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MYRATGELDI SÖYEGOW AND HIS PATH FOR THE “RESTITUTION OF THE NAMES” IN THE HISTORY OF TURKMEN ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

Abstract: *A representative of the post-war generation of the Turkmen academic community, Myratgeldi Söyegow (1950-2023), like many late Soviet intellectuals, existed in several social spaces. His life between social activities, academic and creative career, as well as activity as a fighter for the “return of names” certainly deserves a separate study. Often, turning to the topic of cultural and intellectual history of the late USSR, as well as post-Soviet Turkmenistan, academic specialists cannot always find a foothold, understand the context of the formation of certain processes and views. The purpose of this article is to fit Söyegow 's activities into the social and cultural contexts of his era. How did the cultural and academic changes that took place in the second half of the 20th century affect the activities of Myratgeldi-aga? What response did the researcher give to the challenges of these changes? Why did a philologist by training turn to the field of intellectual and cultural history?*

Key words: *history of science, Turkmen academicians, history of the repressed, word in science.*

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THE MODERN-DAY intellectual history as a field consists of multiple theoretical dimensions to analyse the status of a researcher and to reflect over his/her legacy. The majority of those dimensions relies on two key elements: the reflection on the contexts, multiplicity of social and cultural realities which had their impact on a researcher's activity; and the study of practices, the implementation of a researcher's visions and values.

The historiography reveals several examples of those dimensions. For example, microhistoria takes the activity of a research (a case) from the perspectives of interaction between his/her actions and wider spaces of culture and politics. This method is based on the distancing from a researcher's own language towards more nuanced and accurate analysis of a researcher's positioning in the global tendencies. Markus Messling used this approach in his evaluation of the visions of the Enlightenment's legacy in the epoch of nationalism by Jean-François Champollion, the decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphics (Messling 2023). Susan Marchand based her research of the Asian studies in Germany on the unity of research questions used by the scholars living in different pe-

riods. She accurately follows the changes of meanings behind the answers on those questions related directly to the specificities of cultural and political situations (Marchand 2009). Henning Trüper brought the attention to the issues of emotions and aesthetics in the history of Asian studies. Those factors are always underestimated in comparison with the universal grid of “knowledge/power”. Despite the frequent use of the latter, it is almost irrelevant for the rigorous investigation (Trüper 2020).

For other scholars, such as Herman Paul, a researcher is foremost a social being which had to deal with the issues of ethics and regulations inside a community (Paul 2019). Those values such as “epistemic vices” have their specific impact on the research activity by a scholar (Daston, Galison 2018). This approach shares its vision with the so-called “history of subjectivities”. Unfortunately, the lack of reflection and critique in the use of those approaches blurred the boundaries between personal and communal, agency and subjectivity (Bessmertnaya 2023). In the perspective, this sketchy analysis leads to the domination of meta-narratives and meta-categories (“Soviet”, “Muslim”, etc) in the modern-day historiogra-

phy. Hence, the intellectual history provides the wide range of tools for in-deep analytics over the scholarly activities.

My intention to start this text with this discussion is meaningful. The old-fashion academic genealogies and history of a professional community have their ground in the over-schematic visions (*Marchand* 2009). The academic genealogies substitute the object of research by stressing on the infinite shifts of names and titles aiming to demonstrate an imaginary path of development (*Trüper* 2020: 25–56). Those approaches have no answers for those who want to study the knowledge-formation mechanisms. On the contrary, they isolate an academic community, making almost impossible to understand its interaction with broader categories of society and culture.

From my perspective, the activity of Myratgeldi Söyegow should be seen through the lens of cultural and social processes of the second half of the 20th century. Söyegow was not simply a witness of those events, but was actively involved in those fundamental shifts of the reflection on the past inside the Soviet Union. Undoubtedly, it is impossible to create a full-scale research of his academic biography. One of the factors for this situation is the lack of alternative perspectives on the history of Turkmen academic community besides the old-fashion genealogical schemes (*Babaev*, et al. 1982). This article refers to microhistoria as a method of seeing a scholar inside the shifts of academic culture and changes in the visions of the past used by the Soviet and Turkmen specialists. However, it is rather difficult to alienate our vision from Söyegow's own language, mainly due to the scarcity of the sources.

