Ethnographic Writing on Bukharan Jews: From Lost Tribes to Community Scholarship

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Bukharan Jews are people of Jewish faith originally from Central Asia (defined here as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan) many of whom now live in Israel and the United States. Their centuries-old presence in Central Asia is documented by medieval Arab travellers and scholars, who were the first to write about them as the “ethnographic other.” These writers, such as the ninth-century historian Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and the fourteenth-century explorer Ibn Battuta (d. 1369), mentioned the presence of people of Jewish faith in Central Asian cities as part of the wider historical and geographical description of the territories they visited. Often Jews were referred to when evaluating how the local dhimmi population of a city was treated.

Allusions to the Jews in Central Asia are sparse before the nineteenth century. The first European to mention them was Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela (1167), who visited Jewish communities from Spain to the Middle East and Central Asia (where he met the Jews of Samarqand). Until the 1700s, no other European wrote about Bukharan Jews, mainly because very few Europeans visited Central Asia, which since the disintegration of the Mongol Empire in the fourteenth century had become a dangerous travel destination. The few who did travel were more impressed by the myth of Prester John and the ten lost tribes of Israel than in describing the real Jewish people of the area, especially since in the medieval and early modern periods, the difference between “myth” and “reality” was tenuous. The idea that the Jews in the lands beyond the Caspian were descended from the “ten lost tribes” had been propagated throughout Europe by the popular Travels by the fourteenth-century explorer and fantasy-writer John Mandeville.

Nineteenth-Century Ethnographic Writings: Russian Imperialists and Jewish Anthropologists

This vague, fantasist knowledge of Jews in Central Asia would change when Tsarist Russia took an imperialist interest in the region. The Russian conquest of Siberia of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led the country to gaze evermore to the lands beyond its expanding southern border. Ambassadors were dispatched to try to negotiate formal trade relations with the rulers of Central Asia, such as the Emir of Bukhara. These early diplomats were the first to produce information about these lands for the Russian Empire; information which was viewed as useful for a potential future conquest. The production of ethnographic knowledge was entwined with a broader inquiry into geography, archaeology, linguistics, and physical anthropology, in order to know the different peoples. Knowledge of the land preceded its conquest. Jews were mentioned in this scheme of knowledge. Florio Beneveni, a Russian ambassador to Bukhara in 1718–1725, wrote a journal keeping track of the political and economic situation of the khanate. His entry from April 1723 mentions the economic activity of the Jews of Bukhara, in relation to a dye, due to its potential economic use to Russia:

And in the land of Bukhara ... there is one small tree that grows in the steppe, and they extract from its worms an expensive paint called kermez, in German kushenina ... The Bukharans do not know the secret of how to make it, but they take those worms and sell them to the Jews, and the Jews rub these worms and make that paint ... Silk is dyed with this dye, and in other countries cloths are dyed with it, and they are sewn, and called karmazins.4

Bukharan Jews are also mentioned in what is considered the first piece of modern Russian ethnographic writing, the Description of All Peoples Inhabiting the Russian State, Including Their Worldly Ceremonies, Beliefs, Habits, by the German-Russian geographer Johann Gottlieb Georgi in 1777. A large section of the work concerned the peoples of Siberia, which included colonists from Bukhara (called “Bukharan Tatars”). Georgi differentiates between “our Bukharans” (nashi Bukharskie)—the Bukharan colonists residing in Russian Siberia—, and the Bukharans residing in the city of Bukhara, outside of the Russian empire. In his description of Bukharan Tatars, he concentrates first on

the Bukharans of Siberia, and uses them to derive knowledge about their customs in their home city. In other words, included in Description of All Peoples Inhabiting the Russian State are peoples who are not (yet) in the Russian state, but of potential future interest to it. Georgi thus describes Bukhara as would an ethnographer who had actually visited the city, as well as its minorities, including the Jews.

