

The Gur-i Amir Mausoleum and the Soviet Politics of Preservation



1. General view of the Gur-i Amir, 2009. Photograph by Charles Shaw.

By

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Those who doubt our power, see our buildings
— Inscription on Timur's Ak Sarai palace,
Shakhrisiabz, Uzbekistan

In the Soviet Union preservation was intimately connected to the goals of the Communist Party and employed in the struggle to build the legitimacy of the Communist state, even in periphery. In the earliest years of the Soviet state, preservation was used to compare the new order with the tsarist regime, and in the relatively prosperous and stable postwar period it helped to construct the optimistic vision that history marched toward human liberation. The state went to great expense to manipulate the built environment, preserving monuments as part of broad didactic landscapes where citizens could learn about their country's historical evolution toward the promised Communist future.

After the revolution, the Bolsheviks reapportioned material wealth and nationalized the artistic and architectural heritage of the Russian Empire, appropriating the buildings they deemed to have the greatest artistic and historical value in the name of the people, such as Moscow's Kremlin, Leningrad's suburban palaces, and nobles' estates. This feudal or bourgeois art justified preservation because, according to a decree from the Council of Workers and Soldiers and Deputies from November, 1917, "it is the splendor that talented people managed to create even under the yoke of despotism and testifies to the beauty and strength of the human spirit."¹

In central Asia, the state undertook to preserve great Islamic historic monuments under the premise that it was refurbishing this cultural patrimony on behalf of its original workers and craftsmen, the ancestors of the region's proletariat. However, some of the region's architectural monuments were difficult to wrest from their local historical and political contexts and to include in the wider proletarian narrative of Communism's evolution. This was never clearer than in the case of the fifteenth-century Gur-i Amir mausoleum in Samarkand, in modern Uzbekistan.² The Gur-i Amir (Persian for "tomb of the emir") was the final resting place of the region's greatest conqueror and builder, Tamerlane (1336–1405), or simply Timur, who created an empire centered in Samarkand that stretched from Delhi through Iran and to the Caucasus, and that came close to taking Moscow.

Because custodianship of spiritual architecture had been associated with political legitimacy in historic Turkestan, which had been part of the Russian Empire since 1865, the Soviet regime recognized that the Gur-i Amir was essential in achieving its broader goals in the region. The local Soviet regime hoped to capitalize on the mausoleum's political and religious resonance in order to legitimize Soviet power as a liberating force. Their strategy was to dissociate the interpretation of the site from the figure of Timur, recalibrating the local hagiography toward a more acceptable Soviet hero, Timur's grandson Ulughbek, who provided archeological legitimacy to the Soviet project of Uzbek nation building.

The Soviet preservation and reinterpretation of the Gur-i Amir proceeded in two primary registers: for locals who witnessed the physical transformation of the site, and for citizens throughout the Soviet republics who learned about it in newspapers, film reels, glossy guidebooks, and tourist brochures. The Gur-i Amir and other Timurid structures also played a noteworthy role as showplaces of Soviet Islamic modernity for visiting dignitaries, especially during the Cold War. These practices followed a long pre-Soviet tradition of presenting custodianship over heritage as a way to legitimate political rule. Since the introduction of Islam to the region in the eighth century, emirs and khans had patronized the shrines and mausoleums of Sufi sheiks or endowed *wakfs* (religious endowments) to preserve mosques and *medresas* (colleges of theology and jurisprudence) in order to instantiate their rule among local Turki and Persian-speaking Muslims. After the Russian annexation of Samarkand in 1868, Russian rulers reoriented the politics of custodianship—away from Sufi shrines, toward sites that were more legible to their orientalist educations, such as the Gur-i Amir.

The mausoleum, topped by an azure-ribbed dome, was begun in 1403 for Timur's presumptive heir and grandson Muhamad Sultan, rounding out the southern end of a courtyard with a preexisting medresa to the east and a *khanaqa* (Sufi lodge) to the west.³ Timur himself was buried there in 1405, and was eventually joined by other sons, grandsons, and two members of the *ulema*, or Islamic clergy. Timur's grandson, Ulughbek (1394–1449), transformed the Gur-i Amir into the family mausoleum we know today, transferring his father Shahrukh's remains from Herat, commissioning the arched, tiled gateway to enclose the courtyard in the north, adding the eastern entrance hall, procuring the lustrous green nephrite gravestone from Chinese Turkestan to mark Timur's grave, and endowing it with a fictive genealogy that traced the dynastic line back to Mongol and Islamic provenance to Genghis Khan and Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, respectively.

Later regional dynasties, such as the Shaibanid Uzbeks (1500–99) and the Manghits (1785–1920), used Bukhara as their capital instead of Samarkand. Logically, the bulk of their patronage went to shrines around Bukhara, like those of Sufi saints such as Baha-ud-din Naqshband, rather than to the Gur-i Amir.⁴

