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## Soviet-Tajik Writing Intelligentsia in the Late 1930s

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### Советская таджикская писательская элита в конце 1930-х годов

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the formation of a Tajik-Soviet writing elite in the 1930s, exploring how a new generation of Soviet writers in the late 1930s emerged out of new state institutions. Prior to their emergence, the founders of Tajik literature – Sadriiddin Aini and Abolqosim Lahuti – used their unique position vis-à-vis Moscow to shape the direction of Tajik literature. Despite the former’s important place in Soviet hagiography, it was the younger generation of Tajik writers – including writers like Mirzo Tursunzoda, Jalol Ikromi, Sotim Ulughzoda, and others – that emerged on the all-Union writing scene in the late 1930s and became key cultural and political figures in the post-war era. While the role of the Tajik writer inevitably became the portrayal of the national subject in the modern context of Soviet development, this article shows how comparing the themes and writings of these two generations in the 1930s demonstrates how Tajik national identity building related to the nationalities policies of the early Soviet Union and, in particular, the relationship between Tajik national identity and territory. This paper relies on a few primary source materials the Central State Archive of the Republic of Tajikistan, but also online archives, newspapers/periodicals, and published Books and collections. This paper finds that the mobilization of a younger generation of Tajik-Soviet Writing Intelligentsia led to the creation of a new vision of Tajik national identity unfolding in a Soviet space. Unlike the early writers Sadriiddin Aini and Abolqosim Lahuti, these younger writers emerged in new Soviet institutions and therefore projected a new Soviet-Tajik identity in the late 1930s and eventually became leaders of Central Asian literature in the post WWII period.

**Keywords:** national identity, national politics, Tajik writers, Tajik-Persian literature

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**Аннотация:** Статья посвящена истории формирования новой таджикской советской литературной элиты в 1930-е гг. На примере реализации проекта «Политика советских национальностей» показан процесс становления новых национальных символов, языка, мифологии Таджикистана, представлены основные его участники в лице основателей таджикской литературы – Садриддина Аини и Аболкосима Лахути и молодых авторов – Мирзо Турсунзаде, Ялола

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Икромии, Сотима Улутзода и др., которые стали ключевыми фигурами в культурной и политической жизни республики в послевоенную эпоху. Показано, что роль таджикского писателя в те годы во многом определялась необходимостью создания и изображения национального субъекта в контексте советского развития. Проведенный автором анализ тематики художественных произведений двух поколений литераторов 1930-х гг. продемонстрировал то, как построение национальной идентичности таджиков, определение их территориальной локализации были связаны с национальной политикой Советского Союза той эпохи. Данная статья опирается на разные группы источников, включая документы Центрального государственного архива Республики Таджикистан и онлайн-архивов, публицистические материалы и художественные произведения. Автор приходит к выводу, что мобилизация молодого поколения представителей таджикской советской литературной интеллигенции привела к формированию нового типа таджикской национальной идентичности на советском пространстве. В отличие от Садриддина Айни и Аболкосима Лахути, молодые таджикские литераторы сумели вписаться в условия советской действительности. Именно они формировали с конца 1930-х гг. новую таджикскую идентичность, став в итоге лидерами художественной литературы Центральной Азии в послевоенный период советской истории.

**Ключевые слова:** национальная идентичность, национальная политика, таджикские писатели, таджикско-персидская литература

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## Introduction

In contemporary Tajikistan, the image of the Soviet-Tajik writer continues to lend itself to the state-building project. Traveling around the country's capital Dushanbe, you will find streets, buildings, and public monuments celebrating figures like Sadriddin Aini, Mirzo Tursunzoda, and Abolqosim Lahuti. Examples include the Sadriddin Aini Theater of Opera and Ballet, a street named after Mirzo Tursunzoda, and the Lahuti Drama Theatre, all found in the city center. Not far from these landmarks, stands a mural alongside the Writers' Union building, where Aini, Lahuti, and Mirzo Tursunzoda's life-sized likenesses can be found alongside the Russian-Soviet writer Maksim Gorky and more classical Persian figures like Abu Ali Ibn Sino (Avicenna), Firdowsi, Rudaki, and Hofiz Sherozi. The Tajik state evokes these writers' images in more official settings too. For example, Aini and Tursunzoda are two of the six individuals awarded Tajikistan's "highest honorary title" (Hero of Tajikistan).<sup>1</sup> Finally, the citizens of contemporary Tajikistan encounter these latter two writers on a daily basis, as the two writers are respectively portrayed on the one-*somoni* and five-*somoni* bills, the lowest (and most commonly used) bills of Tajik currency.

Why is the Soviet-Tajik writer promoted in the post-Soviet period if these figures were so closely linked to the Soviet state? The importance of these figures is a direct consequence of the project of Soviet Nationalities' Policy in the context of the Tajik SSR. As Adeeb Khalid explains, Tajikistan's elevation as a full Soviet Republic in 1929 pre-dated a Tajik nation-building project and therefore demanded considerable attention

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<sup>1</sup> K. Abudullaev, *Historical Dictionary of Tajikistan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 187. The others include Soviet-Tajik party members and scholars Bobojon Ghafurov, Nusratullo Maqsum, and Shirinsho Shotemur. The current President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon is the only living recipient of the award.

and initiative in the creation of national symbols, language, and a founding mythology of Tajikistan.<sup>2</sup> The project itself required the participation of politicians, ethnographers, scientists, writers, journalists, politicians, and teachers both from within Soviet borders (especially from the Tajik SSR, the Uzbek SSR, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), but also those from beyond its borders in Europe and Iran. Writers like the Bukharan writer Sadridin Aini and the Iranian revolutionary poet Abolqosim Lahuti played an important role in this process, particularly following the national delimitations of Central Asia.