Besides the Qur’anic laws, they have other specially-written laws, which are all mild, but can be executed without a delay [...] therefore, among them many Jews (called Diuhut), Arabs, Persians, Indians and other oriental people can be encountered, also Gypsies (called Diaji) roam in tents.5

Georgi also describes the professions of Bukhara, and though he had not actually visited the city, he already anticipates the economic observation of many the European traveller of the nineteenth century: “the dying is mostly done by Jews, some of whom have small silk factories.”6

Bukhara was thus viewed as a next step for conquest after Siberia for Russian imperialists. Siberian colonial officer Timofei Burnashev recorded notes from his embassy to Bukhara in the Sibirskii Vestnik’ (Siberian Bulletin). Burnashev explains that due to the advance of the English, Ekaterina II decided to direct her attention to the Kazakh-Kyrgyz steppe, Bukhara, Tashkent, regions of raw materials of interest to the empire. He travelled from Siberia to Bukhara in 1794 to act as Russian ambassador for one year. Just like Georgi, he lists the ethnicities living in Bukhara, then briefly discusses the Jews, their profession (“dyeing of silk”), their economic situation (“rather affluent”), and their dress (“instead of belts they must wear ropes”).7 Other Russian envoys to the city, Filip Efremov in the 1770s, baron Egor Kazimirovich (George) Meyendorff in 1820 and Nikolai Vladimirovich Khanykov in 1841, also dedicated short sections of their journey reports to the Bukharan Jews.8

6 (Die Färberei wird meistens von Juden betrieben, deren einige kleine Seidenmanufakturen haben), see Georgi, Beschreibung, 149.
7 Timofei Burnashev, “Puteshestvie po Sibirskoi linii do g. Buhkhary v 1794 g. i obratno v 1795 g.,” Sibirskii vestnik (St. Petersburg: 1818).
8 Egor K. Meyendorff, Voyage d'Orenbourg à Boukhara; fait en 1820, à travers les stéppes qui...
Two common points are striking in all the nineteenth-century Russian writing on Bukharan Jews: the authors all discuss that Jews produced and dyed silk, and that they were subject to restrictions in dress. Of specific interest to the Russian politics, many also allude to the fact that Jews were oppressed by Muslims, and thus held a “good disposition ... towards every foreigner, to Christians in particular.” The political implication of this is made clear by a letter sent by the West Siberian Governor-General Ivan Aleksandrovich Vel’iaminov to the Minister of War Prince Alexander I. Chernyshev in 1834:

Wealthy Bukharan Jews and merchants generally prefer the Russian government and trade with the Russians so far, weighed down by despotic self-interest and the cruel management of the khans, and secretly express sympathy for the transition (of course, the whole nation) to Russian citizenship ... Jews, in particular, yearn for Russian domination in Central Asia, in order to start factories, factories, trading houses, gold mines, scatter [develop] mines, etc. (otherwise most of their capital is buried in the ground from the greed of the Khan and his relatives).

Indeed, Jews were said to have welcomed Russian troops during their conquest of Samarqand of 1868. After the annexation of Turkestan into the Russian empire in 1867, discussion of Bukharan Jews by Russians became more distinctly imperialist in nature. It went hand in hand with map-making and census-taking as a tool to dominate a territory. The Russian Geographical Society’s Ethnographic Division, founded in 1845, held an interest in the newly conquered territories of Turkestan, and set about studying its different peoples and collecting objects in order to organise ethnographic exhibits in Russia.
Jews were captured in Russian imperialist photography, particularly the *Turkestan Album* (*Turkestanskii Al’bom, 1871*), which was compiled by Russian Orientalist Aleksandr L. Kun and commissioned by the governor general of Russian Turkestan, Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufman. As part of a colonial enterprise, the album sought to define the newly conquered territory through a visual survey of its monuments, peoples, and economic foundations. Jews were portrayed in the album’s two-volume ethnographic section (*Chast’ Etnograficheskiaia*), which presented the musical instruments, crafts, celebrations, and architecture of the region. Part two of the ethnographic section displays the various “ethnographic types” (*tipy narodnostei*), including Uzbeks, gypsies (*dzugi, mazang*), Indians, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, “Sarts,” Arabs, Iranians, and of course Jews (*evrei*). All the Jewish men photographed wear the typical, and—until the Russian conquest—obligatory Jewish fur hat, the *tilpak*, and are distinguishable by their sidelocks. The collection also contains photographs of Jewish wedding ceremonies, the bridal party (*shab-i dukhtarān*), the matchmaking process, a funeral, prayer recitation, lessons at the Jewish school, swaddling the cradle (*gahvāra bandān/gavarabendan*), and holiday celebrations (such as *Sukkot*).

