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Soviet “Afro-Asians” in UNESCO: Reorienting World History*

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NARRATIVES of African and Asian unity figured prominently in the agendas of national liberation pursued by decolonizing countries in the first half of the twentieth centuries. As historians have pointed out, across Afro-Asia, anti-colonial elites formulated agendas of modern statehood that shared a remarkable dualism. Analyzing the agenda of the Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Movement (AAPSM) in the early 1960s historians observed a shift from a “universalistic” ideal of African and Asian cultural liberation and modernization towards a more “particularistic” agenda of anti-colonial struggle.¹ This they generally regarded as the logical consequence of inter-Asian strife (notably the Indo-Chinese border war of 1962).² This article problematizes this explanation. Shifting focus to the sub-state realm of cultural and intellectual activism, it shows that the demise of a universalistic agenda of Afro-Asian Solidarity was rooted in trends going beyond the level of inter-state politics.

This article traces the activities of Central Asian intellectuals on the Soviet Committee for Solidarity with African and Asian Countries (*Sovietskii Komitet Solidarnost’ Strany Azii i Afriki*—SKSSAA), showing how these committed “Afro-Asians” came to activate the UNESCO

*The research for this article was conducted as part of the international research project “The Legacy of Soviet Oriental Studies: Networks, Institutions, Discourses,” directed by Michael Kemper (UvA, Amsterdam) and Stéphane A. Dudoignon (EHESS, Paris) and funded by the NWO (The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research). I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and Carolien Stolte for their valuable comments on this paper.

¹ This distinction is made for instance by David Kimche, *The Afro-Asian Movement: Ideology and Foreign Policy of the Third World* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1973).

² G. H. Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Non-Alignment* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966); Kimche, *The Afro-Asian Movement*; Dietmar Rothermund, “The Era of Non-alignment,” in *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi -Bandung Belgrade*, ed. N. Mišković, H. Fischer Tiné, and N. Boškova (London: Routledge, 2014), 19–34.

institutional infrastructure in support of an academic agenda that stressed the historical agency and unity of African and Asian peoples. From the moment of the SKSSAA's inception at the Asian Conference for the Relaxation of International Tensions in Delhi, 6–10 April 1955, various Soviet activists framed their anti-imperial commitments in terms of a radical program of cultural liberation and reform that can be traced back to the Asian Relations Conference of 1947.³ While these Central Asian intellectuals acted as representatives of the Soviet state (whether on the All-Union level or on the level of the particular Republics) this article suggests they should be regarded as representatives of a transnational cultural heritage too. The personal biographies of various members indicate that for various Central Asian intellectuals on the SKSSAA the Afro-Asian Solidarity agenda went beyond the confines of inter-state diplomacy.⁴ They sought not just to emancipate their particular cultural heritages but also to revise and synthesize them, thus to reform world history and culture at large. At international meetings and conferences such as the Conference for African and Asian Writers in Tashkent (1958) the “Afro-Asian” intellectuals and scholars (writers, poets, academics trained in the humanities) acted not just as spokespersons for particular states, but also for a one-world cultural heritage or humanism that acknowledged the cultural contributions of the peoples of Afro-Asia as a whole. In the USSR this shift manifested itself in a post-Stalinist agenda of historical revisionism that was controversial both in Moscow and in the wider socialist camp.⁵

In 1956 the UNESCO General Conference adopted a Major Program for the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Values, at the initiative of India and Japan. Historians have investigated UNESCO's historical role as a space for internationalist and anti-colonial activism.⁶

³ For the way the AAPSM-agenda could be traced back to CRIT and the ARC, see Stolte in this issue.

⁴ For works looking both beyond the inter-state and metropolis-periphery axis, see “Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, Manifesto: Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa,” *Radical History Review* 131 (2018): 176–182; Tim Harper and Sunil S. Amrith, “Sites of Asian Interaction: An introduction,” *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 249–257.

⁵ See H. Jansen, “Internationalizing the *thaw*: Soviet Orientalists and the Contested Politics of Spiritual Peoples' Solidarity in Asia 1954–1959,” in *Alternative Globalizations, Alternative Globalizations: Encounters Between the Eastern Bloc and the Postcolonial South*, ed. James Mark, Steffi Marung, and Artemy Kalinovsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

⁶ See for instance Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2013); Quinn Slobodian, *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015); Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York, London: The New Press, 2007); Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

But its function as a space where the agenda of the budding AAPSM could be negotiated has yet to be seriously addressed. Similarly, there has been little attention for the role played by Soviet (or socialist) activists in this constellation, and virtually none for the role played by Soviet "Asians."⁷ This article fills this lacuna. Focusing on Soviet Central Asian intermediaries, it suggests that in the mid-1950s key actors within the SKSSAA activated UNESCO for a "universalistic" program of Afro-Asian cultural reform, the intellectual roots of which could be traced back to the radical visions circulating within various radical anti-colonial and modernist movements of the interwar period.

In UNESCO, the Soviet agenda for Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity was confronted by an increasingly unwelcoming bureaucratic regime. Western responses to the Tashkent Conference for African and Asian Writers (1958), and the UNESCO project for the "History of Asia" (1957–1962) indicate that observers failed to recognize the complex internationalism of the "Afro-Asian" activists. Trends in the human sciences encouraged an approach to world culture and history as compartmentalized into particular national heritages. This encouraged the marginalization of world culture as a space where a complex agenda of Afro-Asian Solidarity and emancipation could be advocated.⁸ While an extensive analysis of these marginalizing trends goes beyond the scope of this article, they do suggest that on the global level of International Organizations new norms of professionalism restricted the space for an ambiguous, self-reflexive politics of Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity in UNESCO.

ACADEMIC AFRO-ASIANISM: THE QUEST FOR A SHARED HERITAGE

Agreement to set up a Committee for Solidarity with the Countries of Asia (*Sovietskii Komitet Solidarnost' Strany Azii and Afriki*–SKSSAA) was reached at the Conference of Asian Countries for the Relaxation of International Tensions (CRIT), 6–10 April 1955, New Delhi.⁹ It was

⁷ The exception to this rule (although not focusing on Central Asian activists in particular) is Louis H. Porter, "Cold War Internationalisms: The USSR in UNESCO, 1945–1967" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2018).

⁸ Poul Duedahl has witnessed a similar shift with regard to UNESCO's History of Mankind project, see Duedahl, "Selling Mankind."

⁹ The introduction to the archive of the Soviet Solidarity Committee states that the protocols of this meeting have gone missing, see Predislovie Arkhiv Sovetskogo Komiteta Solidarnosti, f. 9540, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Moscow, Russia. For more on CRIT and its afterlives, see Stolte and Leow in this issue.

set up to participate in the budding AAPSM, which would be institutionalized as the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization in Cairo, December 1957.¹⁰

That the Soviet Union was allowed to take part in AAPSM-related events was not self-explanatory. In the post-war years of Stalinist Russocentric state politics, foreign observers had come to see Soviet Central Asians as representatives of the "European" Soviet state. As a consequence, Soviet Central Asians had not been invited to the first inter-governmental Conference for African and Asian Countries held in Bandung, 18–25 April 1955.¹¹ However, the Soviet Union's adoption of Nehru's Five Principles in February 1955 offered new opportunities for cultural and scientific engagement. Crucially, in the non-state realm of culture and scholarship, Central Asians were acknowledged their own, distinct Asian heritages, which granted them access to Afro-Asian arenas. After Stalin's death, Soviet cultural figures and intellectuals activated International Organizations for "soft" diplomacy beyond ideological blocs.¹² The new Soviet Party leader Nikita Khrushchev aimed to establish friendly relations in the decolonizing world. As a consequence, the visibility of the Central Asian Republics in Soviet foreign affairs increased, with Central Asian intermediaries show-casing Soviet anti-colonial commitments and successes in modern state-building.¹³

¹⁰ At the Conference for African and Asian Countries held in Cairo in December 1957 it was agreed that the Solidarity Movement would also include the countries of Africa, and the Soviet Solidarity Committee adjusted its name accordingly (Soviet Committee for Solidarity with the Countries of Asia and Africa - in this article the acronym SKSSAA will be used throughout).

¹¹ This has been described as a disappointment for the USSR, but recent scholarship has shown that the USSR actively coordinated with the PRC, see for instance Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2014); Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (London: The Bodley Head, 2012).