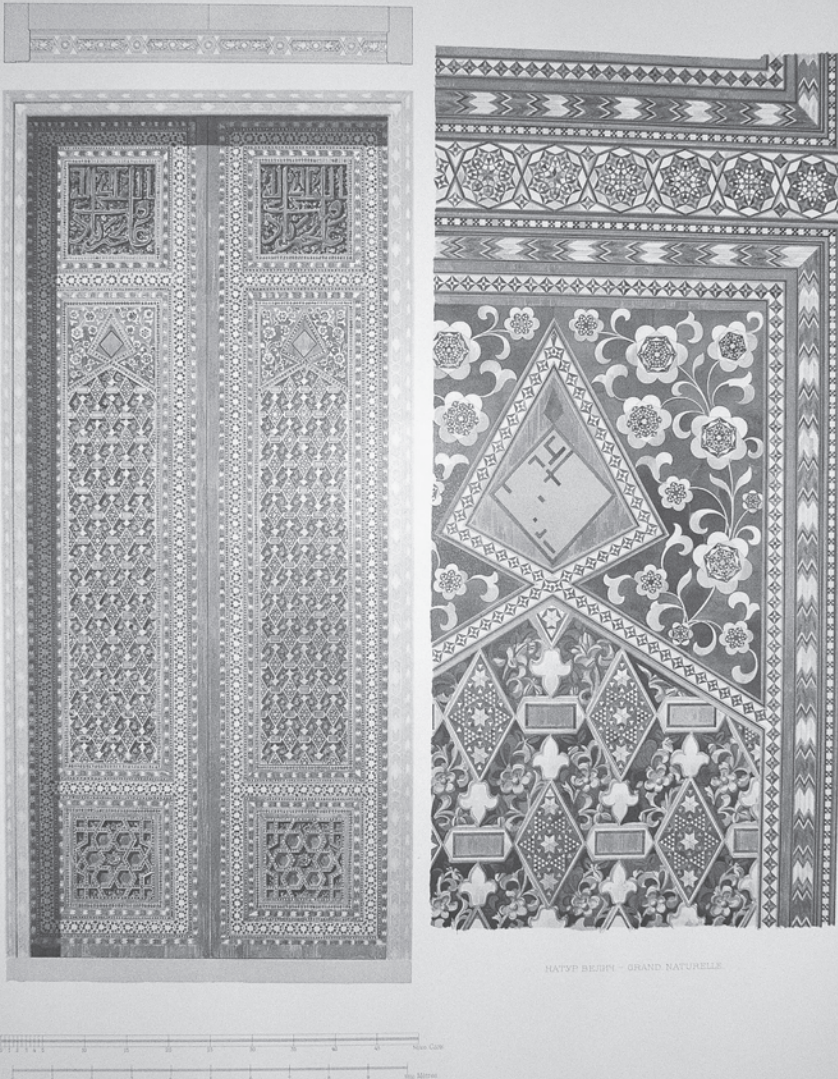
Funds for the preservation of the Gur-i Amir began to flow back to the site only in the mid-nineteenth century. The establishment of the Turkestan Governorate General based in Tashkent (1865) eased the access for European orientalist travelers who came to the region largely for the Gur-i Amir—and not the tombs of Sufi saints—employing it as a metonym for Timur and for the city of Samarkand itself. European travelogues collapsed five hundred years of history into one figure, often referring to Samarkand’s inhabitants as “the subjects of Timur,” or imagining that the “ghost of the terrible monarch float[ed] under the mausoleum, seeming still to defend his devastated capital,” acts of historical foreshortening made possible by tourists’ inability to communicate in Persian or Turki.⁵ Rather paternalistically, they assailed the locals for custodial negligence and interpreted the Timurid buildings as the mysterious but decrepit flourishes of a declined civilization. For European and Russian orientalists as well as Russian rulers, the Timurid civilization was the one that the Turkestan Governorate General had to measure itself against. In the search for political legitimacy the Russians shifted resources toward the Gur-i Amir, and not to the Sufi shrines preferred by the former ruling Manghit dynasty.⁶

The preservation of the Gur-i Amir was especially poignant in the symbolic imaginary of the Russian Empire. Timur’s armies nearly conquered Moscow in 1395 and the Vladimirskaiia bogomater’ icon, considered a sacred object in Russia, performed its first purported miracle by saving the city from occupation. The Russian conquest of Turkestan meant a chance to show Russia’s subjects and the West that it was a solvent, dynamic, great power capable of civilizing its own barbarians. As Dostoyevsky observed in 1881, “In Europe we were only poor recipients of charity and slaves, but we come to Asia as masters. In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we are also Europeans.”⁷

In 1868, Governor General Konstantin von Kaufman began the work of preserving the Gur-i Amir by erecting a fence around it and allotting more than 3,000 rubles to stabilize the monument after the collapse of the northeast minaret in an earthquake. He filled holes in the roof, recruited local master carvers to craft two marble staircases in the main hall, and cleared out a garden to open up the site to the new Russian city, allowing it to serve as a link between the old Islamic town and the new European one.⁸ However, after von Kaufman’s initial outlay, the

ДЕРЕВЯННАЯ ИНКРУСТИРОВАННАЯ ДВЕРЬ ВОСТОЧНОГО ВХОДА ВЪ МЕЧЕТЬ ГУРЪ-ЭМИРЪ
(РЕСТАВРАЦИЯ)

PORTE DE BOIS AVEC INCRUSTATIONS A L'ENTRÉE ORIENTALE DE LA MOSQUÉE DE GOUR-ÉMIR
(RESTAURATION)



2. Detail of the door to the Gur-i Amir's main gallery. From *Mecheti Samarkanda, Les Mosquées de Samarcande, Vypusk 1: Gur Emir* (S. Peterburg: Izdanie Imperatorskoi Arkheologicheskoi Kommissii, 1905).

local Russian government was unable to spare a steady stream of funding for upkeep. Between 1895 and 1917 the preservation and study of Samarkand's monuments was carried out by a private group of notables, the *Kruzhok Liubitelei Arkheologi* (Circle of amateur archeologists), which was composed of Russian elites, scholars who had flocked to the region, and one local mullah. Members of the circle, with support from the Imperial Archeological Society, produced a sumptuous folio volume of site surveys and architectural details of the Gur-i Amir in 1905 to inspire Nicholas II to release more preservation funds in Turkestan on behalf of Timur, the “most magnificent

builder of the Muslim East.” Its title, *Mecheti Samarkanda*, or Mosques of Samarkand, reflected their misconception of the building’s original purpose. The volume perpetuated the narrative of central Asian civilization as a grand but fallen star, whose decline after the sixteenth century had practically mandated Russian tutelage in aesthetics and preservation, noting that “the artistry that we admire in the monuments of Samarkand was imported here from outside. This style did not develop any further after the death of Tamerlane . . . [and] fell quickly into decadence.” It also lifted the burden of proof for repairs from Russian hands, asserting that earthquakes and the Gur-i Amir’s “inadequate preservation (*remont*) under Timur’s successor khans resulted in such a condition of ruin as to make further maintenance extremely difficult.”⁹ The choice of the Gur-i Amir to inaugurate the series bespoke its unparalleled importance in Russian eyes and offered Nicholas II as the inheritor of Timur’s cultural legacy, rendering the “iron cripple,” Timur, as the dispossessed double of the tsar.

Even with limited funds, the circle’s orientalists, numismatists, and archeologists managed to save the dome from collapse and to reinforce the flooring with brick columns. S. M. Prokudin-Gorskii’s photos from between 1905 and 1915 showed the entrance gate’s *iwān* on the verge of collapse, the main hall beset with cracking, and most of the glazed blue tiles fallen away from the dome and the central edifice.¹⁰ But it is difficult to assess the quality of the circle’s efforts because the era saw two earthquakes — in 1868 and 1903 — that toppled the remaining minarets. Observations from Russian, European, and American travelers mention both rampant souvenir seeking and neglect, as well as precautionary stabilization measures, but these accounts are colored by sentiments toward or against the Russian regime and cannot be understood as objective records.¹¹

The Russian Revolution of 1917 and subsequent Civil War (1918–23) temporarily cut Turkestan off from the rest of the Red Army in Siberia and European Russia. When in 1918 Turkestan’s Bolsheviks managed to defeat the White Army forces supported by the British and violently suppress the Provisional Government of Autonomous Turkestan (also called the Kokand Autonomy), they began to seek the support of the native population by forming a regional bureau of Muslim organizations based in Tashkent. However, Bolshevik control was elusive because a more than decade-long struggle to defeat anti-Soviet local Muslims — labeled derisively as *Basmachis* (Turkic for “bandits”) — raged immediately thereafter. Fighting was especially violent in rural southern Turkestan, where rebels found support in the Ferghana valley, the Karakum desert, and the mountains of present-day Tajikistan. The technologically



3. S. M. Prokudin-Gorskii's photo of the cupola: "Dome of the Gur-Emir mosque from eastern side. Samarkand," 1905–15. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Prokudin-Gorskii Collection [LC-DIG-prokc-21831].

superior Red Army gained control of most of the region by 1926, but Basmachi insurgents continued raiding Soviet settlements from bases across the border in Afghanistan until 1934.¹² Because Samarkand was largely spared from the most violent episodes of the Civil War and the Basmachi rebellion, the Gur-i Amir seems to have escaped significant new damage. Thus it was not until the mid-1920s that Bolshevik control in Tashkent and Samarkand allowed for the new regime to think of matters architectural and historical.

