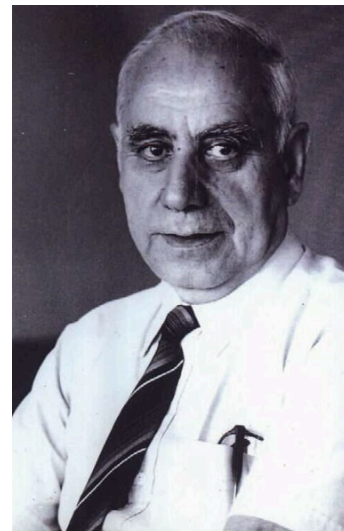


Mohammad Asemi

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‘ĀṢEMI (also Osimi and Asimov) MOḤAMMAD, Tajik educator, scholar, statesman, and humanist (b. Kojand, 1 September 1920; d. Dushanbe, 29 July 1996; [Figure 1](#)). He had a difficult early life in the early years of the Soviet rule. After completion of technical school in his hometown, he attended ‘Ališēr Navā’i University in Samarkand, where he graduated in 1941 in physics-mathematics. In the following years he served at the front in World War II near Leningrad, where he lost a brother on the battlefield. After the war ‘Āṣemi assumed guardianship of his brother’s children in addition to his own growing family. In spite of the hardship, the war experience brought about mutual trust between him and the Soviet authorities and paved the way for his later promotions. The orders he won for showing courage in battle were followed by several other medals and decorations during his long career.



‘Āṣemi held important administrative positions in Soviet Tajikistan. He served as a senior instructor and then the deputy director of Teachers’ training institute of Kojand (1946-52). He completed his postgraduate studies at the Communist Party Academy of Social Sciences in Moscow (1952-55), and then returned home to become the rector of the newly founded Polytechnic University in Dushanbe, which was named after him posthumously (1956-62; see [EDUCATION xxviii.](#)). For the next three years he held several key political posts in Tajikistan, including those of minister of education, chairman of the committee of governmental control, secretary of the central committee of the Communist Party, and deputy chairman of council of ministers (1962-65). Finally, he served as the president of the Tajik Academy of Sciences (1965-88), where he spent his

energy and administrative skills to expand it in new directions (Borjian, 1988-89). ‘Āṣemi became a Tajik academician (1965) and was elected a corresponding member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (1974).

‘Āṣemi’s scholarly contribution is considerable and multifaceted. His primary subject of interest was philosophy in the broad sense of the word, with particular attention to the achievements made in the East. He contended, without succumbing to exaggerations, that many original thoughts were developed in the East. He wrote extensively on the history of science and its luminaries such as Moḥammad b. Zakariyā’ Rāzi, Avicenna, and Omar Khayyam, and published an edition of Abu Rayḥān Biruni’s *Ketāb al-tafhim le awā’el ṣenā’at al-tanjim* with an extensive commentary (Dushanbe, 1978). ‘Āṣemi’s long tenure at the Academy allowed him to appreciate the dilemma of modern technology and contributed to its assessment. He collaborated with experts in establishing seismic regulations for his earthquake-prone country (see [EARTHQUAKES ii](#)), and persuasively demonstrated the hazards of nuclear power plants in the Pamirs, the chief water resource of Tajikistan and her neighbors. ‘Āṣemi’s name appears in several joint publications of the Academy.

The Persian language and literature was of great concern to ‘Āṣemi, himself a prominent orator and writer in his mother tongue with a prodigious store of classical verses and common proverbs. He wrote on poets such as Ḥāfez, ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi, ‘Abd-al-Qāder Bidel, Amir Ḳosrow of Delhi, and [Eqbāl](#) of Lahore and headed the editorial board on the Cyrillic edition of the *Šāh-nāma* (2nd ed., 9 vols., Dushanbe, 1987). At the Academy he pressed the Terminology Committee (*Komitet-e eṣṭelāḥāt*) to compile specialized dictionaries on various branches of science in order to decrease the dependency of Tajik Persian on Russian (Qāderi). His proposals for improvements in the state of the language were put into practice in his own works, notably in preparation of textbooks that were largely translations from Russian, supporting his contention that Tajik was capable enough to express imported notions without having to borrow heavily from Russian. ‘Āṣemi’s language vision is partly reflected in two major reference

works prepared under his supervision: a Russian-Tajik dictionary (*Luḡati rusī-tojiki*, Moscow, 1985) and [*Éntsiklopediyai sovetii tojik*](#).

It was also under ʿĀṣemi’s inspiring leadership that UNESCO adopted the project of writing the multi-volume *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (1992-). He himself was elected the president of the board of editors and personally edited the series’ fourth volume. Nevertheless, ʿĀṣemi’s efforts to convince major Persian scholars to contribute to the project met with limited success; objections were raised over the soundness of what was regarded by them as a politically biased term, “Central Asia,” instead of their traditional “Greater Irān” (Zarrinkub). ʿĀṣemi also laid the foundation and served as the president of the International Association for the Study of the Cultures of Central Asia, which organized conferences and supported publication of a journal based in Pakistan (Dani). Furthermore, ʿĀṣemi was devoted to promoting Indo-Persian heritage by expanding relations with the Indian subcontinent. He visited several academic centers in India and Pakistan, and was honored with the Jawahar Lal Nehru International Award (1983).

As a political and intellectual leader, ʿĀṣemi mastered the subtle art of protecting national values and interests within the Russian-dominated culture of the Soviet Union. He was the only prominent Tajik who used two surnames: Osimī in Tajik Persian and Asimov in Soviet and international publications. He was a staunch advocate of the vast opportunities that Pax Sovietica offered in education and technology, and used his authority to realize them. He contested many Western Sovietologists by supporting the conventional Soviet claim that Asian peoples were beneficiaries of the Soviet system (ʿĀṣemi, 1975), and continued to hold this view in the post-Soviet years, though at this time he could openly admit certain downsides, national language and culture being the foremost (ʿĀṣemi, 1992). ʿĀṣemi’s achievements combined with his personal qualities, character, and demeanor, made him so much admired that his compatriots generally rank him together with Ṣadr-al-Din ʿAyni, [Bobodzhan Gafurov](#), and Mirzā Tursunzāda as pillars of Tajik identity in the 20th century. Yet, unlike the latter three, ʿĀṣemi never became a prominent Soviet figure

(indeed, he was not even promoted to full membership of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, which was unusual for someone who had led his own republic's Academy for more than two decades); instead, he gained considerable international recognition by promoting scholarship on Central Asia and representing the region in UNESCO, an unmatched success not only in his own country but also perhaps in all Central Asian republics.

In the new world order following the collapse of the Soviet Union, ʿĀṣemi followed his own admonition that the independent Tajikistan must end its isolation by winning new strategic friends among the international community, the Persianate world in particular. Consequently, he founded the organization Peyvand "Connection," which organized international gatherings and published the periodical *Peyvand* in Persian script. In the gloomy air of bloodshed and retribution that followed the civil war, ʿĀṣemi was assassinated by unknown individuals on the streets of Dushanbe. His demise was considered an irreplaceable loss for the young Tajik republic.

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