

Matthias Battis

Soviet Orientalism and Nationalism in Central Asia: Aleksandr Semenov's Vision of Tajik National Identity

ABSTRACT

Russian Orientalists participated – often in a close but precarious relationship with the state – in the transformation of Central Asia from a Tsarist colony into part of what Francine Hirsch has called an “Empire of Nations.” One of them was the former Tsarist colonial clerk Aleksandr Semenov (1873-1958), who together with such prominent representatives of the region’s Persian-speaking elites as Sadriddin Ayni or Bobojon Ghafurov, and with the support of his academic mentors, such as Vasiliĭ Bartol’d and Sergei Ol’denburg, effectively – albeit somewhat reluctantly – lobbied for the official recognition of the Persian/Tajik language and of Tajikistani statehood. The study of their cooperation shows how Central Asian cultural heritage was researched and preserved, but also how it was reinvented in national terms and codified; and how these processes were negotiated between local intellectuals, scholars and the state.

Introduction

This issue of *Iranian Studies* focuses on the Persian-speaking world through Russian eyes. But had any region of Central Asia been part of the Persian-speaking world in the eyes of members of either tsarist or Soviet administration? By the time of the conquest of Central

Matthias Battis is a DPhil candidate in history at Wolfson College, University of Oxford. The research for this article has been made possible by the generous support of the Arts & Humanities Research Council and, in particular, of the Gerda Henkel Stiftung.

Asia, Russia's image of Muslim culture had been significantly influenced by contact with its Tatar minority. Tsarist Russia often interacted with Central Asia with the help of its Tatar subjects, who were valued translators in this mainly Turkic speaking part of the world.¹ The fact that the Russians did not have a sufficient number of ready-made Persian-language translators almost certainly led to a decline in the official use of Persian; the local population had to address their petitions to the Russian authorities in Turkic if they were to be translated.² In addition to that, Kazan, the home of a sizeable Tatar population, had been the leading center of Russian Oriental studies before 1855, when St. Petersburg took its place.³ When the greater part of Russian-ruled Central Asia under was made a separate Governor-Generalship in 1867, it was tellingly called Turkestan (in accordance with the toponym *Turkestān* [Persian for "the land of the Turks"], under which the area north and east of *Mā warā' al-nahr* [Arabic for "land beyond the river"] had already been known to Arab geographers of the ninth and tenth centuries).⁴ After the 1917 revolution there were initially few signs that a Persian state would be established in Soviet Asia. For instance, in 1921–1922 the People's Commissariat of Nationalities of Turkestan (*Turkkomnats*) was made up of national departments for the Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Uzbeks; Tajiks fell under the category of "national minorities." Of the sixty newspapers published by *Turkkomnats* in local languages, not a single one was in Tajik.⁵ As late as 1923, Stalin failed to mention Tajiks when speaking about the nationalities of Bukhara at the twelfth party congress.⁶ Similarly, the constitution of the short-lived (1918-1924) Turkestan Soviet Socialist Republic, which incorporated a considerable amount of Persian-speakers, did not recognize the Tajiks as an "indigenous [*korennyi*] people."⁷ This, however, prompted protests from the famous Russian Orientalist Vasilii Bartol'd; in his publication *Tajiks—A Historical Outline (Tadzhiki –Istoricheskii ocherk)*, Bartol'd wrote that the country's "most ancient inhabitants ... have been forgotten. ... The future will tell to what extent the historical delimitation in 1924 will further the

national rebirth of the Tajik nation [*natsional'nost*].”⁸ A Tajik state was indeed established in 1924, but merely as an autonomous republic within the Uzbek SSR. Only at the end of 1929 was Tajikistan granted the status of an independent Soviet Socialist republic. In this matter, too, the voices of Russian Orientalists seem to have had considerable influence on the decision; in particular considering how little support for a Persian state in Central Asia there initially seems to have been among Soviet administrators and local elites.

Colonial Clerks, Imperial Scholars, Bolsheviks and Central Asian Communists: Unlikely Alliances for Tajik Statehood

Orientalist scholars such as Bartol'd or his friend and pupil Aleksandr Semenov (1873-1953),⁹ who had briefly been the Vice-Governor of the Samarkand *oblast'* between August 1916 and April 1917 before becoming an internationally respected Soviet academician, appear to have been important lobbyists for the establishment of a Persian-speaking Soviet republic in Central Asia. Their opinion carried significant weight in government circles and among Central Asia's educated elites, since it was widely regarded as scientific and objective. For instance, Vera Tolz stressed that although “Orientalist knowledge ... constituted ‘an important part of the colonial project of control and command,’” it was often appropriated by nationalists among the colonized peoples. This might seem somewhat puzzling at first, but she explains that such knowledge was often perceived not as colonizing, but that it was “widely viewed as objective science and could therefore be accepted as such by the colonized peoples.”¹⁰ The prestige and expertise of Orientalist scholarship was also an important factor in forging what Francine Hirsch has termed a “revolutionary alliance” of former imperial scholars and the Bolshevik government, whose shared “appreciation for the potential of scientific government ... and interest in the nationality question ... shaped the very formation of the Soviet Union.”¹¹ Hirsch explicitly mentions the close cooperation