Because the Gur-i Amir was a religiously and politically significant structure, it became part of the Communists' multifaceted and ongoing efforts to unseat Islam in central Asia. In the early 1920s the Bolsheviks allied with progressive Muslims, known as Jadids, to gain a foothold among the population before jettisoning them on account of their piety and purported bourgeois nationalism and pan-Turkism. In 1927 an aggressive and comprehensive attack on Islam began, with the elimination of wakfs, religious education at *mektebs* (primary schools) and medresas, and Sharia law by banning the courts of *qazis* (Islamic legal scholars). Between 1927 and 1929 the state



4. S. M. Prokudin-Gorskii's photo of the entrance gate: "Entrance into the Gur-Emir mosque. Samarkand," 1905–15. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Prokudin-Gorskii Collection [LC-DIG-prok-02290].

also murdered and drove away countless *ulema* (clergy), and ransacked or repurposed numerous mosques in a campaign that "tended to run out of control." In the estimation of historian Adeeb Khalid, this campaign was so furious as to largely escape archival record.¹³ In the conciliatory postwar years, the Soviets sought to control rather than combat the faithful through SADUM, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, which provided a sanctioned form of "official" Islam.

The Gur-i Amir was spared the destructive treatment that other architectural treasures received. Indeed, under Stalin's mandate as general secretary (1922–53), the Soviets did not destroy what they deemed to be the most significant Timurid and post-Timurid mosques and medresas despite their original religious purpose. Rather, the restoration of these particular Islamic buildings, as well as their reinterpretation as outdoor museums celebrating the traditional workmanship of the Uzbek proletariat and Islamic-inspired creativity that had run its natural course, was part of the Communists' broad campaign to win social support and prove the Soviet Union was a force of liberation, and not a simple continuation of the Russian Empire under a different name. Similar efforts included the project to

fashion national republics in the region (1924–36), the *koreni-zatsiia* (nativization) campaign to elevate local Muslims in the Soviet government and the party, and the unveiling campaigns to “liberate” Muslim women, known as the *hujum* (attack) on local custom (1927).¹⁴

There were also significant changes in the administration of preservation in the 1920s, aimed at making the Soviets more able guardians of Islamic monument than the Russian Empire had been, and offering a tangible measure of comparison between the two regimes. Thus Ivan Umniakov (1890–1976), a central actor and historian of early Soviet preservation efforts in central Asia, saluted the Kruzhok Liubitelei Arkheologi for its attentive study of local architectural monuments but he criticized the tsarist custodianship model under which the society operated because it largely relied on existing wakfs for physical upkeep. By his estimation, the tsarist preservation system had left monuments throughout the region in a state of ruin.¹⁵

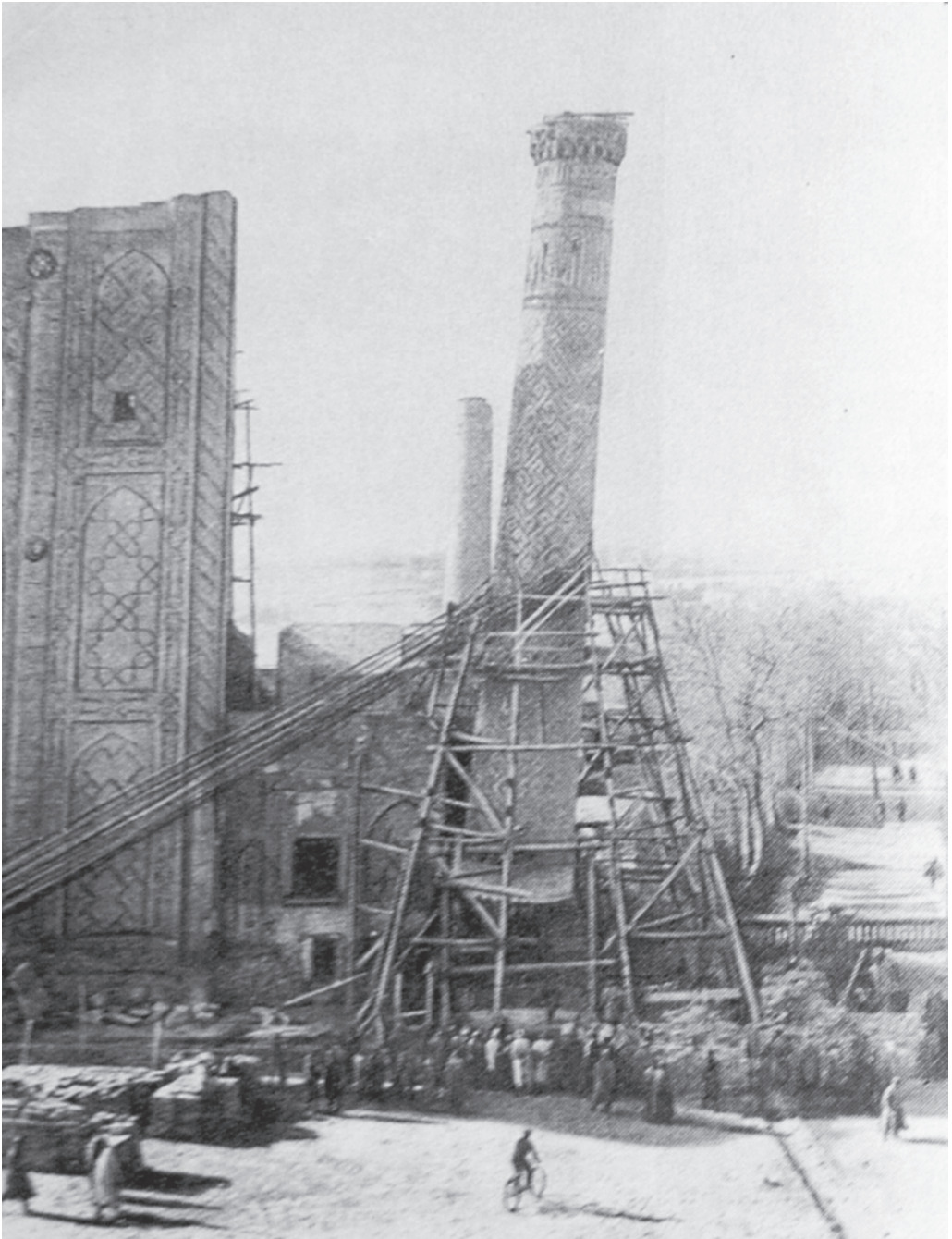
The Soviets moved quickly to set up a new system of political administration that included a new preservation bureaucracy. In 1918, Tashkent was named the capital of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Turkestan ASSR), and when Moscow redrew the political boundaries of the region in 1930 it became the capital of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, replacing Samarkand, which became a regional capital in the Uzbek republic. This move further disassociated the Soviet administration from that of the Russian Empire. In 1920, Tashkent’s Communist Party, with input from Valerian Kuibyshev (1888–1935) and Mikhail Frunze (1885–1925), organized the Turkestan Committee for Museums and Security for Ancient Monuments and Art (Turkestanskii komitet po delam muzeev i okhrany pamiatnikov stariny, iskusstv, i prirody, shortened to Turkomstaris) along the lines of similar organs in other Soviet republics. The committee was devoted to the study, preservation, and security of architectural monuments as well as to creating the first socialist museums and nature preserves. The unlikely grouping of sacred, secular, and natural treasures under the committee’s jurisdiction testified to the anticipated secularization of preservation and promoted the relegation of wakfs and religion in general from lively preservation force to mere historical anecdote.¹⁶