This article first looks at these two figures who lent themselves in the service of the Soviet party-state. Because they could be mobilized as trusted Bolsheviks and reliable speakers of Persian, they were among the first articulators of a Tajik-Soviet literary identity, which simultaneously laid claim to a Persian heritage rooted in the history of Central Asia and the larger Persian-speaking world. The story, of course, did not end with these two writers; as the second part of this article demonstrates, a second generation of writers – the Komsomol Generation – eventually emerged out of budding Soviet institutions and would continue the work, creating their own distinct vision of a Tajik national identity.<sup>3</sup> By comparing these two generations, their works, and their place within a broader pan-Soviet stage, this article demonstrates an inherent tension in the 1930s search for a Tajik national identity and its place in a broader Persianate context.

The politics of the 1930s demanded “native” voices to promote a new Tajik national identity and bolster the Soviet Union’s anti-colonial rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> Absent a local group of Tajikistan-based intellectuals, Aini and Lahuti served this function. Yet, Aini’s status as witness to the oppressive pre-revolutionary Central Asian order and Lahuti’s unique position in Moscow as a devoted Stalinist, an internationalist, revolutionary poet, and a representative of the “East” at large made it impossible for them to fully develop a local “insider” perspective on Tajikistan that would be simultaneously national and Soviet. To fill this gap, local party members and Writers’ Union officials encouraged the younger generation of Tajik writers to create the insider images and narratives that the Soviet center demanded. The first achievement on that path was the young writer Sotim Ulughzoda’s play *Red Clubs* that was presented for Russian audiences at the 1941 Festival of Tajik Art in Moscow; the trend was more fully developed in the post-war

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<sup>2</sup> “Tajik as a Residual Category,” in A. Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The idea of this group as the Komsomol Generation comes from Soviet scholars. In cultural studies of Tajikistan from the Soviet period, scholars often emphasized the importance of the Komsomol in this group’s emergence in the 1930s. See, for example: Z. Osmanova, *Ocherk istorii tadjikskoy sovetskoy literatury* (Moscow: Akademiya Nauk, 1961), 338.

<sup>4</sup> See: K. Holt, “The Rise of Insider Iconography: Visions of Soviet Turkmenia in Russian-Language Literature and Film, 1921–1935” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2013), 155–220. In using “insider iconography,” I borrow from Holt, who defines “insider iconography” as a set of guiding principles in literature in which “outsider” writers tried to incorporate “insider” or native voices and perspectives into their Russian-language works depicting the region. She suggests that these practices informed how later natives depicted the Republic. In Tajikistan, where the process of Sovietization and the attempt at creating a Soviet-Tajik nation started in earnest in the 1930s, intermediaries Aini and Lahuti played a much larger role in developing this “insider iconography” until eventually younger writers more extensively developed a Soviet-Tajik identity in their works.

years, when the membership of the Komsomol Generation of Tajik writers significantly increased. The attempt to mobilize local educated elites had been a source of frustration for the Soviet Writers' Union members in Moscow, but, by the time of the German Invasion in 1941, their plans started to show promise. The same generation of Komsomol Writers on the verge of breakthrough in 1941 would become the undisputed authority on Tajik literature in the post-war period.

### **Creation of a New Tajik Literature: Aini and Lahuti in the Early 1930s**

Sadriddin Aini had strong ties with the Tajik intellectual project since its earliest conception in the 1920s. Throughout his post-revolutionary life, he conducted most of his work from Samarqand, a city that had a sizable minority of Persian-speakers and served as the center of Tajik literature before 1929.<sup>5</sup> In 1923, Aini had been elected a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic, but remained in Samarqand. In this period, he also started writing his first novel, *Odina*, first published in Samarqand in 1924 and subsequently translated and published in Russian in 1928.<sup>6</sup> In 1925, he started writing his *Namunai Adabiyoti Tojik (Anthology of Tajik Literature)*, a study of Central Asian Persian literature (newly defined as Tajik) of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Shortly after, in 1930, he published his second major literary work, *Dokhunda* (translated and published in Russian in 1934) which the Soviet press continuously praised as the first Tajik novel. The administrative decision to transform Tajikistan from an ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) within Uzbek borders to the seventh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1929 made the task of building up a Tajik national identity all the more pressing; in this changing climate, Aini's ability to fashion himself as a reliable figure up for the task solidified his position as founder of Tajik literature and allowed him to secure his position in the field of Soviet culture.

It is difficult to overestimate Aini's role in the developing national-Soviet culture of Tajikistan in the 1930s. He was the first to publish works (published in Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian) that featured Tajiks as the main characters.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, he served several political roles in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, showing his ability to navigate the tough political milieu of Stalinist Central Asia. During the brief existence of the Tajik ASSR, he served as an official Tajik representative in Samarqand and played a crucial role in the Samarqand section of the Tajik State Press. When Tajikistan became a Republic in 1929, he, alongside Lahuti and others, was elected as a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Tajik SSR.

Similarly, Lahuti played a leading role in the early development of Tajik literature. After his emigration to the Soviet Union from Iran in the early 1920s, Lahuti briefly lived in Moscow, working as a typesetter at the newly-established Central

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<sup>5</sup> K.P. Marsakova, *Istoriia Kul'turnogo Stroitel'stva v Tadzhikistane (1917–1977)*, v. 2 tt. (Dushanbe: Donish, 1983. Vol. 2), 29; Even after the 1929 creation of the Tajik Republic, Samarqand and Bukhara, two major Persian-speaking cities in Central Asia, would remain part of the Uzbek SSR.

<sup>6</sup> L. Yountchi, *Between Russia and Iran: Soviet Tajik Literature and Identity, 1920–1991* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2011), 61; J. Becka, *Sadriddin Ayni: Father of Modern Tajik Culture* (Naples: Istituto Universitario orientale: Seminario Di Studi Asiatici: Series Minor V, 1980): 38–39.

<sup>7</sup> E. Grassi, "From Bukhara to Dushanbe: Outlining the Evolution of Soviet Tajik Fiction," *Iranian Studies* 50, no. 5 (2017): 693–694; Yountchi, *Between Russia and Iran*, 33–44.