between Lenin and the Orientalist Sergei Ol'denburg, who led the Soviet Academy of Sciences until 1929, and the Academy's Oriental Institute in 1930-1934¹² According to Lisa Yountchi, Ol'denburg was a particularly active supporter of the establishment of a branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Tajikistan.¹³ His awareness of the matter was almost certainly raised through his correspondence with Aleksandr Semenov between 1918 and 1930, in particular on the subject of Ismaili manuscripts.¹⁴ Adeeb Khalid, Vera Tolz, Francine Hirsch and Yuri Slezkine all stressed that Jadids, Bolsheviks and imperial Orientalists all shared a belief in the scientific and objective existence of nations and ethnic groups, and in the possibility of influencing their self-awareness.¹⁵ Their cooperation was therefore more probable than one would initially assume. Moreover, as Michael Kemper has emphasized, the Soviet government attached "outstanding political importance" to the field of Oriental studies.¹⁶ Academics were invited to bring their expertise on a relatively obscure region into an alliance with the government, which in turn offered monetary rewards, promotion and entirely new careers to its contractors. As a result, the early Soviet state service was characterized by a significant degree of penetrability for tsarist Orientalist scholars such as Nikolai Marr, Vasilii Bartol'd or Aleksandr Semenov,¹⁷ whose influence was henceforth stronger than it had been before the revolution. In the tsarist period, the protests of prominent scholars had often been ignored, for instance in the case of the demise of the ethnonym *Sart* despite Bartol'd's opposition.¹⁸ At the same time, Semenov's remarkable career in the tsarist colonial administration illustrates the high degree of "interpenetration of the worlds of scholarship and colonial rule" before the revolution.¹⁹ The closer the alliance between government officials and scholars was, the more weight the choices made by these scholars on questions of nationality or border delimitation carried. The data provided by Oriental scholars played a key role in arbitrating controversial questions linked to the national-territorial delimitation in the region. Adrienne Edgar has argued that

while in theory Soviet ideology emphasized popular demand as the decisive factor in questions of national-territorial delimitation, in practice ethnographic criteria together with the voices of local communist leaders were often more crucial.²⁰ Vera Tolz, Adeeb Khalid, and Sergei Abashin have shown that Central Asian elites—during what Miroslav Hroch has termed the initial phase of nationalist mobilization (elite non-political interest in folklore and popular culture)²¹—consulted the works of Russian Orientalists.²² In addition, the scholars’ familiarity with the local languages, customs and history often earned them respect among the local population. This respect could, however, go hand in hand with a degree of suspicion from local Russians, as illustrated by the following account by Nadezhda Fioletova, Semenov’s neighbor in Tashkent in the 1920s:

“Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Semenov ... professor at the faculty of Oriental Studies, adopted some local traditions, including lifting one’s right hand to the heart as part of a greeting. Rumors had it that he had allegedly converted to the Mohammedan faith in secret. I don’t know whether that is true, but was immensely respected by the local population—his name was magical, it opened the doors to any Muslim home.”²³

All of the above-mentioned factors facilitated the emergence of networks between Russian former-imperial-turned-Soviet Orientalists and up and coming Central Asian Soviet scholars, some of whom had been representatives of the old regime’s elite—Bukharan court historians, *madreseh* students, or Samarqandi booksellers. Such networks profoundly shaped the Central Asian Soviet Republics in their initial stages, and cooperation among the scholarly elites continued to have a direct impact on the republics’ intellectual life well into the 1950s.

Adrienne Edgar has reminded us of the “crucial contribution of local elites in shaping Soviet nations.”²⁴ However, “local” does not necessarily mean non-Russian. Russians like Aleksandr Semenov, who had spent the greater part of their lives in Central Asia, are best described as *local* Russians. Yet other locals, who are usually described as *natives*, were often based in Russia for long periods of time. Such was the case of Bobojon Ghafurov, who headed the Oriental Institute of the Soviet Union’s Academy of Sciences in Moscow from 1956 until the end of his life in 1977.²⁵ Shedding light on cooperation among such people might not tell us much about the motives and design of Soviet nation building in Central Asia, but it highlights the channels and opportunities available to actors in Central Asia to affect the formulation and implementation of nation-building policies. The study of what Alexander Morrison has called “applied Orientalism” in the Soviet case provides valuable insights into the relationship between the state and the humanities and social sciences; it also sharpens our conception of Orientalism in the sense of Edward Said’s nexus of imperial domination and colonial knowledge.²⁶ On the most abstract level, it questions essentializing dichotomies such as “native vs. colonizer”, “Russian vs. Central Asian culture,” which, although useful instruments of analysis, can lead to a simplistic and static understanding of fluid and potentially multiple human identities and cultures.

A Nation Promoted by Orientalists?

At the same time, we should not exaggerate the influence of Russian Orientalists on the emergence of a predominately Persian-speaking Soviet republic. The rationale and goals of the Bolshevik nationalities policy, which among other things led to the emergence of Tajikistan, are manifold. In his study on the establishment of national republics in Soviet Central Asia, Arne Haugen has argued that earlier scholarship on the topic had tended to emphasize the tactical and Machiavellian nature of Moscow’s policies aimed at securing its

grip on Central Asia.²⁷ Such interpretative framework is prone to stress the artificiality and modern origins of the Central Asian Soviet Republics.²⁸ Later scholarship has taken Soviet ideology more seriously and stressed the push for modernization and societal transformation. This school of thought has paid more attention to the part played by Central Asian actors in the emergence of the Soviet republics. It also highlighted that fact that some features of the Soviet national culture and national identity models had not been created from scratch during the Soviet period; to some extent they reflected the pre-existing identities and historical divisions. Haugen writes:

“It is a main argument in this study that the nationalization of political discourse and ultimately the entities that were established as a result of the delimitation process to a great degree corresponded to historical divisions and formations in Central Asia.”²⁹

In *Tribal Nation*, Adrienne Edgar emphasized the role of Central Asian intellectuals in shaping the already existent group identities. Terry Martin’s *The Affirmative Action Empire* has shown how members of the Communist Party outside of Russia used the ideology of nationalism in their struggles for resources and power. And Adeeb Khalid’s *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform* has analyzed how Muslim reformers had adopted the language of nationalism in their efforts to reform and lead society. All the Soviet and post-Soviet Tajik national historiographies that this author has consulted describe the emergence of their national state as the outcome of a teleological process of “ethnogenesis” of an ancient Tajik people.³⁰ This view is the main heritage of Russian and Soviet Oriental studies in Central Asian historiography, national ideology, and perhaps even identity up until today.³¹ In the case of Tajikistan this heritage was significantly shaped by scholars such as Aleksandr

Semenov, whose vision of the history and identity of the Tajiks I will outline in the following.

When in 1924—the year that the Republic of Tajikistan was first established—Semenov’s article “On the national delimitation of Central Asia” appeared in print in Tashkent, it was part of the very processes it described. Published during the formative years of the Bolshevik nationalities policy, the article must have been met with great interest among intellectuals in Central Asia. Given the resources at stake for ambitious representatives of the future “titular” nationalities, for many the question of national territorial delimitation was far from academic. Central Asian Communist party leaders and intellectuals in particular came to regard their nationality as a potential asset in the contest for jobs in government, academia, and the cultural or health sector.³² Semenov’s article provided some of the academic arguments the Tajik republic’s proponents could use in order to achieve their goals. Francine Hirsch has shown that Tajik communists readily quoted Russian Orientalists in their urge to establish a Tajik republic, e.g. in their appeals to the Peters commission—a body set up by the Communist Party in late 1929 to settle border disputes between the Tajik and Uzbek SSRs. She noted that “Tajik leaders ... cited from Bartol'd’s works to argue that the Tajiks were descendants of Iranian tribes that were indigenous to contested parts of Uzbekistan.”³³ And Paul Bergne, in his pioneering study *The Birth of Tajikistan*, even argued that the Tajiks were initially a nation promoted by Orientalists. As Central Asian intellectuals—often equally fluent in Turkic and Persian—who could have potentially promoted Tajik nationalism had “fallen under the spell” of Turkism, it was “Russian scholars who took up the cause of the Tajik nation.” Bergne further wrote: “When in 1924, the Soviet government decided on the ‘National Territorial Delimitation,’ it was exclusively Russian ‘orientalists’ who contributed to the exhaustive study of the Tajiks ‘ethnie.’”³⁴ Similarly, Sergei Abashin noted that

between 1926 and 1929, when Tajik intellectuals were extensively lobbying for a more independent “Greater Tajikistan,” “the arguments of the Tajik lobbyists were mainly based on the issues of language, culture and history” taken from works such as Bartol'd's *Tajiks—A historical outline*, and from the volumes *Tadzhikistan* and *Po Tadzhikistanu*, published by Mikhael Andreev and Aleksandr Semenov in 1925.³⁵ The above-mentioned papers were published by the Society for the Study of Tajikistan and the Iranian Peoples Beyond its Borders, founded in the same year and with Semenov among its members.³⁶

Turk and Tajik

In terms of its scholarly content, Semenov's article “On the national delimitation of Central Asia” followed Vasilii Bartol'd's “History of Turkestan” published in 1922.³⁷ Semenov quoted whole passages from Bartol'd's work without attribution. This should, however, not be mistaken for carelessness—Semenov's referencing in his other works is impeccable. Rather, the complete lack of any references in the whole article reflects its purpose: it was not to motivate further reading, but to help “economists-researchers, sociologists and *the organs of administration*”³⁸ to gain a quick basic understanding of the origins and nature of the ethnic mosaic of Turkestan. Consequently, the fourteen-page article contains only a short historical background on Central Asia since antiquity, and an outline of the region's prevalent religions, cultures, languages and peoples, with some information about various ruling dynasties. As the title suggests, the spotlight is on the peoples of Central Asia, which are referred to by Semenov either as nationalities (*narodnosti*) if settled, or as tribes if nomadic. However, the message transcending the article's thicket of empirical information is roughly this: this country may be called Turkestan, and it was until recently ruled by Turks; but let us not forget that it is an ancient homeland of Iranians,³⁹ whose culture and language was at the very least as decisive a factor in its history.

In addition, the article creates an almost clear-cut dichotomy between the notions of sedentariness, Iranianness and high culture, on the one hand, and nomadism, Turkicness (or Mongolicness) and relative primitivism on the other. Semenov, for instance, refers to the Persian myth about *Fereydun* to argue that the Turāniāns of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* are not Turkic, and that there is no “Turāniān race.”⁴⁰ Later he emphasizes that the usage of the term “Turkestan (the land of the Turks)” became widespread only during the reign of the Seljuq (*Saljuqiān*) dynasty; and that the Turkification of Central Asia gained momentum only in the centuries after the fall of the Samanids (*Sāmāniān*).⁴¹ However, Semenov argued, Central Asia belonged to the Iranians in antiquity. Virtually preserving Bartol'd’s exact wording, he wrote:⁴²