Another important Russian colonial photographic collection was assembled by Samuel Martinovich Dudin (1863–1929), founder of the Ethnographical Department of the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg (now the Russian Ethnographical Museum). Dudin led expeditions to Turkestan in order to collect physical materials for the museum collection, and on the way produced his own material—photographs and sketches. His collection of 40,000 items mainly represents Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Turkmen—he intentionally did not collect Jewish objects, justifying that “in their everyday life and dress, they do everything as the Sarts ... and I cannot duplicate items for a material collection.” He did photograph them though, with thirty-one photos depict-
FIGURE 7.1 “Evrei. Sheivamu (Mulla Suleiman)”

TURKESTAN ALBUM, ETHNOGRAPHIC PART, PART 2, VOL. 1, PL. 29, NO. 86.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
ing Jews in Central Asia from his 1902 expedition. This photographic collection, taken thirty years after the *Turkestan Album*, shows notable differences in Jewish dress. Whereas in the 1871 *Turkestan Album*, all male Jews, regardless of age, wear the obligatory and low-status *tilpak* (Figure 7.2), one can observe in Dudin’s 1902 photos that younger Jews do not, and instead wear a typical skull-cap (*doppi*, in Russian *tiubeteika*, Figure 7.2a). This demonstrates a change in dress and status due to the influence of Russian colonisation.

While Russian discussion of Bukharan Jews placed them as one people among many others, a *narod* of the empire, to be categorised and known for the sake of knowing imperial geography, Jewish anthropologists, on the other hand, had a more scholarly, apolitical interest in Bukharan Jews. This interest was by no means predominant—the vast majority of Russian-Jewish ethnography and anthropology of this period concerned the Eastern European Jewry—

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17 Sergei Kan, “‘To study our past, make sense of our present and develop our national consciousness’: Lev Shternberg’s Comprehensive Program for Jewish Ethnography in the USSR,” in *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse*, (ed.) J. Veidlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 64–84.
Bukharan Jews occasionally figured in as objects of inquire of themselves, beyond the interests of empire. The Jewish Society for History and Ethnography (founded in 1908) published the quarterly *Evreiskaia Starina* from 1909 to 1930 in order to disseminate ethnographic studies of Jews throughout the Russian (and later Soviet) empire. Most of its articles pertained to the Jews from the Pale of Settlement, with almost none dedicated to the Jews of Central Asia. In 1912, Russian-Jewish scholar Vaisenberg complained about this lacuna; he wrote that there was little interest for the study of Jews south of Russia, due to an engrained habit to regard Jews throughout the Russian empire as a single homogenous community, with scholars tending to believe that “the Jews over there are the same as ours”, despite striking differences in reality.\(^{18}\) While the interest of Russian-Jewish ethnographers was limited, other European travellers (many of whom were of Jewish origin) published many ethnographic details about Bukharan Jewish life during the nineteenth century, such as Joseph Wolff, Henry Lansdell, Arminius Vámbéry, and Elkan Nathan Adler.\(^{19}\)

There was also a tendency among Russian-Jewish anthropologists to Orientalise the non-European Jews of the empire. In his doctoral dissertation, “The Jews: a Comparative Anthropological Study,” Russian-Jewish physical anthropologist Arkadii El’kind studied photographs of Jews from across Eurasia; from the Pale of Settlement, the Middle East, the Caucuses, and Central Asia. In his framework, which may have been modelled by his own desire to assimilate, Russian-Polish Jews were racially “European,” while those from the Caucuses and Central Asia were deemed “allotypical,” meaning that they conserved the Semitic racial type.\(^{20}\) Citing the work of Polish anthropologist I.M. Judt, El’kind claimed that in fact “the ancestors of the Semites are to be found in Central Asia, where their nomadic masses could already mix with the Aryan and Turanian elements of Pamirs, Armenians, Mesopotamians. Proto-Hebrew tribes headed from there to the west, to Syria and Palestine.”\(^{21}\) Such speculations on the origins of the Jews of Central Asia, guised in the form of science through