Press of the East and studying at the Communist University for the Toilers of the East.<sup>8</sup> In 1925, he moved to Stalinobod (contemporary Dushanbe) and became a leading figure in the party-state system, working in agitprop (political propaganda), the state publishing house, and, after 1926, by serving as a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Tajik SSR. By the establishment of the Tajik Republic in 1929, Lahuti's name already had become synonymous with the Tajik SSR, but he moved back to Moscow in 1931. During its inception in 1933, Lahuti was selected as a member Organizational Committee for the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow.

The 1934 Congress served as a watershed moment for reporting on Tajik literature in the Soviet Press, but the situation throughout the 1930s resembled what happened at the Congress itself. Aini and Lahuti were praised for their contributions and leadership, while commentators repeatedly raised the issue of the unimpressive state of Tajik literature and obscurity of the Soviet Tajik writers. At the Congress, Aini and Lahuti were the only representatives to deliver speeches on the state of Tajik literature.<sup>9</sup> Ulughzoda, Chairman of the Organizational Committee of the Soviet Writers' Union in Tajikistan, was originally expected to speak on Tajik literature, but Lahuti fulfilled this role. If we are to believe Lahuti's explanation, Ulughzoda could not deliver the speech because his participation in a "sowing campaign" had caused him to arrive late to the Congress.<sup>10</sup>

In his report on the state of Tajik literature, Lahuti used the opportunity to qualify its dismal state. National bourgeois tendencies spurred on by the Jadids, he said, had been the result of this weakness. After praising Aini, he explained his main concern that all the young writers suffered from one major issue. Namely they showed a "low level of literary technique and general literacy, a limited purview [*krugozor*] and a low set of knowledge, which inevitably led to an oversimplification and a shallow penetration into their portrayed object."<sup>11</sup> In his speech, later translated by the writer Vladimir Lugovskoi, Aini praised Tajik poetry's long history and Lahuti's defining role as a contemporary poet and a model for young poets. He went into less detail describing the deficiencies of the local writers, explaining simply that the task was to improve their ability to match the standard set by Lahuti.<sup>12</sup> These reports, delivered by Aini and Lahuti, demonstrate both the clear leadership of Aini and Lahuti in Tajik literary affairs, as well as their clear separation from the younger generation of writers and poets.

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<sup>8</sup> S. Hodgkin, "Classical Persian Canons of the Revolutionary Press, Abū al-Qāsim Lāhūtī's Circles in Istanbul and Moscow," in A. Mozafari, H. Rezaei Yazdi, *Persian Literature and Modernity: Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> K. Schild, "Between Moscow and Baku: National Literatures at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers" (Phd diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010), 95, 164–165; *Pervy vsesoiuzny s'ezd sovetskikh pisateley: stenograficheskiy otchet* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), 141, 533, 706. In terms of quantity, Tajikistan's two representatives resembled the number of representatives from other republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus' Republics, but the Tajik case is somewhat unique, primarily because Aini and Lahuti both resided and worked beyond the borders of the Tajik Republic.

<sup>10</sup> *Pervy vsesoiuzny s'ezd sovetskikh pisateley*, 141; the reasons for he did not speak are not clear – Schild proposes that it is possible that none of the other Tajik delegates felt comfortable enough with their Russian. Given his prominence, it is possible that others expected Lahuti to speak on Tajik literature's behalf.

<sup>11</sup> *Pervy vsesoiuzny s'ezd sovetskikh pisateley*, 142–143.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 544.

### **Moscow, Bukhara, and Beyond: Abolqosim Lahuti and Sadriddin Aini and the Space of Tajik Identity**

Throughout the 1930s, Aini and Lahuti played an increasingly important role as representatives of a Tajik identity, while serving as special links between the Moscow and Stalinobod. Unlike Russian authors who visited to the region, they possessed knowledge of the local language and could pass as Tajiks, serving the Writers' Union's anti-colonial image of promoting "native" voices. Yet, they each fulfilled specific roles within the Soviet hierarchy, which relied on the writers' personal backgrounds to fulfill its broader goals. Lahuti – the revolutionary, Stalinist, and internationalist – served as Stalin's Central Asian and played an important role in shaping the Soviet Union's anti-colonial image abroad.<sup>13</sup> Sadriddin Aini was a steadfast reminder of the horrors of the pre-revolutionary Central Asian past that helped justify Soviet power in Central Asia. Although they would gradually give way to a younger generation of writers who evolved out of new Soviet institutions in Central Asia, the rise and continued prominence of Aini and Lahuti – for most of their lives and in the form of Soviet-style hagiographies after their death – reflect their reliability for the center in a tenuous era of struggle for control in Soviet Tajikistan. At the same time, the literary and public profiles they created raised an important – and never fully resolved – intellectual issue regarding the place of Central Asian Persian speakers (Tajiks) in the broader Persian-speaking world.

In the aftermath of the congress, Lahuti rose to even more prominence in Moscow circles. While he nominally served as a "Tajik" poet, his work and public profile demonstrates a much more central place in Soviet politics and cultural production. During this period his poetry and press coverage highlighted three important parts of his identity – a revolutionary, a devoted Stalinist, and an international Communist, which in turn limited his ability to articulate a localized vision of a Tajik national identity. Lahuti first achieved high status in the Soviet literary system as a Tajik poet and literary functionary by the 1930s, but he also gained authority as a representative of Central Asia.<sup>14</sup> His close devotion to the Stalinist cult and his personal relationship with the General Secretary of the Communist Party no doubt explained his high ranking position in Moscow society, but, especially given the other two aspects of his identity, also had implications for the ambiguities surrounding Tajikistan's place in the Persianate speaking world.

