The Rise of Insider Iconography: Visions of Soviet Turkmenia in Russian-Language Literature and Film, 1921–1935

Katharine M. Holt

To be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2013
ABSTRACT

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This study investigates how Turkestan generally and Turkmenia more specifically were represented in Russian-language film and literature in the early Soviet period. By analyzing the work of writers and filmmakers as well as the ideological and artistic constraints that they faced, I explore not only depictions of these spaces, but also the biographies of several of their key depicters, delving into the historical circumstances in which given texts were produced and the relationship between these texts and the larger artistic fields into which they were released.

The study opens with a discussion of texts by “outsiders” who positioned Turkmenia as a space worthy of exploration between 1921 and 1927. Chapter One examines two essay collections by the Eurasianists—Iskhod k vostoku. Predchuvstviia i sversheniia. Utverzhdenie evraziitsev (Exit to the East: Forebodings and Events: An Affirmation of the Eurasians, 1921) and Na putiakh. Utverzhdenie evraziitsev (On the Way: An Affirmation of the Eurasians, 1922)—as well as Dziga Vertov’s documentary film Shestaia chast’ mira (One Sixth of the World, 1926) and two literary works by Nikolai Tikhonov, a “fellow traveler” who passed through Turkmenistan in the mid-1920s. Despite the differences in the approaches of the Eurasianists, Vertov, and Tikhonov, I argue, all of these men envisioned Turkmenia as an undelimited space within a larger landmass that was worthy of further exploration.

In Chapter Two, I explore how “outsider” writers and filmmakers were inscribed into the Soviet project of building socialism in Turkestan during the First Five-Year Plan. First, I turn my attention to two texts about the construction of the 1,400-kilometer Turksib railway, the flagship
construction project for Central Asia in the First-Five-Year-Plan era: Viktor Turin’s documentary film *Turksib* (1929) and Viktor Shklovsky’s related children’s book *Turksib* (1930). In my analysis of these works, I discuss how the two texts position their authors as facilitators of modernization and as mediators between the Soviet periphery and the center. Next, I discuss the first literary “shock brigade” sent to Central Asia, in 1930, and analyze the contributions made by Tikhonov and his fellow Serapion Brother Vsevolod Ivanov to the 1932 almanac *Turkmenistan vesnoi* (*Turkmenistan in the Spring*). I suggest that Tikhonov adapted to his new roles as an official representative of Soviet Russian literature and a witness to socialist construction with special ease, while Ivanov displayed deep ambivalence about taking on new, more institutionalized responsibilities vis-à-vis the Soviet Central Asian periphery.

Chapter Three takes up the shift in official Soviet poetics toward “insider iconographers” and the changing practices of writers and filmmakers visiting Turkestan during the Second Five-Year Plan. First, I discuss Vertov’s film *Tri pesni o Lenine* (*Three Songs about Lenin*, 1934), which I claim is paradigmatic for the turn toward native voices that characterized official Soviet culture in 1933 and 1934. Next, I describe the work of the national commissions that were set up in Moscow in advance of the first All-Union Writers’ Congress in 1934. These commissions, I suggest, helped establish new conventions for the representation of space in Turkestan, pushing writers and other artists to show the region’s constituent republics as landscapes mastered by the local populations. I then analyze the almanac one of these commissions produced, *Aiding-Gümner: Al’manakh k desiatiletiiu Turkmenistana, 1924–1934* (*Aiding-Gümner: The Almanac for the Tenth Anniversary of Turkmenistan, 1924–1934*). In a discussion that centers on Petr Skosyrev’s novella *Oazis* (*Oasis*), Grigorii Sannikov’s poem cycle “Peski i rozy” (“Sands and Roses”), and Oraz Tash-Nazarov’s translated poem *Bairam-Ali*, I argue that the volume bears
traces of the moves toward “native voices” and an iconography that equates Turkmenistan with the concept of a transformed, flourishing desert.

Chapter Four examines “insider iconography” from a different perspective. Instead of focusing on texts that illustrate the paradigm in its purest form, I look at a set of literary works that not only accommodated it, but also refracted it. Specifically, I read Platonov’s “Turkmenia cycle” as an outgrowth of the kind of landscape production that was being practiced by the national commission for Turkmenistan and other cultural producers in the mid-1930s. Along with Platonov’s letters and journal entries from the period, this cycle, I argue, suggests that cultural producers operating in the Soviet Union were well aware of the conventions that were developing for the representation of Turkmenistan. At the same time, I maintain, the cycle represents a unique artistic achievement, one that not only encapsulates but also transcends the cultural trends that were dominant when it was produced.

As a whole, the dissertation shows how the space of Turkmenia was gradually transformed into Soviet landscapes and places in Russian-language literature and film; how the rise of high Stalinism affected the production of texts about the region, redirecting responsibility for its representation to insider iconographers and those willing to pose as such; and how Platonov can be considered as both a practitioner and an articulate critic of the paradigm I call “insider iconography.” I argue that between 1921 and 1935: 1) Turkestan and the rest of Central Asia became clearly visible in Russian-language cultural products for the first time; 2) the signifier “Turkmenistan” began to take on a specific meaning in the Soviet ideological system; 3) there was a paradigm shift in the dominant strategy of the Soviet “East’s” representation in officially sanctioned texts, as “insiders’” views and simulacra of them became increasingly
valued; and 4) Platonov reflected on this shift in his “Turkmenia cycle,” which can be read as the apotheosis of “insider iconography.”
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Note on Transliteration and Translation

Within the text I use the transliteration system of the Library of Congress, except in the case of names that are more familiar to English-speaking audiences in another form (e.g., Gorky, Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, Shklovsky) and in the case of names where the Library of Congress system impedes the use of the English possessive form (e.g., Dzhumal, which would be transliterated as Dzhumal’ with the Library of Congress system). For place names, I generally employ the standard American English spellings as found in the Merriam Webster dictionary (e.g. Ashgabat, Kara-Kum) rather than transliterations from Russian (e.g., Ashkhabad, Karakumy) or Turkmen spellings (e.g., Ashgabat, Garagum). When quoting from published translations, I retain the translators’ original spellings. When referring to places not commonly written about in English (e.g., Baýramaly), I generally use a transliteration of the Soviet-era, Russian-language term (e.g., Bairam-Ali). In the notes, I strictly adhere to the Library of Congress system.