¹² There is a rich tradition on Soviet cultural politics in the Cold War, see for recent contributions the work of Michael David-Fox, including Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015); Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy & Western Visitors to the Soviet Union 1921–1941* (Oxford University Press, 2012). For a focus on Soviet East exchanges with the Arabic world see Masha Kirasirova, "The Eastern International: The 'Domestic East' and the 'Foreign East' in Soviet-Arab Relations, 1917–68" (PhD diss., New York University, 2014).

¹³ For recent contributions addressing the role of Central Asian intermediaries in Soviet foreign diplomacy towards the decolonizing world, see Artemy Kalinovsky, "Not some British Colony in Africa: The Politics of Decolonization and Modernization in Soviet Central Asia, 1955–1964," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2013): 191–222; Masha Kirasirova, "Sons of Muslims' in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the foreign East, 1955–1962," *Ab Imperio* 4 (2011).

It took a while for the Soviet Solidarity Committee to commence its activities. The Committee was set up in May 1956 and the first meeting of the SKSSAA Presidium was held in November of that year.¹⁴ Mirzo Tursun-Zade, Tajik poet and member of the Soviet Partisans for Peace delegation that had helped organized the CRIT in Delhi, and he was installed as the SKSSAA's President.¹⁵

Within the Presidium of the SKSSAA members of the cultural and scholarly elites of the Soviet "Asian" Republics (the Caucasus and Central Asia) were well represented. Nevertheless, at the first Presidium meeting in November there was some concern among members that the profile of the Soviet Solidarity Committee's wasn't recognizably "Asian." T.B. Berdyev, President of the Turkmen Academy of Sciences memorized how one of his French colleagues had wondered why international conferences and meetings weren't held in the Central Asian Republics but only in Moscow. Anatoly Sofronov, head of the Soviet Friendship Society with Arab Countries and vice-President of the Committee, emphasized that it was "essential" that Central Asians were to be invited to the upcoming Conference for Asian Writers in Delhi, next to the Soviet "Europeans" who had been invited already.¹⁶

The official task of the Solidarity Committee was to encourage economic, scientific and cultural cooperation between the peoples of Asia and Africa.¹⁷ One upcoming event that was given much attention during the meeting was the Conference for Asian Writers, to be held in New Delhi in December 1956. The idea for the conference had been proposed at the CRIT in Delhi, and in July of the previous summer delegations from Burma, China, Korea, Nepal and Vietnam had already congregated in New Delhi for a preparatory meeting, outlining the evaluation of "our respective literary and cultural heritages" as one of its primary aims. The conference was to generate an "atmosphere of tolerance and friendship" so that "new creative works [could] be provided and shared among the various nations . . . struggling towards a new future of peace and freedom."¹⁸

Despite the Committee's declared focus on international cultural exchanges, various SKSSAA-members suggested that the Committee's activities should also include a academic agenda that aimed to

¹⁴ See introduction to the archive. Predislovie, f. 9540, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

¹⁵ See E.P. Chelyshev, *Izbrannye trudy: tom tretii vremia i liudi* (Moscow: Nauka, 2002).

¹⁶ Stenogramma Zasedaniia Sovetskogo Komiteta Solidarnosti Stran' Azii, 1 November 1956, f.9540, op.1, d. 2, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

¹⁷ Predislovie, f.9540, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

¹⁸ As summarized in M.V. Desai, "The Asian Writers' Conference December 1956 - New Delhi," *Books Abroad* 31, no. 3 (1957): 243.

universalize world culture through the emancipation and reform of the heritages of non-Western countries. As Mirzo Tursun-Zade, Tajik poet and President of the SKSSAA suggested, the agenda of Afro-Asian Solidarity was strongly entangled with an agenda of cultural emancipation and reform: "countries want to establish their cultural traditions, elevate their economy and culture."¹⁹ Also Alexander Guber suggested that the revision of cultural heritages was needed as much as their exchange to his mind, the agenda of Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity meant not just to support "the resurrection of a downtrodden culture," but to take active steps towards the creation of a "new culture."²⁰

That the emancipation of cultural heritages constituted a key aspect of modern agendas of cultural reform was also suggested by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* (1946). In June 1955, the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had made his first diplomatic visit to the Soviet Union. That same month, Vladimir Balabushevich and Aleksei Diakov, leading Soviet indologists at the Institute for Oriental Studies (*Institut Vostokovedenie Akademii Nauk*—IVAN) in Moscow, published a review of Nehru's *Discovery of India* (1946) in *Kommunist*, the organ of the All-Union Communist Party.²¹ In the book, Nehru had advanced the idea that a science of cultural heritage (or "nationalism") could serve as an anti-dote to religious communalism, Muslim-Hindu oppositions in particular. Claiming the country "needs to get rid of the exclusiveness in thought and social habit," he had tabled the idea that a cultural history emphasizing the shared elements in the past of different communities and groups would help to bridge cultural differences and correct the "idea of ceremonial purity [that] has erected barriers against social intercourse and narrowed the sphere of social action."²²

A few years before, Soviet scholars would have discarded Nehru's views as bourgeois nationalism. But the cultural and intellectual thaw of the mid-1950s had opened new opportunities for Soviet intellectuals to expand the notion of historical materialism.²³ Now, the Soviet indologists denied Nehru's allegations that Communist Parties were

¹⁹ Stenogramma Zasedaniia, 1 November 1956, fond 9540, opis 1, delo 2, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ V. Balabushevich, A. Diakov, "Kniga o velikom indiiskom narode," *Kommunist* 32, no. 9 (1955): 97–106.

²² As quoted in Prasenjit Duara, ed., *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (London: Routledge, 2003), 37.

²³ For the effects of the thaw on Soviet historiography, see Roger D. Markwick. "Thaws and Freezes in Soviet Historiography 1953–1964," in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones (London:

"completely alienated from their national traditions."²⁴ In fact, they praised Nehru's cultural heritage agenda in terms of a universalistic humanism: "[t]hese sections are particularly interesting and characterize the author as a leading international activist and humanist, as a passionate supporter for the idea of solidarity between peoples." For the Soviet academics Nehru's humanism did not contradict the agenda of particularistic anti-colonial struggle. The reviewers framed Nehru's humanism as an anti-colonial commitment, rooted in colonial experience: "Dreaming about that time when India would throw off the yoke of colonial slavery, Nehru wrote: 'Proud of their Indian heritage, [the Indian people] will open their minds and hearts to other peoples and other nations, and become citizens of this wide and fascinating world, marching onwards with others in that ancient quest in which their forefathers were the pioneers.'"²⁵

The Soviet indologists' review suggests that, as part of the thaw, Soviet academics activated the study of cultural heritage for the construction of new solidarities between non-state communities and groups. A trend to rehabilitate the study of cultural heritage was also reflected on the Soviet academic research agenda.²⁶ Historically, strong links existed between the Soviet Academy of Sciences and Indian scholarly institutions, and the custom to invite Russian/Soviet scholars to the yearly Indian Science Congress had continued throughout the years of Stalin's rule. In August 1955 Alexander Guber was officially installed as director of the Institute of Oriental Studies (IVAN). Under his directorship the institute underwent a reorganization that rehabilitated a traditional humanities-oriented research agenda, centred on the philological study of contemporary and historical literatures, including the study of religious texts. As such the IVAN's research agenda was geared towards the academic SKSSAA agenda. Contemporaries framed the reorganization,

Routledge, 2006), 173–193. For how this affected inter-Asian dynamics, in particular Soviet relations with the PRC, see Jansen, "Internationalizing the thaw."

²⁴ Balabushevich, Diakov, "Kniga," 102.

²⁵ Ibid. The reference to humanism as a way out of colonialism resemble the visions articulated by the Asian Socialist Conference, see Lewis in this issue.