\(^{21}\) Arkadii D. El’kind, *Evrei* (*Sravnitel’no-antropolologicheskoj issledovanie, preimushchestvennoe...*
allusions to nose lengths and skull types, represent a return to the same kind of myth-making of John de Mandeville. Such confabulations would characterise much of the "armchair anthropology" of the late nineteenth century, in contrast to the less fanciful information brought back by ethnographic writers. Under the Soviet era, on the other hand, there would be a push for on-the-ground scientific ethnographic research by state-sponsored scholars.

2 Soviet Ethnography

After the 1917 Revolution and the installation of the communist regime across Russia and the former territories of the Russian Empire (which then became the territories of the Soviet Union), the Bolsheviks collaborated with many of the same imperial experts of the tsarist administration.22 The predominant cultural ideology of the 1920s was that of korenizatsiia—encouragement of local languages and cultures of the Union.23 Hence, Russian ethnographic interest in Bukharan Jews strengthened after the Soviet revolution, with the increased preoccupation with the "nations" (narody) that made up Soviet national identity. Jews were classified as one of the nations of the USSR and separated into categories ("Mountain Jews" of the Caucasus, European Jews of Russia, Central Asian Jews).24 The Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum in 1924–1927 wondered if each exhibit should show the Jews of each oblast', thus tying ethnic categories to the empire/union's own political borders.25

In terms of ethnographic fieldwork of Bukharan Jews during the Soviet period, most of it was performed by Russian Ashkenazi Jews. Russian-Jewish ethnographer Isak Luria, interested in the customs of non-European Jews (he had previously conducted ethnomusicological fieldwork in Palestine) served the interests of the Soviet state when he was sent to Samarqand by a committee of the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic society of St. Petersburg to study Central Asian Jews. In 1922, he established the Native Jewish Museum of Samarqand in the former house of merchant Ari Fuzailov in the old Jewish quarter of Samarqand, exhibiting a total of 869 artefacts. He employed the photograph-

no po nabliudeniiam nad pol'skimi evreiami) (Moskva: Tipo-lit Vasil'eva, 1903), 336. For the full text see https://www.prilib.ru/item/408187.
22 Hirsch, Empire of Nations, 24.
24 Hirsch, Empire of Nations.
25 Ibid., 194.
ers Kuldashev and Poliakov to document Jewish life in the region. However, his efforts received vocal criticism from the local community, who resented his scholarly detachment from real Bukharans in favour of their artefacts, and the museum was shut down in the 1930s.26

An important scholar to take a specific interest in Bukharan Jews was Zalman Lvovich Amitin-Shapiro (1899–1968), an Ashkenazi Jew who moved to Bukhara in 1918 to work as an instructor for Jewish children at a Soviet school. He studied the social life of Bukharan Jewish women and collected anthropological information which proves illuminating to this day.27 M. Levinskii followed the path set by Vaisenberg and published an article on the history of Bukharan Jews in the periodical Evreiskaia Starina, which continued from imperial into Soviet times.28

Soviet studies of local Jewry, which had begun to take off in the 1920s, declined in the 1930s due to anti-Semitic Stalinist policies. Evreiskaia Starina was discontinued in 1930. From then on, Jews were mostly ignored by Soviet scholars, who pursued subjects more aligned with State interests.29 There is therefore a gap in the study of Bukharan Jews from the 1930s to the late 1980s.

3 Post-Soviet Ethnography

The fall of the USSR in 1989 provoked a large-scale migration of the Jews of Central Asia to Israel and the United States. It also allowed Western scholars to enter Central Asian countries, to directly study the Bukharan Jews who remained, as well as to access documents within the archives of the Uzbek, Tajik, and Russian states.