“[T]he ancient population of Turkestan, both sedentary (Parthians [Pārtiān] and Bactrians [Bākhtariān] in the Transcaspian region, in the Morghāb area, which was part of Bactria, Khwarazmians [Khvārazmshāhiān] in the lower reach of the Āmudaryā and Sogdians [Soghdiān] along the Zarafshān), as well as nomadic (Saks), were part of the Iranian branch of the Indo-Europeans, the very same to which the founders of the first global monarchy—the Persians—also belonged.”⁴³

The term *Turk*, on the contrary, appeared only in the sixth century AD according to Semenov. He went on to write that: “not possessing their own culture and entering a close relationship with the surrounding cultured nationalities, (the Turks) submitted to their influence.”⁴⁴

Bartol'd had written in a similar fashion about the struggle of the tenth century Samanid dynasty with their Turkish opponents: “The new conquering movement of the Central Asian barbarians towards the cultured regions was, as always, preceded by some involvement of the barbarians in the sphere of culture.”⁴⁵ But he equally emphasized that

commerce with the Turks brought some advantages to the “cultured populations.”⁴⁶

Notwithstanding the similarities between the two, there is more emphasis on synthesis and ambiguity in Bartol'd's work. In part this is a matter of sheer volume—Bartol'd wrote a monograph, Semenov a short article. Francine Hirsch argues that Bartol'd's analysis emphasizes the connectivity of Tajik and Uzbek culture and the fact that ambiguity was the rule rather than the exception when it came to categorizing people as Uzbeks or Tajiks.⁴⁷

However, as mentioned earlier, Bartol'd, too, had emphasized the indigenous status of the Tajiks. Semenov's works also point in the direction of Tajik-Uzbek symbiosis. In the 1950s, as the director of the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Tajik Academy of Sciences in Stalinabad, Semenov wrote a prospectus for the history of Tajikistan “in the imperialist period.”⁴⁸ Protesting against the ideological demand to write national histories strictly in line with the borders of the Central Asian Soviet republics, he argued that a history of Tajikistan would have to embrace the Khanate of Bukhara, which he described as “the heritage of both Tajik and Uzbek people,” where Tajiks and Uzbeks “lived a shared life, nourished by a common essence of culture.” However, Semenov concluded, this culture was dominated [*prevalirovanie*] by the Tajik language and literature; and such a history would also have to include the “ancient Tajik cities of Bukhara, Samarkand and others.”⁴⁹ His pro-Iranian/Tajik stance reflected his scholarly beliefs and prejudices about the cultural development of Central Asia. He had apparently been influenced by the scholarly fascination with the Aryan theme in nineteenth century Russia (and Europe), which, according to Marlène Laruelle, had the double-purpose of providing the Russians with a link to an Indo-Iranian “Aryan” ancestry in the ancient Orient and justifying the latter's imperial “re-conquest.”⁵⁰ It was, however, most likely also a message that he wanted to deliver to the “organs of administration” to which his 1924 article was addressed.

The Benefits and Pitfalls of Seeking Legitimacy in (Persian) History

In his short autobiography, the Bukharan poet Sadriddin Ayni claimed that not only was there little support for a Tajik state in Central Asia during the 1920s, the idea even faced outright opposition.⁵¹ He wrote:

“In those years Pan-Turkists slanderously spoke out against national delimitation and depicted the party’s policy as a deliberate separation of the united “Turkic” population of Central Asia. ... [They claimed that] ...in Central Asia there is no such people as the Tajiks: Tajiks – are those very same Uzbeks who under the influence of the Iranians and the madreseh lost their native Uzbek language.”⁵²

In 1924 Ayni was not yet the national poet of Tajikistan, but merely a former *madreseh*-student and Bukharan poet writing in both Tajik and Uzbek, who was struggling to get his work published. He had made a deal with the new Tajik government to write and publish his *Specimen of Tajik literature*—a book that (like Semenov’s article) had not only a scholarly but also a political dimension.⁵³ In a nutshell, Ayni’s argument was that where there was Tajik literature there also had to be a Tajik people. When the book was published in Moscow in 1926, wrote Ayni, his opponents started using “red phraseology” and attacked the publication because it featured an allegedly reactionary poem by the Persian poet Rudaki. Eventually, regardless of the efforts of “Russian Orientalists who defended the book and opposed its removal,” Ayni’s work was eventually withdrawn and destroyed in 1930.⁵⁴ Aleksandr Semenov was probably among those defending it. After all, he was a member (together with scholars such as Mikhael Andreev and Vasilii Bartol'd) of the above-mentioned Society for the Study of Tajikistan and the Iranian Peoples Beyond its Borders—a society that was crucial in raising awareness in Moscow and Tashkent of the lot of the Persian-speaking population in and outside the Soviet borders. The society’s chairman (and

plenipotentiary of the Soviet Union's People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs in Uzbekistan), Andrei Znamenskii, defended Ayni's work with the words:

“It is necessary to stand up for the right of the Tajiks to their ancient native art; particularly when taking into account the future struggle for cultural-political influence in the East among the Persian-speaking countries. This means: in Iran, Afghanistan, and to a certain (significant) extent in India. In all these places, one can assume, the Tajik anthology will find its readers.”⁵⁵

As this quote suggests, Znamenskii was a leading and high-ranking advocate for the promotion of Tajik language and culture within the USSR in view of heightening its prestige abroad.⁵⁶ Eminent scholars of Tajik literature, such as Kamoliddin Ayni and Muhammadjon Shakuri, have emphasized his support for Ayni in defending *Specimen of Tajik literature*.⁵⁷ Unsurprisingly, Semenov explicitly expressed his gratitude to Znamenskii for his assistance in the publication of the *Guidebook for Katagan and Badakhshan*, which Semenov edited in 1926 at the request of the Society for the Study of Tajikistan.⁵⁸ When the latter was temporarily shut down in 1929, it was integrated into the Tajik State Research Institute in Dushanbe/Stalinabad, which counted Semenov among its foremost researchers.⁵⁹ The institute played a leading role in researching and publishing on Tajik history, language, literature and ethnography.