²⁶ Recent works in English that address the history of Oriental Studies in the Soviet Union are: Michael Kemper and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, eds., *Reassessing Orientalism: Interlocking Orientologies during the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2015); Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann, eds., *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011); V. Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Stéphane A. Dudoignon, "Some Side Effects of A Progressive Orientology: Academic Visions of Islam in the Soviet South After Stalin," in *After Orientalism: Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Re-appropriations*, ed. Pouillon, François and Jean-Clause Vatin (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 121–132.

in particular the rehabilitation of literature-studies as a step towards destalinization.²⁷

ACTIVATING UNESCO: SITUATING THE SOVIET "EAST" IN AFRO-ASIA

At the November 1956 meeting of the Soviet Solidarity Committee, Guber took the initiative to separate the agenda of cultural-historical revisionism from the agenda of cultural exchange. He also pointed at the potential value of UNESCO as an arena where an agenda of Afro-Asian Solidarity could be advanced, observing that this was the only international organization thus far to have developed concrete measures towards cultural-historical reform or, in his words, "national education and Enlightenment."²⁸

Guber was the right person to point the SKSSAA into the direction of UNESCO. He headed the eastern section of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (*Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo Kul'turnoi Sviazi s zagranitse*—VOKS) and participated in UNESCO conferences abroad.²⁹ At the November 1956 meeting of the SKSSAA Presidium Guber justified his plans to activate UNESCO as an arena for Afro-Asian Solidarity as a means to adjust the "un-democratic" tendencies dominating the Organization. In particular, he criticized the Organization's Eurocentric worldview, which, he stated, had become painfully apparent the previous spring at the UNESCO Regional Conference in Tokyo where Asian member-states had been greatly outnumbered by UNESCO's "European" member-states.³⁰ When the USSR became a member of the Organization, Guber was installed as a member of the Soviet editorial committee of *The Intellectual and Scientific History of Mankind*.³¹

UNESCO's *History of Mankind*-project was the brainchild of Joseph Needham, a Cambridge-educated scientist with strong connections

²⁷ H. Jansen, "Khrushchev's 'Break to the East,' Sino-Soviet Conflicts, and the Regionalization of Soviet Oriental Studies," in *In Search of Other Worlds: Essays Towards a Global Historical Reading of Area Studies*, ed. Loschke, Torsten, Katja Naumann, Matthias Middell, and Steffi Marung (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2010).

²⁸ Stenogramma Zasedaniia, 1 November 1956, f.9540, op.1, d. 2, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

²⁹ V.Iu. Afiani and V.D. Esakov, eds., *Akademiia Nauk v Resheniiax TsK KPSS* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010), 141.

³⁰ Stenogramma Zasedaniia, 1 November 1956, f.9540, op.1, d. 2, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

³¹ Afiani and Esakov, eds., *Akademiia Nauk*, 141.

among Chinese Revolutionary circles.³² In 1948 Julian Huxley, UNESCO Director General at the time, managed to get his plans through the UNESCO General Conference just before being forced to step down as Director General.³³ Huxley and Needham were old friends, and both believed history to be a central aspect of humanity's fundamental education, as a field where "a lost sense of common humanity after 1945" could be restored.³⁴ An explicit aim of *The History of Mankind*-project was to conceptualize an integrated history of mankind that highlighted the intellectual and scientific trends uniting the world's different peoples as a means to combat nationalism and Eurocentrism.³⁵ To revise world history was to change the future: as Ralph Turner, Professor at Yale and one of the project's supervisors suggested: it is from "the past from which men draw their basic judgments." In the current age, he argued, "... a conception of mankind as a unity, or as working together in community-integration through time, is a necessary intellectual achievement for the mid-twentieth century."³⁶

By 1951 the International Commission of the UNESCO-project was still far from achieving its anti-Eurocentric ideals—Syria and India were the only Eastern countries represented on the *History of Mankind*'s International Commission.³⁷ At a roundtable discussion on the *Concept of Man and the Philosophy of Education in East and West* organized in New Delhi that same year, Asian representatives resolved to postpone UNESCO initiatives to construct a new universal humanism. Most participants believed that the Western humanities were biased, and failed to sufficiently acknowledge the contribution of the East to world history and civilization.³⁸ As Jean Filliozat, Secretary General of the International Union of Orientalists remembered, one of the conclusions reached in New Delhi was that a "new universal

³² For recent scholarship on the History of Mankind project, see Paul Betts, "Humanity's New Heritage: UNESCO and the Rewriting of World history," *Past and Present*, no. 228 (2015): 249–285; Poul Duedahl, "Selling Mankind: UNESCO and the Invention of Global History, 1945–1976," *Journal of World History* 22, no. 1 (2011): 101–133.

³³ For controversies surrounding Huxley and Needham, see Duedahl, "Selling Mankind."

³⁴ As cited in Paul Betts, "Humanity's New Heritage," 253. For the Julian Huxley's worldview and his aims for UNESCO see Glenda Sluga, "UNESCO and the (One) World of Julian Huxley," *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (2010): 393–418.

³⁵ Betts, "Humanity's New Heritage"; Duedahl, "Selling Mankind."

³⁶ UNESCO Radio, "A History of Mankind," date missing, 1951, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org> (accessed on 08 February 2018).

³⁷ Duedahl, "Selling Mankind."

³⁸ Discussion on the Cultural and Philosophical Relations Between East and West, 5 December 1951, UNESDOCS, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org> (accessed 12 March 2017).

humanism” could only be created with sufficient knowledge on the whole “ensemble of human cultures,” also incorporating “elements borrowed from the various cultures of Occident and Orient”.³⁹

For Filliozat the roundtable constituted a pivotal moment in UNESCO’s history. It helped kick-start a new UNESCO program, focused on the “Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Values” (East-West Project for short).⁴⁰ According to the Indian UNESCO Commission the East-West Project proposal had been inspired by “ideas expressed, from time to time, by the Minister of Education, the Prime Minister and the Vice-President of India,” Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.⁴¹ Like Filliozat, also Maulana Azad, India’s Minister of Education and President of the UNESCO Commission regarded the East-West Project as expressive of “an Asian and African point of view on the programs and plans of UNESCO” and an important step towards overcoming UNESCO’s Eurocentric bias.⁴² Azad suggested that the East-West Project was inspired by an agenda of Afro-Asian Solidarity—the “spirit generated by the Bandung Conference.” For Azad, this spirit was at least partly revisionist. On the one hand, he thought that an international program of cultural and scientific exchange might benefit mutual understanding between peoples: “A good deal of conflict and misunderstanding between the East and the West can be removed if all that is best in these areas is made known to one another on a sufficiently large scale.”⁴³ But he also believed that UNESCO should emphasize the bonds uniting the peoples of Africa and Asia. To his mind, UNESCO had a moral obligation to help the “under-developed or undeveloped areas of the world to catch up with the more advanced countries” in the field of “education, science and culture.” Importantly, in these fields, the “voice” of African and Asian countries should be

³⁹ Report on an enquiry on the possibilities of broadening the teaching of the humanities, 2 March 1956, UNESDOCS, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org> (accessed on 22 October 2015).

⁴⁰ For the East-West Project see Laura Elizabeth Wong (2008), “Relocating East and West: UNESCO’s Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values,” *Journal of World History* 3, no. 8 (2008): 349–374; Laura Wong, “Cultural Agency: UNESCO’s Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Values, 1957–1966” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2006).

⁴¹ Report on the Second Conference of the Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO, 13 March 1956, 008 (540) MP 03, East-West Major Project, Participation India part 1 (hereafter EWMPP1-1), UNESCO Archives (hereafter UNESCO), Paris, France.

⁴² As quoted in: Report on the Second Conference of the Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO, 13 March 1956, 008 (540) MP 03, EWMPP1-1, UNESCO, Paris.

⁴³ Ibid.

heard.⁴⁴ Pointing at Bandung, Azad maintained that this implied that UNESCO should give greater attention to "the growing solidarity of these countries in world affairs"—and should seek to emphasize what united them.⁴⁵

A PEOPLES' HERITAGE FOR ASIA: ECHOES OF THE ASIAN RELATIONS CONFERENCE

While animated by the same revisionist, anti-Eurocentric spirit as UNESCO *History of Mankind*-project, Azad's plea to adjust world history with an eye to the "growing solidarity" between African and Asian countries can be situated in a longer tradition of inter-Asian debates regarding the past and future of the continent. In particular, personal linkages suggest that Azad's agenda can be situated in the legacy of the Asian Relations Conference (ARC) of 1947, and the interwar visions that shaped its agenda.⁴⁶

As it turned out, the UNESCO East-West Project drew connections between various places and historical arenas where conceptions of (Afro-)Asian unity had been negotiated. In 1957, UNESCO received a proposal from the International Council for World Affairs (ICWA), to set up an international research project entitled *The History of Asia* within the confines of the East-West Project. The project could be traced directly to the ARC. The ICWA was a non-politically affiliated institute for the research of international relations that had functioned as organizing body for the ARC held in Delhi in 1947. The ARC had brought together various Indian and Soviet representatives in UNESCO and the AAPSM. Both Maulana Azad and Evgeny Zhukov, heads of the Indian and Soviet Commissions for Cooperation with UNESCO respectively, had participated in the Asian Relations Conference. Mirzo Tursun-Zade, head of the Soviet Solidarity Committee had been installed as one of the members of the Provisional General Council of the Asian

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ For the insight that the ARC provided a crucial link between post-war debates on inter-Asian cooperation and decolonization and their interwar-predecessors, see C. Stolte, "The Asiatic Hour': New Perspectives on the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, 1947," in *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War*, ed. N. Mišković, H. Fischer Tiné, and N. Boškova, 57–75. For interwar internationalisms see Ali Raza, Franziska Roy, and B. Zachariah, *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views 1917–39* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2015). Also see C. Stolte and H. Fischer Tiné, "Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 1 (2012).