Although its political role was undeniable, Turkomstaris offered a haven for a largely apolitical group of archeologists and orientalists from the old Kruzhok, like Vasily Bartol’d (1869–1930) and his students, who were more concerned with deciphering Persian engravings than revolutionary eschatology. Some, like engineer Mikhail Fedorovich Mauer (1866–1947), were committed Marxists. Although the rhetoric had changed, their preservation tasks and the technology available to them

had in truth not changed much since the Russian Empire. Archeologist V. L. Viatkin and architect B. N. Zasyplin (1891–1955) immediately compiled a list of buildings that could be restored; the Gur-i Amir was included in this first list, along with other major works of Islamic architecture such as the Registan medresas. They also compiled a list of monuments beyond repair, such as the Bibi-Khanym mosque and the Ishrat Khan mausoleum.

By 1924 Turkomstaris began emergency repairs across the city to reinforce roofs, vaulting, and minarets in danger of imminent collapse. They also began recarving cornices, retiling majolica, and rebricking entrance portals throughout Bukhara and Samarkand.¹⁷ That same year, however, Turkomstaris faced a budget tightening that threatened its existence. In Moscow the Soviets had set up a system of preservation that was highly centralized, so director of Turkomstaris D. I. Nechkin's plaintive appeal to the party's Central Asian Bureau (Sredazbiuro) in Tashkent to stave off elimination eventually wound up on the desk of Mikhail Kalinin, the titular head of the Soviet government in Moscow, for approval. Nechkin pleaded that the protection of "ancient monuments of Muslim architecture" was of the "highest political meaning for the strengthening of Soviet power among the population of central Asia."¹⁸ In 1920, 30,000 people had visited the Tashkent Museum of the Revolution, a number that grew to 57,000, over half of whom were Muslim, by 1923. Finally, he reminded them that Gosplan¹⁹ had already allotted 170,000 gold rubles for preservation efforts in Samarkand that year. Nechkin's appeals paid off and the funds were approved.²⁰

In fighting for its life, Turkomstaris convinced Kalinin's Central Executive Committee of its political worth in central Asia and soon became the beneficiary of generous new funding. Turkomstaris's boldest and most symbolic project immediately after the Russian Revolution was the northeastern minaret of the Ulughbek medresa at the Registan, Samarkand's main square, surrounded on three sides by medresas that ceased functioning as religious schools in 1918. Shortly thereafter the minaret began to list, and Turkomstaris requested and received 100 million rubles to prevent its collapse.²¹ Progress was slow and only in 1927 was Mauer, who had by then been named Samarkand regional architect, able to acquire the metal for a sling anchored in the center of the square to keep the tower from falling. Finally in 1932, with equipment from Moscow, he elevated the minaret and placed a new stone slab in its base, completing the job to the cheers from the assembled crowds.²² In his memoir, *Padaiushchii Minaret* (Falling minaret), Mikhail Evgenivich Masson (1897–1986), the most prolific archeologist of the era, breathlessly recalled how the cadre of young specialists was animated by revolutionary élan, vowing that



5. “Falling minaret” on the Ulughbek medresa with Mauer’s sling, circa 1932. From M. E. Masson, *Padaiushchii Minaret: severo-vostochnyi minaret Samarkandskogo medrese Ulughbeka* (Tashkent: “Uzbekistan,” 1968).

“under Soviet power we can’t let it fall. . . . Those of us new to power want to be different than before. All relations are new, even toward the monuments of the past!”²³ The basic narrative that this act of preservation presented to Samarkandis was clear: the tsarist regime allowed the crumbling of minarets and the sinking of the cupolas, but the Soviet regime would spare no expense to protect the region’s heritage.

Meanwhile, archeological and structural work on the Gur-i Amir continued. In 1924, Turkomstaris began an extensive

two-year study of the mausoleum that allowed a more detailed account of the Timurid burial order at the site. Mauer and Masson were put in charge of the preservation of the site and immediately faced the emergency of preventing the crypt's vaulting from collapse.²⁴ Mauer designed an engineering solution that used wood railway ties to remove the pressure from the old plank floor, and then replaced it with an iron and cement platform with materials imported from Moscow. New vaulting in the crypt was constructed in "Muslim-style bricks."²⁵ In addition, Masson oversaw an archeological remote sensing project—or as he called it, a "magnetic investigation"—above Timur's sarcophagus, noting that his instruments registered a "paramagnetic object" (paramagnitnoe telo) inside which was likely the remains of the coffin or other stray objects.²⁶ (During the search for alternative forms of spirituality that accompanied the decline in belief in Communism, late-Soviet seekers of the occult seized upon the other meaning of telo, as "body," to speculate that Timur's remains would unleash supernatural powers if disturbed.)²⁷

Turkomstaris and its successors (Sredazkomstaris and Uzkomstaris) celebrated the involvement of local master craftsmen in restoration work in an attempt to demonstrate that imperial disdain had been replaced by benevolent tutelage and the cooperation of peoples. In his Uzbek and Russian-language history of Sredazkomstaris, Umniakov wrote that it was "especially important to attract representatives of the local population" to restoration work, as they ultimately were responsible for the "building of the country's culture."²⁸ Masson's *Mina-ret* recounted the committee's reliance on Usta Abdu Kadyr Abdubakiev, who came from a renowned family of restorers who had worked in Bukhara and Afghanistan since the eighteenth century, for his formula for alabaster and limestone mortar and his carvings in the lower archways of the Ulughbek medresa.²⁹ But despite these overtures, Umniakov, Masson, and other Russians remained paternalist in attitude and actions. Until a native class of engineers was trained, the structural tasks remained the Russian domain, with locals charged with ornamentation and embellishment. This dilemma echoed the larger one faced by Soviets in central Asia: the requirement for technically or politically skilled administrators collided with the imperative for *korenezatsia* (nativization or indigenization) in order to demonstrate that the Soviet Union offered liberation and not Russian conquest by another name.

