

ARCHIVAL REPORT

## Not By Archives Alone: The “Revolution” in Soviet Central Asian Literary Studies

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(Received 19 February 2022; accepted 25 February 2022)

In contemporary Central Asia, Soviet-era authors are national heroes. Writers’ natal homes have become lovingly curated home-museums; statues of poets bedeck city squares; and schoolchildren write dictations from twentieth-century novels. Less often discussed in public, such writers also once belonged to the Soviet Writers’ Union, many of these poets called themselves “proletarian,” and their novels purported to imagine “revolution.” Poems about tractors rarely appear in today’s anthologies, and new editions of 1930s novels excise the once-obligatory references to Stalin. In reaction to their Soviet-era canonization, some writers have been knocked from their pedestals, as recently happened to Hamza in Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup> Due to the political sensitivity of many Soviet writers in Uzbekistan, most serious scholarly attention has turned, since 1990, toward transitional Jadid writers of the early revolutionary years who were ultimately devoured by the official regime, such as Cho’lpon and Fitrat.

If the official narrative within Central Asia has emphasized national genius to the exclusion of political context, Western scholars have tended toward a more pessimistic account, stressing the political pressures that limited the scope within which Central Asian writers could work. Beginning at the height of the Cold War, some scholars sought evidence of “Aesopian” languages of resistance, through which authors encase their social critiques in officially acceptable framings.<sup>2</sup> Too often, however, those eager to read *between* the lines neglect reading the lines on the page. While scholars of Russian literature have studied Gorky and Sholokhov, Platonov and Pil’niak as literature, despite the political strictures in which they wrote, few scholars in the Western academy have granted Central Asian literatures the dignity of careful, theoretically informed and properly historicized literary scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

Different as the two approaches may seem, they are both responses to the same problem. There is a deep pathos and profound ethical dilemma inherent in the study of Central Asian literature in the context of Soviet (neo-/ post-) coloniality. It can be wrenching to acknowledge how much Central Asian writers depended on material support from the Party, and

<sup>1</sup> Kamp, “Symbol of Ideology: Hamza’s martyrdom, erased.”

<sup>2</sup> Edward Allworth’s field-defining work took such an approach; see Allworth, *Uzbek Literary Politics* and *idem., Evading Reality: The Devices of ‘Abdalrauf Fitrat, Modern Central Asian Reformist.*

<sup>3</sup> There are several important exceptions from emerging scholars, including Kudaibergenova, *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature: Elites and Narratives*; Caffee, “How Tatiana’s Voice Rang across the Steppe: Russian Literature in the Life and Legend of Abai”; Hodgkin, “Romance, Passion Play, Optimistic Tragedy: Soviet National Theater and the Reforging of Farhad”; and Sharipova, “The Decolonization of the Environment in Kazakhstan: The Novel Final Respects by Abdi-Jamil Nurpeisov.”

how imbricated they were in its discourses even in times of terror. But Central Asian writers should not be reduced to mouthpieces for the Moscow Party line, when, in fact, they were instrumental in re-interpreting, reshaping, and resisting it. Without understanding official discourses and institutional structures, it is impossible to fully appreciate Central Asians' appropriations of them. Nor can we understand or appreciate the Central Asian contributions to Soviet literature, and indeed, to an emergent world literature, without engaging with the actual texts they produced.<sup>4</sup> Studying Central Asian literature, then, requires attention to both political context and aesthetic form, drawing on the full variety of sources available in post-Soviet archives and libraries. While not exhaustive, this article offers a guide to several key archives and libraries in the former Soviet Union, contending that while archives greatly enrich the study of Soviet cultures, library collections of Soviet-era books and periodicals will be at least as crucial to the ongoing reevaluation of modern Central Asian cultures and literatures. I focus primarily on literature produced in Uzbekistan. Because of the parallel institutional structures in most Central Asian republics, however, these notes will be applicable also to scholars of other Central Asian literature and culture.

