

## Article

# Soviet Central Asia and the Preservation of History

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**Abstract:** Central Asia has one of the deepest and richest histories of any region on the planet. First settled some 6500 years ago by oasis-based farming communities, the deserts, steppe and mountains of Central Asia were subsequently home to many pastoral nomadic confederations, and also to large scale complex societies such as the Oxus Civilization and the Parthian and Kushan Empires. Central Asia also functioned as the major hub for trans-Eurasian trade and exchange networks during three distinct Silk Roads eras. Throughout much of the second millennium of the Common Era, then under the control of a succession of Turkic and Persian Islamic dynasties, already impressive trading cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand were further adorned with superb madrassas and mosques. Many of these suffered destruction at the hands of the Mongols in the 13th century, but Timur and his Timurid successors rebuilt the cities and added numerous impressive buildings during the late-14th and early-15th centuries. Further superb buildings were added to these cities by the Shaybanids during the 16th century, yet thereafter neglect by subsequent rulers, and the drying up of Silk Roads trade, meant that, by the mid-18th century when expansive Tsarist Russia began to incorporate these regions into its empire, many of the great pre- and post-Islamic buildings of Central Asia had fallen into ruin. This colonization of the region by the Russians, and its later incorporation into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1919, brought Central Asia to the attention of Russian and Soviet archaeologists and urban planners. It was these town planners and engineers who were eventually responsible for preserving many of the decaying monuments and historic urban cores of Central Asia, despite the often-challenging ideological constraints they were forced to work under. The paper focuses particularly on the effect of these preservation policy decisions in Uzbekistan, where the process has been best documented. It argues that Soviet authorities struggled constantly with ways of recognizing the need for historical preservation while at the same time creating a new society that had cast off the shackles of its 'feudal past'.

**Keywords:** Central Asia; Soviet Central Asia; Silk Roads; Uzbekistan; Registan; preservation of historic buildings and urban cores; Bukhara; Samarkand; Tashkent

## 1. Russian Administration of Central Asia (1730–1917)

Beginning in the 18th century, the independent emirates of Central Asia were gradually conquered by Tsarist armies. In the long first phase (between 1730 and 1848), Russia took over the greater part of Kazakhstan. During the second phase (from 1864 to 1884), all the territories of modern Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were conquered. Tashkent was stormed by Russian forces in 1865; the emir of Bukhara was routed in 1868; and the emir of Khiva in 1873. In 1881 the Russians crushed Turkmen resistance at the Battle of Goktepe, and the conquest of Central Asia was completed in 1884 when the Russians acquired the ancient oasis town of Merv ([Soucek 2002](#)).

St. Petersburg devised an effective administrative structure for the region, which included appointing military governors to some regions, civilian governors-general to others, and dividing Central Asia into five regions and two protectorates. Tashkent became the seat of the Russian Governor (eleven of whom ruled from 1865 to 1917), and that city soon surpassed all others in Central Asia in

size, sophistication, and modern urban planning. Until World War I, greater Turkestan was governed by a civil bureaucracy modeled on that of Russia itself. Although somewhat Russified, Tashkent and most Central Asian towns and cities retained Islamic systems of jurisdiction, education, and local administration. The Russians were thus relatively benevolent colonizers and did not interfere significantly in local religious practices; they focused instead on improving the economy, and the transport and education infrastructure of the region, and on occasional urgent building restorations, notably of the collapsing Ulugh Beg madrasa in Samarkand (Soucek 2002).

## 2. Soviet Takeover of Central Asia

After the overthrow of the civilian government in Russia in 1917, city governments and executive committees were set up in major Central Asian cities as organs of the new Provisional Government of Russia. But within months, political authority in Tashkent had fallen into the hands of various Workers and Soldiers Councils, or Soviets. For the next two years, the power of the Soviets was still mostly concentrated in Tashkent and hardly penetrated other areas at all, but gradually Moscow moved to take firmer control of the region, instituting a socialist order and new administrative policies. In the 1920s, both the khanate of Khiva and the emirate of Bukhara came under direct Soviet control, and the whole of Turkestan was made an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, with Tashkent as the capital.