Throughout the dissertation, titles of Russian works appear in transliteration, as do Russian terms when they are not part of a quotation. Quotations from Russian texts, however, generally are provided in both the original Cyrillic and in English translations. In a few instances, where published translations are available and the original quotation is not crucial for my analysis, only translations appear in the body of the text. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.
Terms and Abbreviations

aul settlement in the Caucasus and Turkestan

arik irrigation canal

ARRK Assotsiatsiia Rabotnikov Revoliutsionnoi Kinematografii (Association of Workers of Revolutionary Cinematography)

bai wealthy land or livestock owner in Central Asia

bakhshi folk singer in Central Asia

basmachi local militia groups in Central Asia (from the Turkic word basma, or “assault”)

chachvon a mesh garment worn as a face veil in Uzbekistan (from the Uzbek)

chador a garment that covers the body and not the face (from the Persian). Although chadors are worn only in Iran and Azerbaijan, during the Soviet period the word chador was often used generically in Russian—as it is in several of Dziga Vertov’s films—to convey the term “veil.”

dekhany Central Asian peasants
d. delo (file), in reference to archival materials
ed. khr. edinitsta khranenia (file), in reference to archival materials

f. fond (collection), in reference to archival materials

Gosizdat Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo (State Publishing House)

kino-glaz cine-eye, Dziga Vertov’s term for the “cinematic eye,” which he believed could see truths missed by human vision

kibitka a nomadic dwelling or wagon

kishlak settlement in Turkestan

kolkhoz kollektivnoe khoziaistvo (collective farm)

korenizatsiia nativization

oblast’ an administrative unit in Soviet republics, equivalent to a large district or province

orgkomitet organizatsionnyi komitet (organizational committee)

paranj a body covering or veil worn by Uzbek women (from Uzbek)

RAPP Rossiiiskaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskikh Pisatelei (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers)

RGALI Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art)

sovkhоз sovetskoe khoziaistvo (state-owned farm)

Sovnarkom Sovet narodnykh komissarov (Council of Peoples’ Commissars)

takyr mudflat common in Turkmenistan

TASSR Turkestanskaya Avtonomnaya Sotsialisticheskaya Sovetskaia Respublika

(Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic)

TsIK Tsentral’nyi Ispolnitel’nyi Komitet (Central Executive Committee)

TsKKP(b)T Tsentral’nyi Komitet Kommunisticheskoi Partii (b) Turkmenistana (Central Committee of the Communist Party (b) of Turkmenistan)

TSSR Turkmeniskaia Sotsialisticheskaya Sovetskaia Respublika

(Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic), established October 27, 1924

Turkmenia a conventional name for the territory that was roughly coterminous with the TSSR and before that Transcaucasia; used frequently in Russian, especially before the Turkmenistani government declared independence in 1991

Turksib Turkestano-Siberskaia magistral’ (Turkestan-Siberian Railway)
Acknowledgments

This project was enabled by financial support from a Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation Dissertation Fellowship, a Harriman Institute Junior Fellowship, a Columbia University Mellon Traveling Fellowship, an Isaac Henry Ergas Fellowship for research in Turkic and Central Asian Studies, a Mogilat Fund Fellowship from the Columbia Slavic Department, and a Raskin Fund Award from the Columbia Slavic Department. While I was developing my dissertation proposal, a Summer Research Lab Fellowship gave me the opportunity to attend a Junior Scholars Training Workshop on Central Asia at the University of Illinois, Urbana- Champaign. The same summer a Foreign Languages and Area Studies Fellowship allowed me to enroll in the graduate program at Middlebury’s Kathryn Wasserman Davis School of Russian, where I had the chance to read and discuss many of the literary texts analyzed in this dissertation. The independent study I had there with Oleg Proskurin and Vera Proskurina was particularly fruitful for my thinking.

A huge number of people contributed to this project, whether they know it or not.

I am grateful first and foremost to my advisees. Valentina Izmirlieva placed complete trust in me throughout the dissertation process and provided critical feedback when I needed it most. Her fierce intellect, analytical rigor, and creativity have been an inspiration throughout my years of graduate school, and I am so thankful that she continuously had high expectations for me, even when I was lost in the woods. In his seminars, his scholarship, and his comments on my dissertation, Boris Gasparov has challenged me to think in new ways about literature and its relationship to the larger culture in which it is created. His gifts as a teacher and thinker provide a model to which I can only aspire. With unfaltering generosity, Irina Reyfman has helped me in more ways than I can count over the last seven years. She has been an ideal mentor at every step of the way. I am particularly indebted to her for reading my dissertation chapters so carefully
(and promptly), for introducing me to Andrei Platonov’s Central Asian works, and for sponsoring my master’s thesis, which turned out to be the seed of this project.