### The National State Archive of Uzbekistan

Researchers on Soviet Central Asian literature before 1932 face a conspicuous gap in the archival record. After the 1917 Revolution and for much of the 1920s, Central Asian literature operated under the auspices of informal social networks, many of which had roots in the pre-revolutionary progressive intelligentsia, or Jadids. Often local and ephemeral, these groups represented diverse intellectual trends and reflect the cultural decentralization of the early Soviet years.<sup>5</sup> For example, under the direction of Abdurrauf Fitrat, the Chagatay Conversation (Chig'atoy Gurungi) promoted research and discussion on the Turkic cultural heritage of Central Asia; it also promoted early discussions of script reform in Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> By the late 1920s, the Party and its activists had condemned most indigenous cultural groups. Under influence from Moscow, in 1928 local Party activists founded an Uzbekistan and all-Central Asia chapter of the Association for Proletarian Writers.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, a group of non-European activists organized a chapter of Red Pen (Qizil Qalam), a literary group whose name conveys the outspoken political commitment of its members.<sup>8</sup>

Red Pen and the Association for Proletarian Writers reflected a new, Party-oriented tendency in Central Asian literature, distinct from the earlier, Jadid-inflected groups. However, all these early organizations have the same status in the archival record. All were condemned as counter-revolutionary in the 1930s, and their archives, such as they

<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship has shown the Soviet contribution to a 20<sup>th</sup>-century discourse of world literature; see Hodgkin, "Persian Poetry in the Second-World Translation System"; Khotimsky, "World Literature, Soviet Style: A Forgotten Episode in the History of an Idea"; Gould, "World Literature as a Communal Apartment: Semyon Lipkin's Ethics of Translational Difference"; and Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and Third Worlds*. On debates surrounding "world literature" as a Eurocentric category rooted in assumptions about translatability, see Mufti, *Forget English!* and Apter, *Against World Literature*.

<sup>5</sup> The definitive study of the pre-1932 period is Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> A Tashkent Association of Proletarian Writers was formed in 1923, but it appears to have been dominated exclusively by Russian-speakers, with a largely defunct Uzbek section; see Karimov, *XX asr adabiyoti manzaralari*, 250.

<sup>8</sup> A chapter of Red Pen existed also in Azerbaijan, founded under the direction of the Council of Propaganda that was organized at the Congress for the Peoples of the East in 1920. It is possible the Central Asian chapter of Red Pen also formed under Party direction, but I have found no documentary evidence for this. The Central Asian chapter of Red Pen was dissolved in 1930, while the Association of Proletarian Writers persisted until 1932. For a useful overview of literary organizations in early Soviet Uzbekistan, see Baldauf, "Educating the Poets and Fostering Uzbek Poetry of the 1910s to Early 1930s." On the Azerbaijani chapter of Red Pen, see Feldman, *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus*, 176–207.

were, were largely destroyed. Today, those who research their work must scavenge for traces of their activity in early Soviet publications, in scattered archival files of the Party-state and personal files. Some materials relevant to early literary groups can be unearthed in the state archives of Uzbekistan, and while post-Soviet scholars from the region have done essential work in recovering these legacies, much remains to be done.<sup>9</sup>

In April 1932, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party issued a decree dissolving all literary organizations and restructuring them under a single umbrella, the Writers' Union.<sup>10</sup> Soon, the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 promulgated Socialist Realism as the sole mode for cultural production under the auspices of the Writers' Union. Ostensibly, the Union was to eliminate the supposed problem of factionalism in organizations such as the "left opportunistic" Association for Proletarian Writers. The Writers' Union was to adopt a "big tent" approach, accommodating both Party and nonparty participants in an effort to produce a Socialist Realist literature that would draw in the wider masses. The actual effect, of course, was to subject Central Asian literature to an unprecedented level of centralized hierarchy. A once-polycentric literary scene, with sedentary hubs in Samarkand, Bukhara, Ferghana, and to a lesser degree, Tashkent, became centered around Tashkent, whose chapter of the Writers' Union reported directly to Moscow. Parallel chapters of the Writers' Union were formed in the other Soviet national republics as well: for example, many Tajik-speaking writers from Bukhara and Samarkand made an exodus to Stalinobod (modern-day Dushanbe), and smaller Writers' Union chapters were formed also in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>11</sup> However, because Uzbekistan inherited the major cultural hubs of sedentary Central Asia, it remained a center of officially sponsored cultural activity in the region throughout the Soviet period, becoming an international fulcrum for Soviet cultural exchange with the Third World during the Cold War.<sup>12</sup>