Umniakov also perpetuated assumptions about central Asian art and culture that further reinforced Russian tutelage and justified Soviet rule, demonstrating the intellectual continuities between tsarist and Soviet rule in Turkestan. Although many of the Timurid buildings "surpassed their Persian models

in their dimensions,” Umniakov believed they revealed a “full dependence on Persia.”³⁰ In the sixteenth century, central Asian civilization entered a period of “slow and step by step” decline, largely due to its distance from Europe, and thus became “lower than other Muslim countries in cultural relations.” “Detached” from Europe and Persia, its “cultural treasures” could not be preserved, hence the need for assistance from their Russian elder brothers.³¹

If during the early 1920s the Soviet state offered conciliation and a more tolerant stance toward Islam, the late 1920s and 1930s saw arrests of imams, closures of religious schools, and destruction or radical reuse of local mosques as part of Stalin’s “cultural revolution” to usher in Socialism.³² Thus in exchange for an all-out attack on their faith, Soviet Muslims were expected to recognize the greater benevolence toward some of their greatest religious buildings, now stripped of religious function.

In this guise, the full appropriation of the Gur-i Amir into Soviet history occurred in 1941. The Great Purges (1936–38) had swept up many of the first generation of Uzbek intellectuals. The war effort, with its popular sacrifices and evacuations to central Asia, inaugurated an era of hoped-for equality between national republics, replacing the era of “affirmative action” for national minorities.³³ In Uzbekistan, where Soviet-approved national mythologies had not yet congealed, science was marshaled to anoint new national heroes in a region with no prior concept of national pasts, and to confer proper meanings on old monuments. Timur had never been an appropriate national hero because of his illiteracy, piety, and attempted conquest of Moscow, and so the structures of his era were never preserved explicitly in his honor under the Soviets. And so as part of the 500th birthday celebration for the anointed Uzbek national poet Alisher Navoi (1441–1501), the Uzbek SSR celebrated the “epoch of Navoi,” and launched an archeological expedition to Samarkand to lay some final questions to rest about the Timurid rulers and their monuments.

The expedition was led by both Russians and central Asians, and culminated in the exhumation of Timur’s grave and the reconstruction of his skull by the noted anthropologist Mikhail Gerasimov (1907–70), a pan-Soviet celebrity scientist with a talent for making his research on the skulls of historical figures accord with the party line.³⁴ This grave tampering coincided with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, and since the return of the bones to their graves seemed to augur the decisive Battle of Stalingrad in 1942, the event entered local mythology as an anti-Soviet ghost story: the deceased Timur cast as the protector who wielded a mighty gravestone curse—the power to unleash war. The gravestone engravings in fact



6. Mikhail Gerasimov's bust of Timur, which has become the ruler's authoritative visage. Mikhail Gerasimov, *Osnovy Vosstansovleniia Litsa Po Cherepu* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo "Sovetskaia Nauka," 1949).

reveal a simple Islamic prayer and not a curse, and a close read of newspapers shows that the simultaneity of events was not so harmonious.³⁵ Yet the power afforded to Timur's remains and resting place offered a tantalizing alternative narrative to Soviet history, emphasizing hidden local power and the chance for Russian injustices to be overturned.³⁶

Press accounts celebrated the exhumations as the ultimate triumph of Soviet certainty over irrationality and Eastern legend. The primary victory was Gerasimov's proof that Timur's remains (confirmed by the "iron cripple's" fused right leg bones and withered hand) in fact lay in the Gur-i Amir, and not in nearby Shakhristabz as some had thought. His restoration of Timur's visage from his skull, using his recently developed method of facial restoration (perfected on the skulls of Yaroslav the Wise [1938], and later on Ivan the Terrible [1953] and the German poet Friedrich Schiller [1961]), cast a ray of scientific truth into the shadows of speculation of Persian historians and artists. *Pravda Vostoka* (Tashkent) reported all the gory details of the body's handling, taking some pleasure in the disposal of Timur's legend: "Against a picturesque backdrop, under the portal of the mausoleum," Gerasimov cleaned the silt and saline crystals from the skull, removed the remnants of red-brown hair, skin, and brain, put them in bags, and sent them to the anatomy department at the Samarkand Medical Institute for further investigation.³⁷ In a few days' time, the mysteries of Timur's era were solved, his mystique stripped, his infirmities revealed, his remains handled and ignominiously removed in small bags.

The Gur-i Amir was also enlisted to cement another plank of Soviet ideology: the sanctity of Soviet-created national republics. Travelers to Uzbekistan today will notice that Uzbek architecture and identity are intertwined synecdochically, the result of the Soviet policy of delimiting national pasts according to the principle that each republic should have its own national art and heroes no matter how contentious the claims. Then and now, Uzbeks and Tajiks have fought over the right to call the multiethnic cities of Bukhara and Samarkand their own.³⁸ The scientific pretension of Gerasimov's sculptural method cut through the region's linguistic and ethnic mixing, nomadic fluidity, and urban diversity, helping to demarcate the Gur-i Amir as a major site of Uzbek patrimony even though the Shaibanid Uzbeks only arrived in 1500. Gerasimov asserted that Timur's indisputably "Mongol eyes," based on the shape of his sockets and musculature, made him a member of the Barlas tribe of Turks (rather than a "Europeanoid," or Tajik). Meanwhile the true forefather of the Uzbek nation was said to be Ulughbek, whose mix of "Europeanoid" and "Mongoloid" features conformed to official Soviet ethnogenesis accounts, which held that the Uzbek nation had formed with the mix of Turkic nomads and settled Persian speakers.³⁹ In other words, the mausoleum belonged to Uzbekistan because Ulughbek was a "completely formed type of modern Uzbek."⁴⁰

Thus, once again the Gur-i Amir played the pivot around which the legitimacy of central Asian rule turned. Timur came



7. Mikhail Gerasimov and his team discovering Timur's skull in June 1941. Kary-Niazov is at left. From T. N. Kary-Niazov, *Rasmyshleniia o Proidennom Puti* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Politicheskoi Literaturoi, 1970).

along too early to be an Uzbek—and his campaigns against the Muscovites in the name of Islam made him an inappropriate national hero—thus, Ulughbek was elevated not only as an ethnic forefather but as the nation's first Soviet, *avant la lettre*. Gerasimov celebrated the ruler as the “greatest scientist, astronomer and humanist of his era,” whose star charts were consulted by Tycho Brahe, while his less successful statecraft was never mentioned.⁴¹ In his memoir of the 1941 expedition, T. N. Kary-Niazov (1897–1970), the head of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, recounted with regret how the “black forces of reaction” among the ulema had been responsible for the death of the “atheist” Ulughbek and, cavalierly, told of raising the two men's skulls in his hands to ask Saidridin Aini, the Samarkand-born author, which belonged to the “illiterate” conqueror and which to the “scientist.”⁴² Ulughbek had ensured the Gur-i Amir would become the place where rulers were buried and venerated, and now, five centuries later under the Soviets, a place where new kings were made.