Prior to his rise to prominence, Lahuti's limited coverage in the press focused on his revolutionary Iranian background. For example, an aptly-titled 1931 *Pravda* article, "Blacksmith, Cobbler, Poet, Revolutionary," described his longstanding position in the revolutionary movement in Iran as early as 1905 and recalled his involvement in the first workers' organization in his native Kermanshah, as well as his forced exile (for revolutionary activity) to Turkey. After a return to Iran in 1922, the article explained that Lahuti was again forced to leave his country, then choosing to come to the Soviet Union, where he participated in the establishment of revolutionary power in Tajikistan.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> K. Holt, "Performing as Central Asia's Source Texts: Lahuti and Dzambul in Moscow, 1935–1936," *Cahiers d'Asie centrale*, no. 24 (2015): 222.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> "Kuznets, Bashmachnik, Poet, Revolutsioner," *Pravda*, September 7, 1931, 4.

Similarly, in a 1935 piece, the writers Boris Lapin and Zakhar Khatsrevin explained how the Soviet Union had allowed Lahuti to transform from an “eastern Revolutionary to a “poet-Communist.”<sup>16</sup>

Lahuti’s prominence reached new heights, however, vis-à-vis his participation in the Stalin cult. For example, Lahuti played a central role during Stalin’s December 4, 1935 meeting with Turkmen and Tajik *kolkhoz*, a defining moment in Soviet history, because of Stalin’s first mention of the “friendship of Peoples” among Soviet nations.<sup>17</sup> The meeting proved to be one of great personal importance for Lahuti too, because it signaled his prominence as a committed Stalinist.<sup>18</sup> According to the story, Lahuti wrote a *rubai* (a traditional Persian quatrain) at the event, inspired by the moment when the Turkmen *kolkhoz* worker Ene Gel’dieva presented Stalin with a portrait of Lenin. The poem, in Russian translation, was published the following day in *Pravda*’s coverage of the event, where Lahuti was shown handing his poem to Stalin. As the article explained, Lahuti read the poem out loud before giving it to Stalin.<sup>19</sup>

Lahuti’s participation in the Stalin cult increasingly appeared in his published volumes, too. In 1936, for example, Lahuti sent Stalin *rubai*, addressed to the leader, which appeared in the dedication page of his 1937 *Sadovnik*. The original letter contained the original Persian, followed by the Russian translation:

*Ty, Stalin, bolee velikii chem velich'e,  
Poznal serdtsa liudei i dushu krasoty.  
Dusha moia poiut i serdse gromko klichet,  
Chto Lenina i Znak i Put' – vse dal mne ty.*

[You, Stalin, are greater than greatness,  
You came to know the heart of the people and the soul of beauty.  
My soul sings and my heart cries out,  
That you gave me everything – Lenin, the Sign, and the Path].<sup>20</sup>

From these excerpts, it becomes clear that by the end of the 1930s, Lahuti had fully embraced his role in perpetuating the cult of Stalin.

By the end of the decade, Lahuti had blended his identity as an Iranian revolutionary, and devoted Stalinist, which he used in his poetry, demonstrating that his position was beyond that of a national Tajik poet. In 1940 the State Publishing House of the Tajik SSR released a collection of his works. This publication, with translation of Lahuti’s work by his wife, referred to simply as “Banu,” demonstrates how he use. For example, his 1940 collected and translated works collection is divided into several sections: “Motherland of Happiness,” “October and the Singer,” “Tajikistan,” “East,” and “Heart.” As the titles indicate, each section provides samples of Lahuti’s poetry around a specific theme. The first section included poems dedicated to themes celebra-

<sup>16</sup> B. Lapin, Z. Khatsrevin, “Abul’ Gasem Lakhuti,” *Pravda*, September 4, 1935, 4.

<sup>17</sup> T. Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1929–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 437.

<sup>18</sup> Holt, “Central Asia’s Source Texts,” 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10; *Pravda*, no. 334 (1935).

<sup>20</sup> *Stikhotvorenie persidskogo poëta Lakhuti* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), <http://www.stalindigitalarchive.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/frontend/node/119452>; Lakhuti, *Sadovnik*, 1937.

ting the Soviet Union. One focused on the Stalinist Constitution, while another commemorated the death of Sergo Ordzhonikidze. A poem titled “To the Leader of the Peoples,” a reprint of a poem sent to Stalin in one of Lahuti’s letters, specifically celebrated the Soviet leader.<sup>21</sup> “October and the Singer” revealed Lahuti’s pan-Soviet solidarity and his role as an internationalist. In the poem “Taras Shevchenko,” he celebrated the pride of Soviet Ukraine and the October Revolution’s role in the development of Ukrainian culture. The second half of the poem shifted the focus to Iran, which had not yet realized its true freedom. In the last lines, Lahuti anticipated a similar fate for Iran:

The steel sword of Leninism  
gave freedom to Ukraine  
My old Iran will likewise  
become a free, Soviet country.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the decade, in contrast to both Sadridin Aini and a rising generation of younger Tajik writers, Lahuti retained his Tajik identity, but had utilized multiple parts of his identity to improve his position in Soviet society. As we will see below, in contrast to both Aini and younger Tajik writers, he used this position to emphasize the link between a Tajik identity and a broader Persian literary culture, attempting to bring the two together.