I also owe thanks to many other others at Columbia. In the Slavic Department, Professors Tatiana Smoliarova, Rebecca Stanton, Cathy Nepomnyashchy, Cathy Popkin, and Liza Knapp gave me detailed feedback and encouragement when I presented portions of my research at dissertation workshops and conferences. They, and all of my other instructors in the department, have helped me grow tremendously as a scholar and a teacher. At the Harriman Institute, Timothy Frye and Kimberly Marten gave me the opportunity to plan a series of events—including a conference on Platonov—that contributed a great deal to this project, while Alla Rachkov worked her logistical magic to make those events happen. Also at the Harriman Institute, Ron Meyer helped me enormously with the Platonov volume of *Ulbandus*, as well as with a few of the translations that appear here. Elsewhere on campus, Gulnar Kendirbai, Karen Barkey, Paige West, Matthew Jones, and Samuel Moyn stimulated my thinking on topics as diverse as Central Asian history, multinational empires, tolerance studies, the construction of space, and the work of Michel Foucault. Among my fellow graduate students, Greta Matzner-Gore, Maksim Hanukai, Margo Rosen, Sophie Pinkham, Robyn Jensen, Riley Ossorgin, and Edward Tyerman brightened my experience considerably. They and many others made Columbia feel like a real academic home.

A diverse community of colleagues—including Timothy Nunan, Sam Hodgkin, Lisa Yountchi, Masha Kirasirova, Adeeb Khalid, Katerina Clark, Olga Maiorova, Anne Dwyer, and Kathryn Schild—helped me develop my thoughts on the Soviet “East” by sharing their work and responding to mine. I look forward to trading more ideas with them in the future.
While I was in Moscow conducting research, I had the good fortune to become acquainted with Tanya Mazyar, Charles Shaw, Adam Leeds, Ben Sawyer, Ilya Budraitskis, Alexei Penzin, and Masha Bogomolova. They turned out to be both great friends and great interlocutors, and I learned much about archives, Soviet culture, and contemporary Russia from our conversations. I also had the privilege of meeting with Natalia Kornienko and the other archivists in the Platonov group at IMLI while I was in Moscow. I am grateful to them—and to the other Platonov scholars I have worked with, including Masha Bogomolova, Ben Dhooge, Evgenii Iablokov, Nariman Skakov, Natalia Poltavtseva, Thomas Seifrid, Hans Günther, and Philip Bullock—for encouraging my burgeoning interest in the field of Platonov studies.

In the final stages of editing, Ainsley Morse, Maksim Hanukai, Marijeta Bozovic, Roman Utkin, Rossen Djagalov, and Edward Tyerman provided invaluable feedback on my translations, while Robyn Jensen generously proofed my bibliography. Any mistakes that remain are mine.

I could never have completed this project without the continued support of my tremendous network of friends, including Marijeta Bozovic, Kate Burch Belkin, Maria Cristina Rueda, Bill Hilgendorf, Kate and Angus Burgin, Danielle and Alex Mindlin, Henry Rich, Nadja Bruder, Paul Bercovitch, Rains Paden, Gary Belkin, and Dehn Gilmore. Their company through the years has kept me sane, happy, and intellectually stimulated. I am so lucky to know them.

Lastly I want to thank Judith and Peik Larsen for being better parents-in-law than I deserve; my father, Samuel Holt, for inspiring all my academic endeavors and for taking such pride in everything I do; my sisters, Lizzie and Elliott Holt, for being my best friends and bedrock; Reif Larsen, to whom this project is dedicated, for exploring the world with me and making everything and every day better; and my mother, who first took me to Russia and would have been ecstatic to see me complete this. I love you all.
to Ref
Introduction

In his 1956 volume *Soviet Turkmenistan* (translated from the 1955 Russian-language volume *Turkmenistan*), the Russian fiction writer Petr Skosyrev, a frequent visitor to the republic, offered a “leisurably tour” for the reader “who has never been to Turkmenia.”

The map

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above (fig. 1) accompanied his text. Printed as a pullout supplement in the back cover of the book, apparently for easy and frequent reference, it offered a seemingly neutral, God’s-eye view of what Skosyre was describing. In the map and its key, the main features of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (TSSR)—defined as its state and republican borders, populated points, railways, rivers, drying riverbeds, deserts, mountains, and bay—are all clearly delimited and represented. The rhetoric of the map suggests that the Soviet Union has complete control over all of these features: like Bentham’s panoptican, the map offers “complete visibility” and the “automatic functioning of power.”

Even the notoriously inhospitable and large Kara-Kum Desert is presented as charted, mastered territory, without any particular significance. Although the desert is granted its own symbol and is accorded much of the map, it carries less meaning than the more populated areas of the republic, all of which are labeled with proper names. And certainly Turkmenistan’s deserts carry no inflections—as they theoretically could, given the representational history of deserts within Russian culture and literature—as spaces of wilderness, revelation, solitude, expulsion, wandering, inspiration, destiny, or utopia. There be no monsters or prophets here.

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The “positive epistemology” that informs this map is reflected in Skosyrev’s text itself. According to his preface, Soviet Turkmenistan was based on a diary that Skosyrev kept during frequent trips and was first published in 1949, only to be “revised and enlarged” after he toured “several districts of the republic for that purpose in the winter of 1953–1954” (7). Any traces of Skosyrev’s personal experiences, however, are erased, as are any possible distinctions between what he saw before 1949 and after. We see no slippages or contradictions between various sets of his observations, nor any limits on his knowledge, outside one acknowledgement in the preface that the “places I visited most and know best are quite naturally dealt with more comprehensively than those I had to learn about from printed matter or by word of mouth” (7). Instead, we find an account that elides all of his different travels into one journey from the western port of Krasnovodsk, on the Caspian Sea, to the northern town of Tashauz, without any signposts suggesting which places Skosyrev “visited most.” As one site after another comes into his view, Skosyrev draws on this formal structure to present two different perspectives: that of the archetypal traveler, and that of an authoritative guide. As a traveler, Skosyrev offers the reader the vicarious experience of passing through the TSSR, packaging the republic as a set of consumable landscapes. As a guide, on the other hand, Skosyrev invites his reader beyond the realm of surface impressions and into the domain of myth, legend, memory, and fact, inviting him to conceive of the abstract space of Turkmenia as a grounded place—or, rather, set of places, since Skosyrev’s eyes rest on many individual sites.