The archival record reflects this new degree of centralization. In Uzbekistan, the primary archival collection (*fond*, f. 2356) for the study of the literatures of Uzbekistan, which collects the documents of the Writers' Union of Uzbekistan, is located in the Uzbekistan State Archive in Tashkent.<sup>13</sup> The inventories (*opisi*) for this archive are not currently available online, so even to consult them requires researchers to travel to Tashkent on a research visa and obtain permission for archival access, usually through affiliation with the Academy of Sciences, or, less frequently, other institutions, such as the National University of Uzbekistan.

Despite evident hierarchicalism in the Soviet Writers' Union, the archives reveal the center's inability to control cultural production on a granular level, especially in languages other than Russian. The archives brim with unfulfilled plans, unfunded initiatives, and reports of "counter-revolutionary" works that somehow managed to be published. The documents contained in the Tashkent archive comprise the official records of the Writers' Union: meeting protocols, plans for upcoming initiatives, correspondence with Moscow and the Union's regional chapters, and, occasionally, stenographic reports from Writers' Union meetings and interrogations. Meeting protocols, usually quite laconic, convey what was discussed at regular meetings. They are particularly useful insofar as they report who actually participated in the organizational work of the Union, rather than those who

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Nabiev, *Narzulloi Bektosh va ilmu adabi tojiki solhoi 20-30 sadai XX*; Alimova and Rashidova, *Mahmudxo'ja Behbudiy va uning tarixiy tafakkuri*; and Karimov, *XX asr adabiyoti manzaralari*.

<sup>10</sup> See "O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii," 128.

<sup>11</sup> On the exodus to Stalinobod, see Roberts, "City on Paper: Writing Tajik in Stalinobod (1930-38)." On the early formation of chapters of the Writers' Union in national republics, see Schild, "Between Moscow and Baku: National Literatures at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers." Useful starting points for research on Kazakh and Turkmen literature include, respectively, Kudaibergenova, *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature: Elites and Narratives*, and Clement, *Learning to Become Turkmen: Literacy, Language, and Power, 1914-2014*.

<sup>12</sup> See Kirasirova, "Building Anti-Colonial Utopia: The Politics of Space in Soviet Tashkent in the 'long 1960s'"; and Djalalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds*.

<sup>13</sup> Soviet archives were usually organized according to *fond*, or repository, most of which correspond to Party or state institutions. Each *fond* is divided into several *opisi*, or inventories, which in turn organize *dela*, or archival files.

belonged to the Union in name only. The correspondence still available at the archive is spotty in its coverage, but reveals interesting conflicts in many cases. Perhaps most promisingly to scholars of literature, the archive has also retained some written critiques of Uzbek literature, as well as the stenographic reports of meetings discussing specific works. Importantly, the documents in the archive reflect that the Uzbekistan Writers' Union was not exclusively an institution for members of the Uzbek nation, and the archive has much to offer scholars of literature in languages other than Uzbek, including Russian, Tajik, and Uyghur. Most documents in the National Archive of Uzbekistan are in Russian, although some particularly revealing stenographic reports and written critiques are in Uzbek, including some in Arabic script.

