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Settling the past: Soviet oriental projects in Leningrad and Alma-Ata

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Summary

My dissertation is devoted to the history of classical Oriental Studies in Soviet Kazakhstan in close relations with the Leningrad school. I tried to understand the patterns of politicization in seemingly non-political fields of academic enquiry, namely in philology, ancient and medieval history and archeology. At the center of my thesis is the conceptual framework which supported the ‘settling of the Kazakh past’, the turn from a predominantly nomadic perception of Kazakh tribes to an image of a well-developed urban civilization. Thereby I demonstrate that the Soviet Orientalist scholars made a significant contribution to the cultural delimitation of Central Asia and to the ‘creation’ of modern nations in the region. The whole range of academic selection, be it the choice of sources, terminology, chronological and spatial frameworks, was strongly connected to the changing agendas of Soviet politics.

There are several overall issues that this thesis tries to shed light upon. The first of these is the question of center-periphery relations. In contrast to Tashkent, Dushanbe and other republican capitals in the Soviet east, Alma-Ata never obtained its own, Soviet Kazakhstani Oriental Institute. This means that Kazakhstani Orientology had a weaker and smaller structural fundament, being situated at universities and history institutes, and that it was more dependent on the transfer of knowledge and of cadres from the existing institutes in Moscow and, above all, Leningrad. An additional factor is the role of Tashkent in neighboring Uzbekistan, which already hosted the first Central Asian University where also Oriental studies were conducted. Related to this is the question how local, Kazakhstani cadres in Orientology were produced, and under which political conditions they operated.

The second group of questions deals with the process of nation building. What was the role of academics in nation building, and how did this process influence the whole academic system? How did the regional and national discourses on Kazakhstani history develop under Soviet rule? Which parts of prerevolutionary discourses on Russia’s Orient were continued in the Soviet epoch, and which were completely replaced?

The last, third, group of questions touches upon the history of Soviet Islam. What was the fate of the Islamic heritage in the 20th century, and how did academic scholars shape the image of Islam in Kazakhstan? When many scholars of Muslim background en-

tered the Academy of Sciences, did they accept the rules of the game imposed by the Bolsheviks, or did they have alternative ways for dealing with the system? This pool of questions has particular relevance for archeology, which dealt with the Islamic monuments of the past.

My overall aim is to identify the borders of autonomy in a field of scholarship that had its own hierarchies and tasks, and to analyse the diversity of knowledge-power relations in a complex field with several centres and peripheries.

The backbone of my thesis is the analysis of several major “Oriental projects” that were conducted in Leningrad and Alma-Ata between the 1920s and the late 1980s. These academic projects covered the fields of philology (text editions, translations), history (the production of republican/ national histories), and archeology (restoration and exploration of monuments and ancient sites). These scholarly enterprises were organized upon the state demand and embodied the collective and planned character of academic work in the Soviet Union. The source edition projects of the 1930s divided the classical historical narratives of medieval Islamic authors into national pieces, identifying which parts of these texts relate to the history of a particular nation. In the 1940s this selective set of fragments became the basis of republican history writing. Central for national historiography was the issue of ethnogenesis, which was regarded in the fashion that legitimized the modern state borders. Archeological investigation in the republic was centered on the Southern Kazakhstani region and was aimed to explore and study the urban settlements, above all the site of Otrar and its oasis.