While Lahuti’s transition to prominence in Moscow in the 1930s solidified multiple aspects of his identity, Aini, featured considerably less in major newspapers like *Pravda*, formed an identity derived from his position in Central Asia and his connection to the pre-revolutionary era. As a native Bukharan fluent in both Uzbek and Persian, he played crucial roles in the cultural life of both republics. Perhaps to evade persecution given his Jadidist background, Aini embraced his Tajikness. If Lahuti’s credentials in the press emphasized his revolutionary background in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran, journalists highlighting Aini’s role as co-founder of Tajik literature focused on his Central Asian background and his personal suffering under the defeated Emir of Bukhara. For example, a November 1935 *Pravda* article celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of his career as a writer, but first emphasized his early alliance with the Jadids against the Emir, whose oppressive punishments cost the young Aini seventy-five lashings and subsequent imprisonment. The author then explained Aini’s flourishing as a Soviet writer, with novels like *Odina* and *Dokhunda*, and praised his ability to demonstrate the “collapse of the age-old building of eastern despotism.”<sup>23</sup>

Although not quite as thematically diverse as poems of Lahuti, Aini’s works reflected his Bukharan background. In her dissertation, Lisa Yountchi demonstrates Aini’s important contribution in developing a Tajik hero in his early works. With clear ideological motivations in its writing, Aini wrote his first novel *Odina* to demonstrate the oppression faced by Tajiks in pre-revolutionary Bukhara. In the novel, the helpless

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<sup>21</sup> A. Lakhuti, *Izbrannaia lirika* Stalinobod: Gos. izdatel’stvo tadjihskoi SSR, 1940), 14–20.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> “30-letie literaturnoi deiatel’nosti sedreddina aini,” *Pravda*, November 26, 1935, 4.



title-character Odina is diagnosed with tuberculosis (from which he eventually dies) and the love of his life is forced into an abusive marriage.<sup>24</sup> In his next major novel, *Dokhunda* (translated into Russian in 1933), the action again takes place in the pre-revolutionary period. Like Odina, *Dokhunda's* hero Edgor is also oppressed by the ruling regime; yet, Edgor is awarded a greater degree of agency as he decides to fight back, join the Red Army, help create the new Tajik Soviet government, and defend the new country from *basmach* rebels.<sup>25</sup>

Even in his later works, Aini maintained his focus on pre-revolutionary Bukhara, writing only a few works which moved past the period of revolution. As late as 1939, his tale, *Death of a Money Lender* (*Smert' rostovshchika* in Russian, *Marg-i Sudkhur* in Tajik) found its setting again in Bukhara, this time looking at how local moneylenders used their connections with tsardom to rob the peasants of their wealth and property. Aini devoted great attention to describing the “typical” character who would take advantage of the Central Asian peasants (*dekhans*).<sup>26</sup> In his last major work of fiction, *Yatim*, Aini presented the story of a Tajik who, once again, experienced the changes swept into the revolution. Unlike in previous works, Aini continued the storyline into the 1920s and 1930s, showing how his hero joined the Komsomol and fought against the *basmach*, and he ended the story with the capture of Ibrohim-Bek.<sup>27</sup> While the novel is distinct from Aini's earlier works, it still differs radically from novels written by the younger generation of Tajik writers who featured a small number of flat characters in their works, as well as a few locations, to provide didactic plots in a socialist realism key that fit, in the words of Katerina Clark, “modal schizophrenia.” In doing so, they collapsed the present and the future into the representation of the ideal outcome of revolutionary fervor.<sup>28</sup>

Despite their many contributions and prominent roles as Tajik writers, neither Aini nor Lahuti wrote works that described how Soviet power had begun to transform life for Tajiks in Soviet Tajikistan. In the case of Lahuti, his rise to prominence depended on his ability to position himself as a revolutionary Iranian, a Stalinist, and an internationalist. Once settled in Moscow, he was significantly removed from local writers who had begun to formulate their own conceptions of a Tajik national identity. In the case of Aini, understanding motivations are much more difficult, but the majority of his works criticized pre-Revolutionary Bukhara, but remained intentionally vague in describing the development of post-Revolutionary Tajikistan. His prior association with the Jadids, as he was no doubt aware, had deadly consequences that he himself

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<sup>24</sup> Yountchi, *Between Russia and Iran*, 37–39; Yountchi explains that Odina's character was robbed off most agency, dependent on others to change his fate, although this characteristic separates *Odina* from Aini's next novel, *Dokhunda*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–41; In her article, Evelyn Grassi too looks at the differences between the generations. She explains that the majority of Aini's works in the 1930s explored the world of pre-revolutionary Bukhara. See: E. Grassi, “From Bukhara to Dushanbe: Outlining the Evolution of Soviet Tajik Fiction,” *Iranian Studies* 50, no. 5, 694–696.

<sup>26</sup> Grassi, “From Bukhara to Dushanbe,” 696.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 696–697.

<sup>28</sup> K. Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 36–39.

had only barely escaped by latching on to a Tajik identity.<sup>29</sup> It is entirely plausible that Aini avoided adopting new visions of a Tajik national identity out of precaution, but this warrants further research. As we will see below, the generation of writers that emerged in the aftermath of the 1937 purges had a new way of conceptualizing what it meant to be Tajik in the Soviet and used their new roles as national writers to re-center the Tajik nation in the post-1929 borders of the Tajik Republic.

### **The Emergence of the Komsomol Generation: Tajik Literature in the Wake of the Stalinist Purges**

Nearly a decade after the establishment of the Tajik SSR, the All-Union Writers' Union grew increasingly concerned with the perceived inadequacies of Tajik literature. In December of 1938, in the wake of the latest round of Stalinist purges, the Organizational Bureau (OrgBiuro) of the Tajik Writers' Union met to discuss their plans for the following year. The meeting was chaired by Mirzo Tursunzoda, a rising Tajik writer and Party member, who would come to play an immense role in the political and cultural life of the Republic. At the meeting, Mirzo Tursunzoda, addressed fellow writers of the Komsomol Generation. Also, in attendance was the Russian-Soviet writer Sergei Mstislavskii, who had recently arrived from Moscow as part of a Soviet Writers' Union Commission to inspect the work of Uzbek and Tajik writers.

During the meeting, Tursunzoda demonstrated his ability to deflect criticism away from his organization, a crucial skill for any Soviet institutional leader in the late 1930s. The most recent wave of Stalinist purges had devastated the small Writers' Union in Stalinobod, making figures like Tursunzoda more mindful of their public personas. Roberts shows that nine of the original twenty members of the Writers' Union were arrested during the purge; five of them died in prison, one served a fifteen-year term, while three others were released in 1938.<sup>30</sup> Those released were quickly re-integrated into the cultural life of the country. Despite the apparent end of the purge by December of 1938, Tursunzoda's interactions with Mstislavskii and the other Tajik writers demonstrates that he understood the precariousness of his position.

