Culture and Islam in Late Soviet Central Asia

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On February 15, 2018, GW's Central Asia Program organized a workshop on "'Culture and Islam in Late Soviet Central Asia" in the framework of the CERIA (Central Eurasia-Religion in International Affairs) Initiative, generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. This workshop addressed the issue of culture in late Soviet Central Asia in all its diversity, from literature to cinema; it also contextualized the local political framework, ongoing societal transformations, and the hidden place of religion in late Soviet Central Asia. Exploration of these questions offers a better understanding of inner societal processes that were unfolding during the Soviet period and their effects on post-Soviet Central Asian societies.

The workshop **Culture and Islam in Late Soviet Central Asia** focuses on the intersection of Islam, the late Soviet period, communist ideology, and thriving cultural revival in all five Soviet Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

The late Soviet period created conditions where the hegemonic ideological narratives of communism were copied but the meaning they inscribed in everyday lives began to change and localize. Alexei Yurchak described this process as Late Socialism, indicating that ideological texts "were not just copied but perfectly replicated, which made them 'frozen' and context-independent" (Yurchak 2003:481). This meant that everyday contexts guided the change of ideological meaning and new forms were created at local level, where local intellectuals were able to dispute these forms, mutate the meanings of ideological texts, and introduce perspectives, texts and forms that were homegrown in Central Asia.

What we propose to do in this workshop is not only explore the ideological change described and analyzed by the framework of Late Socialism, but also focus on the historical period itself, assessing how the late Soviet era influenced many cultural developments in Central Asia. The period we explore starts in the 1960s with cultural revival in the literary, artistic, and religious spheres. These complex processes of cultural revival included a nuanced reflection on Islam and local conceptions of historical and religious revival that constituted a great part of culture in the region but were repressed by the Soviet ideological machine. By the 1960s, local intellectuals had mastered and owned local cultural production: many texts were produced in Soviet form but using a national aesthetic and language that was unknown to censoring bodies.

This interdisciplinary workshop proposes to focus, for the first time, on the complex interrelations between culture, Islam as the dominant "cultural" religion in Central Asia, culture-ness in the Soviet understanding of civilizing forms of domination (*kul'turnost'*), and power. Workshop contributors explore various cultural production genres, from literature and oral histories, theatre, art, and memories of war in a manner that interrogates the top-down approach of Sovietization in the region. The focus is on how local producers navigated these forms and ideologies in ways that allowed them to create powerful alternative—and usually nationalist—local conceptions of everyday reality.

Sovietness in Central Asia: Politics, Economy and Society

Isaac McKean Scarborough
(London School of Economics)
The Political Culture of Late Soviet Tajikistan

In 1987, Buri Karimov was appointed Minister of Automobile Roads for the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (Tajik SSR). Only 30 years old at the time, Karimov had literally just defended his dissertation in Moscow: as he would later relate, he "became a candidate of science and a minister in one day." Karimov was unusually young for his position—he was, in fact, the youngest minister in the entire USSR—but his appointment was reflective of the broader political culture in Dushanbe at the time.

Handsome and charismatic, Karimov was also both well connected to the necessary figures in Moscow and able to communicate with workers in Tajikistan's villages, where he had grown up. Like many other leading politicians in late Soviet Tajikistan, he managed to balance local roots with an affinity for the Soviet hierarchy, quoting poetry in Persian one day and wheeling and dealing for scarce resources in Russian the next. This paper proposes an initial investigation into the concept and influence of local political culture in late Soviet Tajikistan. While traditional studies of Soviet "political culture" have tended to focus on either levels of political participation (DiFranceisco and Gitelman 1983; Tucker 1973) or the Soviet ideological concept of *politicheskaia kul'tura* (Shakhnazarov and Burlatsky 1980; Brown 1984), this paper suggests that neither framework is particularly well suited to the Soviet Central Asian context.

The Soviet state was not a participatory political system in the Western sense, and applying Western concepts of political participation captures at best a partial picture. Equally, the Soviet concept of *kul'tura* (political or otherwise) was heavily laden with ideological baggage and was in many ways completely divorced from the realities of Soviet politics. Instead, this paper argues, Soviet political culture is much better understood as the "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977) in which Soviet political figures lived and operated. Within the superstructure of the Soviet state, it was political figures who alone operated politically, arguing, debating, lobbying, and creating policy. Understanding their culture, this paper suggests, will be instrumental in tracking the political milieu of late Soviet Tajik society in general. By explicating and outlining the political careers, personal ambitions, failures, and mutual interactions of Tajikistan's leading politicians in the 1980s, this paper proposes to begin elaborating on the political culture of the time and place. Based on extensive archival and oral history research conducted in Tajikistan, along with a close reading of published memoirs, it argues that even as late as the 1980s, Tajik Soviet politics represented a fine balance between Moscow and Dushanbe, between the demands of local actors and central authorities. This balance proved effective throughout the final decades of the USSR; when it broke down in the early 1990s, it had as much to do with the collapse of central authority as with a change in the local political order.

