

In Memoriam
Alexandr Anatoljevich Lehrman

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Professor Alexander Lehrman / Alexandr Anatoljevich Lerman (1952-2011) was a man of many talents. An accomplished rock singer, acting on the forefront of the Soviet pop scene in the early seventies, he evolved into an Indo-Europeanist and Hittitologist after his immigration to the United States of America, and eventually found professional employment as a scholar of Russian literature. Unfortunately, since Alexander had no institutional ties to the community of the Indo-Europeanists by the end of his life, his untimely death initially went almost unnoticed in this community. One goal of the present obituary is filling in this regrettable gap.

Since his school years the interests of Alexander Lehrman were divided between music and languages. A student of the Gnessin State Musical College, the most prestigious specialized high school for Soviet children with musical aspirations, he would spend much of his free time self-studying foreign languages. Being naturally gifted in music, he also had mundane reasons for developing his talents. A rock band, which he formed with his classmates at a time when rock-and-roll was still a novelty in the Soviet Union, quickly made him into a pop star and ensured his popularity with the opposite sex, which, as he confesses in his memoirs, was quite important for him at the time. His motivation for linguistic studies was rather more subtle. In 1964 he read a popular interview with Andrey Zalizniak, now a leading Russian Slavist and then a young scholar, who nonetheless already prided himself in having studied about forty-five languages. This stimulated Alexander's imagination, and he decided to put himself to a test whether he could also become such a polyglot. By the end of life Alexander had mastered forty to eighty languages,

including Turkish, Arabic, Georgian, and Karelian.

The commonality of interests led to a lifelong friendship between Lehrman and Sergey Starostin, later an informal leader of the Moscow School of Comparative Linguistics, and then another teenage fan of the Beatles and avid student of languages. The two became acquainted in 1966 at the High School Olympics in Linguistics and Mathematics and would be virtually inseparable for the next five or so years, compensating for the moments of their separation through correspondence conducted in Latin, Esperanto, Swahili, Old English, Polish, and Sanskrit. In 1967-68 both audited the courses of Aharon Dolgopolsky, one of the pioneers of Nostratic Studies in Russia, and this helped them to define themselves as historical linguists and acquire the foundations of the comparative method. At about the same period Lehrman and Starostin independently studied Indo-European linguistics with the help of A. Meillet's *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes*.

After graduation from high school in 1970 Lehrman decided to pursue the study of English language and literature in Vilnius, Lithuania, a slightly more liberal place than the rest of the Soviet Union. Now, in a mirror image of the previous situation, music and singing became the principal hobby and passion of his life. In 1972 he joined as a vocalist the pop rock band *Veselye Rebiata* "Cheerful Guys", which was arguably the most popular Soviet band in this genre at the time. At a certain point he was performing together with the young Alla Pugacheva, now the *arbiter elegantiae* of Russian pop. Enjoying much popular acclaim, he also acutely felt the pressure of ideological and bureaucratic restrictions imposed upon Russian pop culture by the Soviet state. In particular, he was not able to perform most of his own songs, and the whole repertoire of the band had to be approved by the authorities. Therefore, shortly after his graduation from Vilnius in 1975 he made a decision in favor of emigrating to the West. One of the few legal ways of leaving the Soviet Union was repatriation to Israel, and so Lehrman had to forge an invitation from a non-existent Israeli uncle in order to achieve his goal. His real intention, however, was

immigration to the United States, where he arrived in 1976 after the usual stopovers in Austria and Italy, which were necessary at the time for Soviet refugees.

For the first year in the States, Alexander Lehrman continued to present himself primarily as a Russian rock singer, and gave a number of interviews regarding the difficulties faced by the rock movement in the Soviet Union. Together with another expatriate he formed a rock group “Sasha and Yuriy”, which gave concerts on the West Coast. The group enjoyed some success, but Lehrman eventually decided to opt for a more stable career. Therefore, in 1977 he joined the linguistic department of Yale University, for which his youthful linguistic exercises made him well prepared.

His first modest effort in Hittite and Indo-European studies appeared already early in his graduate student career, when in a 1978 article he argued that the Luvian onomastic element *piḥa-* means ‘fear’, reflecting the PIE root **bheih₂-* seen also in Sanskrit *bhayá-* ‘fear’, while the *walwa/i-* ‘lion’ of Luvian names and its Hittite counterpart *walkuwa/i-* is cognate with the well-known Indo-European word for ‘wolf’, along with the Hittite appellative *walkuwa-* referring to something terrible. The first etymology (“rediscovered” independently by Hajnal 1995: 126 and 157) remains one of the viable alternatives for the widespread family of Anatolian *piḥa-* (see the most recent discussion by Kloekhorst 2008: 674–6 for alternatives). Contra Kloekhorst 2008: 951 the meaning ‘lion’ for *walwa/i-* is now assured (see Hawkins apud Herboldt 2005: 294–5), and Lehrman’s analysis (presented in refined form in a 1989 article) must be fundamentally correct, even if some morphological details remain to be clarified. This etymology has wider implications for the much vexed and still unresolved question of the precise conditioning for the development of medial **k^w* to **g^w* in Anatolian (on which see most recently Kloekhorst 2006).

Lehrman’s chief contribution to our understanding of Anatolian and more broadly Indo-European is without doubt his study of “Simple Thematic Imperfectives in Anatolian and Indo-European”, his Yale dissertation completed in 1985 under the direction of Warren Cowgill.