Since well before 1917, literature in Central Asia has been closely linked to pedagogical aims. The Jadids, or Islamic modernist reformers of Central Asia, placed “enlightenment” at the forefront of their agenda, and most literary careers in early Soviet Central Asia meandered through teaching and education policy in addition to the arts, particularly since full-time employment as a writer was rare in the early Soviet decades. Consequently, the literature of the early post-revolutionary years—including theater, prose literature, and poetry—placed an uncommon emphasis on moral and political education. After the promulgation of Socialist Realism, with its emphasis on accessibility to the “people” (*narodnost'*), Central Asian literatures retained their pedagogical focus. The inextricable connection between literature and pedagogy in Central Asia is reflected in f. 94, which contains the archive of the People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros/Ministerstvo Prosveshcheniia USSR). The records of the Narkompros reveal literature to be an integral part of the Party's agenda for the cultural “enlightenment” of Central Asia's masses, and show the Writers' Union to be part of a complex of Party-sponsored initiatives for cultural construction, including libraries, Red Teahouses, literary circles, and other institutions for circulating and promoting Party-sponsored literatures.<sup>14</sup>

### The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art

Moscow's archives are essential to students of Soviet Central Asian cultures for two main reasons. First, because Soviet culture was organized hierarchically, with all roads leading to Moscow, many key documents can be found only there. Local Central Asian institutions consistently reported to their higher-ups in Moscow, and these reports often supply a bird's-eye view that is difficult to discern in the day-to-day records held in Tashkent and other Central Asian cities. Second, since the political vicissitudes of the Soviet- and post-Soviet periods hit close to home, some of the most sensitive archival materials have been classified or disposed of in the region. Founded in 1941 to unify a variety of Party, state, and personal archives, Moscow's Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) is an essential, and vastly underutilized, repository on Central Asian literatures. The archive contains reports from Moscow brigades sent to supervise and report on Central Asian literatures; it also includes correspondence and reports sent to the central Writers' Union from regional Union leaders. Certainly for the early Soviet period, more documents pertaining to the Uzbekistan Writers' Union are accessible at RGALI than at the State Archive of Uzbekistan (O'zMDA) itself. For example, while O'zMDA contains only scattered meeting protocols, RGALI includes a more exhaustive record as well as a number of detailed stenographic reports from Uzbekistan Writers' Union meetings in both Uzbek and Russian. The sources in RGALI are particularly revealing when it comes to the dark years of 1936–38, as some

<sup>14</sup> On Red Teahouses as cultural institutions, see Roosien, “Not Just Tea Drinking”: The Red Teahouse and the Soviet State Public in Interwar Uzbekistan.” On state-sponsored cultural institutions in Kyrgyzstan, see İğmen, *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan*; and on Kazakhstan, see Ramsay, “Nomadic Hearths of Soviet Culture: ‘Women's Red Yurt’ Campaigns in Kazakhstan, 1925–1935.”

relevant files remain classified in Tashkent, and much of the Terror played out under the direction of brigades of Moscow-based writers.

### **The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History**

The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) also has much to offer with respect to Soviet literature. The files of the Central Asian Bureau (f. 62) include materials relevant to Turkestan and the Soviet Central Asian republics through the mid-1930s. Of particular interest are documents pertaining to the institution known at various times as the Division of Agitprop (APO), Division of Agitprop and the Press (APPO), and the Division of Culture and Propaganda (Kul'tprop). These files are particularly useful for researchers interested in the press, as the archive contains a wealth of statistics on the names, languages, editorial composition, and relative importance of a variety of early Soviet newspapers and journals. Other documents register complaints from agitprop administrators about the "failings" of cultural institutions and critiques of the press's "explanations" for controversial policies such as collectivization. This collection is particularly useful for the Party perspective on the sparsely documented cultural organizations of the 1920s.

Most of the archival materials in RGASPI are in Russian and reflect the views of Russian-speaking administrators who both wielded great power and misinterpreted local realities. They must be read with caution. For example, one notorious Secret Police document from the Central Asian Bureau files describes a pan-Turkic conspiracy in 1920s Kokand, which supposedly involved several well-known writers. No other evidence exists to support the existence of such a group, which was most likely the fabrication of paranoid officials.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, agitprop administrators' assessment of the local press, especially press in local languages, is often quite superficial, as their understanding of non-Russian press was usually dependent on translated digests.