Riccardo Cucciola (National Research University—Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia)
Rashidov's Diplomacy: Rethinking Uzbekistan as a Model for the Third World (1959–1983)

The figure of Sharaf Rashidov as an intellectual native integrated in the communist system, and Uzbekistan as an example of a modern Muslim and Eastern republic, were key arguments of post-Stalinist political discourse, while the narrative of "Uzbek modernity" was instrumental to Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War. As Baku in 1920 claimed to be the point of reference for those Eastern peoples oppressed by colonialism and struggling

against imperialism, during Rashidov's "reign" (1959–1983) Tashkent claimed to assume the same role for those Third World countries emerging from the decolonization process. In these decades of competition between the capitalist and the communist worlds, the Uzbek leader assumed an active role in the Cold War (during the 1962 Cuban crisis becoming a key interlocutor for Castro), inviting the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America to struggle against the imperialist oppressors, and promoting Uzbekistan—the champion of "friendship between peoples"—as a modern and emancipated "model" of political, economic, social, and cultural development for the newly independent countries. In fact, Rashidov became one of the main Soviet points of reference for the Persian, Afghan, Indian, Pakistani, and Arab communists, supporting the communist rebels in Africa and flirting with Third World leaders. In the 1960–70s, Tashkent became a venue for many of the meetings between Soviet and Asian leaders, even hosting important events in the South-East Asian realm (i.e. the Tashkent Declaration between India and Pakistan in 1966) or international festivals of cinema and literature that attracted thousands of Asian, African and Latin American intellectuals, writers, poets, journalists, and sportsmen. In the 1970s, Uzbekistan also became a symbol of self-styled—and apparent—compatibility between Marxism-Leninism and Islam, restoring mosques and other architectural sites, accepting traditional institutions (such as *chaikhanas* and *makhallas*), and hosting international Islamic conferences in order to offer a facade of religious freedom, tolerance and tradition in combination with Bolshevik progress while enforcing a narrative that seemed to be credible until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Despite the posthumous discrediting of Rashidov over the "cotton affair," the legacy of "Uzbek modernity" would have a strong impact on post-Soviet Uzbek identity.

This paper is based on various unpublished sources and aims to extend the horizon of current historiography on Rashidov's diplomacy and understand the impact of a peripheral Soviet republic on Cold War dynamics.

Irina Morozova (Regensburg University)
Socialist Solidarity or Market Rationality: The Debates and Politics on Economy and Resources between Moscow and Central Asian Republics, 1989–1991

Socialism in Central Asia had its own temporality. Soviet modernist concepts of development were still in use in the 1980s. Late perestroika (1987–1991), however, ruined the poetics of industrial modernity in Central Asia. While scholars have progressed in understanding the grounds of political activism that involved various national and religious identities in Central Asia in this period, only now are they realizing the necessity to analyze the economic transformation of the period. This article aims to explore the reciprocal exchange between rivalries in the economic and ideological (including religious) spheres, with a particular focus on the debates around economic development: how the top leaderships of the

Republics, intellectuals, party and ministerial functionaries discussed these topics and translated them to the public. Although at the thickened historical times of late perestroika, when societal and political changes occurred at an accelerated pace, people rarely had the chance for reflection, certain (conflicting) narratives on economic development and societal progress nevertheless crystallized. The research is based on archival materials collected in the former Soviet archives in Moscow and Central Asian capitals and provinces. As the materials of the last CPSU Congresses (kept in the Russian State Archive of Modern History—RGANI) show, delegates from Central Asian republics tried to attract the center's attention to the problems in their localities and recalled the principle of socialist solidarity. Many did not mention Islam at all. However, their colleagues in Moscow excluded them from the major debates on new economic development.