Lehrman argued for the non-existence of the simple thematic conjugation in Hittite and regarded this fact as a confirmation of the Indo-Hittite hypothesis shared by Warren Cowgill, implying that the Indo-European languages developed the simple thematic conjugation only after the separation of Hittite. Unfortunately, after his graduation he faced serious difficulties finding professional employment in Indo-European Studies.

In 1989 Lehrman accepted the offer of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Delaware to develop the Russian program at that university. The particularly enticing feature of this offer was the simultaneous hire of Lehrman and his wife, Susan Amert. On the other hand, this was obviously a challenge, since Lehrman had no previous experience in teaching and research on the Russian language or literature. His subsequent career demonstrated, however, that he eventually fully embraced the new direction of his research. In 2001 he published “Essays on Karolina Pavlova”, which focused on a nineteenth century Russian poetess whose heritage was largely ignored in the Soviet Union due to her conservative political views. The year 2009 saw his critical edition and new translation of Chekhov’s “Cherry Orchard”, which restored the original text purging it of what Lehrman saw as ideologically driven interpolations.

At the same time he continued to act as an Indo-European scholar. His dissertation was published in revised and expanded form in 1998 as *Indo-Hittite Redux. Studies in Anatolian and Indo-European Verb Morphology* (Moscow: Paleograph). It is naturally the latter version that should be cited, since it contains important addenda and corrigenda. Perhaps because of his relative isolation at that time, Lehrman seemed unaware (see p. vii) that the situation in the field had changed markedly from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s and that a majority of Indo-Europeanists now accepted that “Core” or “Inner” Indo-European (“Restindogermanisch”) was distinguished from Anatolian by several common innovations (the debate centering — as it still does — on which ones and how many). Most (inevitably not all) of Lehrman’s arguments against the

existence of simple thematic actives in Anatolian retain their validity, and the nearly complete absence of such a type in Anatolian versus its productivity in Core Indo-European remains among the most hotly debated of arguably “Indo-Hittite” features. It therefore comes as somewhat of a shock to discover that, as far as can be determined, the 1998 book never received a formal review (the 1985 dissertation and its implications are duly noted by Szemerényi 1996: 268).

In the new portions of the 1998 book (some of which had already appeared as articles in 1996 and 1997), Lehrman advocated his own radical version of the Indo-Hittite hypothesis. The very strong rhetoric embedded in this portion of the book was perhaps due to the author’s self-perception as an outsider in the field of Indo-European studies, being alienated from the academic establishment. Careful reading, however, cautions against overexaggerating the differences between his views and those of the field at large. His vigorous defense of the Stammbaum in Chapter 1 is not only mainstream but, in fact, quite traditional. Few would endorse his absolute rejection of structural arguments for the existence of “laryngeals” in Excurses I and II, but the question of just how far structural arguments for the PIE “laryngeals” can and should be pursued is an abiding one, especially in the case of the frustratingly evanescent **h₁* (see merely as one example of the continuing discussion Di Giovine 2006 and 2012).

By the time of the colloquium on “Greater Anatolia and the Indo-Hittite Language Family” held in Richmond, Virginia, in 2000 (proceedings of which were published in 2001), Professor Lehrman had come to a more realistic and balanced view of the contemporary state of Indo-European studies. As to his own views, it is interesting to note that of the ten common innovations of the non-Anatolian languages he cites (2001: 114-16), more than half are among those accepted or seriously debated across the field: loss of the “laryngeals” as segmental sounds, rise of the feminine gender, creation of the demonstrative pronominal paradigm **so-/to-*, development of the “perfect”, verbal aspect (as opposed to “Aktionsarten”), the

simple thematic class, and the appearance of true participles with fixed diathesis. While most scholars tend to suppose that Anatolian did inherit the dual and the optative, direct evidence for the existence of the former in Anatolian is sparse, and for the latter non-existent. The only truly radical claim of Lehrman is that Proto-Indo-European (for him Proto-Indo-Hittite) had only a three-vowel system **a*, **i*, **u* and that **a* was “umlauted” to **e* and **o* outside Anatolian and independently to **e* in Hittite, a view that is incompatible with the facts in both instances. His model of PIE (PIH) thus stood at one end of the continuum of opinion that marks the field: just *how* radical and numerous are the common innovations that distinguish the other Indo-European languages from Anatolian (and likewise just what are the innovations of the latter)? It is regrettable that the circumstances of Alexander Lehrman’s academic employment and his premature death prevented his full and continued participation in this debate.

The students of the University of Delaware remember Lehrman as a modest person, who would never talk about his past as a pop star, unless being explicitly asked. This surprised many of them to a great extent, since they would naturally regard the career of a rock singer as something more exciting than the profession of a Russian instructor. On occasions he would succumb to their requests and bring his guitar into the classroom. Judging by online evaluations, most University of Delaware students enjoyed Lehrman’s musical digressions and were rather less keen on his etymological observations. Nevertheless, he systematically tried to enrich the university’s intellectual life with the agenda of diachronic linguistics, in particular through maintaining a column devoted to the etymologies of individual words in the departmental newsletter.

The last decade of Lehrman’s life was marked by his infatuation with the religious doctrine of Christian Science. He pursued the new agenda with the same zeal that characterized all his previous endeavors and was persuaded that his belief helped him to heal himself of several incurable diseases. Whether or not this had anything to do with his religious convictions, Lehrman

passed away quickly and peacefully in his sleep.

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