In 1928, Stalin imposed the disastrous First Five-Year Plan, which resulted in the collectivization of agriculture, mechanization of the cultivation of cotton, industrialization, and the exploitation of natural resources. At the same time, because of the introduction of better schools by the Russians and Soviets, by the early-1930s a well-educated Central Asian intelligentsia had emerged who were prepared to fight for independence. Some of these anti-Soviet resistance groups (like the Kazakh *Alash Orda*) caused Stalin so much trouble he decided to eliminate all dissenters, leading to purges of tens of thousands of Central Asians by mass executions and burials (Crews 2006; Soucek 2002).

As part of this attempt to crush independence movements, and as an attempt to ensure that no large, unified pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic movements would emerge, Stalin also ordered new national borders to be drawn up, essentially to create brand new Central Asian Soviets that he hoped would be easier to administer and control (Crews 2006). Before this, borders throughout the region had been fluid and based on mutually recognized clan affiliations. But now, five new discrete political states were invented: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In 1930, Tashkent was proclaimed the capital of the new Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic.

During the first few years of Soviet annexation of the region, the Muslim authorities of Central Asian towns and cities did not participate in any revolutionary political events or movements; nor were they offered any political role by the Soviets. But, in the 1920s, the Soviet government decreed that Islam was an outmoded and oppressive feudal cult, and the religion and its adherents should be severely repressed. In 1937, as a further response to the rise of anti-Soviet resistance movements, a policy of explicit atheism was imposed throughout the region. Virtually every mosque and madrassah in Central Asia was closed; all courts were secularized, and veiling was actively discouraged. Particular attention was focused on Juybari section of Bukhara, which was mostly occupied by Sufis who were strongly opposed to the Uzbek Soviet government; a 16-hectare Sufi necropolis associated with the Juybari Sufis was razed to the ground (Azzout 1999).

## 3. Infrastructure Improvement: Example of Lyabi Hauz in Bukhara

Even as these religious restrictions were being implemented, the Soviets were also making serious attempts to improve health and hygiene in Central Asia. One early example of the intersection of health concerns and architectural preservation occurred in Bukhara, where since the 15th century many *hauz* (or ponds) had been constructed, connected to each other by canals. These had functioned as the principal source of drinking water for Bukharan residents, but they were also notorious for spreading mosquito borne diseases. In the 1920s and 30s, they were all gradually filled in by Uzbek Soviet authorities and replaced by more modern urban water distribution infrastructure.

The only *hauz* that remained open is the early-17th century Lyabi Hauz (Persian for ‘shore of the pond’). Despite the religious restrictions that were now in place, the Lyabi Hauz appears to have been spared because it was the centerpiece of a magnificent ensemble of buildings that were constructed between 1568 and 1622, and that had barely been altered since. The ensemble, which surrounds the pond on three sides, was very much focused on the Islamic faith. The three buildings are the Kukeldash Madrassa, the largest in the city, and two other Islamic edifices built by Nadir Divan-Beghi: a khanaka or lodging-house for itinerant Sufis, and a second smaller madrassa. Nadir was a Vizier who served the powerful Ashtarkhanid ruler Imamkuli-khan, who ruled Bukhara for more than 30 years between 1611 and 1642. Today, the Lyabi Hauz (see Figure 1) and its surrounding buildings functions as the de facto hub of the historical core of Bukhara (Lukonin and Ivanov 1997).



**Figure 1.** Bukhara Lyabi Hauz (Photo taken by Craig Benjamin).

#### 4. Creating the Ideal Society in Soviet Central Asia

The core principle under which urban planners and engineers had to work in the early decades of the Soviet Union was focused on the creation of an ideal socialist society, and this in turn required much clearing away of the past (Azzout 1999). In Central Asia, this ‘clean sweep’ was initially focused on town planning; the Muslim towns of Central Asia needed to be ‘cleansed’ of their feudal legacy of previous centuries. Planning was now based on the principle of ‘the predominance of modern architecture that corresponds to modern aspirations . . . modern architecture is based on socialist sources and should not be a reminder of the past’.<sup>1</sup> Large-scale urban development took place just outside the ancient historic districts of Tashkent, Bukhara and Samarkand, and these became templates for similar construction all over the region.