This article deals with the question of how the young reformers in Russia (those who praised market self-audit and entrepreneurship above any collective identity, including religious) considered the economic reform vis-à-vis Central Asia and how the *nomenklaturas* of Central Asian republics saw their prospects in advance of reform. The realization of the 12th Soviet Five-Year Plan is analyzed against the background of the rapid political liberalization in the republics that followed the First and Second Congresses of the People's Deputies in Moscow in 1989. Political activism spiralled in the direction of rediscovering national history, culture and religion, but without framing protest against the top *nomenklatura* in the republics. Its representatives claimed the rights of the republics on possession of the natural resources and fixed assets within the existing borders. This research adds to our understanding of how the re-division of the Soviet national wealth was debated and communicated between the republics and the center.

Markus Göransson (Stockholm School of Economics)
Brezhnev's Generation: Tajik Soldiers of the Afghan War and Political Socialization

The vast majority of residents of Tajikistan who served as military conscripts in the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) were born in the 1960s, nearly all of them after 1962, and came of age in the period of developed socialism under Brezhnev (1964–1982), a time when Tajikistan was undergoing rapid social and economic change. Growing up in this period, the future soldiers enjoyed expanded opportunities for education and work, rising living standards, and relative social freedoms. They were also the targets of a stepped-up campaign of political socialization in schools and mass organizations, a campaign that was supported by improvements in media broadcasting. If their parents and grandparents had lived through the years of repression and deprivation of the Stalinist and immediate post-Stalinist eras, the new generation was shaped by previously unseen economic advances and political reforms.

This generational experience needs to be taken seriously. Implicit in much of the literature on the Central Asians who served in the Soviet-Afghan War is the question of the extent to which the soldiers were socialized into dominant Soviet social and political discourses. An early research current, spearheaded by the Franco-Russian scholar Alexandre Bennigsen, insisted that the Central Asian soldiers were poorly "Sovietized," weakly Russified, and quite receptive to foreign religious influences. Far from identifying with the Soviet Armed Forces, Bennigsen and his collaborators argued, the Central Asian soldiers found in Afghanistan echoes of their own pre-Soviet religious identity, making them disposed to reassess their relationship to Soviet power. This reasoning rested on the assumption that Central Asia had remained a religiously restive place, where Soviet power had never taken firm root. Later researchers, including Mark Galeotti, Christian Bleuer, Erica Marat and Jiayi Zhou, have comprehensively refuted the claims about Central Asian disloyalty. Pointing to deployment figures, desertion numbers, newspaper reports, and oral testimonies, they find little corroboration of earlier conclusions but much evidence that the Muslim soldiers retained the trust of their (Slavic) superiors and performed on par with their non-Muslim comrades-in-arms.

In general, the later researchers have done so without interrogating Bennigsen's broader claim that the Afghan War soldiers were weakly socialized into Soviet structures and discourses. This paper addresses this issue. Drawing on interviews with over eighty Soviet-Afghan War veterans, newspaper sources, and military records, it looks at the childhoods and youths of Tajik soldiers of the Afghan War, exploring the role that militarist and patriotic propaganda, campaigns of political socialization, and socio-economic changes played in their lives.

The paper argues that the socio-economic developments of the post-Stalinist period changed the interface between state and society in Tajikistan. Just as the expansion of television and radio broadcasting plugged peripheral communities into a common Soviet media space, the dramatic increase in schooling in the post-war period widened opportunities for political socialization. The military-patriotic discourse that was promoted at school, at mass organizations, and through state media may have elicited cynicism and fatigue as well as earnest belief. But it was intense and overpowering and frequently resonated with family memories about the Great Patriotic War. It inevitably became a reference point in the lives of Tajik adolescents. Similarly, the economic and social achievements that were reached in Tajikistan offered a stark point of contrast with the poverty and underdevelopment that the soldiers encountered in Afghan towns and villages.

Culture and Religion in Late Soviet Central Asia

Artemy M. Kalinovsky (University of Amsterdam)

Adab, Kul'tura and the Limits of Friendship

Culture and anti-imperialism were both at the heart of the socialist project. The Soviet Union invested in and promoted various forms of high culture, as well as the cultural elevation of workers and peasants. It also espoused a commitment to anti-imperialism abroad and tried to offer a model at home through the "Affirmative-Action Empire." These two priorities sat uneasily together. The Bolsheviks' notion of culture emerged from debates about Russia's place in Europe, and Soviet conceptions of high culture inevitably drew on European debates. Promoting this version of culture (including forms like opera, ballet, and the socialist-realist novel) in the supposedly de-colonized Soviet republics threatened to reintroduce imperial dynamics. The commitment to anti-colonialism created room for local intellectuals to adapt, resist, and negotiate this cultural project. Using the case of Tajikistan, this paper will argue that the Soviet Union's cultural promotion facilitated the integration of local elites into the Soviet project while simultaneously marking the boundaries of integration and establishing difference. For a part of the intelligentsia, the older Islamic notion of *adab* was largely stripped of its religious connotations and overlapped Soviet definitions of *kul'turnost'*, both of which sat at the nexus of proper personal behavior and high culture. This paper will explore some of the ways in which local intellectuals defined *kul'turnost'/adab*. Then, turning to the question of gender, women's education, and marriage, it will show how different understandings of culturedness served to create and maintain boundaries between Tajiks and Europeans.

