to these of the later 14th and 15th centuries as a rather neglected period of Persian history sandwiched between the upheavals of the Saljuq and Mongol periods on one side and the eventual consolidation of a Persian national state and a Shiʿite religious institution and ethos under the Safavids on the other. On analogy with the earlier "Daylami intermezzo," he styled this the "Turkmen interlude," and he produced from 1938 onwards a series of eleven articles on this period with the overall title of "Turkmenica." Several of these articles dealt with the administrative and military organization of the Qara Qoyunlu and Aq Qoyunlu lines, who dominated the Persian lands and extensive territories further west after the death of Timur. He considered the culmination of this series to be his abridged translation of Fażl-Allāh Ḵonji's *Tāriḵ-e ʿālamārā-ye amini* (as *Persia in A.D. 1478-1490*, London, 1957), which he

did at the age of eighty. Thirty-five years later, his translation provided the basis for John E. Woods' impressive edition of the Persian text of Ḵonji's work and his revised and annotated version of Minorsky's original (London, 1992).

From the Aq Qoyunlu of the "Turkmen interlude" in Iranian history to the succeeding Safavids was but a short step, and Minorsky in fact termed this last "the third stage of the Turcoman dominion in Persia" (*Tadhkirat al-mulūk*, p. 30). Concerning the new dynasty, he wrote on the Turkish verse written by the Safavid founder, Shah Esmāʿil I, under the pen-name of Ḵaṭāʾi (with the Turkish text written out again in his own Arabic script). His main work on the Safavid period, however, was a facsimile edition and translation of Mirzā Samiʿā's *Taḏkerat al-moluk*, a work written for the Ghalzay Afghan leader Ašraf, who ruled Persia in the years 1725-29. Regarding as of little use a translation pure and simple of this text, written in a rather indifferent, jerky Persian style and bristling with technical terms of the administrative departments (*divān*s) and the army, which were largely absent from the standard dictionaries, Minorsky conceived his task here as the elucidation of these terms, with the aid of the rather exiguous Persian historical sources and the body of travel accounts left by European visitors to the Safavid lands in the 17th and early 18th centuries. The result is a solid edifice, not only of administrative and military practice (rather than of theory, such as what the "Mirrors for Princes" provide) but also of the social and economic structures underpinning the Safavid state. For some time after Minorsky's work, the *Taḏkerat al-moluk*, supplemented by the surviving archival material of the period, has formed the basic source for our knowledge of how the Safavid state was constructed and functioned, and was extensively utilized by such scholars as Hans Robert Roemer, Heribert Busse, Klaus Röhrborn, Roger M. Savory, and John R. Perry. Only subsequently has a parallel Safavid work (probably written in the early 1720s), the *Dastur al-moluk* of Mirzā Rafiʿā Anṣāri, extant in a Tehran manuscript, become fully known and studied, and has been shown to be the possible basis of the slightly later *Taḏkerat al-moluk* (see Marcinkowski's tr., Intro., pp. 1-60).

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