Tursunzoda opened the meeting by addressing common criticisms lodged against the Tajik Writers by officials of the All-Union Writers' Union. His words show his ability to utilize the politically loaded language of the purge years demonstrate that the failures of the Tajik Writers' Union were beyond the writers' control. He blamed recent failures on the Republic's "political enemies":

In the last few years the Soviet writers of Tajikistan composed, to the best of their abilities, several works and poems. However, the leadership of the enemies of the people did not provide a path for the literature of Soviet Tajikistan to develop. Our task is to completely liquidate the remnants of these evil doings and to improve the work of the OrgBiuro.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, 387.

<sup>30</sup> F. Roberts, *Old Elites Under Communism: Soviet rule in Leninobod* (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2016), 330.

<sup>31</sup> Central State Archive of the Republic of Tajikistan (TsGART), op. 1, d. 3, l. 3. My thanks to Professor Artemy Kalinovsky for sharing some material he obtained during his own research on the Writers' Union. Here Tursunzoda is referring to the victims of 1937 purges that had also reached Tajikistan. For more on the purges see Roberts, *Old Elites Under Communism*, 330.

Tursunzoda showed that, despite the problems of recent years, the Tajik writers were moving in the right direction:

The SSP (All-Union Writers' Union) needs to... acknowledge the creative achievements of the recent years. Our poets and writers for the last two years have written a number of worthy poems, songs, plays, etc. Rakhim Djalil finished the first part of his novel '*Gulru*.'<sup>32</sup>

Having demonstrated his commitment to the party-line and absolved himself and his comrades of responsibility for the failures of the local Writers' Union, Tursunzoda moved on to discuss specific problems he and his fellow writers faced.

Tursunzoda used the opportunity of Mstislavskii's visit to request assistance from the center in pursuit of the Tajik writers' literary goals. First, Tursunzoda explained, the financial situation of the Writers' Union was unacceptable – in 1938, they had only received forty rubles for the entire year, one-third of the 1937 amount. As a result, they lacked the resources to train new writers and, unlike their Uzbek and Kazakh neighbors, they could not afford to build connections with their national “folk poets and writers” on the ground.<sup>33</sup>

Other issues were administrative in nature but resulted from the Tajik writers' relative isolation from the center. The lack of good translators and the funds to pay them meant that important translation projects remained neglected. The Almanac of Tajik Literature (published locally in the Tajik language) sat for a year-and-a-half in the State Publisher's office (*Tajikgosizdat*) awaiting its translation into Russian. Even the Tajik writers' main representative in Moscow, Lahuti, had neglected his duties as their intermediary. Tursunzoda explained:

Despite the several major shortcomings from our side, the leadership of the Soviet Writers' Union of the USSR leads us weakly [*slabo rukovodit nami*]. For example, let's take Comrade Lahuti. Although we aren't sure if this had to do with his illness or not, he has *not* directed the work of the SSP [Soviet Writers' Union] of Tajikistan. SSP resolutions or letters that were sent often went unanswered.<sup>34</sup>

In the above quote, Tursunzoda addressed the failures of Lahuti and showed that the causes of Tajik literature's delayed progress were often beyond the control of local writers. Throughout his appeal directed at the visitor Mstislavskii, he used his position to lobby for financial and administrative support from Moscow, while simultaneously demonstrating his loyalty to the Communist Party.

Like Mstislavskii, Soviet journalists and Soviet Writers' Union officials approached the Republic's frequently complained about the stagnation of literary activity in Stalinobod.<sup>35</sup> By the mid-1930s, however, observers in major newspapers started to change their

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<sup>32</sup> TsGART, op. 1, d. 3, l. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., l. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ch. Shaw, *Making Ivan-Uzbek: War, Friendship of the Peoples, and the Creation of Soviet Uzbekistan, 1941–1945* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015), 188. Charles Shaw shows that the attitudes Shteinberg expressed in his treatment of Tajik literature persisted and shaped the approaches of representatives from Tajikistan and Moscow when trying to improve the state of Tajik literature.

tone. For example, a *Pravda* article in 1935, “Amidst Tajik Literature,” (*Vokrug Tadzhikskoi Literatury*), explained how these negative perceptions emerged out of the linguistic and geographic distance between the average Russian reader and the Tajik writers:

Lahuti and Aini give Tajik literature an exceptional place in the literatures of the Soviet Union. But Lahuti and Aini are people of the old generation and the younger generation of Tajik literature somehow have not shown themselves capable of replacing their fathers... What do we know about them? Have we really read their works or read anything about them? ... The young Tajik writers live like they are invisible. Yet, they are real. You can see them on Lenin [street] in the House of the Press [*Dom Pechati*] or at each other’s residences but if you do not know their language and cannot look at their books, it will be very difficult to learn anything about their work...<sup>36</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, the importance of translating Tajik works into Russian had gained traction among both Tajik writers in Stalinobod and observers in the Russian-language press.

The new campaign to connect Tajik writers to the metropole was a crucial step in the emergence of the Komsomol Generation on the Soviet-wide stage. Leading writers like Tursunzoda had survived the purges and showed their ability to navigate the tense political environment and lobby on their organization’s behalf. Although issues such as geographic distance, administrative gaps, and lack of financial resources impacted the efficacy of these efforts, coordination between writers in the metropole and periphery had reached new heights in the late 1930s and 1940s. Both groups were willing and able to take the necessary steps to improve the quality of Tajik literature and to make its writers more visible for Russian-speaking audiences. As discussed below, the 1941 Festival of Tajik Art became the crowning moment for this new interaction between center and periphery.