Also worth mentioning is Moscow's Komsomol (Communist Youth League) archive, once independent, but now a division of RGASPI housed in a separate building across town. Communist Youth League members were a driving force in Soviet cultural production, and they organized cultural festivals, literary competitions, and "outreach" drives to the countryside. The collections of the Komsomol archive include stenographic reports of activist conferences and extensive files on major Komsomol events. There are also many reports on initiatives to expand access to radio, film, and periodical press, often providing unique insight into the local reception of Soviet mass media and cultural production. The Komsomol archive's inventories are organized according to republic, enabling researchers to quickly identify relevant materials along national lines.

### **The Alisher Navoiy Literary Museum**

While state archives offer some irreplaceable documents, when it comes to manuscripts, researchers will need to look elsewhere. The former Soviet Union is dotted with the home-museums of venerated cultural producers, and Central Asia is no exception. Tashkent, for example, hosts the home-museums of luminaries such as writers Oybek and Abdulla Qahhor, the famed musician Yunus Rajabiy, and renowned dancer Tamara Xonim, among many others. The museums are worth visiting just for their public exhibitions alone, but many also hold some or all of the personal archives of each author.

The most significant museum archive for the study of Soviet Central Asian literature in Uzbekistan is the Alisher Navoiy Literary Museum in Tashkent, which was founded in 1939 as part of the preparations to celebrate the quincentennial of medieval Persianate poet 'Ali Shir Nava'i. In the 1960s, the museum established an archive organized mostly

<sup>15</sup> The file is located in RGASPI, op. 2, d. 2199. For more discussion of this conspiracy theory, see Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, 374.

by author names. The museum's administration has recently been in transition and, like cultural institutions everywhere, appears woefully underfunded. However, researchers who are able and willing to wade through shelves of disorganized files will find a trove of documentation from some of the most prominent writers of Soviet Uzbekistan, from still-renowned authors like G'ofur G'ulom, whose name still bedecks a major subway station in Tashkent, to once-major but now-forgotten writers like Oydin and Husayn Shams. The files include personal documents and correspondence from some authors. Most significantly, the archive holds manuscripts and unpublished proofs, as well as significant manuscript collections of medieval and early modern Central Asian literature. Copies can be quite expensive and researchers are expected to submit and adhere to a list of authors they wish to study before gaining access to the library.

### Library Collections

Since the "archival revolution" opened Soviet archives to Western researchers, scholarship on the region has heavily emphasized intensive archival research. While this work has greatly enriched the scholarly understanding of Soviet social and political history, an excessively archive-focused approach has limitations for the study of Soviet culture.<sup>16</sup> At various historical turning points, archives—particularly those located in Central Asia—have classified or otherwise disposed of key documentary evidence of local literatures. Personal archives, albeit valuable, have been lost or rendered inaccessible.

Meanwhile, published materials from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods must be handled with great caution. As political priorities changed, Soviet republications scrubbed out-of-date language. The names of purged cultural figures were routinely eliminated from texts and, in some cases, literally defaced in physical copies of books. Consequently, serious scholars of literature and culture must undertake significant searches just to identify the original texts of major works, and to parse how they have been revised. While the "authentic" first editions are invaluable, their revision histories often reveal much about the ongoing process of interpretation and revision that took place with input from authors, their editors, their censors, and later, the scholars who study them. For example, Abdulla Qahhor's major novel *The Mirage (Sarob)* was published first in the official journal of Uzbekistan's Writers' Union, then issued in book form in the late 1930s, and subsequently republished in heavily redacted editions over the course of the twentieth century, including the post-Soviet period.<sup>17</sup> Other works were published once and completely forgotten after their writers were purged; such is the case of the prolific writer Husayn Shams, a leading figure in the cultural life of the 1930s, but largely forgotten after his fall from grace during the Great Terror.

