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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

LOCAL MODERN: EXPLORING VERNACULAR CULTURES ACROSS CENTRAL EURASIA

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Over the last two decades, the study of processes of vernacularisation has gained considerable traction especially among linguists, literary studies experts, and historians of Europe and South Asia. However, to date we know of no significant effort to bring into conversation and synchronize the historiographies of vernacularisation across diverse linguistic and cultural areas encompassing Central Eurasia. This can be achieved by promoting a dialogue between scholars specializing in the study of areas, in which equally significant movements of vernacularisation are known to have taken place in the modern period, especially among the Muslim-majority regions and Turkic-speaking communities of Russia, Central Asia, and China.

While facilitating exchange between experts of different area studies, the proposed conference is designed to expand the current academic commentary on vernacularisation by drawing on the study of imperial history, literature, and identity formations. This approach is intended to allow the exploration of a territory of historical inquiry yet uncharted: the entanglements of local systems of knowledge with competing ideologies of sovereignty, writing cultures, practices of communal organization and visions of the self.

This international conference sets for itself the task to initiate a conversation between scholars specializing in different linguistic areas, literary traditions, and writing practices which once fell under the rubric of 'Soviet nationalities studies.' Invited speakers are encouraged to reflect comparatively and across genres so as to add a new interpretive dimension to the current historiography on vernacularisation and modernity. More specifically, the proposed event is designed to bring together academics specializing in the history and the literatures of modern Central Eurasia who are willing to reflect on what processes of linguistic and literary realignment might signify for local communities, individuals, and their systems of knowledge.

ABSTRACTS

Dr. Naomi Caffee | Assistant Professor, Reed College

Writing Central Asia in Russian: Language, Place, and Displacement in Post-Soviet Russophone Literature

What “makes” a place? What kind of place is Central Asia? What does it mean to be Central Asian, for whom, and to whom? These questions frame the topic of my paper, which examines constructions of place in the works of Russophone writers from post-Soviet Central Asia. I will be focusing on the authors’ engagement with Central Asia as a “storied place” — that is, a place formed by narratives and other modes of representation. I investigate how authors assemble or stage the interactions of different representations of Central Asia and Central Asian-ness, invoking the ways Central Asia has been experienced, remembered, created, and recreated at various times and places throughout history. This leads to broader considerations of how Central Asian Russophone writers situate themselves between local and global contexts, and how they navigate the opposing gravitational pulls of cosmopolitanism and vernacularization. I argue that, as mobile, multilingual subjects writing in a former colonial language, who are plugged into broader global literary networks yet increasingly concerned with local communities, they employ strategies of poetic place-making in order to challenge existing paradigms of Central Asian-ness and pave the way for new kinds of radical embeddedness, introducing new possibilities for identity and belonging. The result is a process of literary place-making not limited to “what the text and the place are doing...and doing to each other,” to quote the theorist Bertrand Westphal (*Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, 2011), but which is also dependent on the active role of culturally hybrid subjectivities and perspectives.

Dr. Benedetta Contin | Assistant Professor, University of Vienna

Realism in the Aftermath of the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934): The Armenian Way to Challenge Aesthetics

In 1934 the Union of Soviet Writers of Armenia was founded by the Party, in order to provide aesthetic guidelines of preference that corresponded with the state’s ideology. In the aftermath of this event many writers were victims of the Stalinist purges and exiled or put to death for committing the crime of bourgeois nationalism. Many authors whose works were banned from Soviet Armenia and Stalinist Russia published in the United States and Middle East or in Soviet Armenia by means of underground self-publications (*samizdat*). Within the Union there coexisted two main theoretical branches or groups, at least at the beginning of its foundation. On the one hand, there were partisans of a more universal socialist literature and on the other hand, there were supporters of a literature based on ethnical and local models. Between the first and the second congress of the Union, respectively in 1934 and 1946, the faction of the ‘Nationalists’ and that of the ‘Proletarians’ or ‘Internationalists’ continued to oppose each other. This confrontation strongly affected the style, topics and language of the literary works produced in this period. Within this framework, my talk aims to explore the relation between ideology and language, as well as between language and ethnicity through the analysis of some samples of literary works produced in the thirties and forties of the 20th century.