Relations Organization (ARO) the Conference had resolved to set up. The ARO had provided a connection between the Soviet Tajik poet and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who had been installed as head of the ARO Provisional Council.

In its design and orientation, the ICWA *History of Asia*-project showed strong affinity with Huxley's *History of Mankind* project. The aim of the ICWA *History of Asia* research project was to bring together an international group of scholars to revise and compose a new "standard history of Asia."⁴⁷ On the one hand, the project proposal reproduced traditional Asianist tropes, speaking of the "resurgence of Asia" as one of the "outstanding development[s]" of the 20th century.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the project approached world culture from a global, human perspective, and to highlight the "cultural contributions of Asia to human civilization." For the ICWA the research project was of global relevance, not exclusively (or primarily) Asian: "It is believed that such an approach would adequately guard against any nationalist bias of anti-west sentiments."⁴⁹

As the plan suggested, "the experience of the UNESCO Commission in preparing the *Cultural and Scientific History of Mankind* might be drawn upon and adopted with suitable modifications."⁵⁰ Indeed, the organizational set-up of the projects was similar: the *History of Asia* was to be written as a series of (five) separate volumes, plus a single-volume summarizing the main trends for a popular audience. Research would be conducted by an international collective of scholars, and was to be overseen by an international editorial board. Links between the *History of Asia* and the *History of Mankind* were also constituted by personal connections. On the *History of Asia* editorial board was the British historian Arnold Toynbee, who earlier had acted as a consultant for the *History of Mankind* project. Also the Indian historian and Indian diplomat in France, Kavalam Madhava Panikkar, can be viewed as an intermediary figure. Panikkar had been the Indian representative of the UNESCO East-West Project Advisory Board and he was also a member of the editorial board of the sixth volume of the *History of Mankind* project published in 1966.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Letter to Luther Evans, 19 October 1957, 008 (540) MP 03, EWMPP1-1, UNESCO, Paris.

⁴⁸ Memorandum of the "History of Asia Project," 19 October 1957, 008 (540) MP 03, EWMPP1-1, UNESCO, Paris.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Letter to Luther Evans from S.L. Poplai," 22 November 1957, 008 (540) MP 03, EWMPP1-1, UNESCO, Paris.

Like the *History of Mankind*, the *History of Asia* aimed to be inclusive: showing the way *all* peoples and groups had contributing to world history and cultural development.⁵² Both projects adopted a "peoples" approach to world history. As the ICWA emphasized, the aim of the project was to foresee in "the growing demand both from the peoples of Asia and from the peoples of Europe and America for a standard study of the historical evolution and cultural contribution of the peoples of Asia to world civilization."⁵³ In contrast to various interwar Asianisms, not the continent or its constituent nations were taken as the force moving history forward, but the cultural and intellectual activities of non-state communities and groups.⁵⁴ The Asian continent as a political and geographical unit provided nothing but a window on the interconnections and links between different societies and groups, illuminating a shared heritage of interlocking cultural and intellectual trends that stretched beyond national or regional boundaries.

This peoples' orientation diversified Western civilization, promising to universalize Western citizenship models. As Nehru stated in *The Discovery of India*, Western intellectuals imagined themselves as the "vanguard of an advancing civilization," while living an "artificial life which has no living contacts with the culture of the East or of the West."⁵⁵ As such it inspired both Indian and Soviet representatives participating in the AAPSM and UNESCO to activate cultural traditions as a source of modern cultural transformation and unity. In Kavalam Panikkar's historical writing, for instance, common people and groups were presented as cultural-historical agents. His *Asia and Western Dominance* (1953) argued that the heritages of "common people" served to unite not to divide world culture. Rather they shared a "substratum of values" that to a large extent "accounted for . . . Asian unity."⁵⁶ Like Nehru in *The Discovery of India*, Panikkar presented

⁵² For an exploration of *The History of Mankind* as an intellectual history, see Betts, "Humanity's New Heritage."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ For variations of Pan-Asiism and Pan-Iranism in the early 20th century see Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); S. Saaler and J.V. Koschmann, eds., *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism and Borders* (London: Routledge, 2007); Carolien Stolte, "Orienting India: Interwar Internationalism in an Asian Inflection, 1917–1937" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2013).

⁵⁵ As quoted in Duara, *Decolonization*, 35.

⁵⁶ As quoted in Christopher W.A. Szpilman, "K.M. Panikkar: 'Asia and Western Dominance,' 1953," in *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History Volume 2: 1920–Present*, ed. S. Saaler and C.W.A. Szpilman (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 284–285.

religions as an obstruction of Asian unity, in particular religions such as Hinduism and Confucianism, which he believed were “peculiar to their countries of origin and mutually incompatible.”⁵⁷ The Soviet Indologist and reviewers of Nehru’s *Discovery of India*, praised the book in particular for drawing attention to the historical contribution made by sub-state cultural and political actors—presenting this as an activist turn away from big men and their institutions.⁵⁸

At the ARC Nehru’s opening speech had talked of a “crisis” in “world history” arguing that formerly colonized Asia must take up its place in world affairs.⁵⁹ The ARC Roundtable on Cultural Problems concluded that “[h]istory needed to be rewritten” so that not the “individual national culture” but the “unity of all cultures” were emphasized: “The essence of culture lay in the fact of our realizing the oneness of mankind.”⁶⁰ As *The History of Asia*-project demonstrates, the UNESCO East-West Project provided the space to follow up on this. In the USSR, meanwhile, measures were taken to activate the Soviet Academy of Sciences in support of this revisionist agenda. In February 1956 Bobodzhan Gafurovich Gafurov, First Secretary of the Tajik Republic and Tajik historian, proposed to reorganize the IVAN as a complex research institution with an international focus: aimed to support research institutions in decolonizing countries with knowledge and expertise.

Soon after, Gafurov was established as IVAN’s director, replacing Alexander Guber; a signal to the world that in the USSR people from formerly colonized countries could take on leadership positions among “Europeans” too.⁶¹ The IVAN’s new research agenda focused on modern themes, but the course set in under Guber was preserved as well, and his efforts to re-activate traditional philological research on the cultural and religious heritages of the countries in Asia and Africa kept up. The IVAN explicitly presented itself as heir to interwar Russian Oriental Studies, which was known for its sub-state and anti-Eurocentric orientation. Changes in the IVAN’s staff embodied such spiritual continuities: in 1957 Yurii Roerikh was installed as head of the new Sector for Ancient Cultural and Spiritual traditions at the India Department. He was the son of famous painter and émigré orientalist Nikolai Roerikh, who in the interwar years been a close friend of Indian

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Balabushevich, Diakov, “Kniga,” 102.

⁵⁹ Editorial board, *Asian Relations* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948),

24.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 193.