In Uzbekistan, the major library collections are held at the Alisher Navoiy National Library (Alisher Navoiy Milliy Kutubxonasi). However, the collections of books are difficult to access, often requiring days to retrieve, and the catalogs are incomplete. Scanning and copying is expensive and heavily restricted; many early Soviet books are held in the rare book and manuscript collections, where access policies are more restrictive still.

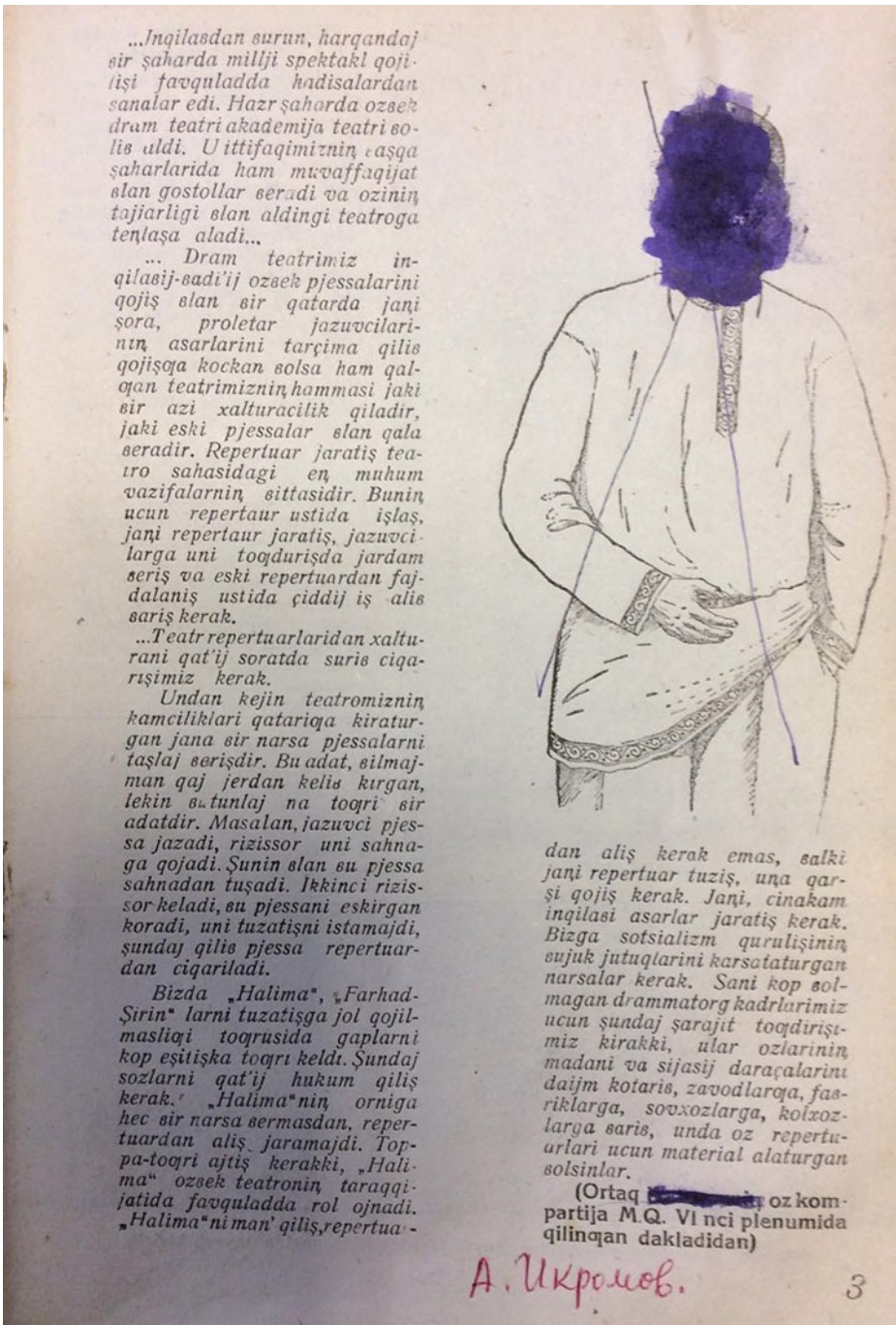
Many university libraries in the United States hold useful, albeit spotty collections of Central Asian periodicals and books.<sup>18</sup> Also worth mentioning are the collections of Central Asian publications bequeathed to the New York Public Library (NYPL) by Edward Allworth. While some items are represented in the digital catalog, the most exhaustive