### **Tajikness unfolding in Soviet Space: The 1941 Festival of Tajik Art**

From the end of the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s until the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the Komsomol Generation of Tajik writers published a row of new works that demonstrated their adherence to the doctrine of socialist realism. This included works, such as Rakhim Djilil’s novel *Gulru* and Jalol Ikromi’s novel *Shodi*. The former’s plot centered around Soviet engagement with the *basmachi*, while the latter told the story of the creation of a Tajik collective farm (*kolkhoz*). Finally, Sotim Ulughzoda had completed two plays *Shodmon* (1939) and *Red Clubs* (in Russian: *Krasnopalochniki*, in Tajik: *Kaltakdoroni Surkh* 1940). Despite the relative obscurity of the younger Tajik writers, all-Union celebratory events such as the 1941 Festival of Tajik Art show how increased interaction between center and periphery allowed Tajik writers to develop their own “insider iconography” for the Tajik Republic and share their visions of Tajikistan with a Russian audience.

The lead-up to the 1941 Festival of Tajik Art put the spotlight on the history and culture of the Tajik SSR in the Soviet press. As early as January of 1941, journalists in *Pravda* started publishing about the event, which was set to take place in mid-to-late April. On January 18, *Pravda* published an interview with a member of the Central Com-

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<sup>36</sup> D. Mirskii, “Vokrug Tadzhikskoi Literatury,” *Pravda*, August 20, 1935, 2.

mittee of the Tajik Communist Party, T. Isaev, who shared the main details of the event. The Stalinobod Theater of Opera and Ballet would showcase their work with several performances, including a musical, two operas (*Vose's Uprising* and *The Blacksmith Kova*; in Russian: *Vosstannie Vose* and *Kuznets Kova*), and two plays (Ulughzoda's *Red-Clubs* and Shakespeare's *Othello*).<sup>37</sup> The Festival would conclude with a large concert, which would feature songs and dances by ensembles from around the Republic's regions.

During the festival, the writer Abdusalom Dehoti and Tursunzoda used the principles of socialist realism in their opera *Vose's Uprising* and introduced a distinctly Tajik story. Set in the Hissor Valley of Tajikistan in the late nineteenth century, the opera told the story of a proto-nationalist uprising against an unpopular leader supported by the Bukharan Emir. The first act begins with a gathering of peasants in the village of Mukhtor; together with their leader, an old peasant named Vose, the people share their complaints against the Emir of Bukhara and his viceroy, Khakim, for their abuses against the people. The second act demonstrates Khakim's evil deeds – he cannot trust the people beneath him and he has captured the hero Vose's daughter, Gulnor, who he intends to take as his wife. By the third act, the uprising has freed Gulnor and the people have captured Khakim's fortress. At the end of the act, however, Khakim's forces have taken Vose prisoner. In the final act, they execute him for his role in the uprising. The revolt continues under the leadership of the young Nazir, who finally defeats the tyrant. He enacts his vengeance and kills the traitor Sharir, who carried out Vose's execution. The difference between Lahuti's opera and the one written by Dehoti and Tursunzoda is indicative of broader differences between these writers' strategies of representing Tajikistan. While Lahuti emphasized Tajikistan's connection to a broader Persian literary culture, the younger writers instead promoted Tajikistan's distinctiveness.<sup>38</sup>

Another writer of the Komsomol generation, Sotim Ulughzoda was the most visible Tajik writer at the Festival. The young playwright and member of the Tajik Writers' Union OrgBiuro wrote the play *Red Clubs*, which depicted local resistance to the *basmachis*.<sup>39</sup> Shown during the Festival, this play was the first work in which Russian-speaking audiences encountered a depiction of Soviet struggle with the *basmachis*, told from the perspective of local Tajiks. Although the play was staged in the original Tajik, attendees received a synopsis of each scene, allowing them to follow the development of the plot.<sup>40</sup>

Attendees would have been aware that the play centered on a national theme. The playbill included a brief biography of Ulughzoda and told of his promising future as a writer and playwright.<sup>41</sup> The text explained the philosophy motivating Ulughzoda's work – according to the writer, the theater would only become “genuinely national”

<sup>37</sup> Both operas were composed by the Russian composer, Sergei Balasnian. The libretto for *Vose's Uprising* was written by Dehoti and Tursunzoda, whereas Lahuti wrote the libretto for the *Blacksmith Kova*.

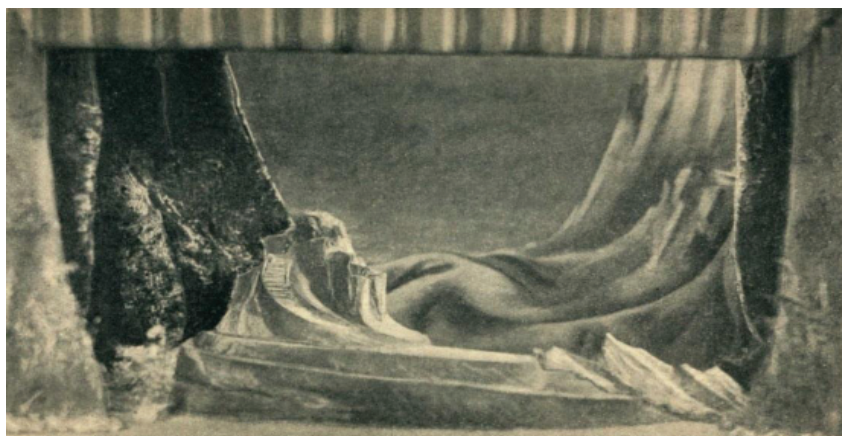
<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that these writers never employed images from classical Persian literature or rejected Tajik claims to figures like Rudaki and Firdowsi. Rather, they, unlike Lahuti, increasingly stressed Tajikistan's distinctiveness as a national category.

<sup>39</sup> The play was written by Ulughzoda and directed by Platonov, a figure associated with the creation of an “insider iconography” for Turkmenistan. See: Holt, *The Rise of Insider Iconography*, 221–273.