An extensive critical literature about space, place, and landscape exists, and before moving any further, I should pause for a moment to elucidate just what I have in mind with these

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terms. In my conception, place and landscape are renderings of space.\(^5\) While space is relatively abstract, unbounded, and untemporalized, I conceive of a place as a specific location that is delimited by articulated boundaries and marked by concretized values and the mortalization of time.\(^6\) Landscape, in contrast, and here I follow W. J. T. Mitchell, is a reduction of space to “what can be seen from a distant point of view, a prospect that dominates, frames, and codifies the landscape in terms of a set of fairly predictable conventions—poetic, picturesque, sublime, pastoral, and so on.”\(^7\) This representational product is, as Mitchell argues, “something to be seen, not touched,” and is an expression of power and control that is often marked by the so-called “‘dreamwork’ of imperialism,” for it discloses “utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance,” as well as the prospect of future development and exploitation.\(^8\) In Denis Cosgrove’s terms, landscape is


\(^6\) In taking this approach generally, I build on the distinctions made in Charles W. J. Withers, “Place and the ‘Spatial Turn’ in Geography and in History,” Journal of the History of Ideas 70, no. 4 (2009): 641. The difference between “space” and “place” is an oft-debated theoretical problem, but most definitions emphasize that “places” have distinctive identities or emotional attachments, while “spaces” do not. For an example of this argument, see Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” in Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology, eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 46. In addition to Gupta and Ferguson, the anthropologist Steven Feld has written a great deal on the differences between space and place. See, for instance, Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., Senses of Places (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996). In stressing the mortalization of time in place, I build on Harrison, “Hic Jacet,” 353.

\(^7\) Mitchell, “Holy Landscape,” 265.

\(^8\) Ibid.; idem, “Landscape and Imperialism,” in Landscape and Power, 2\(^{nd}\) ed., 10, 17.
“not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of the world,” replete with its own cultural meaning and “iconography.”

The relationship between landscape and iconography is central to this dissertation, and I will expand upon this connection below. First, however, I would like to make clear that in approaching space, place, and landscape in the terms laid out above, I am taking a traditionally geographical and “absolute” approach to space, one more in line with the states and administrative units that have been focused on territorial designations. I do this intentionally, for I consider space conceived in these terms as a constructive starting point against which to define place and landscape, though each can be more or less subjectively described. Space in this triadic conceptualization has some individuation and uniqueness: political borders, for instance, can be in view, as can be the proper names of rivers, deserts, and other geographical features. But it is not concerned with “thick history” or temporalization, nor with experience on the ground or from an explicitly subjective perspective (or set of subjective perspectives). That is the realm of place and landscape. All of this is not to say that abstract space is actually given as fixed, timeless, and inert. Rather, I would argue, it is produced as abstract by those viewers—including myself—who approach it as such.

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9 Cosgrove, Social Formation, 13.

10 David Harvey has argued that there are three main ways to view space: in absolute, relative, and relational terms. To Harvey, “absolute space” is the fixed space of Descartes, Newton, Euclid. Often represented as “a pre-existing grid and immovable grid,” it is evoked by those, like Descartes’s engineer, who envision a world “from which all uncertainties and ambiguities could in principle be banished” and seek to prove their mastery over a given dominion. (David Harvey, “Space as a Key Word,” in David Harvey: A Critical Reader, eds. Noel Castree and David Gregory [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006], 272.)

11 In this I agree with the anthropologist Donald S. Moore, who has argued, following Henri Lefebvre, that “[a]bstract, empty, and exchangeable space is a historical product, not an essence. Colonial and postcolonial planners...[have] often promoted this fiction as technocrats charted blocks of abstract space to discipline settlements where landscapes were already alive with grounded livelihoods and spatial meanings. It only appears inert, fixed, and dead.” (Donald S. Moore, Suffering for Territory: Race, Place, and Power in Zimbabwe [Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005], 20.)
produced, but these are sites of greater contestation, for here representations, including absolute visions of \textit{space} and \textit{landscapes}, vie with the daily life of a place’s inhabitants and the effects of material production (the mixing of human labor with the natural world). \textit{Places}, in my reading, are defined by how they are practiced.\footnote{In developing this theoretical premise, I diverge from Certeau, for whom place is associated with a distinct location, while space “occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. [...] In short, space is a \textit{practiced place}.” (Certeau, \textit{Practice of Everyday Life}, 117.) While my understanding of space is atemporalized, abstract, and stable, his notion of space (\textit{espace}) takes into consideration “vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables,” in other words the behavior of walkers, inhabitants, and travelers who pass through and use a place (\textit{lieu}). (Ibid.)}

Turning back to Skosyrev, I would argue that he codifies the gridded, delimited \textit{space} of Turkmenistan first and foremost as a set of \textit{landscapes}, opening nearly every section with an overview of what travelers would see, were they to follow in his footsteps. Turkmenistan is rendered knowable in these scenes, which are generally unmediated by any human figures and

\footnote{I also amend Lefebvre’s formulation in his pioneering work \textit{The Production of Space} (1974). In that text, he argues that space is produced through the interaction of \textit{perceived space} (the social practice and logic of the code connected to a space, e.g. how a tenant in a high-rise operates in his daily life), \textit{conceived space} (the representations of space that create the code, e.g. the plans for a space created by planners, engineers, and architects), and \textit{lived space} (“representational spaces” that intellectualize space and manipulate ideological codes that exist around space, e.g. works of art, of literature, and of dance). At the same time, Lefebvre maintains, space is also produced by multiple kinds of production at four different levels: the level of \textit{absolute space} (space is empty until a body occupies it and creates it by perceiving it), \textit{appropriated space} (space is a product of political and social fluctuations that pave the way for other processes), \textit{dominated space} (space is a product of a set of institutional arrangements among political institutions, representation practices, etc.), and \textit{material production} (space is a product of the mixing of human labor with the natural world). At all moments, Lefebvre argues, social relations among people, ideological representations of space, mental conceptions of space, and material circumstances affect the production of space.