⁶¹ For more on Gafurov see my previous work. Also see Kirasirova, “‘Sons of Muslims’ in Moscow.”

writer and Nobel-prize winner Rabindranath Tagore with whom he felt intellectual kinship.⁶²

In 1957, Gafurov became the president of the Soviet East-West Committee, newly set up under the wings of the Soviet Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO. Gafurov's personal network connected him with key figures on the SKSSAA and the *History of Asia* editorial board. First, Gafurov was an old friend of Tursun-Zade, the President of the Soviet Solidarity Committee. Upon his arrival in Moscow, Gafurov was installed as vice-President to the SKSSAA. Second, Igor Mikhailovich Reisner, the Soviet representative on the *History of Asia* editorial board was an old acquaintance of Gafurov too; he had acted as Gafurov's academic supervisor in the early 1940s and was a member of the IVAN staff.⁶³ Gafurov's historical method had been shaped in the tradition of pre-Revolutionary Orientology that had inspired Indian interwar Asianists such as Tagore. Gafurov's first book on Tajik history was written during the war and perpetuates the complex, humanistic tradition of pre-Revolutionary Orientology. At this time, censorship was low and the Institute of Oriental Studies had been evacuated from Leningrad to Tashkent—transferring the Imperial heritage of Orientology to the peripheries. Rather than emphasizing the productive role of class struggle and conflict, Gafurov's first book on Tajik history emphasizes cultural entanglement and unity, highlighting moments of cultural and intellectual synthesis brought on by encounters between wandering Sufis, Muslim court poets, and tradesmen.⁶⁴

From the start of his historical career, Gafurov framed his historical writing as a critique of Western knowledge. In 1945 he emphasized the need to highlight the heritage of the Tajik people, as a means to make up for neglects of bourgeois historians: "Ours is a responsible task: to open up the rich past of the Tajik people; a 'people without history' in the approach of bourgeois historians."⁶⁵ This peoples' focus was

⁶² Anita Stasulane, *Theosophy and Culture: Nicholas Roerich* (Rome: Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 2005), 44–56; John McCannon, "In Search of Primieval Russia: Stylistic Evolution in the Landscapes of Nicholas Roerich 1907–1914," *Cultural Geographies* 7, no. 271 (2000); for more on Tagore's views see Prasenjit Duara, "Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (2010): 963–983. For Tagore's view resonating in socialist Eastern Europe, see the contribution of Ana Jelnicar, "Srečko Kosovel and Rabindranath Tagore: Universalist Hopes from the Margins of Europe," in *The Internationalist Moment*, ed. Raza, Roy, and Zachariah.

⁶³ L.B. Aleaev, *Istoriografiia Istorii Indii* (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniia RAN, 2013), 220–221.

⁶⁴ B.G. Gafurov, *Tadzhikskii narod v bor'be za svobodu i nezavisimost' svoei rodiny* (Stalinabad: Gosizdat pri SNK Tadzhikskoi SSR, 1944).

⁶⁵ E.N. Pavlovskii, ed., *Nauka v Tadzhikistane. Pervaia Nauchnaia Sessia k XV-Letiiu Tadzhikskoi SSR* (Stalinabad, 1945), 16.

perpetuated in Gafurov's *History of the Tajik People* (1949), the first officially endorsed history of the Tajik Republic. *The History of the Tajik People* reads like an illustration of Nehru's suggestion that the liberation of Afro-Asian cultural and intellectual heritage would serve to reorient Western narratives of civilization and history. As Gafurov asserted, the aim of *The History of the Tajik People* was to adjust serious shortcomings in Western knowledge of the East: showing that Central Asian peoples all had made an "original influence on the general treasury of human culture," and the research of their historical trajectories should be supplemented with "the general moments in their histories, illuminating what united them."⁶⁶

INTIMATE CONNECTIONS: AFRO-ASIAN HUMANISM THROUGH A LOCAL LENS

In the three aforementioned history projects (*The History of the Tajik People*; *The History of Mankind*; *The History of Asia*) cultural heritage, literature in particular, served as a source of unity bridging the differences between individuals and groups. As Glenda Sluga has argued, Nehru saw UNESCO's universalism as a useful context for encouraging agendas closer to home.⁶⁷ We may assume that for Nehru, as well as Azad, an important aim was to spread an understanding of unity among the Indian population, between Muslims and Hindus in particular. For Gafurov, as for other Central Asians, the language of shared literary traditions and humanism served a similar agenda: capture the lived experience of unity across ethnic and religious divisions that marked the life of various people living in the complex culturally diverse region of Soviet Central Asia.

As part of Khrushchev's diplomatic "Break to the East," Soviet Asian intermediaries were expected to show-case successes of the Soviet "model" abroad, and to craft a favorable image of the USSR in the decolonizing countries. Historians have productively examined how this new political circumstance affected Moscow-periphery dynamics, showing how Central Asians intermediaries creatively made use of their new political leverage, and negotiated greater recognition and

⁶⁶ B.G. Gafurov, *Istoriia Tadzhijskogo Naroda v kratkom Izlozhenii. S drevneishikh vremen do velikoi oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii* 1917 g (Moscow: Gos. Izd'vo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1949), 6.

⁶⁷ Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 85.

better resources for their respective Republics.⁶⁸ Indeed, at the first SKSSAA Presidium meeting of November 1956, Anatoly Sofronov urged Central Asian representatives " . . . to tell and most of all show-case the countries of Asia the economic growth of our national Republics, of Uzbekistan and others."⁶⁹ Alexander Guber underscored that the Soviet experience contained valuable lessons for developing countries: " . . . we don't just have colossal experience with issues such as the liquidation of illiteracy in our country, but also on a whole range of concrete measures that may be useful for those countries."⁷⁰ SKSSAA discussions illustrate how Asian participants turned the agenda of Afro-Asian Solidarity to the advantage of projects closer to home.⁷¹ At this first meeting Berdyev stated, "we should learn" from the fact that there is great interest in the successes achieved in Central Asia, and he argued that this should be highlighted in the Soviet press. Garegin Sevunts, the celebrated Armenian writer, pushed this insight further, claiming the SKSSAA should have its own organ and set up its own publishing house. Mukhtar Auezov, the enigmatic Kazakh playwright suggested that, if the SKSSAA helped activate the "entire network" of Solidarity Committees, perhaps one of the next Afro-Asian Solidarity Conferences be held in one of the Republics. Tursun-Zade capitalized on Afro-Asian Solidarity to seek support for cultural and intellectual reform-agendas within the Soviet Republics, emphasizing that it was of great importance to activate the Republican intelligentsias, and to make sure that Central Asian cultural and intellectual figures should "participate on the pages of our printed press and the radio."⁷² Next to that, he suggested the SKSSAA was in need of a second vice-President, one who possessed a good working knowledge of oriental languages. His comment that the present situation (in which the Committee had Anatoly Sofronov as vice-president) was "satisfactory for now" turned historical state-periphery relations on its head, underscoring that within the SKSSAA the leading role was played by Soviet Asians.⁷³

⁶⁸ See Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2018). Also see the special issue on Russian-Eastern interactions of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 2 (2013).

⁶⁹ Stenogramma Zasedaniia, 1 November 1956, f.9540, op.1, d. 2, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ For the way Soviet cultural diplomacy was intended for a domestic audience too, see David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*.

⁷² Stenogramma Zasedaniia, 1 November 1956, f.9540, op.1, d. 2, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

⁷³ Ibid.

While Soviet Central Asians productively operated the Moscow-periphery axis, SKSSAA debates also highlighted the appeal of inter-Asian cultural entanglements intersecting the particular Moscow-Republic state dynamics. During the November 1956 meeting, A.A. Khorava, drew attention to cultural links between the Soviet Caucasus and minority communities of “muslim-Georgian” background in Iran and Turkey.⁷⁴ Berdyev added that Turkmen communities might perhaps provide access to the “progressive part of the intelligentsia” in these countries. Moreover, SKSSAA members used their new leverage not only to influence Moscow, but also their home Republics. Tursun-Zade’s claim that the Soviet Central Asian intelligentsia should be activated could also be read as a reminder to the Tajik leadership to step up the cultural education and emancipation at home. This was also the case for Mukhtar Aueзов’s claim that the visibility of the Central Asian Republics in the Soviet media should be increased. The Kazakh intellectual underscored the need to educate the Central Asian peoples in the spirit of internationalism: “the work of writers from Indonesia and India should be popularized among us too.”⁷⁵ These and other statements made during the first SKSSAA-Presidium meeting show the ambiguous nature of the language and self-representation of Central Asian intermediaries—depicting them as representatives both of the state and of a transnational non-state cultural heritage.

Many Soviet Solidarity Committee members were intellectuals, artists and writers. Mirzo Tursun-Zade, for instance, was both a representative of the Tajik Republic as well as a prize-winning poet and President of the Tajik Writers Union. His career in poetry started around the time of the Asian Relations Conference, when he published his first collection of poems on India. Contemporaries remember him as a prominent internationalist activist. His poems of the 1940s–1960s had titles such as “My Sister, Africa,” and “Voice of Asia.” Nevertheless, his writings were not unambiguous. In January 1956 he published an article on India, entitled “Our Great Friend And Neighbor” in the Tajik Party Organ *Kommunist Tajikistana*. The opening passage states that Indian culture had influenced “not just the cultural and scientific development of the peoples of East and Southeast Asia, but of the entire world.”⁷⁶ On the one hand, this passage may have intended to perpetuate an India-centric Asianism; claiming a leading role for India

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mirzo Tursun-Zoda, “Nash Velikii Drug i Sosed,” *Kommunist Tadzhikistana* (20 January 1958), 2.

in the spread of civilization across the wider Asian continent. On the other hand, the statement that India's cultural development had influenced the entire world situates this process in a one-world context: reminding the reader that cultural development is a global phenomenon that can not be traced to one country alone.