Both the Society for the Study of Tajikistan and the Tajik State Research Institute gave Semenov the opportunity to prove himself useful to the Soviet authorities at a later, more turbulent, stage in his life. After his arrest in the spring of 1931 as a representative of the so-called reactionary-bourgeois school of Bartol'dians [*Bartol'dovtsy*], Semenov was suspended

from his professorship at the Oriental Faculty of the Central Asian State University in Tashkent (SAGU) and exiled to Kazan.⁶⁰ However, unlike the local mastermind of the purges at SAGU, the Marxist-historian Mikhael Tsvibak (executed in 1937), Semenov survived the assault. Already in January 1932 he was compiling a Tajik dictionary and working on a bibliography of Persian dictionaries for the above-mentioned society and for the Tajik State Research Institute.⁶¹ The dictionary was a continuation of the projects that Semenov had been working on since 1927, when the Tajik authorities asked him and ‘Abd al-ra‘uf Fetrat (‘Abdalrauf Fitrat) to submit proposals for the introduction of the Latin script in the country.⁶² In the same year Semenov advised the Central Committee of the New Tajik Alphabet at the Central Executive Committee of the Tajik ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) in Samarkand on issues such as “the phonetic and morphologic particularities of the Tajik language” or “the meaning of the new alphabet for the Iranian peoples of Persia, India and Afghanistan”—which, as he was told by the above-mentioned committee, would better be limited to the Tajiks at that moment in time.⁶³ In late August 1930, only a few months before his arrest, Semenov chaired the decisive Linguistic Conference on the creation of a modern Soviet Tajik language in Stalinabad.⁶⁴ His conclusion followed what appears to have been the dominant opinion in the republic at that time: one should refrain from too drastic a reinvention of the language, it should remain close to the language of the contemporary Tajik press and literature and intelligible by all Tajik speakers in the USSR.⁶⁵ It seems fair to say that such work significantly shaped contemporary Tajik culture, on the one hand furthering its Sovietization and Russification, while on the other hand safeguarding a considerable degree of historical authenticity and continuity by preventing an even more drastic break with its Irano-Islamic past. It also, crucially, provided a much-needed income for the sacked professor and quite possibly also protection from more severe repression. Just how nearly Semenov escaped the fate of many of his colleagues is

reflected in a 1938 testimony by Aleksandr Shmidt, dean of the Oriental Faculty of SAGU in the mid-1920s:

“While I held the post of the dean of the Eastern faculty of SAGU, and subsequently the deputy-director of SAGU, I led a reactionary group of academics together with professors Semenov, Malitskii and Andreev. We created a counter-revolutionary sabotage group from among the professors and lecturers of the Eastern faculty, in order to thwart the training of Soviet specialists, to hinder the Sovietization of the staff and the introduction of socio-political disciplines and Marxist-Leninist methodology.”⁶⁶

The Orientalist, the Poet and the First Secretary

In 1953, the year of Stalin’s death, Semenov celebrated his 80th birthday. In his congratulations, Sadriddin Ayni calls Semenov a friend and writes:

“It is one of your particularities, that while you were living in a tsarist colony—the former Turkestan, you committed yourself to the cause of researching the language, writings, literature, art and architectural styles of the oppressed colonial peoples, which in your eyes deserved attention, at a time when the government clerks and colonizers regarded those peoples as deserving nothing but insult and humiliation. ... [y]ou dedicated all your energy and deeds to the development of Soviet Orientology, which had set itself the aim of making publicly available the cultural heritage of the formerly

oppressed peoples, and paving the way for their [national] self-consciousness [*samosoznanie*].”⁶⁷

Obviously, there is much ideological pathos in this letter. It is best described as semi-official due to its institutional context: by the time Ayni wrote those lines, he had become the first president of the newly established Tajik Academy of Sciences. Semenov, too, after having been forced to leave Tashkent in the course of the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign in 1949, found refuge at the same institution, and was appointed the first director of its Institute for History, Archaeology and Ethnography in 1951.⁶⁸ Possibly the letter was not so much an expression of genuine friendship, as it was the fruit of another “revolutionary alliance”—born out of the convergent interests of two independent-minded representatives of two different *ancien régimes*, who shared a love for Central Asian cultural heritage; who managed to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new order; who knew how vulnerable their past rendered them; who cooperated for mutual benefit; and whose cooperation profoundly shaped the intellectual life and possibly even the very emergence of the Tajik republic.