I depart here from Lefebvre in two important ways. First, I streamline two of his frameworks of analyses by blending his oppositions among \textit{social practice}, \textit{representations of space}, and \textit{representational spaces} on the one hand and \textit{social, mental, material, and ideological} processes on the other. I do this because I take it as a given that representations of space, the daily life of a space’s inhabitants, and the material production of a space are all affected by mental, ideological, social processes, but believe that there is not \textit{always} a material dimension to representations of spaces. In other words, I think something is to be gained by separating material production from representations of space but considering them in the same analysis. Second, in eliminating the category of “\textit{representational spaces},” I collapse the boundary that Lefebvre creates in \textit{The Production of Space} between “artists,” who are said to deal in images and symbols, and “planners.” I am not sure that this distinction between the two is ever as sharp in reality as in Lefebvre’s reading of it (do planners not deal with symbols and abstractions? are artists really as free to manipulate codes as he believes?), but the distinction between the two was certainly not sharp in the Soviet Union, especially after the late 1920s. Instead, I treat texts produced by both “planners” and “artists” as \textit{representations of space}.}
unthreatening to the reader. The capital city, for instance, appears in Skosyrev’s gaze as a sun-drenched and unpopulated garden city:

Ashkhabad, capital of Turkmenia, is a sunny city with white houses and broad, straight, busy but not noisy streets lined with acacias, thuja, honey locusts, English elms and plane-trees; with narrow, brick-covered *ariks* [irrigation canals] that now and then are filled with running water; with asphalt pavements that grow soft in the midday sun in July. […]

There is always an aureole of charm about cities that lie at the foot of mountains or by the sea. Ashkhabad is particularly beautiful in the spring when the almond-trees are in bloom and fresh, early grass covers the hills standing in a semi-circle around its southern outskirts. When seen in the early morning from Karl Marx Square, the main square in the city, the landscape in the direction of the mountains towering the south is breath-taking. (106)

Often, Skosyrev writes of what he spies from his train compartment, presenting views from the Central Asian Railway as though he were a reliable, landscanning eye, one unaffected by the visual distortions introduced by train travel.¹³ Not all of these scenes are so picturesque or reassuring to the reader. Describing the space east of Krasnovodsk and the Caspian Sea, for instance, Skosyrev focuses on its monotony and ugliness:

From Krasnovodsk the train speeds for more than 60 miles in the shadow of the steep Kuba-Dag Mountains, which imperceptibly give way to the Kyurynin-Kyure highlands. To the south of the railway, the passenger at first sees the calm, blue waters of the bay and then a colourless plain of clay and sand, which, like a tiresome companion, claims the attention of the traveler in Turkmenia day after day. It is always there, now to the right, now to the left of the train. At the oases it withdraws to the horizon only to reappear as the train pulls out of these havens.

There is little to gladden the eye in this part of Turkmenistan. (55)

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¹³ When we are in a moving vehicle like a train, objects closer to us appear to move faster than objects farther away. Moreover, objects closer to us appear to be moving backwards, while distant objects appear to move in our same direction. This phenomenon, which is dubbed “motion parallax” and allows us to discern relative distances, is tied to other illusions of self-movement, including “vection,” which causes a viewer to believe they are moving when they are not. Vection can also occur during train travel, especially when an observer is in an unmoving train and a moving train passes by. Although Skosyrev betrays no anxiety about the distortions introduced by train travel, these distortions preoccupied a number of writers who came before him, as Nina Lee Bond has demonstrated in “Tolstoy and Zola: Trains and Missed Connections” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2011), especially Chapter 3, “Motion Parallax: Trains as Tricknology.”
While this landscape might not be as inviting as the one Skosyrev provides for Ashgabat, it is clear that the writer’s eye is still trained on what Turkmenistan offers—and could offer upon future development. Moreover, Skosyrev clearly still expresses command over the views he encounters: he confidently directs the reader from the bay to the sands to the oases, authoritatively proclaiming the weariness that the sand-swept view inspires in him and his “eye.” He still acts as the “monarch of all I survey.”

Michel de Certeau has claimed that railway navigation provides “a speculative experience of the world,” arguing that the windowpane “creates the spectator’s distance” and an “abstract ocular domination of space,” even as the railway’s “injunction to pass on” reminds the spectator that “this is not your country.” We could build on de Certeau’s assessment to suggest that train travel puts the passenger—here Skosyrev—in a prime position to create landscapes, for his contact with the space through which he passes is purely visual, and his point of view is distant enough to encourage a sense of mastery over the terrain. Inside or outside the train compartment, however, Skosyrev’s first strategy for familiarizing his reader with Turkmenistan is to dissect it into unmediated scenes for his reader.