The urban landscape of Bukhara reflected the various stages of its immense history, and even by the 20th century it had essentially retained all of its historic buildings and monuments (despite the destructive efforts of the Mongols), although many of these, such as the Ark Citadel, were in a very poor state of repair. But for the Soviets, these historical buildings were expressions of the feudal mode

<sup>1</sup> Alexandrovich, I. A. 1990. Research on the first general plan of Bukhara. Quoted in Azzout (1999).

of production, so the only way these buildings could be preserved was to obliterate any trace of their original meaning.

In 1918, Vladimir Lenin personally signed a decree concerning 'the classification and conservation of artistic and historical monuments whether belonging to individuals, organizations or other entities' (Kriyoukov 1967). The two classifications that were now applied were cultural buildings of outstanding artistic value; or buildings representing historical significance. But the criteria used to assess how buildings were to be classified was based on Marxist attitudes towards religion, which meant that Islamic religious buildings were demolished in large numbers, particularly after the proclamation of the 1937 law prohibiting spiritual influence. One example of the effects of this is that, in 1917, an inventory had listed 360 mosques in Bukhara. But, by 1940, only 35 buildings in the city were deemed to be worthy of preservation, and only four of these were mosques (Azzout 1999).

With the clearing away of the feudal past completed, and with the remaining buildings having been deemed to meet the general definition of an expression of the 'culture of the proletariat' (such as the mosque and Minora depicted in Figure 2, for example) mosque and, the government now turned to the task of protecting those monuments and buildings that remained. Some historic buildings were selected to house museums, while others became government ministry buildings. According to the government, by giving these buildings new purpose, it opened up the 'considerable possibilities of forming the New Man in the utilization of historic spaces' (Kostoshkin 1986).



**Figure 2.** Bukhara Great Mosque (Photo taken by Craig Benjamin).

## 5. Early Preservation Committees

Local populations were now made responsible for the upkeep and protection of all the surviving historic properties of the proletariat, so committees were formed in many Central Asian cities, and indeed throughout the Soviet Union. In the early 1920s, a committee called Turkomstaris was formed, and it immediately focused its attention on restoring the crumbling Ulugh-Beg Madrassa in the Registan in Samarkand, as noted above. In 1925, after the five Central Asian Republics had all published their own constitutions, a new 'uber committee' called Credakomstaris was established, under which autonomous Soviet committees were organized. The committee responsible for the restoration of buildings in Bukhara—the Bukhkomstaris—was now in charge of preserving the remaining historic buildings in that city, and it received direct funding from Moscow in order to do so (Azzout 1999).



This committee was superseded in 1930 by the Uzkomstaris, but the work of this committee was severely hampered by the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Government, which regarded the work of historic preservation as being a low priority and accused individuals who advocated for this as being reactionary and not paying proper attention to the revolutionary new monuments of the people. In 1940 the Committee was terminated and its functions transferred to the Council of the Commissioners of the People of Uzbekistan; but when some of these commissioners tried to focus on historical preservation, they too were accused of being reactionary. Many were sent into exile, and some were executed. This committee was dissolved in 1943. A new committee for the protection of historic buildings was established in 1957 under the Council of Ministers of Socialist Uzbekistan, but it was quickly dissolved, to be replaced by yet another committee formed within the Ministry of Culture ([Azzout 1999](#)).

## 6. New Heritage Status Policy in the 1960s

Very little actual preservation was undertaken by any of these committees from the 1920s to the early 1960s, hampered as they were by charges of being reactionary and having their priorities in the feudal past rather than the socialist future. What saved the historic buildings of Central Asia was the emergence in Moscow in the 1960s of a new ideological concept of ‘heritage status’, whereby entire old towns throughout the USSR were now deemed worthy of preservation. This new concept was first integrated unto town planning policies, and in 1961 the Uzbekistan Ministry of Culture drew up new plans of the major old town centers, starting with Bukhara. The new policy stated that ‘the ancient heritage must now be an integral part of the development of the modern idea of the town’ (Bukhara Plan 1965)<sup>2</sup>. Some 55 hectares of ancient central Bukhara were now designated for preservation, although this is modest when one considers that, as Azzout points out, the old town actually covered 300 hectares ([Azzout 1999](#)). Almost no new building construction was to be permitted in the old town; and anything that was approved had to be no higher than two stories.