Dr. Jeanine Dağyeli | Assistant Professor, University of Vienna/Austrian Academy of Sciences

What is the Vernacular? Language Politics and the Breaking up of the Language Continuum in Central Asia

This presentation examines the seemingly paradoxical trajectories of the growing importance of vernacular Turkic language variants in late 19th and early 20th centuries' Central Asian non-elite literary production on the one hand, and the loss of linguistic diversity during this vernacularisation, especially during the first Soviet decades, on the other. The loss of significance of the Persian language in Central Asia is conventionally attributed to the colonial conquest in the aftermath of which Russian officials employed Tatar translators to communicate with the local population, and to the gradual ousting of an allegedly foreign, elite language to the benefit of vernacular language variants. For many parts of southern Central Asia, the assumption of a Turkic vernacular substituting an elite Persian language is problematic, not least because Persian variants were the vernacular for parts of the population.

If we look at popular literary texts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the notion of an emerging vernacular becomes even more complex. From the later 18th century onwards, previously orally transmitted, non-elite text genres were increasingly put into writing. This allows us glimpses into the processes of mutual linguistic and stylistic shifts, borrowings and interactions between Persian and Turkic language variants on a demotic level. Far from being the standardised, unified languages of later decades, the language ecology of 19th and early 20th century Central Asia was instead characterised by a continuum of both Turki/Chaghatay and Persian language variants (complemented by some smaller languages) that only gradually gave way to nationalist language politics during the early Soviet period. Denounced as language decline and incorrect commingling of grammar and words by modernists and philologists alike, this continuum was apparently accepted as means of communication by the main target audience of the texts. The Arabic script that does not show most vowels so crucial to Turkic language variants and that was therefore decried as deficient for language development by 20th century modernists furthermore fostered a "silent vernacularisation" by glossing over dialectal differences and allowing people to pronounce the vowels of words as they would in daily parlance.

On the basis of popular 19th/early 20th century literature, this presentation will discuss changes in the language ecology of what is today Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and analyse the antipodal trends of linguistic *Proletkult* and Internationalism which competed for hegemony in their ambivalent effects on language.

Dr. Michael Erdman | Curator, The British Library

Vehicularizing the Vernacular: Popularizing Vernacular Languages in Soviet Turkic Communities

In the histories of many linguistic communities, the concept of the vernacular is a bit of a fiction. While providing a useful counterpoint to the literary, it can mask considerable intervention and management aimed at the production of uniformity, simplicity, and malleability. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, large-scale political, aesthetic, and ideological movements swept across many Turkic communities, often motivated by populist, if not nationalist, sentiments. Among the concerns of these movements' members was the purportedly unsuitable nature of literary languages for contemporary communication. Activists proposed a variety of innovations, alterations, and radical reformations to narrow the gap between the elite and the popular, usually with the aim of addressing, or incorporating, non-elite audiences. In the process, they created new systems of communication, frequently touted as vernacular or popular. Despite their names, they were often as much of an artificial construct as their elite counterparts, failing to reflect any one given speech community in its historical context.

In the present paper, I investigate the process of selling the later iterations of such vernaculars to the masses they were meant to reflect. By focusing on the Soviet Turkic periodical press in the 1920s and early 1930s, I will track the efforts undertaken by intellectuals, writers, apparatchiks, and editors to convince various populations to adopt new, nationally-identified vernaculars as markers of their identities. I will rely on periodicals from Uzbekistan, Tatarstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Bashkiria, Crimea, and Azerbaijan, focusing on both the form and content of articles about language and script. I will explore their delineation of alien and authentic within the categories of lexicography, phonology, and syntax. I will also

draw attention to their use of bespoke orthographic systems intended to highlight the vernacular and play down the literary, simultaneously establishing a benchmark for the transliteration of the vernacular in the latter part of the 1920s.

Importantly, this article takes up one of the many criticisms embedded in Devin DeWeese's address "It was a Dark and Stagnant Night ('til the Jadids Brought the Light)" concerning a more critical approach to language change in Central Asia. It also mirrors, in an exceptionally limited fashion, the work completed by Geoffrey Lewis in his seminal *The Turkish Language Reform*. By narrowing in on publications of mass appeal – magazines – I aim to demonstrate how purportedly democratic movements can become, or even be conceived as, effective mechanisms of state control.

