CHAPTER 13

Rescuing the Tatar Muslim Heritage in the Soviet Union: The Expedition Diaries of Mirkasym A. Usmanov

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In the fall of 2013, Kazan University experienced a jubilee that it barely noticed: Half a century before, in 1963, faculty members started the Archaeographical Expedition of the Scientific Library of Kazan University, which conducted seasonal fieldwork to collect Oriental manuscripts and old prints from the populations of Tatar settlements in Russia.1 Research was halted twice during this period: in 1967, when its leader Mirkasym A. Usmanov was preparing the defense of his Ph.D. dissertation, and in 1991, when the dissolution of the USSR and financial problems made it impossible to go into the field. However, in 1992, the two leading libraries of the Republic of Tatarstan—the University Library and the National Library—joined forces to get the search for Oriental manuscripts back on track.

For about half of those 50 years the expedition was directed by my father, Mirkasym Abdulakhatovich Usmanov (Tatar pen-name: Mirkasїym Gosmanov, 1934–2010). Together with his mentor, Shamil' Mukhamed'iarov (1923–2005), Usmanov was the initiator of the field program, and for over 25 years he was the major organizer and propagator of the Expedition. Usmanov led the yearly trips, and he was the first to study the items that were brought to the Sector for Rare Books and Manuscripts of Lobachevskii Library at Kazan State University (KGU). From the early 1990s to 2010, the Expedition continued under the direction of Usmanov’s disciple Zavdat Minnullin.

The Expedition was a central element in Usmanov’s program for recovering the Tatar past, and it was through his studies of Oriental manuscripts that Usmanov made a name for himself in the West. In the early 1990s, he established close links with Stefan Reichmuth at the Institute of Oriental and

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Islamic Studies of Bochum University, where the history of Russia's Muslims became a research focus at that time, and it is no coincidence that one of his very first publications in the West was a historical overview of Tatar manuscript culture.² Usmanov was also the key player in the establishment of scholarly cooperation between KGU and IRCICA in Turkey, and here, too, the recovery and study of the manuscript heritage was central.³ The materials retrieved by the Expedition led to a significant expansion of the University’s Oriental manuscript collection and provided more urgency to Usmanov’s demand for the re-establishment of the discipline of Oriental Studies at Kazan State University.⁴

Today, the active part of the Expedition is history. While many facets of it were published in Usmanov’s regular reports, the time has come to draw conclusions from what the Expedition achieved and to reflect upon how it worked and its priorities. A major source for this new enterprise are the diaries Usmanov kept of his research trips from 1963 to 1988.⁵ It is through the lens of these field-diaries that I want to place the manuscript expedition into the context of its time, although my contribution will also reveal the limitations of field diaries as a historical source.

Oriental Archaeography at Kazan University

The collection of old books at Kazan University started with the establishment of the so-called Oriental Section (Vostochnyi razriad) in 1804. In the first fifty