Literature scholars have long insisted on the productive aspects of ambiguity, emphasizing the ability of literary texts to invoke different, sometimes contradictory, imaginations.⁷⁷ A full analysis of the work of writers such as Tursun-Zade and Auezov is beyond the scope of this article. But there were strong affinities between the biographies of the Soviet Solidarity Committee members and while they wrote in different genres Tursun-Zade and Gafurov wrote about similar themes.⁷⁸ Both Tursun-Zade and Gafurov were born in the decade preceding the Bolshevik Revolution (1911 and 1908 respectively), and both spent most of their childhood years in rural villages that were situated in multi-lingual and ethnically mixed regions (Gafurov's mother was Uzbek and his father was Tajik). For people such as Tursun-Zade and Gafurov "international solidarity" in the sense of cultural entanglements was a lived, local reality. Both moved to the Tajik capital Stalinabad in the first years (1930–1931) after the Tajik SSR had been established. Upon arrival in the new Republic, both took up jobs as journalists writing for *Red Tajikistan*, the organ of the Tajik Communist Party. When they began their careers in the Tajik state and Communist Party organs, both had spent most of their formative years freely traversing the landmass that would from that time on be imagined as separated by the Uzbek and Tajiks Union Republics.

For people like Turzun-Zoda and Gafurov the cultural agenda of Afro-Asian Solidarity resonated with very 'close-to-home' experiences; with literature providing an important source of unity in a diverse society. In Soviet Central Asia, literary heritage was closely associated with Islam. For both Tursun-Zade and Gafurov the Islamic literary heritage was part of their upbringing. Both seem to have come from "cultured" (while poor) families and were versed in Islam.⁷⁹ Both were groomed for a career in "enlightenment" and militant-atheism in the

⁷⁷ See for the Soviet case for instance, Katerina Clark, *Moscow the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture 1931–1941* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2011).; Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁷⁸ For the insight that intimate encounters may carry complex, transgeographical meaning, see for instance Kirsty Walker, "Intimate Interactions: Eurasian Family Histories in Colonial Penang," *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012) 303–329.

⁷⁹ Roberts, "Old Elites Under Communism."

1920s (a career-path that in Revolutionary Russia was usually preserved for people knowledgeable about religions). Tursun-Zade received his secondary schooling at the Institute for Enlightenment in Tashkent and Gafurov at the Behbudi-internat in Khujand, which was named after the well-known publicist and kadi (Islamic judge) Mahmud Khoja Behbudi (1874–1919), one of the most influential spokespersons of Central Asian Islamic reform in the early 20th century.⁸⁰ In Gafurov's historical writings of the 1930s and 1940s Islamic civilization was reimagined as a source of belonging and popular unity.⁸¹ In *The History of the Tajik People* (1949) Sufi poetry in particular was presented as a unifying heritage. Appropriating the ideas of pre-Revolutionary orientalist, Gafurov emphasized that the writings of Sufi “poets” of the 11th and 12th centuries reproduced “free-thinking and humanitarian ideas” and served to unify elements of different spiritual and philosophical traditions: mentioning neo-platonism, Manichaeism, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Nestorianism, Sufism, and Ismailism.⁸² In Gafurov's approach of history then, Islamic culture and literature was essential to the understanding of Tajik history as intertwined with that of other peoples and communities in the region. The literary element in the biographies of Gafurov and Tursun-Zade suggests that they saw themselves as part of a transnational heritage or civilization as well as representatives of a particular Soviet Republic.

Literature played a central role in the self-understanding and self-representation of SKSSAA-members. Their literary profiles allowed them to present themselves as representatives of states as well as representatives of a global Peoples' Republic of Letters.⁸³ During the SKSSAA meeting in November 1956 Mukhtar Auev emphasized the added value of literature: writers could uncover realities that would otherwise remain hidden from view, they could get “beyond other

⁸⁰ For more on this internat and the early Soviet elite environment where Gafurov grew up, see Flora J. Roberts, “Old Elites Under Communism: Soviet Rule In Leninobod” (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2016). For the Jadids see the work of Adeeb Khalid, including his most recent book Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire and Revolution in the Early UUSR* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁸¹ For interpretations of modernity in Central Asian Islam see the work of Stéphane A. Dudoignon. For instance Dudoignon, ed., *Devout Societies vs. Impious States? Transmitting Islamic Learning in Russia, Central Asia and China, through the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2004). For Islam as secularized cultural heritage see Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

⁸² Gafurov, *Istoriia Tadjikskogo Naroda*, 272–274.

⁸³ For the term “People's Republic of Letters” see Rossen Djagalov's analysis of the Afro-Asian Writers Movement, see Djagalov, “The People's Republic of Letters: Towards a Media History of Twentieth-Century Socialist Internationalism” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2011).

established connections" and "tell you much about every country."⁸⁴ The biography of Tursun-Zade suggests that for him, the universalistic cultural agenda of Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity did not contradict the more particularistic agenda of Soviet state building and that the productive use of literary ambiguity allowed him to accommodate a lived experience of a multi-layered, dynamic identity with the demands of Soviet foreign policy.⁸⁵ Perhaps it was this productive ambiguity that Tursun-Zoda sought to preserve when he urged the SKSSAA that all publications of the Soviet Solidarity Committee were to be written in an "artistic literary style."⁸⁶ From this perspective, the AAPSM framework allowed Soviet Central Asian intellectuals to sustain and reform a literary identity that cut across modern state boundaries, and to emancipate this heritage as a source of solidarity between different communities and groups.⁸⁷

In autumn 1958, the Soviet Union hosted the Conference for African and Asian Writers in Tashkent, 7–17 October.⁸⁸ The conference welcomed over 200 people and UNESCO was one of its major sponsors. Its set-up and location in the capital of the Uzbek Republic served to peripheralize Moscow, and flagged the active role of Afro-Asia as a space of historical development and progress. Given Tashkent's reputation as a modern Soviet city and as the first Bolshevik stronghold in the former Emirate of Bukhara, it signalled that decolonization and modernization could be achieved on a non-capitalist basis.⁸⁹ In his opening speech Nuritdin Mukhitdinov, former First Secretary of the Soviet Uzbekistan and member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of All-Union Communist Party, highlighted the new centrality of Afro-Asia in world affairs, and

⁸⁴ Stenogramma Zasedaniia, 1 November 1956, f.9540, op.1, d. 2, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

⁸⁵ This further elaborates Clark's insight that even in the most "anti-cosmopolitan" period of Stalin's rule "nationalist or imperial trends coexisted with, and were imbricated with, some form of cosmopolitanism," see Clark, *Moscow the Fourth Rome*, 4.

⁸⁶ Stenogramma Zasedaniia, 1 November 1956, f.9540, op.1, d. 2, SKSSAA, GARF, Moscow.

⁸⁷ For a comparison with literary imaginations of the future for Afro-Asia / the Third World in the work of Marxist writers in Pakistan, see Raza in this issue.

⁸⁸ In my analysis of the Tashkent Conference I build on the work of others, including Duncan M. Yoon "Our Forces Have Redoubled": World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau," *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 233–252; Djagalov, "The People's Republic of Letters"; Constantin Katsakioris, "l'Union Soviétique et les intellectuels Africains: Internationalisme, panafricanisme et négritude pendant les années de la décolonisation, 1954–1964," *Cahiers de monde russe* 47, no. 1 (2006): 15–32.