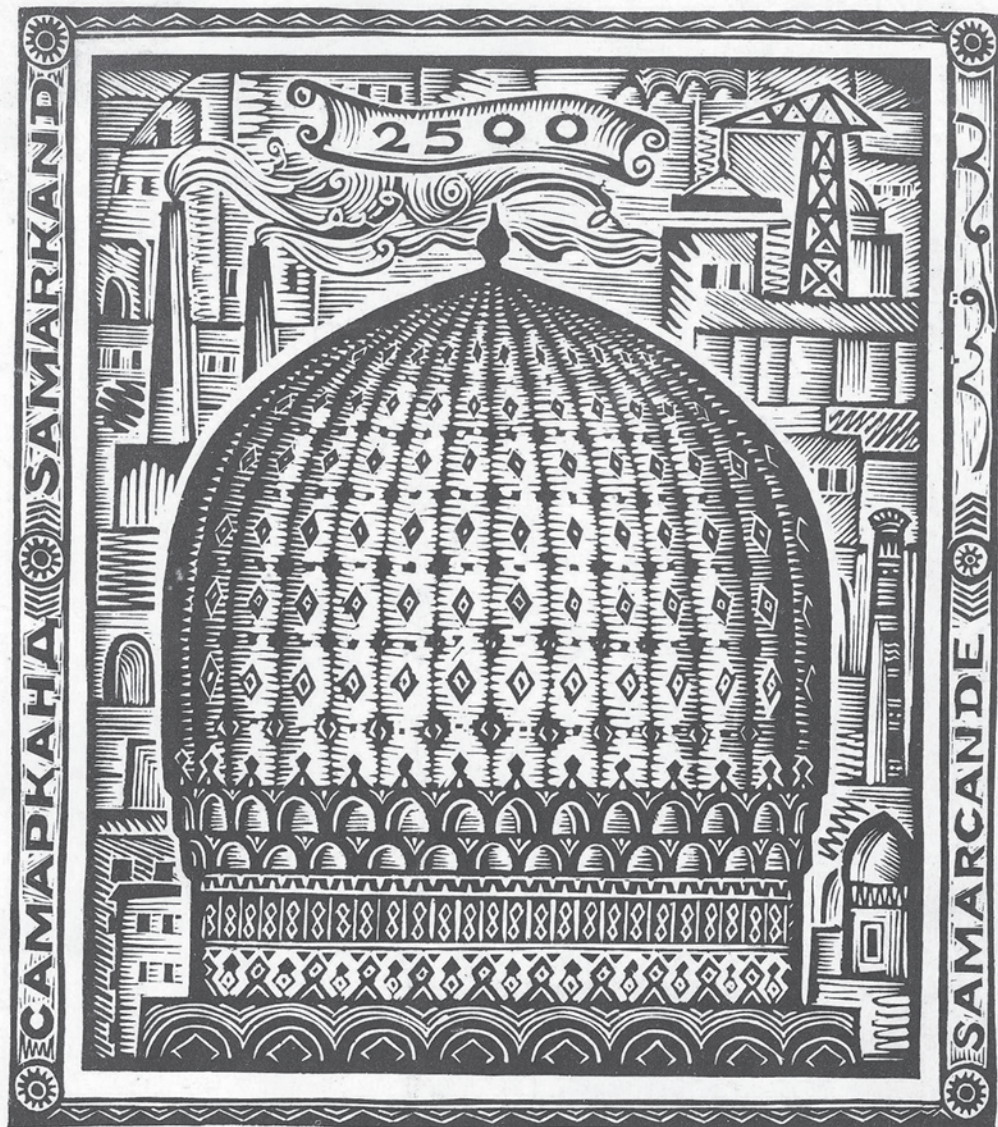
The final chapter of the Gur-i Amir's Soviet life began near the conclusion of World War II and lasted till the end of the union, as the building became one of the placeholders to confirm Soviet progress. Uzkomstaris was folded into the new Committee for the Protection of Monuments of Material Culture, and in 1943 its budget for restoration in Samarkand was 1 million rubles, with no less than 860,000 earmarked for the Gur-i Amir—a princely sum, especially during wartime.⁴³ Though proponents of Timur's powers could attribute the state's lavish preservation spending to an act of penance to placate the old

ghost, in fact the campaign was in keeping with the wartime reconciliation with local culture, including a rollback of the most virulent antireligious policies. Nevertheless, the scope of the restoration on the Gur-i Amir was astounding. Excavation and restoration work took place from 1943 to 1956, resulting in definitive dating of the entire complex, the uncovering of the ruined khanaqa and the medresa's foundations, a new steel-reinforced concrete foundation for the northern entrance gate, identifying the gate's architect as a certain Makhmud from Isfahan, and restoring its marble stalactites (*muqarnas*).⁴⁴

Inside the dome itself, the nineteenth-century brick pillars were replaced by an eight-sided pyramid of wooden planks housed between the inner and outer domes, a seismic upgrade done according to the earlier plans of Mauer. In addition, the original shape of the dome was restored and its bare patches plugged with turquoise majolica tiles prepared especially at a Samarkand ceramics studio. Much of the mausoleum's exterior panelling was restored, along with the green onyx at the base of the tomb's interior, and an "experimental" mosaic border in the lower portion of the southwestern minaret was added to recreate its lost coloring.⁴⁵ The preservation work of this era obeyed modern city planning dictates. The supervising architect Zasytkin expanded Kaufman's nineteenth-century walls to embrace the entire complex. He removed several private homes and a small neighborhood mosque at the complex's northeast corner and planted trees, all to open up the views to the monuments, and helping to demarcate a spatial—and temporal—boundary between the bustling Soviet city and its ancient monuments.⁴⁶