Another—more affectionate—friendship borne out of necessity and mutual advantage was that between Semenov and Bobojon Ghafurov, the most senior political figure in Tajikistan during the second half of the 1940s and 1950s. That friendship, too, had a deep impact on the Tajik republic. Initially, Ghafurov had been a protégé of another Russian Orientalist and specialist in Persian and Tajik literature, Iosif Braginskii. Braginskii was director of the department for propaganda of the Central Committee of the Tajik Communist Party in 1940 and in 1941 he promoted Ghafurov to that very position.⁶⁹ At that time Ghafurov started to work on his dissertation “History of the Ismaili sect from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the first imperialist war.” His research was supervised by a Moscow Orientalist, Evgenii Beliaev, but it seems it was Aleksandr Semenov who encouraged Ghafurov to write

on that topic—he may have hoped to win the promising young man for a career in academia.⁷⁰ We know for certain that Ghafurov was keen to mobilize Semenov’s academic skills and prestige to help produce the two-volume *History of the Tajiks and Tajikistan*. On 22 May 1941 he wrote Semenov a letter:

“Respected Aleksandr Aleksandrovich! The CC CP/b/ [Central Committee of the Communist Party/Bolsheviks (of Tajikistan)] and the Sovnarkom [Council of Peoples’ Commissars] of Tajikistan have decided to produce the ‘History of the Tajiks and Tajikistan’ in two volumes in 1941-43 ... On 1 July a conference will take place in Stalinabad to which researchers-Orientalists from Moscow, Leningrad, Tashkent and other cities have been invited. We resolutely ask you to take part in the conference and especially in the production of the ‘History of the Tajiks and Tajikistan.’ Please send your acceptance by telegraph. We will cover all expenses. With best wishes, secretary of the CC CP/b/ of Tajikistan Ghafurov.”⁷¹

Judging by the tone of the letter, Semenov did not have much choice. However, the German invasion of the USSR delayed the publication of the *History of the Tajiks and of Tajikistan*—a book that was evidently of at least as much political relevance as it was of academic interest. Semenov, rather than travelling to Stalinabad to furnish Tajiks with patriotic historiography, was kept busy in Tashkent during the months that followed; he received academics (including many leading Orientalists) who had been evacuated from all parts of the Soviet Union to the “city of bread,” as Tashkent was known since the publication of Aleksandr Neverov’s novel of the same title in 1923.⁷² As a result, it was not until after the war that the ambitious project was, to at least some extent, realized by Bobojon Ghafurov himself, who published his *A Short History of the Tajik People* in 1947.⁷³ In his review of the

work, Semenov praised the author's "gratifying attempt to give a connected representation of the destinies of the Tajik people from the very beginning up to our days."⁷⁴ He acknowledged the teleological character of this narrative and that it was written, "so to say, from the viewpoint of the Tajiks [?]."⁷⁵ But Semenov ventured more overt criticism, too. For instance, he saw Ghafurov's differentiation between a "local Iranian and a Tajik aristocracy" during the Samanid period as artificial; he was uncomfortable with the disassociation of Tajik and Iranian history in the tenth century simply because in the twentieth these terms had come to signify two different nations. In the same vein, Semenov maintained that Tajik history could only include poets such as Saadi and Hafiz—who were "close and related to the Tajik people" but lived in "Central Persia, India and Turkey"—if it incorporated many others, too. He concluded that "for the sake of accuracy of the historical picture" matters of prime importance should not take a back seat to those of lesser gravity.⁷⁶

Ghafurov did not take the criticism personally (besides, many more revised editions of his book were to appear). A few years later, in the spring of 1946, another congratulatory letter reached Semenov, who had just been awarded the honorary title "Distinguished Figure of Tajik Science." The letter was written by Bobojon Ghafurov, then the second secretary of the Tajik Communist Party's Central Committee, who was five months away from being promoted to the post of first secretary, which he held until 1956.⁷⁷ Semenov could not have been given the above award without Ghafurov's support—it probably happened on the latter's own initiative. The letter speaks of Semenov as rightfully belonging to the Tajik people, whose culture and history he had spent half his life researching.⁷⁸ Interestingly, Ghafurov expressed a lack of understanding for his friend's unwillingness to move to Tajikistan and asked him to visit Stalinabad "possibly in spring, spring is good in Stalinabad!" As mentioned above, five years later Semenov did indeed accept the invitation

to lead the Tajik academy's Institute for History, Archaeology and Ethnography.⁷⁹

Semenov's student Ahror Mukhtorov reported that once the expelled professor had arrived in Stalinabad, Ghafurov took great care of him—he was elected member of the republic's Academy of Sciences and deputy of the Tajik Supreme Soviet. In addition to the privileges that came with these roles, Semenov was given an apartment within walking distance from his workplace, where electricity was never cut off, a car and access to cheap quality food through a government shop.⁸⁰ Moreover, Mukhtorov maintained that Ghafurov had received the green light, from Stalin personally, to provide a harbor for scholars who, in Ghafurov's words, were "caught up in the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign" but who "had brought great benefit to science" and could continue to do so.⁸¹

Once Ghafurov's political authority had surpassed that of Semenov, nothing kept him from lecturing the eminent academic on the way history should be interpreted. In 1949 he wrote Semenov a letter about the jubilee of a Persian poet and "great Tajik thinker" Nāser Khosrow.

"You are, of course, familiar with the debate about Tajik culture.