Skosyrev’s secondary strategy, I would suggest, is to create places in his reader’s mind. Skosyrev presents not only as sights, that is, but also sites that carry specific meanings for the republic and the Union as a whole, and which are reified as “Real” in the Lacanian sense. As a guide, Skosyrev has two temporal axes of orientation: he defines what resources each place currently produces, as well as the collective memories with which each place is endowed. When turning his eye toward resource-production, Skosyrev defines the Bay of Kara-Bogaz by its

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mineral extraction and chemical industries, Neftyanaya Mountain by the oil it produces, Gaurdak by its sulfur production, Gasan-Kuli by its carpet-weavers, and so on. If the resources that Skosyrev identifies are all tied up in the Soviet project, the historical memories that Skosyrev affixes to places are not. They revolve around figures as diverse as Alexander the Great, who founded the city that would later become Merv (alternately called Mari); Yzdegerd III, the last of the Sassanid rulers, who was overthrown by Arab invaders in the seventh century; Genghis Khan, who invaded in the twelfth century; Peter I, who sent an emissary to Turkmenia in 1717; Makhtumkuli, a Turkmen poet who worked in the late eighteenth century; the twenty-six Bolshevik commissars from Baku who were killed in Turkmenia in 1918; and the Turkmen who rode horses to Moscow in the summer of 1935. Indeed, a wide range of historical eras is in play for Skosyrev, as we can see in his description of the Murghab Valley and its town Merv:

The Murghab Valley is one of the most ancient settled lands in Asia. From time immemorial the people living in it have been growing cotton in addition to other agricultural crops.

Two thousand years ago, Chinese geographers wrote that in Turkestan the fields are planted to “vegetable wool.” Chinese merchants placed a high value on the textiles of Samarkand and Merv.

Merv (Mari in Turkmenian), the chief town in the Murghab Valley, was for many centuries one of the richest towns of the Ancient East.

The exact date of its foundation is not known. The Zend-Avesta, the sacred Zoroastrian writings, mentions Merv as an important town.

Ancient Chinese chronicles speak of Merv (Mu-lu in Chinese) as the most important town on the route between China and Iran. (156)

Skosyrev’s description of Merv continues through the nineteenth century, covering its invasion by Arabs in the seventh century, its history as a cosmopolitan cultural center, its destruction at the hands of Genghis Khan’s son Tuli, its partial restoration by Tamerlane’s son Shah Rukh, and its resurrection in the Soviet era. Even this excerpt, however, demonstrates that Skosyrev does not heavily discriminate in his attention to the past. Rather, he piles up the facts, which suggests
that his primary goal is to make each place thick with associations for the reader, not just to attach one Soviet meaning to each location.

Despite the generally authoritative stance of Skosyrev’s text (and its accompanying map) toward the space of Turkmenistan, the work still betrays anxiety when it addresses the assumptions the reader might have about the republic. In the passage about Merv quoted above, Skosyrev is so insistent that the town’s history is long and “important” (he repeats that word twice in two paragraphs, at least in English translation\(^\text{16}\)), that the burden of proof seems to lie with proving that Turkmenistan does, in fact, have ancient cultural roots. Elsewhere, Skosyrev ardently seeks to disprove the “deep-rooted idea that Turkmenia is a land of waterless spaces and ancient caravan routes” (25). While he acknowledges that the Kara-Kum Desert covers four-fifths of Turkmenia and “is as big as Finland or one and a half times as big as Great Britain” (181), Skosyrev assures the reader that the “lifeless desert” is a false notion, arguing that “[t]here are no really lifeless deserts” (181), on the one hand, and that the Soviet people, “the real masters of the land, came and brought life with them” (64), on the other. The Kara-Kum is a formidable opponent to engineering projects and to the preservation of historical memory, Skosyrev suggests, but ultimately it has proved no match for the “Soviet people,” who “stopped the desert’s advance and passed to the offensive themselves” (11), building canals and exploring the redirection of water into ancient river beds. However strongly worded, his proclamation implies that, in fact, the desert threatens the development of the republic and has not entirely been mastered by the Kara-Kum Canal still in construction.

\(^\text{16}\) In the Russian edition, Skosyrev does not repeat the same adjective to illustrate the city’s importance, but he does reiterate the city’s relevance. The original last two paragraphs of this passage read: «Точное время основания его неизвестно. В священной книге домусульманского Хорезма «Зенд-Авесте» о Мерве говорится как о значительном городе. // В древних китайских хрониках Мерв (по-китайски Му-лу) был причислен к наиболее крупным пунктам на пути из Китая в Иран». (Skosyrev, Turkmenistan, 193, emphasis mine.)
These moments of anxiety signal that in 1956, the proper ideological “meaning” of Soviet Turkmenistan was not yet entirely fixed, especially for those who—like Skosyrev’s presumed Russian- and English-reading audiences—had never been to the republic. The basic message of the text, however, is unambiguous. The reader of Skosyrev’s eight, site-centered chapters—“Turkmen Seaboard,” “Neftyanaya Mountain,” “At the Foot of the Kopet-Dag,” “Ashgabat,” “In the Valley of the Tedzhen and Murghab,” “A Journey Southeast Across the Kara-Kum,” “On the Amu-Darya,” and “Road into the Future”—receives a clear message: Soviet Turkmenistan can be codified in specific ideological and temporal terms. There is much that lies outside of Skosyrev’s purview entirely: he does not dwell on how places are practiced by their inhabitants, for instance, nor does he acknowledge any memories bound up with resistance to the Soviet project. As a propagandist, he is concerned only with emphasizing that the republic has a distinct history, that it plays a specific role in the Union as a whole, and that it will be developed further in years to come. His work, however, emphasizes that the TSSR is mappable by cartographer and writer alike, so long as they understand the rules of Soviet landscape iconography and know to highlight the achievements of the Soviet state.