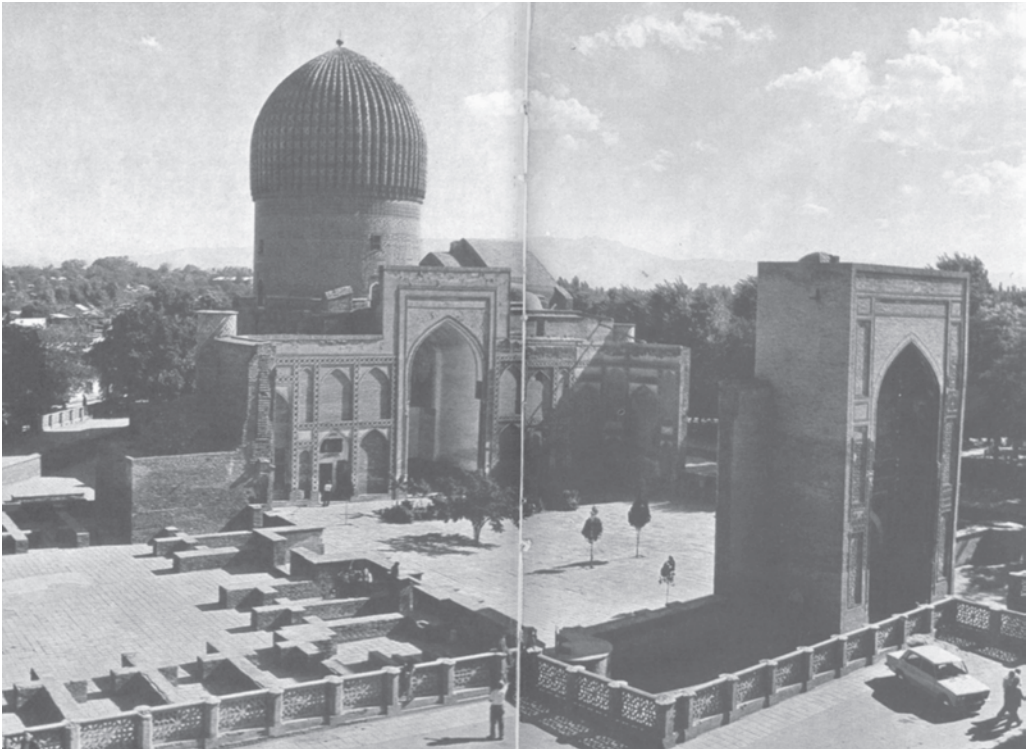
Zasytkin employed the latest technology in the service of the traditional fabric, using chemistry to match the yellow and blue glazes of the fifteenth-century tiles, and insisted on installing them one by one, by hand. Samarkand's most renowned master ceramicist was still serving in the army, but he found a team of accomplished craftsmen, many of whom had worked in preservation since the revolution, including Kuli Dzhililov, winner of the Stalin Prize for his ceiling carvings in the Navoi State Opera Theater in Tashkent.⁴⁷ True, the division of labor in preservation continued to put Russians in charge of the engineering and Uzbeks in charge of embellishments, but the latter were now recognized for their unquestionably vital role in composing a Soviet work of total art.

The buffing and study of the Gur-i Amir in the 1940s and 1950s prepared it for its role as socialist showpiece in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1961 Khrushchev had announced that the children of the era would grow up to live under Communism, helping to invest the built environment with expectations for the future, marking the distance traveled from the feudal,



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8. The Gur-i Amir against a backdrop of smokestacks and cranes on the cover of book of prints celebrating the Samarkand's 2500th anniversary, 1970. From Ivan Kiriakidi, *Samarkand 2500* (1970).



9. General view of the Gur-i Amir, early 1970s. From Iu. N. Aleskerov, *Samarkand=Marakanda, etc: Kush kelibsiz! Dobro Pozhalovat'!* (Tashkent: Izdatel'stvo Ts.K. K.P. Uzbekistana, 1974).

Islamic past. By the city's 2500th birthday in 1970, Samarkand's monuments had turned into the prized showpieces of a burgeoning tourist industry as well as the sparkling proof to foreign Muslim diplomats that the Soviet Union took care of their coreligionists. *Pravda Vostoka* reported on the benchmarks of Soviet modernity—and the augurs of a Communist future, such as schools, factories, museums, theaters, and cinemas—and counterposed them with the glistening, restored, yet discursively sealed Islamic monuments, the “stone pages” of the city's “glorious past.”⁴⁸ Headlines such as “Today in an ancient city,” “New beauty for the eternal city,” and “Years equal to centuries” emphasized the chronological distance.⁴⁹ To borrow a phrase from a White Russian émigré, under Soviet rule the “immutable east had become mutable” due to its collision with Soviet modernization. Although Soviet press narratives mimicked earlier orientalist discourse that turned the monuments into metonyms for the city, they sought to prove that the fissure of progress had opened since 1917 rather than to assail the stagnation. Once again architecture, and no building as much as the Gur-i Amir, played the pivot around which ideology was shaped.

The era of independence has witnessed a reversal of Soviet hero making, as Timur has been elevated as the father of Uzbekistan, with the Gur-i Amir once again at the center of the architecture of legitimacy. Modern preservationists decry the almost uniform channeling of state funds to projects



10. Contemporary preservation work on the Gur-i Amir, 2009. Photograph by Charles Shaw.

relating to Timur to the exclusion of all others, while the culture of graft has resulted in cost-saving methods of restoration, such as the use of cheap bricks on glazed façades. It also appears that an even more insecure state has more at stake in demonstrating the modernity and progress it has ushered, resulting in starker efforts to demarcate past from present. The result—an unprecedented wall that has severed the Gur-i Amir’s organic relationship with its neighborhood—has made preservationists and residents yearn for the good old Soviet days. Meanwhile, the elasticity and renewed power of the Timur ghost story serve as warning to the present leadership that those who seek to control the Gur-i Amir are tempting fate.

Biography

Charles Shaw is a PhD candidate in Soviet and central Asian history at the University of California, Berkeley.

Endnotes

¹ Cited in Iu. V. Raninskii, *Osnovy Sokhraneniia Pamiatnikov Arkhitektury v Preemstvennom Razvitii Ansambliia* (MARKh: Moskva, 1980), 9.

² The tomb can also be transliterated from Persian as Gur-e Amir. During the Soviet era it was Russified to Gur Emir, which is still frequently used in modern Uzbekistan.

³ The exact intentions of the Timurids, their burial order, and the exact entrance to the Gur-i Amir generated much scholarly debate. Vasily Bartol'd’s account from 1916 was long considered authoritative. See V. V. Bartol’d’s article “O Pogrebenii Timura” (The burial of Timur), trans. J. M. Rogers, *Iran* 12 (1974): 65–87. Most of the outstanding questions were put to rest over the course of Soviet-era archeological work, a synthetic version of which can be found in G. A. Pugachenkova, *Po drevnym pamyatnikam Samarkanda i Bukhary*, 2nd ed., (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968).

⁴ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 125.