There is a necessity for a brief disclaimer from my side before starting the core part of the article. I was acquainted with Söyegow by correspondence. In a reason of my interest to the intellectual and cultural history of Turkmenistan, I inquired him on his multiple writings on those topics produced in the period of the 1990s – 2020s. In 2015, I organised a conference “Turkmenistan's natives on the border of the Neva river”¹ and invited Söyegow to join his Russian colleagues. In 2016–2017, in his turn, he asked me for a favour to collect the data on «The music magazine of Astrakhan». Consequently, he wrote an article about this edition, by using the copies of this journal created by my efforts (*Söyegow* 2017a). Afterwards, we had several conversations about my doctoral thesis. Söyegow even wanted to be its foreign reviewer. However, my critique of the monograph written by his student,

Victoria Clement, bothered him (*Ikhsanov* 2020). Our last conversation was dedicated to his skepticism towards the critique of “Jadid-centered historiography” that I quoted in my article².

My acquaintance with his research method was brief and fragmented. Therefore, I have a limited perception of the Söyegow's localisation in the complexity of social worlds and multiplicity of communities³. For this reason, I will concentrated my attention to the interactions between Söyegow's ideas and wider discourses.

Ordinary, an obituary implies some kind of eulogy (*Tyagay* 1988) or a list of achievements (*Ataniyazov* 1990). However, some scholars used it for their purposes. For example, the linguist Alexander Samoiloich used the series of obituaries dedicated to his teachers for constructing his version of history of Turkic linguistics and to proof the necessity of methodological shift in this branch of humanities (*Blagova* 2012; *Tolz* 2005).

My article aims to track how the cultural and methodological shifts in the Soviet academic community had their impact on Söyegow's work? What was his answer to the challenge of national construction during the Soviet period and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Why the linguist by training was forced to switch his sphere of academic interests towards intellectual history?

This article is based primarily on the writings created by Söyegow full of brief biographical notes.

Myratgeldi Söyegow was born 14th January 1950 in the village of Hojambaz, situated in the Hojambaz district of Çärjew region in the Turkmen SSR. According to his official biography, he was born in the family of local civil servant (*gullukçy*) (*Muhyýew, Kürenow* 1988: 135). However, numerous biographers mentioned the esteemed positioning of his family by referring to his own articles. Thus, according to Zeki Petkaş, Söyegow's grandfather was a graduate of renowned madrasah “Chor-minor” (*Pektash* 2014)⁴. Moreover, the Söyegow's family has closed family ties with the region of Samarkand in the neighbouring

¹ URL: http://www.orientalstudies.ru/rus/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4266&Itemid=48 (accession date 01.12.2023).

² The essence of the discussion was to discuss the criticism of Jadido-centric historiography, which received particular development after the special issue of the Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient “Beyond Modernism: rethinking Islam in Russia, Central Asia and Western China (XIX-XX centuries).” Although, this discussion began in the early 1990s. by the works of Stéphane Dudoignon (*Dudoignon* 1996; *DeWeese* 2016).

³ On her social networks, singer Selbi Tuvakgylyzhova demonstrated a book with the autograph of Soegov, her university teacher.

⁴ Soegov himself, in his articles, indicates Seyitkuliev as a famous native of Hojambaz, without specifying family relations (*Soegov* 2021).

Uzbekistan (Söyegow 2021). The Söyegow's father was a Party official, educated in Tashkent (Pektash 2014). Nevertheless, Söyegow himself has not underlined this fact in his writings (Söyegow 2021). Instead, he stressed on his personal achievements. He started his career at the first regional school named after the Turkmen poet Magytmguly Pyragy (Muhyyew, Kürenow 1988: 135) as a young journalist and poet. The very first publication signed by Söyegow has been published in 1964 in a magazine for children entitled *Mydam taýýar* ("Always ready")⁵.

The life of young Söyegow passed in the period after the Second World War. This time had its particular impact on the history of Central Asia. The intensified migrations within the borders of the USSR and the unified vision of the external danger led to the formation of all-Union identity (Carmack 2019)⁶. But this period also should had been an initial page in the new wave of nation construction inside Central Asia itself. It was a reason for the plans to organise several great anniversaries of the so-called national poets (Shin 2017)⁷ and to summarise the reports by the so-called «complex expeditions» (Bustanov 2015). The all-Union Academy initiated the latter means to create the new historical narratives for the regional countries, mostly by using the methods of archeology and ethnography. Later, the scholars proceeded those materials through the unified models of historiographical description (Bustanov 2016).