II. Developing the Iconography of Soviet Turkmenistan

If, by 1955, the propagandistic message about Soviet Turkmenistan and its places was established enough to be neatly encompassed in works such as Skosyrev’s, this was not the case in the 1920s and early 1930s. Indeed, in the early Soviet era, it was much less clear how the abstract space of “Turkmenia” was to be approached and codified in landscape and place. Representing any area of the new Soviet Union had its challenges in this period, since major “Sovietization” efforts were ongoing and the official poetics of the Soviet state were yet to be developed. Turkmenistan posed a particular representational challenge, however, because it was
one of the least culturally assimilated spaces that the Bolsheviks inherited from the Russian Empire. Most of the territory that became the TSSR was conquered by the Russians and incorporated into the Russian Empire as Transcaspia only in the 1880s, in the last phase of the colonization of Turkestan, which had begun in the 1860s.\(^\text{17}\) When the Bolsheviks took power, it was transformed into part of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The Transcaspian oblast’, or province, of the Turkestan ASSR was separated from the remainder of the Turkestan ASSR by the territories of Bukhara and Khiva, which became the Khorezm People’s Soviet Republic and the Bukharan People’s Soviet Republic. Only in 1924, with the delimitation of the Central Asian republics, was the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic created out of the former Transcaspian oblast’ and the western districts of the former Bukhara Emirate and Khiva Khanate (see figs. 2 and 3).

\(^{17}\) For a detailed description of the conquest of Turkestan, see David MacKenzie, “The Conquest and Administration of Turkestan, 1860–85,” in *Russian Colonial Expansion to 1917*, ed. Michael Rywkin (London: Mansell, 1988), 208–34. It is worth noting that the term “colonization” is used deliberately here to describe the conquest and integration of Turkestan, for there is little scholarly debate about whether the incorporation of Turkestan can be defined as such. In contrast, there is quite a lot of debate over whether or not the Russian expansion into the Eurasian steppe can be considered “colonialism” akin to European hegemonism. One camp of historians, including Alton Donnely and Ralph Clem, has argued that this conquest can comfortably be compared to those “frontier” expansions that took place across territorially contiguous empires, while other historians, including Willard Sunderland and Mikhail Khodarkovsky, have maintained that Russia’s expansion into the Eurasian steppe was unique from other imperial expansions. See Alton Donnely, “The Mobile Steppe Frontier. The Russian Conquest and Colonization of Bashkiria and Kazakhstan to 1850,” in Rywkin, *Russian Colonial Expansion*, 189–207; Ralph Clem, “The Frontier and Colonialism in Russian and Soviet Central Asia,” in *Geographic Perspectives on Soviet Central Asia*, ed. Robert A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 19–36; Willard Sunderland, “Empire Without Imperialism? Ambiguities of Colonization in Tsarist Russia,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2003): 101–38; Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
In the imperial period, the governance of Transcaspia was sharply influenced by ethnographic ideas of how the nomadic Turkmen differed both from Russians and from the more religious settled Muslims elsewhere in Turkestan. To accommodate what was thought to be unique to the Turkmen, and to protect the nomads from the “fanaticism” of urban and settled Muslims, the Russians created a special judicial system for Transcaspia based on customary tribal law, distinct from the Islamic law used elsewhere in Turkestan. As a region populated by a semi-nomadic and largely illiterate population ruled through tribalism, Transcaspia had none of the obvious foundation stones for cultural integration when the Bolsheviks took power. As Adrienne Edgar has written, the Turkmen groups who inhabited its “largely inaccessible expanse of arid terrain

18 Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 32. The measure was taken because Russian administrators still supported the idea, first propagated by Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufman (Governor-General of Turkestan from 1867 to 1881), that nomads needed to be protected from Muslim townspeople, who were considered a more serious threat to colonial rule and were thus to be the objects of particular tsarist attention. (Daniel Brower, “Islam and Ethnicity: Russian Colonial Policy in Turkestan,” in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples*, eds. Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997], 122.)
[...] possessed no clearly bounded territory, no common political institutions, no uniform language, and no mass culture of print and education—in short, none of the trappings of modern nationhood.”¹⁹

Adding to the complication of representing Turkmenistan in the early Soviet period, at least in Russian, was the fact that the space was largely unknown to both cultural producers from outside Central Asia and the Party-State itself. To get to know the vast territories and multiethnic populations now under their control, including the semi-nomadic Turkmen tribes who roamed the Transcaspian territories, the Bolsheviks made a “revolutionary alliance” with imperial ethnographers, geographers, and linguists.²⁰ Together with these imperial scientists and the local Turkmen elites, including the leading jadids—Abdrashid Qari, Abduraif Fitrat, Ahmad Donish, and Mahmud Behbudi, all Islamic reformers devoted to modernization and educational reform—the Bolsheviks worked in the early 1920s to devise and popularize a concept of Turkmen nationhood grounded in territory, language, and the unification of the Turkmen tribes.²¹ By 1924, the Bolsheviks and their allies had set the terms for the national delimitation of Turkmenistan, and the borders that would later be reified by Skosyrev had been put in place. But the rest of the meanings that Skosyrev so blithely attached to each corner of the republic had yet to be

¹⁹ Edgar, Tribal Nation, 2.

²⁰ Francine Hirsch, Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 21–61. According to Hirsch, while the Russian and European colonial empires used techniques of enumeration, mapping, and surveying to create new categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, the Soviet Party-State used them to eliminate these oppositions. (Ibid., 12–13.) Similarly, while the Russian Empire pursued a policy of direct assimilation in some regions and non-interference in others, the Soviet government advocated different policies toward different national territories depending on their populations’ presumed place, not the Marxist historical timeline. (Ibid., 146–7.)

²¹ Significantly, the Bolsheviks did not build the concept of the Turkmen nation on the principle of genealogy, though it had been privileged by Turkmen up until the late nineteenth century and though genealogical criteria were used to determine which groups would be included within Turkmenistan and where the capital would be. (Edgar, Tribal Nation, 17–40.) For more on the jadids, see Adeeb Khalid, The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
The “political-aesthetic struggle” for the “dominion over signs,” to quote Boris Groys, was eventually resolved in Russian-language cultural products about this part of Central Asia, as Skosyrev’s volume suggests, but it took years of experimentation and then sustained attention to the problem.\(^2\) As a result, the era saw rapid and drastic change in how—and by whom—the republic was represented in Russian to readers and audiences. In this dissertation, I will explore several aspects of this change and the development of the iconography that Skosyrev and others were to rely on later in the Soviet era.