Dr. Christopher Fort | Assistant Professor, American University of Central Asia

Witnessing the Past: Abdulla Qahhor's Tales from the Past and Soviet Uzbek Subjectivity in 1930s-1960s

This paper examines the final work of Soviet Uzbek author Abdulla Qahhor, *Tales from the Past* (*O'tmishdan ertaklar*, 1965), an episodic autobiographical novella that, according to the author and his readers at the time, "unmasks" the evils of pre-Soviet Central Asia in order to justify the post-revolutionary Soviet state. The paper uses the example of Qahhor's novella to argue that the author, and other Soviet Uzbek writers like him who wrote similar autobiographical pieces between the 1930s and 1960s, had another, less discussed goal with his autobiography: to publicly present himself as a Soviet citizen through the act of witnessing and suffering a cruel pre-Soviet past. With this, I suggest that Soviet Uzbek men of letters pioneered a mode of Soviet subjectivity parallel to the better-known subjectivity studied by Russianists. Whereas the Russian authors and public figures analyzed by the Soviet subjectivists typically represented themselves as revolutionaries who constantly struggled between the Marxist-Leninist dialectic poles of spontaneity and consciousness, Uzbek authors like Qahhor presented themselves in these narratives of the pre-Soviet past as passive witnesses, as Soviet new men awaiting the revolution in order to achieve self-actualization. The paper focuses on Qahhor's *Tales from the Past* as particularly exemplary of this parallel mode of public self-representation, but I also demonstrate the popularity of witnessing as an act demonstrating Soviet citizenship among Uzbek authors throughout the 1930s and 1960s and tease out the origins of this form of witnessing in pre-Soviet Uzbek writing.

Dr. Svetlana Jacquesson | Excellence and Key Researcher, Palacky University Olomouc

When Epics Are Performed in Writing

In this presentation I explore the relationship between textualisation, i.e. the written codification of oral lore, and vernacularisation, i.e. the admission of local languages first to literacy (literisation in Pollock's conceptualization) and their simultaneous or subsequent promotion as the preferred vehicle of literary forms (literarisation according to Pollock again). I foreground the massive 1920s campaigns for folklore collection – and more precisely the collection of epic lore – as a key site for understanding literisation and literarisation in Central Asia, and I focus on the Kyrgyz Manas epic. The first and in many ways most complete transcripts of the epic were produced in the Arabic script in the second half of the 1920s. This was a shoddy case of literisation given the limited capacities of the Arabic script to capture the peculiarities of oral or spoken Kyrgyz and the writing habits of the scribe partaking of the then wide spread written conventions of Chaghatay. Nonetheless, these transcripts were quickly turned into a cultural heritage and subjected to a series of failed and successful literarisations, i.e. they were used for the production of a national epic. Three of these attempts that took place respectively in 1935-1940, 1958-1960 and 1995-2014 are well documented and in all three of them the practices of literarisation were subjected to the close scrutiny of the local literary and political elite. Without surprise, the three versions of literarisation differ significantly from each other or, as Lauri Honko (2000) suggests, in each of these versions the epic was performed in writing differently. It is by comparing these different written performances of the epic and the actors and practices involved in them that I try to tease out the ways in which vernacularisation was understood in early Soviet Central Asia and how it was used locally in the ideational and discursive invention of modern communities and cultures.

Dr. Emily Laskin | Post-Doctoral Fellow, NYU Jordan Center

To the Center of the Periphery: Abdulrauf Fitrat's „Tales of an Indian Traveler“

This paper examines one of the polemics of Abdulrauf Fitrat, the book *Bayanat-i Sayyah-i Hindi* (*Tales of an Indian Traveler*, 1911). Written originally in Persian and drawing on early twentieth-century debates between *qadim* (traditionalist) and *jadid* (reformer) thought in Central Asia, the book provides exhaustive descriptions of life of Fitrat's native Bukhara through the eyes of a fictional traveler from India. My examination of this texts belongs to a project which looks more broadly at how Central Asian intellectuals wrote back to Europe and Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The results of the Russian conquest of the region were mixed for jadidist reformers, like AbdurauF Fitrat, who found nearly every aspect of life in his native Central Asia inferior to recent European achievements in governance, medicine, philosophy, even as he strove for his region's independence from imperialism and colonization.