<sup>40</sup> Andrey Platonov directed the play and therefore it is likely that the play was translated live, but the historical record is silent on the issue.

<sup>41</sup> *Krasnapalochniki: Narodno-Geroicheskaia Drama v Chetyrekh Aktakh* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo 'Isskustvo', 1941), 1–5.

when it staged truly “national plays.” Ulughzoda’s goal, the text maintained, was to write works based on “material of Soviet Tajik reality.”<sup>42</sup> The result of this endeavor included his featured *Red Clubs* and his first major play (*Shodmon*), which told the story of *collectivization* in Soviet Tajikistan.



**Figure 1. Stage set from Act II, showing the mountains where Salim gathers his forces in preparation of countering Rakhim-Bek’s attack)**

Source: *Krasnpalochniki*, 19.



**Figure 2. From left to right: A. Burkhanov in the role of Salim; M. Kasymov in the role of Rakhim-Bek; Kh. Babakhanova in the role of Khurmo**

Source: *Krasnpalochniki*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> *Krasnpalochniki: Narodno-Geroicheskaia Drama v Chetyrekh Aktakh* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo 'Isskustvo', 1941), 6.

The hero of *Red Clubs* was Salim, the chairman of a local *kolkhoz* and commander of a group of local *krasnopalochniki* (literally, “red clubs”). Under his leadership, the red clubs defend their region from a group of *basmachi* led by the reactionary Rakhim-Bek.<sup>43</sup> The pinnacle of anti-Soviet resistance, Rakhim-Bek has returned to Soviet Tajikistan to wage war against the Soviet state and has captured Khurmo, Salim’s soon-to-be bride. In the end Khurmo escapes and returns to Salim’s camp. After her return, Salim leads a valiant attack against the *basmachi*. As the playbill explained, the director Andrei Platonov, together with Ulughzoda and the play’s artist, K. Kuleshov, went to great lengths to showcase Tajiks and Tajikistan; the stage was specifically set with mountainous backgrounds and the costumes clearly distinguished the actors as natives of Central Asia. Viewers could see Tajikistan as a place where Soviet transformation was unfolding with their own eyes.

Ulughzoda’s *Red Clubs* differed from the operas written by Lahuti, Dehoti, and Tursunzoda, because its fictional plot was set in very concrete historical context of Tajikistan’s recent past – the struggle with the *basmachi*. By creating the Tajik equivalent of the socialist realist “positive hero” who is an “emblem of Bolshevik virtue” and whose life is “patterned ‘to show the forward movement of history,’” Ulughzoda started a trend that was further developed by his fellow writers in the post-war period.<sup>44</sup> Following his lead, they wrote full-length novels employing the same strategy of dividing post-revolutionary Tajik history into simple periods (civil war, collectivization, and the Great Patriotic War) and presented narratives which conformed to the doctrines of socialist realism. This helped connecting Tajik and Central Asian history with that of the other parts of the Soviet Union, thus including the history of the region into the uniform historical narrative of the early Soviet period. These new works of Tajik literature also allowed the writers to use settings and characters that emphasized Tajikistan’s national distinctiveness unfolding in a Soviet space.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored a brief period of Tajik intellectual history, which can effectively be called the pre-history of the Soviet-Tajik writers. In the aftermath of the Second World War, writers including Mirzo Tursunzoda, Sotim Ulughzoda, Rahim Jalil, Foteh Niyozzi, Abdusalom Dehoti, Jalol Ikromi and Mirsaid Mirshakar and others emerged as the undisputed leaders of Tajik literature. Especially after their deaths in 1954 and 1957, Aini and Lahuti became enshrined symbolically as the fathers of modern Tajik literature. Yet the competing visions over the Tajik nation’s place in the Persian-speaking world reached new heights in the late 1940s. In 1949, just a few years before Bobojon Gafurov published his *History of the Tajik People*, for example, Mirzo Tursunzoda published an article “Protiv Kosmopolitizima i Paniranizma (Against Cosmopolitanism and Iranization)” in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. Much like Gafurov, Tursunzoda put Tajikistan and Tajiks at the center of classical Persian literary heritage, but

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<sup>43</sup> The Russian “krasnopalochniki” is slightly different from the original Tajik, *Kaltakdoroni Surkh*, which literally means “red club carriers.” This term refers to everyday individuals who took up items as their disposal and fashioned them as weapons (including clubs, farm equipment, etc.) to fight the *basmachi*.

<sup>44</sup> K. Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 46–47.

went on to strongly criticize “bourgeois” theories that robbed Tajikistan of its national distinctiveness and suggested a shared pan-Iranian literary past.<sup>45</sup> The tension between Lahuti’s vision of a shared Persian literary past and the younger generation’s insistence on a national distinctiveness had been overcome. Tursunzoda went far enough as to criticize the term “Tajik-Persian Literature,” which, if once useful during a period when Tajiks needed to reclaim their “undeniable rights against the rampant ‘iranization’ of our Tajik culture,” had now outlived itself in a new period when both Tajik culture and “patriotic self-awareness” had grown to new heights.<sup>46</sup> While the phrase “Tajik-Persian Literature” would later appear in scholarly works and publications, it was clear that a Tajik-centered vision of Tajik identity had become an institutionalized fact.

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<sup>45</sup> M. Tursun-zade, “Protiv Kosmopolitizma i Paniranizma,” *Literaturanaya Gazeta*, February 9, 1949, 3; L. Yountchi, “The Politics of Scholarship and the Scholarship of Politics: Imperia, Soviet, and post-Soviet Scholars Studying Tajikistan,” in *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 225–226. Yountchi explains that Gafurov’s 1952 edition of *History of the Tajik People: A Brief Account* argued that the Tajiks “have their own culture independent from the Persians, their own cultural traditions, and their own history,” even as he acknowledged shared historical-linguistic backgrounds.

<sup>46</sup> Tursun-zade, “Protiv Kosmopolitizma i Paniranizma,” 3.



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