⁸⁹ Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging A Soviet City, 1930–1966* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

encouraged the participants to actively engage with one another to “still better determine your place in the common struggle of all progressive mankind for peace.”⁹⁰ Mukhitdinnov described the writers from Africa and Asia as peoples standing in a long historical tradition of shared history and culture: “The peoples of the East played and continue to play a very important part in world history. Like the peoples of Europe and the other continents, they have for ages been creating invaluable material and spiritual wealth, which has become part of the treasure-store [sic] of world culture and civilization.”⁹¹

While institutionally separate, in the minds of various representatives of the Colombo powers, the UNESCO agenda of cultural-historical revisionism was closely connected to the unifying aims of the Afro-Asian Writers Conference. Burma, as well as India, enthusiastically supported the agenda of cultural historical reform as an asset to contemporary agendas of Afro-Asian cultural exchange.⁹² While U Nu, Prime Minister of Burma, was unable to attend the Conference he nevertheless sent an enthusiastic message of greetings in which he described the current generation of African and Asian writers as carriers of a long, shared cultural heritage. “Generally speaking, the peoples of Asia and Africa have comparatively recently shaken off their lethargic inertia in the intellectual, esthetic and spiritual sphere—an inertia forced on them in many cases by alien influences—and have either embarked on new and wonderful adventures of the mind and the spirit, or re-awakened to and recovered their ancient heritage, which in turn is inspiring them to produce a coherent and significant fusion of the old and the new.”⁹³

While U Nu’s message of greetings was infused with Asianist rhetoric, his representation of Asia as stifled by the yoke of colonization was not intended as a plea to return towards a romanticized past. He, like Mukhitdinnov, approached the Conference as a moment of reform and modernization, as a chance for African and Asian writers to

⁹⁰ Speech Mukhitdinnov at the First Session Asian-African Writers Conference, 7 October 1958, 008 (470) MP 03, East-West Major Project, Participation USSR part 1 (hereafter: EWMPPUSSR-1), UNESCO, Paris.

⁹¹ Speech Mukhitdinnov, 7 October 1958, 008 (470) MP 03, EWMPPUSSR-1, UNESCO, Paris.

⁹² That the search for a shared heritage was central to the Third World project has been argued by Prashad, see his *The Darker Nations*. For community building being as part of the postcolonial project also see Christopher Lee, *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), esp. the introduction.

⁹³ Message of Greetings from the Prime Minister of the Union of Burma, 7 October 1958, 008 (470) MP 03, EWMPPUSSR-1, UNESCO, Paris.

collectively negotiate a shared cultural heritage and position in world civilization. As he optimistically claimed, "a great mood had arisen for discussion, for comparison of viewpoints and attitudes and for mutual exhortation."⁹⁴ Similarly, in his speech Mukhitdinov framed the Conference as a humanist moment; addressing the audience as a community of people who had "chosen to devote [their] lives to the lofty ideas of humanism."⁹⁵ In the sphere of culture, Central Asian activists could present themselves as modern actors in their own right, and Tashkent as a center of international engagement and renewal, a progressive Afro-Asian "humanism," rather than only a Soviet "model" for decolonizing countries.

PROFESSIONALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS: MARGINALIZING THE SPIRIT OF AFRO-ASIAN PEOPLES' SOLIDARITY IN UNESCO

The idea that cultural heritage served to unite the different peoples of Afro-Asia was contested within the AAPSM. The Chinese People's Republic (PRC), for instance, was critical of Soviet attempts at historical revisionism, with Chairman Mao rejecting the narrative of the "spiritual unity" of peoples as contradictory to socialism, and a continuation of imperialist practices.⁹⁶ An active supporter of "Bandung" internationalism, the PRC leadership had supported its efforts to improve Afro-Asian cultural exchange from the beginning. For various reasons, however, the PRC leadership resisted the Soviet efforts at cultural-historical revisionism. In the late 1950s critiques of Soviet revisionism in the PRC rose and in 1958 the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent received strong-worded criticism in the Chinese literary press.⁹⁷ The PRC was not the only critic of an Afro-Asian cultural reform agenda. At the Afro Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) in Cairo, December 1957, African delegates criticized Indian rallying calls for cultural reform, suggesting that more immediate measures were needed if independence from colonial rule were to be achieved.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Message of Greetings, 7 October 1958, 008 (470) MP 03, EWMPPUSSR-1, UNESCO, Paris.

⁹⁵ Speech Mukhitdinov, 7 October 1958, 008 (470) MP 03, EWMPPUSSR-1, UNESCO, Paris.

⁹⁶ For PRC critiques of Soviet revisionism that situate debates about cultural history at the center of the Sino-Soviet rivalry, see Jansen, "Internationalizing the *thaw*."

⁹⁷ Ibid. For an account of Chinese internationalist enthusiasm, see Leow in this issue.

⁹⁸ As is suggested for instance J.S. Friedman, "Reviving Revolution: the Sino-Soviet Split, the 'Third World,' and the Fate of the Left, Volume I" (PhD Dissertation, Princeton

Inter-Asian conflict may have had an effect on the AAPSM agenda. But intellectual trends and currents also obstructed the inter-Asian initiatives to revise world history in the name of Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity. First of all, many Western observers did not always recognize the non-state dimension of the Afro-Asian heritage and humanist projects. Political scientist G.A. von Stackelberg, for instance, perceived the Tashkent Conference strictly in terms of Moscow's state interests, framing the event as nothing but a great opportunity for Soviet propaganda abroad.⁹⁹ Failing to recognize the Conference's self-proclaimed aims and purposes, Von Stackelberg argued that its greatest significance was that it allowed the USSR to be "represented at the next conference of Afro-Asian states."¹⁰⁰ In Von Stackelburg's view a "realistic" analysis of the event conflated the voice of cultural and intellectual elites with the political interests of nation-states. For instance, to back up his claim that certain delegates disagreed with the "concept of the unity and solidarity of writers, which dominated the conference," Von Stackelberg quoted the Indian writer K.L. Shridharani who said that "[s]uch conferences as these in Tashkent constitute a challenge for Indian writers."¹⁰¹ Von Stackelburg did not question the author's choice to depict India's writers as representatives of the Indian state instead of a larger Peoples' Republic of Letters. Moreover, he explained the author's comment as a defence of art for art's sake, signifying that "a writer is essentially an individual and that this individuality is what makes his work valuable."¹⁰²

Second, and as Poul Duedahl has also demonstrated, the intellectual fashion in UNESCO worked against the one-world humanism that had inspired the *History of Mankind*.¹⁰³ Within the Organization Julian Huxley's universalistic aspirations had been contested from the very beginning. Key-figures executing the *History of Mankind*- and East-West Projects were sceptical about Huxley's hopes that a one-world humanism or cultural and scientific history could be attained. In 1947 already, Jacques Havet, future director of the East West Project, had dismissed Huxley's "scientific humanism" arguing that the best

University, 2011); Djagalov, "The People's Republic of Letters." See McGann in this issue for a more complex picture of Indian-African interactions.

⁹⁹ Appendix to Letter from G. Frumkin to J. Havet, 27 December 1958, 008 (470) MP 03, EWMPPUSSR-1, UNESCO, Paris.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Duedahl, "Selling Mankind," 132.

UNESCO could do was to strive towards a "conscious pluralism."¹⁰⁴ Similar sentiments were voiced years later by Caroline Ware, editorial coordinator for the sixth volume of the *History of Mankind*. In a letter to the Dutch historian Jan Marinus Romein, she stated that if she would have any disagreement with Julian Huxley "it would not be on the absolute merits of the Russian or Marxian or Lysenkan position or on any specific point, but on the basic issue of whether there is only one way to perceive truth or many ways."¹⁰⁵

In this intellectual climate Gafurov's attempts to orient UNESCO programs towards the creation of a shared "new" cultural heritage did not prove easy.¹⁰⁶ In 1958, around the time of the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent, Gafurov wrote to several UNESCO departments, trying to open up space to disseminate the achievements of the Conference. In a letter to Rudolf Salat, Director of the Department for Cultural Cooperation, he argued, it "would hardly be right or expedient to concern ourselves solely with the past, leaving all the cultural values that are created in the present and in different countries out of consideration."¹⁰⁷ To support the mutual understanding between peoples, Gafurov's proposed, UNESCO should pay greater attention to the works of modern Asian and African writers such as Mukhtar Auezov, which would acquaint the UNESCO readership with the "the life and disposition of the many-numbered peoples of the Orient living on the territory of the USSR."¹⁰⁸

In his proposal Gafurov had presented the Soviet Central Asian writers as representatives of the "Orient" - an ambiguous term that acknowledged the way Asian and African writers represented an imagined reality transcending the boundaries between particular countries. The poetics of Gafurov's phraseology was lost on the UNESCO staff and soon got mired in the ordering principles of the UNESCO bureaucracy. First Michel Dard, head of the Division for

¹⁰⁴ As quoted in Wong, "Cultural Agency," 48.

¹⁰⁵ "Letter #164 from Caroline F. Ware to Jan Romein," 17 July 1961, Archief Jan Romein, inventory number 115, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (ISG), Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

¹⁰⁶ Here I reference Wong's description of Eastern European activists within UNESCO who tried to have the implicit purpose of the East West Project, i.e., the creation of "new" mutual values, be acknowledged in the project's name. See Wong, "Cultural Agency," 87-88.