This paper explores the relationship between Fitrat's choice of language (Persian was the prestige literary language of a region which encompassed and stretched beyond Central Asia), literary form (the travelogue was closely associated with imperial expansion), and political geography (Fitrat was interested in locating Central Asia in relation to regional and global political power). These issues, taken together, reveal Fitrat's concern with Central Asia's relationship to the broader Muslim and Asian worlds, as well as a self-reflexive tendency to compare Central Asia's social, economic, religious, and political situations to those in other neighboring regions. Meanwhile, *Tales of an Indian Traveler* imitates not only Russian and British travelogues about Central Asia, but also contemporaneous fictional travelogues from Qajar Iran, linking his own work both generically and in its self-critical orientation to literary developments in neighboring Muslim regions. Finally, in critiquing his own society while using a traveler from the east, rather than the west (or Russia in the north) to provide an evaluative gaze, Fitrat's *Tales of an Indian Traveler* represents a Central Asia that looked both inward, toward its own social problems and developments, and outward, toward its connections to and affinities with other parts of the Persianate world, simultaneously making, as this paper will argue, a critique of backwardness alongside a protest against peripherality.

Dr. Gabriel McGuire | Assistant Professor, Nazarbayev University

Kazakh Children's Literature of the Thaw: The case of Berdibek Soqpaqbaev

Berdibek Soqpaqbaev's 1957 *Meniñ Atım—Qoja* (My Name is Qoja), a short novel that reads like a Soviet version of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, is perhaps the most famous work of Kazakh children's literature. In 1960, Soqpaqbaev followed this novella with his memoir *Balalıq Şaqqa Saiaxat* (An Excursion to Childhood), an account of his own childhood in the 1930s. Both the novella and the memoir are narratives in which the protagonist's central task is to fashion themselves not merely into an adult but specifically into an adult who is a citizen of Soviet modernity. As other scholarship on children's literature in the Soviet Union has emphasized, these tales of talented but mischievous young children are socialist realism in miniature, models of how the Soviet institution of the school brings direction and order to the chaotic and directionless enthusiasms of childhood. Yet the peculiarity of Soqpaqbaev's work is that his characters are not just Soviet but Kazakh, and in the case of Qoja, not just Kazakh but also a poet. The struggle to fashion the child into a Soviet citizen is consequently entangled with the larger struggle over how (and to what extent) Kazakh culture might be reconciled with Soviet culture. In both *Balalıq Şaqqa Saiaxat* and *Meniñ Atım—Qoja*, this paper argues, Soqpaqbaev uses references to pre-Revolutionary Kazakh *aqıns* (bards) and to oral literary forms as a device by which possible gaps between these identities are smoothed over.

Dr. Benedek Péri | Eötvös Loránd University*A Taste for the Classical, a Taste for the "Modern": A 19th Century Poetic Anthology from Khiva*

The manuscript of the poetic anthology (Török O. 373) preserved today in the Oriental Collection of the library of the Hungarian Academy of sciences was acquired by Ármin Vámbéry (1832–1913) somewhere around Khiva during his trip to Central Asia in the early 1860s. Compiled in the 1800s, the volume contains poems not only by such classics of Persian and Turkic classical poetry as Nesīmī (d. 1417) ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492), Mīr ‘Alī-šīr Navāyī (d. 1501) and Fuḏūlī (d. 1557) but it also includes pieces composed by near contemporary and contemporary poets, like Maḥdūmqulī Firāḡī (d. 1797), ‘Andalīb (d. 1770?), Mūjrim ‘Ābid (d. 1815) who were active in a wider region around Khiva at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. The present paper aims at giving an overall picture of the manuscript and intends to show how an anthology targeting a local readership in Khwarazm reflects a shift in literary taste from an intricate classical literary expression to a more simple language and style.