This preservation was closely associated with attempts to improve tourism in these cities. The hope was that by concentrating the historic buildings in a small area, even a single street, the tourist would have the opportunity to experience ancient Bukhara or Samarkand without actually having to visit the real areas in these cities where most people lived (Plan of Bukhara 1977). Buildings were now reclassified according to three criteria: buildings suitable for external viewing; buildings that could retain their original function (such as baths or residences); and buildings that could be adopted for new purposes, while retaining their architectural facades.

This new heritage status policy had little effect on infrastructure development in the old town centers; most of this was focused on the new Soviet districts outside the historic centers. So, even by the end of the 1960s, after a decade of heritage preservation, the streets of the historic centers of Bukhara and Samarkand were unpaved and dusty, and people had to fetch water from fountains. Before Uzbekistan’s independence in 1991, much of the old town of Bukhara lacked sanitary facilities and running water. Today, the old towns and the newer Soviet districts are almost polar opposites—winding narrow passageways and blind walls versus straight boulevards, for example.

Restoration in Central Asian historic towns under the ‘heritage policy’ was also linked to Soviet propaganda, in that efforts were stepped up during periods in which other countries were taking an interest in the region. For example, in 1980, UNESCO celebrated the thousand-year anniversary of the Central Asian Islamic philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna). As a result, 40 buildings and mausoleums were restored in the heart of historic Bukhara ([Louw 2007](#)). The same thing happened in Khiva in 1983 on the occasion of the 1200th anniversary of the birth of the mathematician Muhammad al-Khwarazm. Soviet restoration work had been ongoing at Khiva since 1967, but during 1983 the Kunya Ark ceiling

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<sup>2</sup> Detailed Plan of Bukhara, Moscow, 1977, see ([Azzout 1999](#)); General Plan of Bukhara, Moscow, 1940, see ([Azzout 1999](#)).

and the first two ayvans inside the Tosh Hauli harem were superbly restored (Louw 2007; Heritage and Restoration).

Two additional examples further demonstrate the effect of these various policy shifts concerning architectural preservation between the 1920s to the 1980s: Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan and the largest city in Central Asia; and the trio of madrassas constructed around the famous Registan in Samarkand.

## 7. Tashkent

Tashkent was heavily industrialized in the 1920s and 1930s, a process that received a tremendous boost during World War II with the relocation of factories from western Russia as a way of preserving Soviet industrial capacity from the invading Nazis. None of this industrialization occurred in the historic old town, however. The Russian population of Central Asia increased significantly during the Great Patriotic War, with evacuees from the war zones boosting the Russian population of the region to well over a million. By the 1950s, Russians and Ukrainians made up more than 50% of the total residents of Tashkent (Allworth 1994).

On 26 April 1966, a powerful earthquake struck Tashkent, effectively destroying the city and leaving more than 300,000 people homeless. Other Soviet republics responded to help rebuild the devastated city. This event gave Soviet urban planners the opportunity to apply the ‘heritage status’ criteria to the historic core of the city, and at the same time to create a model Soviet city outside of the old town by building wide shady streets, parks, immense plazas for parades, fountains, monuments, and acres of apartment blocks (Raab 2014).

There were several important Islamic buildings in the historic core of Tashkent, all of which had suffered neglect because of their religious status and were in a very poor state of repair by the time of the 1966 earthquake. After the earthquake, and through to the end of the 1980s, they were all carefully restored, and today constitute a superb ensemble around a central square. The key buildings are the Barak Khana Madrassa, the Tilya Sheikh Mosque (which houses one of the oldest copies of the Quran in the world, the so-called Uthman Quran), and the Kukeldash Madrassa. These buildings are all in an excellent state of repair, but for some visitors, wandering around them provides more of a museum experience than a sense of the atmosphere that must have pervaded the Tashkent Registan in centuries gone by.

Continuing urban development in the 1970s and 80s further increased the size of Tashkent, and at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Tashkent was the fourth largest city in the USSR with a population in excess of 2 million. Since independence, Tashkent has undergone significant economic cultural and architectural change. The huge statue of Lenin that once stood in ‘Red Square’ was removed in 1991 and has now been replaced with a modern globe. In 2007, Tashkent was named the cultural capital of the Islamic world because the historic core of the city is home to so many historic mosques and Islamic locations of interest, fortunately restored by the ideological shift towards ‘heritage status’ in Moscow that commenced in the 1960s.