⁵ Alcee Durrieux and Rene Fauvelle, *Samarkand: La Bien Gardée* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1901), 107.

⁶ Other Timurphilic travelogues include Ella Christie, *Through Khiva to Golden Samarkand* (London: Seeley, Service, and Co., 1925); Stephen Graham, *Through*

Russian Central Asia (New York: MacMillan, 1916); Henry Lansdell, *Russian Central Asia, including Kuldja, Bokhara, Khiva, and Merv*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1885); Annette M. B. Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan: A Garden of Asia and its People* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915); A. Polovtsoff, *The Land of Timur: Recollections of Russian Turkestan* (London: Methuen and Co., 1932); Eugene Schuyler, *Turkistan: Notes of a Journey in Russian Turkistan, Kokand, Bukhara, and Kuldja*, ed. Geoffrey Wheeler, abridged by K. E. West (New York: Praeger, 1966); and Arminius Vambery, *Travels in Central Asia: A Journey from Teheran across the Turkoman Desert on the Eastern Shore of the Caspian to Khiva, Bokhara, and Samarcand* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865).

⁷ As cited in Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (London: Pearson, 2001), 208.

⁸ M. E. Masson, "Mavzolei Gur-Emir," Samarkand, 1929, in *Tamerlan*, ed. A. R. Andreev, A. I. Buldakov, and Sergei Shumov (Moscow: Kraft+, 2003), 205.

⁹ *Mecheti Samarkanda, Vypusk 1: Gur-Emir* (St. Petersburg: Imperialisticheskaiia Arkheologicheskaiia Kommissiia, "Ekspeditsiia zagotovleniia gosudarstvennikh bumag," 1905), v, vi.

¹⁰ The Prokudin-Gorskii Collection can be viewed at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/prok/>.

¹¹ Eugene Schuyler, America's consul in Moscow and later in St. Petersburg, was among the most sympathetic observers. See Schuyler, 132. However, Annette Meakin, a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, deemed the monument's biggest threats to be "barbaric tourists and professors with hammers," (Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan*, 240).

¹² A helpful summary of the revolutionary era in central Asia can be found in Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). For more on the Basmachi rebellion, see Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹³ According to Khalid, "overall, we have better accounts of the destruction that Genghis Khan visited upon Islam in Central Asia than we do of the assault by the Soviets." Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 72.

¹⁴ On the unlikely project of building nations in central Asia, see Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). On the women question, see Gregory Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–29* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); and Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006). For the elevation of locals, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–29* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ I. I. Umniakov, *Arkhitekturnyie Pamiatniki Sredeni Azii: Issledovanie, Remont, Restavratsiya* (Tashkent: UzSSR Narkompros — Glavnyi Sredne-Aziatskii Muzei, 1929), 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7–9.

¹⁸ RGASPI (Rossiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'noi i Politicheskoi Istorii) f.62, opis 2 delo 133, li.6–9.

¹⁹ GOSPLAN was the central Soviet budget and economic planning agency, an acronym for State Planning Committee, or Gosudarstvennyi Komitet po Planirovaniu.

²⁰ RGASPI, f. 62, opis 2, delo 133, li. 10, 39.

²¹ RGASPI, f. 62, opis 3, delo 133, li. 14.

²² M. E. Masson, *Padaiushchii Minaret: severo-vostochnyi minaret Samarkandskogo medrese Ulughbeka* (Tashkent: "Uzbekistan," 1968), 9

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ M. E. Masson, "Mavzolei Gur-Emir," 206.

²⁵ Umniakov, *Arkhitekturnyie Pamiatniki Sredeni Azii*, 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁷ This questionable theory was put forward in a prominent Uzbek literary journal in 1990, characterizing the era's search for heroes and powers untainted by Soviet associations. See Yevgenii Berezikov, "Nerazgadanniye Tainy Vostoka: Magicheskii Kamen' Timura," *Zvezda Vostoka* 4 (1990): 132–37.

²⁸ Umniakov, *Arkhitekturnyie Pamiatniki Sredeni Azii*, 37.

²⁹ Masson, *Padaiushchi Minaret*, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–31* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

- ³³ See Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–39* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
- ³⁴ Gerasimov's autobiography is available in translation: Mikhail Gerasimov, *The Face Finder*, transl. Alan Houghton Brodrick (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1971).
- ³⁵ The archeological expedition was described in a series of articles in *Pravda Vostoka* (Tashkent) from June 15 to June 25, 1941. The article on Timur's grave opening was published June 20. The Nazi invasion occurred in the predawn hours of June 22.
- ³⁶ The story of Timur's curse was published for the first time in the permissive years of Perestroika by Berezikov in *Zvezda Vostoka* (1990). The curse was the subject of the documentary, *Proklatie Timurlana* (The curse of Tamerlane), dir. Aleksandr Fetisov (2004), originally aired on the Russian channel "Rossiia."
- ³⁷ Mikhail Sheverdin, "Izuchenie Cherepa Timura," *Pravda Vostoka* (Tashkent), June 21, 1941, 4.
- ³⁸ For more on these disputes and the fascinating efforts to marshal census data, ethnography, and anthropology in the service of drawing republican boundaries, see Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 175–86.
- ³⁹ M. M. Gerasimov, *Osnovy Vosstanovleniia Litsa Po Cherepu*, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo "Sovetskaia Nauka," 1949), 156.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 164.
- ⁴² T. N. Kary-Niiazov, *Rasmysleniia o Proidennom Puti* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Politicheskoi Literaturi, 1970), 206.
- ⁴³ B. N. Zasyupkin, "Izuchenii i restavratsiie mavzoleia Gur-Emir" (Samarkand: Kom. Po okhrane pam. Material'noi kul'tury pri Sovete Ministrov UzSSR, Otdel Okhrany I Restavratsii Pam. Arkhit., 1947), 2.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2–10.
- ⁴⁵ I. I. Umniakov, lu. N. Aleskerov, *Samarkand: Kratkii Spravochnik*, 2nd ed., (Tashkent: Gos. Izd-vo Uzbekskoi SSR, 1958), 44–48; and I. E., Pletnev, *Gur-Emir*, 3rd ed. (Tashkent: "Uzbekistan," 1968), 15.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ B. N. Zasyupkin, "Nauchnyi otchet po restavratsionnym rabotam v ansamble 'Gur Emir' v 1948 godu" [internal archive material #551, from 1959, Komitet po okhrane pam. Mater. Kul't. pri SM UzSSR].
- ⁴⁸ lu. N. Aleskerov, *Samarkand=Marakanda, etc. Kush kelibsiz! Dobro Pozhalovat!* (Tashkent: Izdatel'stvo Ts.K. K.P. Uzbekistana, 1974), 15.
- ⁴⁹ *Pravda Vostoka*, Oct. 15, 1970; Oct. 22, 1970; Oct 24, 1970.