One needs to assert more forcefully the right of the Tajik people to their cultural and historical heritage." "...We are awaiting your arrival impatiently. In general, it would be desirable

[commendable] if you could fully keep your promise."⁸²

The 1971 edition of Ghafurov's seminal work *Tajiks* speaks of the mistakes of "bourgeois historians-emigrants," accusing them of presenting the history of Central Asia only in terms of national and racial struggles while neglecting the importance of class and putting forward "speculative 'theories' about the predominance of one or another of the 'pure' [*chistykh*]

races.”⁸³ Ghafurov was polite enough not to allude to Semenov who was, after all, not entirely innocent of such sins. In an unpublished manuscript from 1917 titled *A Short Outline of the Destinies of the Tajik People*, Semenov had claimed that despite the Turkic conquest of Central Asia “the Tajiks managed to preserve their cultural dominance [*pervenstvo*]” and were able “to preserve their high cultural achievements and [their] Aryan genius.”⁸⁴ Against the backdrop of statements reminiscent of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and Ernest Renan, the accusations of racism Semenov faced during the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign in the late 1940s appear not entirely unfounded. Evidently, Semenov had been influenced by the academic fashions, preoccupations and prejudice of late nineteenth century Orientalism and its fascination with the origins of the Indo-European languages in Asia, and the vague and almost mystical notion of the ancient Aryan civilization.⁸⁵ Semenov thus must have disagreed (albeit not too openly) with the notion, popular among Bolsheviks and some of their Central Asian allies during the 1920s, that the Tajik/Persian culture and language were nothing but a disposable remnant of a feudal and elitist court culture, alien to an essentially Turkic Central Asia. It would not only have violated his scholarly beliefs to acquiesce to such claims; it would have been bad career advice, too. His academic convictions, employability in Persian/Tajik studies and the fact that scholarship was respected and seen as relatively objective by Russian and Central Asian political actors, academics and public figures rendered Semenov an ideal and effective (if accidental) lobbyist for the official recognition of Tajik and Persian culture and language in Soviet Central Asia.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether one regards Tajikistan as the reincarnation of an ancient nation (as the official Tajik national ideology asserts today) or emphasizes its modern roots, without paying attention to the networks of Central Asian intellectuals and Russian Orientalists and their

interaction with the state during the first half of the twentieth century, one runs the risk of overestimating either of the two viewpoints. On the one hand, the writings of some Russian Orientalists convey a sense of the antiquity and wealth of the languages, cultures and identities in Central Asia. On the other, the traces of censorship and ideology within those very works, and the great personal risk to which their authors were often exposed, remind us how far from objective and how fit for political purpose their work often was. An analysis of the networks connecting those scholars with other local intellectuals illustrates that knowledge about “the Orient” was not only produced—in Saidian terms—to rule the “Orientals,” but that it was also appropriated by Central Asians in order to gain access to resources, recognition and power. People like Ghafurov not only managed to refashion former Russian scholarship to serve their own purposes, but they surpassed their former mentors in influence and status, often at the price of significant Sovietization and Russification. The study of such networks shows how Central Asian cultural heritage was researched and preserved, but also how it was reinvented and codified in national terms and how these processes were negotiated between local intellectuals, scholars and the state.

1 The role of Tatar language reformers was so prominent that during the early years of the Turkmen Republic Turkmen intellectuals complained about them allegedly “polluting” their language. In: Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 135f.

2 I am grateful to Alexander Morrison for this remark. However, according to Thomas Welsford and Nouryaghdi Tashev, in the case of Islamic legal documents the shift from Persian to Turkic was delayed and Persian remained the norm until approximately 1910. In: Welsford and Tashev, *Catalogue of Arabic-script documents*, 11.

3 Schimmelpenninck, *Russian Orientalism*, 95.

4 *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. s.v. “Turkistān.”

5 Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan*, 22.

6 Stalin’s words were: “Take Bokhara: in Bokhara there are three nationalities—the Uzbeks, who constitute the principal nationality, ... the Turkmens, ... and the Kirghiz.” In: Rakowska-Harmstone, *Russia and Nationalism*, 71.

7 Abashin, *Natsionalizmy v Srednei Azii*, 190.

8 Bartol’d, *Sochinenia*, vol.2,p.1, 468.

9 Semenov’s personal archive in the Tajik Academy of Sciences in Dushanbe contains correspondence between him and Bartol’d that amounts to slightly over 200 letters. For this archive I will use the reference: Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, Archive of A.A. Semenov, box x/folder x, page x. (In short: A.A.S., bx, fx, px).

10 Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient*, 111.

11 Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 23.