After the end of the Second World War, the policy in Central Asia, from one side, became more repressive. Söyegow himself described the trials against the nationalist use of the local epics (Söyegow 2018). There were the well-known alphabet reforms and Russification of the dictionaries all around the USSR (Clement 2018). But, from another side, the ideas of previous period emerged from the oblivion (Klimovich, Skosyrev 1949). While the state proclaimed its distancing from the strict atheist policy and started the new period of national construction, different academic groups found a window of opportunity to re-introduce previously abandoned concepts and constructs back to the mainstream discourse (Tsar 2017). Therefore, the late Stalinist period could be characterised by the instability of cultural life in Central Asia. While there was a strict and hierarchical system of the all-Union society, the nationalist readings of local cultures flourished widely through the

Soviet space (Babayeva 2016).

The 20th congress of the Communist party started the new era in the cultural and intellectual history of the all-Union space. The complex changes introduced to the Soviet society by the reforming process had their consequences in the cultural sphere (Dudoignon 2014). It was exactly the period, when the "oral culture" of the Soviet humanities was formed and started its circulation behind the pompous congresses and official meetings. The uncertainties of methodology, family memory and instability of the constructs revealed themselves through emotional discussions and debates (Bessmertnaya 2020). In Central Asia, the local scholars used the term "silent nationalism of the academic practices" to describe the same phenomenon (Bisenova, Medeuova 2016).

In the period of those dominating tendencies, Söyegow became a student at the Philological department of the Turkmen state university. His period of education lasted from 1968 to 1973 (Muhyyew, Kürenow 1988). Undoubtedly, the professors of Söyegow made a big impression on him. For example, Hekim Maşakow was a representative of the group of Turkmen scholars who faced the start of the War in Leningrad (Söyegow 2012). A half of this group lost their lives at the fields of the World War, including the literature critique Ahmed Ahundow-Gürgenli (Khalimov 1990). Those traumas had their impact on the reflection of the Söyegow's generation. During the third year, Söyegow had a course «history of the Turkmen literature» taught by the professor Mýäti Kosaýew. He had a particular impact on the reflection of his students by actively demonstrating his religious identity and by organising the discussions with living writers and poets, including the old masters like Berdi Kerbabaýew (Söyegow 2017c). The activity of this professor left his mark on Söyegow's vision of the national culture, his perception of Islam and identity of the Turkmen people.

At the same moment, the young man was fascinated by the new opportunities presented by the shift of research methods (Mammedov, Janbekov 2020).

Previously, during the Stalinist period, the scholar Nikolai Marr severely criticised the European scholarship of biases and the one-dimensional perspective (Slezkine 1996). Marr believed in the impact of political biases on the European comparative linguistics (Brandist 2015). Every European scholar aimed to proclaim his/her native language the most ancient and directly connected to the wisdom of previous generations (Marchand 2009). Marr created his "paradigm" aimed to overcome those issues from the perspective of minorities (Tikhonov 2021). He sought the signs of future fusions of all the languages in one world unit (Gerasimov, Glebov, Mogilner 2016). His ideas found the support by the Party officials and the

⁵ It should be noted that there is a discrepancy in the dates of publication of the poem in the magazine Pioneer between 1966, 1967 and 1969 (Arnazarov 2016; Mammedov, Janbekov 2020; Pektash 2014; Söyegowa 2019). Read more about the children's press in Soviet Turkmenistan (Babaeva 2016).

⁶ This issue is currently being studied by our colleague, Ms. Zukhra Kasymova.

local intellectuals. For example, the Turkmen scholars insisted on their language to be fusional instead of the common conviction in its agglutinative nature (Gelenow 1932). It was a path to support the status of their language as the dialect of independent republic. Without a shadow of a doubt, some of them criticised those ideas, but their destiny was unfortunate (Aşirov 2019).

In the 1950s, the scholars re-introduced to the mainstream discourse the comparative linguistics. Marr's ideas were proclaimed to have the anti-academic nature, but they saved their traces among the writings created by different communities of linguists (Alpatov 2006). The Soviet linguists revived the discussions of the 1910s by searching the "Babylon", the starting point of the world languages' dissolution (Campbell, Poser 2008). Those searched were of particular importance for the Central Asian linguists who were seeking the places of their communities in the world history and world literature (Alpatov 2011). Based on the rationality of the Cold war, any critique of those ideas was seen as politically biased (Campbell, Poser 2008).