Dr. Paolo Sartori | Senior Research Associate, Austrian Academy of Sciences*A Sense of Place: Thinking with Remoteness in Khorezm*

Can places inform writing practices and shape genres? Put it in bluntest terms: can a territory make a text? And if so, how? In posing these questions, I would like to explore not just the ways in which authors describe a place by dwelling upon their perceived defining characters. The stylistic techniques deployed by authors to recreate ambiance is not my concern here. What I have in mind is something entirely different, that is how a place talks back to an author. What I would like to address in this paper is the generative (i.e., textual) power of a place, a sort of cultural capital, in other words, which can push an author to embrace a specific generic mode, reflect on select aspects of a territory, and create the sense of a place. I shall do so by reading the so-called *Diary of the 1873 Siege of Khiva*, a Chaghatay-Turkic text penned by one Mirza Abdurrahman (a Samarqandi scribe) upon commission of the Russian Orientalist Alexander Kuhn.

Dr. Charles Shaw | Assistant Professor, Central European University*A War of Translation: Central Asia's Changing Literary and Oral Cultures during World War II*

Apart from material and moral hardship, there was likely no more fundamental experience for Soviet citizens during World War II than linguistic estrangement and its inverse, linguistic convergence or, more simply, language learning. The Red Army became a venue for Russian-language learning and Soviet acculturation for millions of young Central Asian men. Evacuees and deported peoples struggled to learn the languages of their new surroundings, while local populations encountered new opportunities to learn the languages of various newcomers. Ambitious state-directed efforts in teaching, translation, and textbook and dictionary publishing facilitated these various processes of learning and translation. This paper seeks to cast the Great Patriotic War in Central Asia as a war of translation. It uses translation in two senses: first, in a narrow, strictly linguistic way; and second, in a sense of acculturation. I begin by taking stock of the various venues and modes of linguistic translation, from army textbooks, newspapers, and language courses; the publishing of dual-language dictionaries; and informal language learning at war and on the home front. The paper's primary focus will be to examine two forms of literary practices that emerged at war and which reflected various Central Asian enunciations of broader Soviet culture, namely Central Asian soldiers' letters and war-themed artistic literature. In Russian-, Uzbek-, and Tajik-language soldiers letters I consider questions of orthography, script, and language use in considering the evolution of epistolary practice. In literature, I consider the evacuated Soviet Writers' Union instructions to create socialist realist war literature and compare them to the actual production of Central Asian authors. The aspirational, amateur prose and poetry of Central Asian soldier-authors is also examined as an insight into the breadth and depth of Soviet literary cultural prescriptions. In conclusion, I consider whether Sheldon Pollock's formulation of vernacularization and cosmopolitanization can be productively applied in the characterization of the era as a war of translation.

Dr. Nicholas Walmsley | Assistant Professor, Central European University

“The Wrath of Khan”: The Poetics of Anxious Authors and Professional Panic at the Court of Muhammad Rahim II of Khiva

One way that royal courts cultivate their prestige is through patronage of cultural production in the arts, particularly books that combine text, image, and decoration. The court of the Khivan khan Muhammad Rahim II (r. 1864–1910) is one such example of a royal milieu where cultural prestige rested upon the encouragement of authors, translators, and book artisans. While prestige accrued to the ruler and his court, what were the incentives for the writers and artists? Scholars in and around the Khivan court were on at least one occasion suddenly motivated by fear of the khan’s wrath to compose poetry in quite large volumes because they perceived that their professional livelihoods were dependent upon fulfilling the khan’s expectation that they should be men of letters in the fullest sense. The court functionary Babajan Tarrah “Khadim” would later recount in his memoirs from the 1960s the episode in the life of one of his colleagues, Khudaybergan Divan “‘Ājiz,” which triggered the very social panic among the scholars and bureaucrats of Khiva that triggered this sudden blooming of verse. An investigation of the narrative of the episode, focusing upon the back-and-forth between the principal actors and locations (Khiva and Urgench), and breaking it down into its key moments of action and dialog, reveals how initially subdued anxieties came increasingly to the fore. It demonstrates how issues of self-esteem and self-perception of status in the public sphere contrived to escalate a minor misunderstanding over the authorship of a small fragment of poetry into a major episode that nearly cost a man his life and provoked a self-defensive posture among his colleagues that resulted in an unexpected flourishing of poetry. It illuminates the emotion-based response mechanism as a source of creativity within a professional context and provides an example that may be used to approach the study of the origins and social dynamics of literary production within other stratified high-culture environments.