Peter Rollberg (George Washington University)

The Axiological Subversion of Soviet Officialdom by Kazakh Cinema in the Early 1980s

"Late Soviet culture" is usually defined as the period of the 1970s and 1980s; during those two decades, Kazakhstani cinema was predominantly a beneficiary of the Soviet cultural system. Some of its greatest hits, including Sultan-Ahmed Khodzhikov's *Kyz Zhibek* (1970), and highest artistic achievements, such as Tolomush Okeev's *The Gray Fierce One* (1973), were produced during those years. At the same time, late Soviet culture is also marked by an aggressive stance vis-à-vis violations of the official ideological status quo, an attitude that resulted in the shelving of films such as Bulat Mansurov's *The Funeral Feast* (1972) and Viktor Pusurmanov's *The White Aruana* (1973). However, we can also observe the emergence of a category of films that successfully flew under the radar of censorial

watchfulness, namely low-budget pictures in which a non-Soviet approach to religion emerges with surprising consistency. One of these critically underrated films that deserves a second look is *Assuage Your Guilt* (1983). Directed by Serik Zharmukhamedov, it features an intriguing plot. A young man, his parents' only son, has died in a car accident. At the funeral, many good words are spoken about Sultan, until the Imam asks the question: "Does the deceased owe any debt to anyone?" While this question is rhetorical and part of the ritual, the essential truth to which it points is the subject of the subsequent story.

First and foremost, *Assuage Your Guilt* is remarkable for the explicit religious framing of its narrative, to which the title itself alludes. Indeed, the film opens and ends with a prayer. As a deeply moralistic picture, it reflects a profound unease about social trends in modern-day—and at that point still solidly Soviet—Kazakhstan. The dominant worldviews within the urban and the rural spheres could not be more different. The film's position vis-à-vis these issues can be defined as enlightened skepticism and cautious spiritual revisionism, pointing to existential contradictions within modern urban trends. *Assuage Your Guilt* advocates a viewpoint that is unabashedly traditionalist and implicitly based on Islamic norms, in effect signaling a return to pre-Soviet moral notions, although the film never preaches those values; it allows viewers to draw their own conclusions. *Assuage Your Guilt* proves that the quest for a stable traditional value system remained intact even in this late Soviet urban environment.

Sonja Luehrmann (Simon Fraser University)

Preaching Islam, Preaching Culture: Brezhnev-Era Sermon Texts from the Tatar ASSR

This paper is based on Islamic sermon texts from the Brezhnev-era Tatar ASSR, treated as evidence of the status of Islam in Soviet secularism. The papers of the commissioner for religious affairs in the National Archives of Tatarstan include sermon texts that were submitted after major Muslim holidays. Most exhibit strong similarities to each other as well as to Christian sermons from the same period, emphasizing the moral benefits of Islam and its compatibility with communist work ethics. They use a rhetorical strategy of one-sided accommodation: while meant by their authors as a demonstration of a loyal and harmless Islam, Soviet atheists consistently regarded religious affirmations of compatibility with socialist values as a ruse designed to attract believers. While the uniformity of the sermon texts raises doubts as to what was actually preached, I argue that mistakes and awkward wordings suggest that they are authentic documents of imams trying to "speak Bolshevik" but not always succeeding. Through these and other documents, Brezhnev-era Tatar Muslims appear as the kind of people Ulrike Huhn calls "Soviet believers"—citizens who were both grounded in a religious tradition and fully immersed in socialist life. At the same time, Muslims faced a demand for demonstrations of loyalty that Orthodox Christians no longer experienced to the same degree. Though Islam was a taken-for-granted part of Soviet governance in the Volga region, the refusal to separate liturgical piety from everyday life made it more like evangelical Protestantism than Orthodox Christianity. Archival materials from Tatarstan show that late Soviet secularity was based on assumptions about a culturally post-Christian society that was harsh on all religious practitioners, but also discriminated between them.

