
PRESENTING THE COLLECTIONS

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ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPTS OF KARL FABERGÉ. IV: POETRY AND MINIATURES (PART 2)

Western scholars are often surprised to learn from their Russian colleagues that for Russia Islam is not external and exotic, but rather domestic and familiar, linked by thousands of ties with Russian history and life. Numerous examples exist. One of them is the study in the former USSR of the legacy of the Muslim Middle ages' greatest poets. Throughout the Soviet period, a firm priority existed to study those whose birth and biography tied them to the lands that were part of the USSR. This tendency developed along various lines. Poems by a number of outstanding poets of the Muslim East were translated and published, broad efforts were made to popularise their works, and they became part of the general cultural heritage of the USSR and its peoples. Where I live, many still remember the commemorative gatherings for the 800-year anniversary of Nizāmī and the 500-year anniversary of Nawā'ī organized in cold, hungry, besieged Leningrad in the Hermitage at the initiative of its director, Academician I. A. Orbeli. It was a truly heroic feat. One of the participants wrote many years later: "Our front honoured Nizāmī just as Nizāmī honoured heroes" [1]. Though the city was barely alive, research and translation continued in the face of all odds. "The Blockade Diary" by the marvellous Russian Iran scholar A. N. Boldyrev contains the following entry for January 9, 1942: "I received in the Hermitage yesterday 100 g of fir vitamin and 654 rub[les] by agreement, more than enough for Nawā'ī and Nizāmī" [2].

On the other hand, the "Tajik Firdawsī and Azerbaijani Nizāmī" soon became cult figures in the emergent Soviet culture of the USSR's Muslim republics, conceived as "national in form and socialist in content". Attempts to study the works of these poets in the context of Iranian or, more broadly, Islamic culture were harshly suppressed. They were seen as a slight against the peoples of Soviet Central Asia.

A tragic episode in this tale took place in 1949 in Leningrad. In the course of the "struggle with cosmopolitanism", the outstanding Russian Arabist, Academician I. Iu. Krachkovsky, fell victim to harsh criticism [3]. At an open session of the Academic Council of the USSR Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies, a man specially dispatched from Moscow spoke, accusing Krachkovsky of "cosmopolitanism, comparativism, pan-

Islamism, pan-Arabism, and pandering to bourgeois scholarship". The ensuing discussion, however, did not follow the lines envisioned by Moscow. Students, who had arrived at the session despite a concurrently scheduled meeting of the Communist Youth group, chanted, "Shame! Shame!" Among these protesting students was Oleg Bolshakov, today a celebrated historian and Arabist, author of the multi-volume "History of the Caliphate". A string of intelligent and daring addresses allowed Leningrad's scholars to prove their point. Many remember the sarcastic question Prof. A. N. Boldyrev asked the guest from Moscow: "And if a socialist revolution takes place in Iran tomorrow, how will you look the Iranian people in the eye after you took such a poet (Firdawsī — E. R.) away from them?" [4].

The young people present at the session gained a "stunning lesson in civic courage and scholarly integrity" [5]. One of them, the student Turkologist Aleksei Sidorov (the nephew of Academician N. N. Semenov, laureate of the Nobel Prize, physicist and chemist who worked on the Soviet nuclear project), was the editor of the student scholarly society's wall newspaper. On the day after the meeting of the Academic Council, he released an issue of the newspaper with a complete and accurate account of what had happened. The newspaper hung on the wall for no more than an hour. Several days later, he was arrested, despite the selfless aid of several female fellow students who tried to warn him and shelter him. The student Sinologist Boris Parizhsky also tried in vain to help him (he had gone through the war as a paratrooper and had connections in the Ministry of State Security, or KGB).

Arrested with Aleksei Sidorov were N. A. Dulina, a female student who was in love with him, and the student and war veteran Anton Serov. They were charged with anti-Soviet agitation and received long sentences in concentration camps. The longest sentence was handed out to Aleksei Sidorov, who had fled during a search, knocking down an agent of state security. In the camps, he cut off one of his own fingers as a protest and was transferred to prison, where he was held in the same cell as Ukrainian nationalists who constantly tormented him. After Stalin's death, all three were released, but Aleksei, worn down by his travails, soon committed suicide. I. Iu. Reshetnikova (Gradova), who had gone to warn Aleksei about his possible arrest