## 8. Samarkand: The Registan

The Registan was the heart of Samarkand during the Timurid dynasty. The name *Registan* means “sandy place” in Persian, essentially a huge unpaved square where people gathered to hear royal proclamations and witness public executions. The square is framed by three superb madrassas: the Ulugh Beg Madrassa (built between 1417 and 1420); the Shir-Dar Madrassa (built between 1619 and 1636); and the Tilya-Kori Mosque and Madrassa (built between 1646 and 1660). Collectively, these majestic buildings constitute one of the most impressive sights in Central Asia. But earthquakes, seasonal temperature extremes, normal structural depreciation, and economic crises caused by the decline of Silk Roads trade in the 18th and 19th centuries had left the complex in an almost ruined condition. Domes and portals were partially or totally collapsed, minarets were dangerously inclined, and façades in some places had lost up to 80% of their ceramic tile coverings. In 1875, Russian

authorities used local craftsmen and builders to relevel the Registan Square and shore up some of the most dangerous sections of the madrassas. But, once under Soviet control, the government's prohibition of religious activity meant that religious schools received no preservation attention, so the Registan madrassas received little attention from authorities.

The Ulugh Beg Madrassa, located on the west side of the Registan, is the oldest of the ensemble. By 1920, the larger part of the cladding of the building and the painting décor had all been lost, but the Turkomstaris Committee did sponsor some work on structural preservation, essentially putting up a framework to stop the domes and arches from total collapse, and also shoring up the leaning minarets. Similar emergency structural repairs were done a decade later in 1932, mostly to prevent the minarets from collapsing. With the policy shift towards heritage preservation on the 1960s, major restoration work on all three madrassahs commenced ([Serageldin and Grabar 1989](#)).

Between 1967 and 1987, very careful restoration work was carried out based on extensive studies, including archaeological excavations, probing and measurement of foundations and facades, archival research, and epigraphic studies. In some cases, Soviet engineers had to rebuild the entire interior and the exterior of the buildings almost from scratch, using salvaged brickwork, tiles and majolica gathered from mounds of rubble inside the madrassahs. This painstaking work was incredibly expensive; 90% of the project was funded by the national government in Moscow, and the remaining 10% from local government sources. Restoration was completed just before the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and despite the many twists and turns in Soviet policy towards preservation over the decades, there is no doubt that if the Soviets had decided not to restore the buildings of the Registan, this magnificent sight (shown in [Figure 3](#)) would have been lost to the world ([UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2001](#)).



**Figure 3.** Samarkand Registan (Photo taken by Craig Benjamin).

## 9. Conclusions

During the first decade following independence, a lack of public funding and little foreign investment led to the neglect of buildings in many Central Asian towns and cities. The Soviet neighborhoods, such as those constructed between the 1960s and 1980s in Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara, were particularly susceptible, and many buildings were decaying, although more recently considerable new construction has been happening all over the region. The historic centers of these

towns and cities fared better than the Soviet sectors. Old buildings are being bought up by the middle class and by entrepreneurs to be converted into hotels and other tourist facilities. The old town centers are also the only protected zones in many of these cities, and building permits are not granted for high-rise development (Azzout 1999).

Today in Uzbekistan, one can sense a mixed nostalgia about the Soviet Era. Despite early purges to crush opposition movements, there is no doubt that under the Soviets health care was greatly improved and many new hospitals were built. New industrial plants, mines, and farms were also constructed that ensured good employment for millions; and education was expanded to all social classes. Today, many middle and upper-class Uzbeks still send their children to Russian schools, which are modelled on the former Soviet schools and are generally (if not always accurately) thought to provide a higher quality education. Uzbeks will also point out that women were granted economic equality and paid maternity leave by the Soviet Union, and that artistic expression was strongly encouraged (so that distinctive national identities would emerge) through state support of poets, musicians and composers and visual artists. But we must also acknowledge that, just as Soviet archaeologists conducted decades of outstanding research in Central Asia, it was Soviet and Central Asian engineers, artists and craftsmen, funded by the government in Moscow, who succeeded in preserving the magnificent architectural heritage of the region. The motivations behind shifting preservation policies were complex and ideologically driven, but ultimately it was the adoption of the ‘new heritage status’ policy in the 1960s that was responsible for the preservation of material history in Central Asia.

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