In those debates, the particular meaning had the works written by Vladislav Illich-Svitych, the specialist on the Slavic languages. His contemporaries believed in his genius abilities and knowledge (Dybo 1996). One of the Söyegow's tutors, Ýazmammad Çungayew introduced the young scholars to these discussions (Mammedov, Janbekov 2020). Çungayew also published his ideas on the so-called «Altaic theory» later, during the Perestroika period (Çungayew 1985). In the same period, Söyegow knew a lot about the Marr's vision from his academic advisor Mammednazar Hydryow (Söyegow 2017b). Söyegow tried to combine these two oppositional lines of thought in one unified vision of the history of Turkmen language. His efforts found the success in the series of comparative articles and monographs, including his doctoral thesis (Mammedov, Janbekov 2020). Such uncertainty of methodological standard should not disappoint the modern-day scholars. It was a bright example of the inner debates behind the walls of the Soviet universities (Alpatov 2006).

When Söyegow started his first period of work at the Academy of Sciences in 1974–1981, the USSR witnessed a new wave of political repressions after the series of protests and the event in the countries of the Eastern and Central Europe (Yurchak 2005). Söyegow's tutor, Kosaýew was fired from his position based on the sole line in the article dedicated to the

celebration of Kerbabayew's anniversary (Vasil'kov, Sorokina 2003). This event combined with the dialogues with the former repressed scholars was a new challenge for Söyegow's vision of the Soviet reality (Söyegow 1990). The numerous questions arose in his head.

Despite the controversial nature of the Soviet regime, the Söyegow's career was built on the system of social elevators created by this political system. He was working as the Party representative in his Institute and had even reached the position of an instructor of the local academic institutions in the Ashgabat regional branch of the Communist Party (Arnazarov 2016). He had a good reputation as an academician and civil servant. His networking skills provided him the opportunities to enlarge the scope of his research far from the borders of the Turkmen SSR (Söyegow 2022).

The *Perestroika* period finally gave him an opportunity to openly ask the questions about the controversies of the past. The Perestroika was, in fact, the reaction of the officials on the controversies of the administration (Scarborough 2023). But the huge amount of questions quickly found its way on the pages of the local newspapers, including the issues of national languages and the history of repressions (Clement 2018; Scarborough 2023). The contemporary scandal over the cotton production revealed the racist stand of other USSR's republics towards Central Asian comrades. In their turn, Central Asian communists highlighted the total failure of the Soviet healthcare system in the region and the lack of economic and political consistency (Abashin 2023).

In this period, Söyegow came back to the Academy of Sciences. He started to publish his articles and books about the destiny of repressed scholars (Söyegow 1990). Those publications became the main point of his academic interest. Hence, the Perestroika gave him the opportunities to ask openly his question and to reveal the "oral culture of the Soviet humanities" in the written form. He continued this work further by the support of his international colleagues and new technologies. This activity is a bright example of his courage and commitment.

At the same time, he reached the ultimate position as an academic administrator by defending his habilitation and becoming the director of the Institute of language and literature (Pektash 2014). Shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Söyegow was a vice-minister of education (Söyegow 2013). At this administrative position, he was forced to deal with re-establishment of academic interaction with Türkiye (Nasilov 2012) and the break up with the Soviet and Russian academic systems (Zhukov, Reznikova 2001; Demidov 2002). Söyegow was well-known for his role in the 1990s alphabet reform in Turkmenistan (Clement 2018).

⁷As had been planned: For 1940 an anniversary of Nizami Gänjavi, for 1941 an anniversary of Alisher Navoi, for 1944 an anniversary of Magtymguly Fragi. This entire row of anniversaries fell on the period of 1946–1948.

His articles about the intellectual history of Turkmenistan had a specific meaning – to re-introduced almost forgotten names of the Turkmen scholars back to mainstream discourse inside Turkmenistan. The same process took its place in other countries of Central Asia (Dudoignon 1996), but had its peculiarities in different countries (Amanzholova 2009; Khalid 2015). In the mid-2010s, this trend found its critique by international scholars (De Weese 2016) and adherents of decolonial theory (Bisenova, Mukasheva 2020). Söyegow

was skeptical about this critique (Frank 2020) and believed in the dominance of the true words by the heroes of his texts. His work, despite numerous factual errors, inspired the scholars around the globe to start their investigation (Aşirov 2020).

M. Söyegow was undoubtedly the scholar who made huge contribution in the new vision of the Turkmen culture. His works, despite their, in some sense, outdated methodology, had their impact on the new generations of the Turkmen intellectuals.

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