Literature, Art and Nation in a Timeless Perspective

Naomi Caffee (University of Arizona)

Notes from the Afterlife? Uzbekistan's Russophone Poets Then and Now

The economic, political, and cultural upheavals in Central Asia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union set the stage for the emergence of new, hybrid cultural expressions,

which today are accompanied by increasingly decentralized means of their distribution and consumption. This paper explores the effects of these dynamics on the Russophone literature of Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on two literary circles that originated in the print culture of the late Soviet era but today maintain an active presence online: the Tashkent School and the Fergana School. Shedding light on the effects of political change, mobility, and virtual modes of connectivity, the creative output of these two literary circles highlights the difficulties of categorizing and analyzing literature within the customary frameworks of ethnicity, nation-state, and language.

Ananda Breed (University of Lincoln)

Epic Performances in Central Asia: Negotiating between Past and Present

My paper will provide an overview of a unique performance style and oral epic tradition from Central Asia known as *Manas*, which serves as the name of both a legendary warrior (or Khan) from Kyrgyzstan who united tribes and an epic that is said to contain a larger number of verses than any other epic poem, including the Mahabharata, the Iliad, and the Odyssey. The *Manas* epic contains more than half a million lines and sixty-five known oral variations said to originate from the 10th century, which also exist in neighboring Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. *Manas* can be read as a negotiating and mediating factor between the East and the West in terms of its literary and performance traditions, which link the epics of Greece, from which Western performance traditions emerge, with the epics of Central Asia, which are rooted in the delivery of *Manas* by the tellers (or *Manaschi*) of Kyrgyzstan as well as *Akyn* (or bards) who traveled between encampments to recite epics.

The epic is a series of tales that were historically performed as an oral tradition. In the 21st century, *Manas* expanded to other forms, both physical (books, paintings, statues, movies, theatre) and verbal (narration, spiritual invocation, political speeches). The structure of the paper will provide background information on Manas, followed by an overview of some theatres in Kyrgyzstan and their connection to *Manas*, and culminating with the example of the Osh Uzbek Theatre and their production of a rendition of the *Manas* trilogy that I witnessed in 2013. I argue that the *Manas* epic can be used as a versatile and improvisatory script to address current political issues and that it is the telling and receiving that extends the epic beyond a literary form into one that spills into spiritual, cultural, and political negotiations—mixing ancient traditions and text with contemporary issues and contexts.

Diana T. Kudaibergenova (Lund University/Cambridge University)

The Limits of Late Socialist Realism: Art, Power and National Museums in Central Asia

The thriving artistic field in Central Asia is traditionally divided into “official” and “independent” art producers (Nauruzbayeva 2011; Ibrayeva 2014). Official art is distinguished by its state-sponsored artists and state-sponsored agenda. It mainly produces nationalist artistic narratives in the form of socialist realist art. After 1991, most Central Asian societies shifted to the neo-liberal perspective of the art scene: seeking independence from state-sponsored narratives and funding, artists moved to the Western concept of contemporary art. Contemporary artists seek to focus on social problems and disassociate themselves from state-sponsored artistic institutions and events, which they consider propagandistic and abusive. The works of state-sponsored artists are seen by contemporary artists and critics in Central Asia as mundane, inauthentic and propagandistic; the work of independent artists is considered the only authentic art.

But how far does this separation go? In this paper, I explore how these struggles for capital and recognition have defined art production in Central Asia since the late 1980s. By exploring the time narrative, I ask when Late Socialist Realism ended in Central Asia—does it in fact persist to this day? Is Central

Asian art and its cultural space still *post*-Soviet? Has official production of state-sponsored art become less Sovietized? Does it succeed in creating a sense of cultural authenticity? Does non-official art succeed in the same struggle? Why and how do many contemporary artists engage in the faking of mundane "official" art as a way to expose its abusive framework? By focusing on the different time-space perspectives of art scenes in Central Asia, I seek to demonstrate the importance of cultural authenticity, differences in temporal narration, and the heterogeneity of the contemporary Central Asian cultural landscape.