12 Ibid.

13 Kemper and Conermann, *Heritage of Soviet Oriental*, 222.

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- 14 A.A.S., b13, f7: correspondence between A.A. Semenov and S.F. Ol'denburg.
- 15 Khalid, "The Modernity of Identity," 88; Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*, 138; Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 8 and Slezkine, "USSR as Communal Apartment," 415.
- 16 Kemper, *Liudy i sud'by* (review), 238.
- 17 Ilkhamov, "Archaeology of Uzbek Identity," 26; Tolz, "European, National, (Anti-)Imperial," 53-81; and Tolz, "Imperial Scholars and Minority Nationalisms," 262.
- 18 Abashin, *Natsionalizmy v Srednei Azii*, 130ff.
- 19 Morrison, "Applied Orientalism," 637.
- 20 Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 53.
- 21 Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 15.
- 22 Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*, 140; Brower and Lazzarini, *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands*, 194 and Abashin, *Natsionalizmy v Srednei Azii*, 152.
- 23 Fioletova, *Istoria odnoy zhizni*, 60.
- 24 Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 5.
- 25 Bashiri, "Prominent Tajik Figures," 86.
- 26 Said, *Orientalism*.
- 27 Haugen, *Establishment of National Republics*, 13f.
- 28 See, for instance: Roy, *The New Central Asia*, xiii.
- 29 Haugen, *Establishment of National Republics*, 7.
- 30 See, for instance: Gafurov, *Tadzhiki*; Masov, *Istoria Tadzhikskogo naroda*; Masov, *Istoria topornogo razdeleniya*.
- 31 Khalid, "A secular Islam," 579; Abashin, "Post-Soviet Nationalism," 58; Brower and Lazzarini, *Russia's Orient*, xix.
- 32 Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 72ff; Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 165.
- 33 Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 184.
- 34 Bergne, *The Birth of Tajikistan*, 127ff.
- 35 Abashin, *Natsionalizmy v Srednei Azii*, 190f.
- 36 Masov, *U istokov istorii*, 475.
- 37 Litvinskii and Akramov, *Aleksandr Alexandrovich Semenov*, 87.
- 38 Semenov, "K problem natsional'novo razmezhivania," 1 (my emphasis).
- 39 In the article Semenov either uses the term "Iranians" or the expression "population belonging to the Iranian branch of the Indo-Europeans."
- 40 Semenov, "K problem natsional'novo razmezhivania," 2.
- 41 Ibid., 8.
- 42 Bartol'd, *Sochinenia*, vol.2,p.1, 109.
- 43 Semenov, "K problem natsional'novo razmezhivania," 2.
- 44 Ibid., 5.
- 45 Bartol'd, *Sochinenia*, vol.2,p.1, 123.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 184.
- 48 A.A.S., b12, f10. p1ff: "Proekt prospekta kratkogo ocherka stat'i o razvitii kul'tury i nauki v Tadzhikistane v periode imperializma" [Project for the prospectus of a short outline of an article about the development of culture and science in Tajikistan in the period of Imperialism], late 1950s (not dated precisely).
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Laruelle, *Mythe Aryen*, 47 and 138; Germanov, "Turkestanskii Kruzhok Liubitelei..."
- 51 Ayni, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, 118.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid., In Ayni's words: "My work played an important role for the realisation of the party's national policy."
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Saidmuradov, Mal'tsev, Osimi, *Iz istorii vostokovedeniia*, 28
- 56 For a similar pro-Tajik stance by Znamenskii, expressed at the Second Congress of Soviets in 1929 in Dushanbe, see: Kassymbekova, "Humans as Territory," 362.
- 57 Ayni, *Namunai Adabiëti Tojik*, 415 and Shukurov, *Ravshangar-i Buzurg*, 43f.
- 58 Semenov (ed.), *Kuškakī, Burhān-ad-Dīn*.
- 59 Saidmuradov, Mal'tsev, Osimi, *Iz istorii vostokovedeniia*, 25.
- 60 Vasil'kov and Sorokina, *Liudi i sud'by*; and: Germanov, "Vostochnyi front."
- 61 A.A.S., b6, f9: Certificate (spravka) issued to A.A.Semenov by the Society for the study of Tajikistan and the Iranian peoples beyond its borders, 5.1.1932, signed by N.El'burikh as secretary of the administration (sekretar' pravleniia) and: Iskandarov, *Pamiat'i Aleksandra Aleksandrovicha Semenova*, 64ff.

- 62 Bergne, *The Birth of Tajikistan*, 81f.
- 63 A.A.S., b6, f9: letter by the Central Committee of the New Tajik Alphabet at the Central Executive Committee of the Tajik ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) to A.A.Semenov, 13.11.1927, signed by the Committee's vice-chairman Uigur and its secretary N. Reis.
- 64 Bergne, *The Birth of Tajikistan*, 80.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Germanov, "Vostochnyi front."
- 67 A.A.S., b9, f10: letter by Sadriddin Ayni to A.A.Semenov, November 1953.
- 68 Mukhtorov, *Akademik Bobodzhon Ghafurov*, 170f.
- 69 Bashiri, "Prominent Tajik Figures," 86.
- 70 Mukhtorov, *Akademik Bobodzhon Ghafurov*, 14.
- 71 A.A.S., b13, f3, p43: letter from Bobojon Ghafurov to A.A.Semenov, 21.5.1941.
- 72 Manley, *To the Tashkent Station*, 137.
- 73 Mukhtorov, *Akademik Bobodzhon Ghafurov*, 24.
- 74 A.A.S., b.7, f.10., p.1: "Nekotorye zamechaniia na knigu "Kratkaia istoriia Tadzhijskogo naroda"/Tarikhi Mukhtasari Khalqi Todzhik," B.Gafurova, t.1 Stalinabad 1947 (Some comments on the book "Short history of the Tajik people" by B.Gafurov, vol.1). (This was apparently an internal review by A.A.S)
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Bashiri, "Prominent Tajik Figures," 86.
- 78 A.A.S., b13, f1. p116: letter by Bobojon Ghafurov to A.A. Semenov, 15.3.1946.
- 79 About the fact that Ghafurov invited Semenov to Stalinabad in 1951 the author of this paper learned from the scholars Dr. Nizom Nurjonov, Prof. Dr. Hamza Kamol and Prof. Dr. Khaidarsho Priumshoev during his fieldwork in Tajikistan.
- 80 Mukhtorov, *Akademik Bobodzhon Ghafurov*, 171.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 A.A.S., b13, f1, p122: letter by Bobojon Ghafurov to A.A. Semenov, 7.5.1949.
- 83 Ghafurov, *Tadzhiki*, 4.
- 84 A.A.S., b12, f14: Stat'ia o Turkestane [A Paper on Turkestan] by A.A. Semenov, 1917 (unpublished).
- 85 Schimmelpenninck, *Russian Orientalism*, 62.

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