¹⁰⁷ In doing so, he advised, attention should be on the cultural values that were currently being "created," for it were these, he believed, that attracted most distrust and misunderstanding. Letter from Gafurov to Rudolf Salat, 24 September 1958, UNESCO 008 (470) MP 03 EWMPPUSSR-1, UNESCO, Paris.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Cultural and International Exchanges, failed to recognize Gafurov's reference to the African and Asian writers as representatives of a literary or spiritual "Orient." In fact, he responded to Gafurov's letter that UNESCO could not afford to take on a role of "a universal organism for the dissemination of national cultures," thus reducing the idea of an ephemeral transnational "Orient" to a community of political nation states.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Roger Caillois, head of the Literature Section, failed to grasp the Conference's *raison d'être* when he responded that the publication of national literatures wasn't UNESCO's task and recommended Gafurov would turn to organizations such as the British Council or l'Alliance française.¹¹⁰ As the response of these UNESCO functionaries suggest, the UNESCO bureaucratic regime responded to the political reality of fixed inter-state borders, not to the sub-state imaginations that blurred the boundaries between peoples and states.

Added to Gafurov's difficulties navigating the UNESCO institutional structure was a growing trend in world scholarship towards compartmentalization or regionalization.¹¹¹ In the late 1950s already trends in the UNESCO East-West Program reflected the tendency of social sciences to understand the world as a series of fixed entities that could be scientifically analyzed and compared. This trend was already manifest in the 1957 description of the UNESCO East-West Project by Luther Evans, UNESCO Director General from 1953 onwards, that was published in the Delhi-based journal *March of India*. As Evans claimed, the East-West Project had "two civilizations" as its focus: Asia, which he claimed could also be defined as the "East" or "Orient" on the one hand, and "the West" on the other hand, which he believed encompassed "all the cultures of Europe and the Americas."¹¹² While Evans claimed that "UNESCO is, and has been for years, well aware that 'cultural regions' are a relative concept," he restricted this notion to the socio-economic level, quoting Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's speech at the 1951 *Humanism and Education in East and West* roundtable, that "[t]he world is unified physically but is mentally

¹⁰⁹ Letter to J. Havet from Michel Dard, 3 November 1958, 008 (470) MP 03 EWMPPUSSR-1, UNESCO, Paris.

¹¹⁰ Letter to J. Havet from Roger Caillois, 3 November 1958, 008 (470) MP 03 EWMPPUSSR-1, UNESCO, Paris.

¹¹¹ Timothy Mitchell, "The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science," in *UCIAS Edited Volume 3: The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David Szanton (2003), article 3.

¹¹² "A Major Project in UNESCO'S Program" article by Luther H. Evans, 17 January 1957, 008 (540) MP 03, EWMPP1-1, UNESCO, Paris.

divided."¹¹³ This approach of world culture should be contrasted to the way cultural history was approached within the ICWA *History of Asia*-project. Crucially, in the ICWA plans for the *History of Asia*, the Asian continent functioned as a window on broader potentially all-world processes of human development and integration. This allowed historians to approach peoples as cultural and historical agents, "contributing" to a wider, integrated world history and culture. In Evans' description of the East-West Project, by contrast, Asia functioned as a culturally bounded unit, comparable on the social level but culturally distinct.

In the next years, changes in India's political climate came to affect the agenda of the East-West Project, encouraging the trend towards compartmentalization. Azad passed away in 1958, and by the late 1950s Nehru's influence in the Indian Congress Party began to wane. Right-wing elements capitalized on India's political difficulties, in particular the growing conflicts between China and India that culminated in the Chinese-Indian border war of 1962.¹¹⁴ As India's foreign politics drifted towards the West, the Indian UNESCO Commission came to support an Asian history project that no longer had as its primary aim to actively transcend the boundaries between peoples, states and regions.

In August 1960 India's UNESCO Commission informed the East-West Secretariat that the plans for the *History of Asia* were being reconsidered. In December 1961, an *Asian History Congress* convened in New Delhi. When comparing the work plan of the *History of Asia* book project and that of the *Asian History Congress* a few differences stand out. First, the *Asian History Congress* was organized not by the ICWA but by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). The ICCR was officially set up in 1950, on the initiative of Azad, and with an aim to establishing closer cultural relations between India and neighbouring countries in the East and West.¹¹⁵ Second, the *Asian History Congress* was more regionally focused than the *History of Asia* project had been. In his inaugural address of 9 April 1950, Azad had hinted that initially, the ICCR had aimed to focus on closer relations between India and its neighbouring countries in Asia and the Middle East. While Azad had welcomed the "removal of all the territorial and geographical limitations on the activities of the council" he suggested the expansion of ICCR activities should take place only

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ See Benjamin Zachariah, *Nehru* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹¹⁵ "Proposal for setting up an Institute of Historical Studies in India," undated, 008 (540) MP 03, EWMPP1-1, UNESCO, Paris.

gradually. As such the shift from the ICWA to the ICCR mirrored the trend in UNESCO to move away from Huxley's "one-worldism" and to reaffirm regional boundaries. The new regionalism was not complete however, and reflected Cold War divisions: Gafurov was the only Soviet delegate that had been invited to the *Asian History Congress*, while European scholars from capitalist countries were invited.

Moreover, in their aims for the Congress, the ICCR was less radically revisionist than the ICWA had been. On the one hand, the *Asian History Congress*' work plan stated that the Congress aimed "to encourage the research and study of the History of the peoples of Asia as a whole."¹¹⁶ At the same time the integrative aims of the Congress were modest: the organizers merely stated that it was the sponsors' "hope" that the Congress would "facilitate attempts at integrated interpretations of the various aspects of historical development in Asia."¹¹⁷ Their claim that the Congress "might stimulate interest in comparative studies" suggests that in its new form the *History of Asia* was imagined as the history of separate communities and groups between whom there were few fuzzy edges.¹¹⁸

CONCLUSION

This article has filled a lacuna in current writing about UNESCO by showing how the organization was activated in support of an agenda of Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity that aimed to establish a shared cultural heritage and humanism for Afro-Asia. While central to various Asian states' designs for the future of Afro-Asia, this revisionism was controversial within the wider Afro Asian Peoples' Solidarity Movement. Focusing on the international research project to revise the *History of Asia* it has demonstrated that within UNESCO the revisionist agenda of cultural emancipation and integration became strongly influential, and came to inspire the program for the Mutual Appreciation of the Cultural Values of East and West (1957–1967) in particular.

The biographies of Central Asian intellectuals on the Soviet Solidarity Committee illustrate the complex attitude of Soviet "Asian" cultural elites towards questions of nationalism, anti-imperialism and

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ "Asian History Congress December 9–13," undated, 008 (540) MP 03, EWMPP1-1, UNESCO, Paris.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

internationalism. While in the words of Francine Hirsch these figures were "doubly assimilated," representing the state both at the level of the Soviet Republic and the wider Soviet Union at large, they were more than state representatives.¹¹⁹ These intellectuals boasted an additional profile as culture workers or intellectual representatives of an Afro-Asian Peoples' Republic of Letters. The intellectual traditions in which these figures were educated were at least partly shaped in pre-Revolutionary visions of modernity that circulated in networks of radical Asian cultural reformers and were often highly ambiguous about the role of the state in societal progress. Mirzo Tursun-Zade, Mukhtar Auezov and Bobodzhan Gafurov all declared to be working towards a new, anti-Eurocentric reading of world history and world humanism. On the level of poetics the self-presentation of the Central Asian intellectuals on the Soviet Solidarity Committee produced an imaginary landscape that united the life-worlds of peoples and groups across and beyond the borders of federal states and nations.

Also the UNESCO "East-West" project preserved and encouraged a lived sense of transnational unity and solidarity, against the current of religious communalism and separatist nationalism. Inter-Asian conflicts most probably contributed to the decline of the universalistic agenda of African and Asian culture building. However, as the fate of the *History of Asia* project suggests, global intellectual trends obstructed the international negotiation of a shared transnational heritage and humanism. Also within UNESCO this agenda was controversial, soliciting criticism from various sides. While it took more than political conflict to erode the spirit of Afro-Asian Solidarity, in the 1960s intellectual regimes of professionalization in UNESCO helped undermine the spread of a humanist outlook on world affairs.

¹¹⁹ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2005).