Performing and Remembering Culture and Islam

Svetlana Peshkova (University of New Hampshire)
National Traditions and Natural Landscape

My contribution to this conference starts and ends with questions. If nature could talk, what story would it tell us about religion in late Soviet Central Asia? The relationship between humans and their ecological environment is fundamental to the existence of human societies. Beyond satisfying basic human needs (e.g., food and shelter), the ecological environment is the main resource enabling humans' creation and reproduction of culture, society and historical continuity; it is central to leading meaningful daily lives. Elements of the natural landscape (e.g., trees, caves, rocks, and springs) are part of the ecological environment. If this landscape could talk, what story would it tell us about ritual practice in late Soviet Central Asia? What other-than-Islam cosmological stories are obscured by a persistent research focus on Islam and Muslim identity and morality? Can these other histories become a source for rethinking local gender dynamics, thereby undoing patriarchal structures and their scholarly and political interpretation?

Ali Igmen (California State University, Long Beach)
Selective Remembrance of "The Good Old Days": The Lives of Kyrgyz Actresses According to Post-Soviet Interviewees

In this presentation, I examine the oral history interviews I conducted in Kyrgyzstan between 2006 and 2017 with theatre professionals—actors, directors, producers—and family members. I have been working on a biographical monograph on Sabira Kümüshalieva, Darkul Kuiukova, Baken Kydykeeva, and Saira Kiyizbaeva, known as the "Daughters of Tököldösh." I have been collecting archival sources and carrying out interviews. Depending on the point in their histories, these four talented individuals simultaneously and sporadically represented strength, defiance, conformity, and maternal mentorship. These interviews reveal, as expected, that interviewees' portrayal of late Soviet-era working and living conditions changed between 2006 and 2017. More surprisingly, however, there emerges from these interviews seemingly static depictions of the lives and work of these actresses.

The interviewees describe four women who mentored them in somewhat of a motherly fashion. They are nostalgic for these dedicated role models, who often defied the conventions of their own society in conforming with the requirements of Soviet modernity. However, interviewees convey that these women also saw themselves as the keepers of their traditions: being a Kyrgyz mother-figure meant caring but stern treatment with little patience for a lack of discipline among their younger colleagues, who acted as if they were students.

This presentation explores the ways in which people remember and convey the past, especially when they talk about individuals who were highly regarded. This exploration reveals that Soviet efforts to modernize women's lives by taking them out of the household proved successful. The same process, however, also helped these women assert their own take on what it meant to be a Kyrgyz woman. I argue that they found a space between Soviet modernity and Kyrgyz tradition without compromising either position.

Christopher Baker (University of Indiana, Bloomington and American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)
Ethnic Words and Soviet Things: Coming to Terms

with Soviet Civilization in Esenberlin's Kōşpendiler

My paper focuses on *Kōşpendiler*, a trilogy written by Iliyas Esenberlin in the 1960s and 1970s, and the relationship of this text to the classificatory practices of the imperial and Soviet eras. It explores Esenberlin's understanding of the taxonomies that had classified his heritage and his imagination of the erudition that had marked and recorded his inheritance in uncertain, overlapping classifications. My analysis centers on the conclusion of the work, a part of the novel Esenberlin wrote with more than a century of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and taxonomies on his mind. Its culmination is replete with references to sprawling compendia and to individuals studied during the categorization of existing and historical things.

This concluding section begins in a "room filled with books." It takes place in the headquarters of Russian Governor-General Vasilii Perovskii, among the paper instruments at his disposal for enumerating landscapes and peoples (the character was based on the real-life imperial officer who presided over the Orenburg region from 1833–1842, the same period in which *Kōşpendiler's* concluding section begins). "There is a large map of the Orenburg region on the wall" of the office in addition to "the thick leather covered volumes on the shelves and tables in the corners." There are also cabinets in his office filled with documents on the flora, fauna, and topographies of the vast steppe areas that sprawled out to the south and east of this administrative district. There was nothing fortuitous about this setting or the books and maps with which Esenberlin surrounds the Russian governor-general in the novel. The conclusion was his effort to understand the erudition that had accumulated in the offices of men like Perovskii in the imperial era. It was his attempt to come to terms with this inheritance of paper and with the sediment of words and taxonomies in the steppe across which the Kazakh SSR sprawled.

We know a great deal about imperial and Soviet efforts to classify Central Asian peoples and traditions. We know less about the indigenous imagination of these practices—the meaning of these classifications to those categorized by them or the ways in which indigenous artists perceived the tangled history of discarded and altered taxonomies that in some sense shaped Soviet civilization. Esenberlin struggled to make sense of this patrimony in *Kōşpendiler*. It was his attempt to understand a tradition that had alphabetized his heritage, indexed it, marked it with lines of longitude on a map, collected its plants and animals and named them, and then compiled it all in encyclopedias, travel logs, and dictionaries. His work was a complex literary reflection on what it meant to be classified and recorded in books.