Since the 1990s to the present day, there has been a keen interest in studying Bukharan Jewish history by modern Israeli scholars. A general interest for Oriental Jews in Israel had surfaced in the nineteenth century due to immigration to Israel, and exposure of Ashkenazi Jews to their exotic brethren. Research

27 Zalman Amitin-Shapiro, Zhenshchina i svadebnye obriady u tuzemnykh (“bukharSKikh”) evreev Turkestana, vol. 17 (Tashkent: Itogro, 1925), 189–196. By the same author see also Ocherki sotsialisticheskogo stroitel’stva sredi sredneaziatskikh evreev (Tashkent: Gosizdat UzSSR, 1933), and Ocherk pravovogo bita sredneaziatskikh evreev (Tashkent–Samarkand: UzGosIzdat, 1931).
on eastern communities typically began with ethnographies of their emigrant communities in Israel.\textsuperscript{30} With many Bukharan Jews having migrated to Israel in the past thirty years, thus improving their socio-economic and educational status, a good number have become historians of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bukharan Jewry, publishing mainly in Hebrew and Russian, but also in English or French. By far the most prolific historians of Bukharan Jewry, who access Russian, Hebrew, and Judeo-Tajik sources from archives in Israel, Russia, and Uzbekistan, are Al’bert Kaganovich, Mikhail Zand, and Zeev Levin.\textsuperscript{31} Scholars with a more ethnographic bent are Alanna Cooper (who conducted an ethnographic study of Bukharan Jews in New York, Uzbekistan, and Israel), Evan Rapport (who focused on the ethnomusicology of Bukharan Jews), Tat’iana Emel’ianenko (who has specialised in the ethnographic study and collection of Bukharan Jewish dress), and Thomas Loy (who used the technique of collecting oral histories).\textsuperscript{32}

The largest group of people interested in the history of the Bukharan Jews today is the Bukharan Jewish community itself, not all of whom are scholars at universities. Based mostly in New York and Israel, they have produced memoirs and biographies in English, Russian, Hebrew, and Judeo-Persian detailing life in the community, as well as accounts of family history and reconstructions of life in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{33} They have created social media


\textsuperscript{33} Menachem Eshel, \textit{Galerya: Dmuyot shel Rashei Yahadut Bukhara} (Tel Aviv: Bet ha-Tarbut li-
groups and continue to publish newspapers in Russian within their diasporic communities (*The Bukharian Times* in Forest Hills, New York and *Lechaim* in Israel). The World Congress on Bukharan Jews, established in 2000, in addition to its philanthropic work, meets to deliver papers on the history and culture of Bukharan Jews. The Congress publishes its weekly newspaper *Menorah*, in Russian, Judeo-Tajik, and Hebrew.

Much of the writing on Bukharan Jews by Bukharan Jews remains in the realm of “local lore,” known in Russian as *kraevedenie*. This discipline, which gained traction in early Soviet Uzbekistan as a form of consolidating historical consciousness of the Uzbek nation, is well defined by Emily Johnson, who studied it from the perspective of an “identity discipline.”

It is highly unusual for *kraevedy* to write about places to which they have no clear personal connection. As lexicographers struggling to define *kraevedenie* sometimes acknowledge, “for the most part” this form of research represents the work of individuals who could under some rubric be classified as “local inhabitants.”

In the case of Bukharan Jewish *kraevedenie*, however, the “local inhabitants” frequently live in the United States or Israel, miles away from the place to which they have their personal and historical connection. Johnson also notes that “a willingness to allow certain non-academic community members to participate in scholarly forums on a limited basis represents a typical feature of identity disciplines.” In the study of Bukharan Jews, one can observe that academics frequently cite these non-academic *kraevedy*-scholars, who have access to information of local lore by virtue of the fact that they know their own local legends. Particularly prominent in this regard are historians Robert Pinkhasov,

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34 Levin, “From local to global.”
a Bukharan Jew who resides in New York City, and Robert Al’meev, a kraeved historian of Bukhara who has written extensively on Bukharan Jews, along with other topics on the history of Bukhara.  

4 Conclusion

The study of Bukharan Jews has been remoulded from the colonialist-imperialist collecting practices and knowledge for the sake of control, to genuine ethnographic interest in the folklife of a particular group of people. For the past thirty years, there has been a surge in publications by kraeved scholars from the community itself. These kraevedenie studies are extremely useful sources of insider information to outsider scholars. It can be said that today, the best ethnographic writers on the Bukharan Jews are the Bukharan Jews themselves.

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