<sup>16</sup> On the impact of the "archival revolution" in Soviet social history, see Fitzpatrick, "Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History."

<sup>17</sup> It is now available in a very reliable scholarly edition; this is not the case for many other Soviet-era works. See Qahhor, *Tanlangan Asarlar*.

<sup>18</sup> Particularly useful collections are housed at the University of Chicago, Harvard University, University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.





**Figure 1.** A speech by Akmal Ikromov, published in 1934 and defaced by a reader at the Russian State Library, presumably after he was purged in 1937–38. *O'zbek Sovet Adabiyoti*, no. 6 (June 1934): 3.

catalog is Allworth's own, also held by NYPL off-site.<sup>19</sup> The collection primarily comprises publications from the 1920s in Central Asian languages; as it is stored off-site, it usually

<sup>19</sup> Eren, *Preliminary List of Publications from the Former Soviet East, by Language Group in the Slavic and Baltic Division*.

takes several days to retrieve items from the collection. Many of these rare publications have unfortunately been lost, but the collection remains an essential starting point for any US-based student of Central Asian literature. I would also be remiss not to mention the significant digital collections of Central Asian (mostly Uzbek) literature located at [ziyouz.com](http://ziyouz.com) and [kh-davron.uz](http://kh-davron.uz).

Perhaps the most useful collection of Soviet-era Central Asian literatures is located in Moscow at the Russian State Library (Rossiiskaia Gosudarstvennaia Biblioteka), which collected and still retains most publications from the entire Soviet Union. The card catalogs for books and periodicals in Central Asian languages are held at the Oriental Division (Vostochnyi otdel) of the RSL, across the street from the main building in downtown Moscow. The catalogs are organized by subject and language. Most catalog records for texts in languages other than Russian remain undigitized, and photographing catalog cards is strictly prohibited. After transcribing full call numbers and bibliographic information for books, researchers will need to proceed to the Periodicals Reading Room in Khimki, a suburb of Moscow, where most books in Central Asian languages are held. The Khimki reading room also holds the invaluable Soviet-era press chronicles (*letopisi*) with full bibliographic information about Soviet-era publications, including the often rapidly changing titles of newspapers and journals. Particularly valuable items include the official publications of the republican Writers' Unions, as well as arts and culture journals such as Uzbekistan's *Guliston*. Most newspapers and journals regularly published literary features, so almost no publication can escape the purview of serious scholars of Central Asian literature. Despite the logistical challenges in obtaining call numbers, most materials are in excellent condition. Photography is permitted free of charge and almost without restriction, and the reading room staff is generally able to bring up requested items within the hour. The RSL also permits remote requests for scans, although payment usually requires assistance from someone on the ground in the Russian Federation.

## Conclusion

While the “archival revolution” began decades ago in Soviet history, it has yet to fully reshape the scholarly understanding of Central Asian literatures. Today, the field of Central Asian culture is poised for its own “revolution,” drawing not only on the official archives of Party-run organizations, but also the full spectrum of published books, periodicals, and ephemera. This type of research requires a careful triangulation between archival records, publication histories, and textual analysis—a kind of historical-critical textual work that is paralleled only in the study of sacred texts. By accounting for the full variety of sources—including published materials in the entire array of languages and scripts, personal archives, and Party-state institutions—scholars can produce a new story about Soviet Central Asian literature; one that takes account of its political overdetermination, formal innovation, and aesthetic originality, even under conditions of duress.

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