### III. A “Spatial Turn” to Turkmenistan

The “spatial turns” in the fields of Russian history and literature have been accompanied by the publication of several influential analyses of Russia’s “imaginative geography,” including Susan Layton’s *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*, Ewa Thompson’s *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Harsha Ram’s *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire*, and *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, a collection of essays edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman.\(^3\) Together these texts have explored the cultural myths surrounding the Caucasus, the

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Arctic, the Moscow metro, and several other locales as they have raised questions about Russian imperial knowledge production and Soviet ideological production. Thus far, however, no study has focused on how Central Asia or its constituent republics were represented in Soviet culture. This is a significant lacuna, not only because the region figured prominently in early Soviet art and literature, but also because it was partially created there. Indeed, before the Russian Revolution, the region of “Central Asia” as we know it did not exist. It only came into being in the 1920s and 1930s, as the Russian imperial territories of Turkestan and the Kazakh steppe were transformed—with the help of Soviet-era film and literature—into the new Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These territories collectively became “Central Asia,” that is, only as they were incorporated into the Soviet “empire of nations,” to borrow a term from Francine Hirsch.

The present study seeks to help fill this gap in the scholarship by analyzing how Turkestan and especially Turkmenia were represented in Russian-language film and literature in the early Soviet period. By analyzing the work of writers and filmmakers as well as the

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24 There have been isolated attempts by Soviet philologists to trace the image of Central Asia or the “East” in the work of different Russian writers, all published in Tashkent or Dushanbe, as well as a few recent forays into the problem in English-language scholarship, but no systematic studies of the region’s cultural construction. See the following Soviet sources: B. A. Geronimus, ed. Edinstvo mnogoobraziiia: Sredniaia Aziia v sovetskoi literature: Sbornik nauchnykh trudov (Tashkent: Tashkentskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1984); C. G. Isaev, Vostok v tvorchestve Leonida Leonova: Uchebnoe posobie po spetskursu (Dushanbe: Tadzhikskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1991); M. K. Nurmukhamedov, Sredniaia Aziiia v tvorchestve A. S. Pushkina (Tashkent: Fan, 1988); M. M. Rasuli and N. V. Vladimirova, eds., Sredniaia Aziiia v tvorchestve russkih sovetskikh pisatelei: iz istorii russko-vostochnykh literaturnykh kontaktov (Tashkent: Fan Uzbekskoi SSR, 1977); P. Tartakovskii, Svet vechernii shafrannogo kraia: Sredniaia Aziia v zhizni i tvorchestve Esenina (Tashkent: Izdatel’stvo literatury i iskusstva im. G. Guliama, 1981); P. Tartakovskii, Poeziia Khlebnikova i vostok: 1917–1922 gody (Tashkent: Izdatel’stvo “Fan” Akademi nauk, 1992). One of the few English-language analyses is Ewa Thompson, “The Central Asian Narrative in Russian Letters,” Chapter 4 in Imperial Knowledge, 109–128. Olga Maiorova is currently working on a book project, provisionally entitled Ambiguous Encounter: Russia’s National Self-Perception and the Cultural Appropriation of Central Asia, which is sure to make a large contribution to the field.

ideological and artistic constraints that they faced, I explore not only depictions of Turkmenia, but also the biographies of several of its key depicters, delving into the historical circumstances in which given texts were produced and exploring their relationship to the larger artistic fields into which they were released. In so doing, I follow Harsha Ram “beyond the question of literary representations of empire, and indeed beyond a purely mimetic understanding of the encounter with literature and history.”

This study tracks the representation of Turkmenia from 1921, when the émigré Eurasianists published their first essay collection, *Iskho d k vostoku* (*Exodus to the East*), and Eurasianism as an ideology was launched, to 1935, when Andrei Platonov completed his novella *Dzhan*. I have chosen to focus on this fourteen-year stretch not only because it was in this era that “Turkmenistan” began to take on a specific meaning in the Soviet ideological system, as I suggested above, but also because: 1) it was in this period that Turkestan and the rest of Central Asia became clearly visible in Russian-language cultural products for the first time; and 2) this era saw a shift toward “native,” or “insider” representation of Central Asian space that is critical for understanding what I would call, again following Ram, the “imperial poetics” of the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

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26 Ram, *Imperial Sublime*, 25, emphasis in original. Like Ram, I am interested not only in the question of how Russia’s Asian borderlands were depicted, but also what their depictions—and the circumstances of these depictions’ production—tell us about the relationship among artistic subjectivity, artistic form, and political power.

27 Cf. Ram, *The Imperial Sublime*. In referring to the official poetics of the Soviet Union as “imperial,” I am of course entering into the debate over whether the Soviet Union functioned more like a “modernizing” regime or more like a colonial empire. One group of scholars, including Adeeb Khalid and Yuri Slezkine, has suggested that the USSR is best compared to other so-called “mobilizational states” (I use Khalid’s term), such as Kemalist Turkey, Pahlavi Iran, or Amanullah’s Afghanistan. Another group of scholars, including Douglas Northrop and Paula Michaels, has argued that the USSR is best compared to colonial empires like the Ottoman, Hapsburg, and Austrian. See Adeeb Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Context,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 231–251; Yuri Slezkine, “Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Socialism,” *Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (2000): 217–234; Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Paula A. Michaels, *Curative Powers: Medicine and Empire in Stalin’s Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003). For my part, I see the Soviet Union as a kind of empire, one closer to a “mobilizational state” than the Ottoman, Hapsburg, and Austrian empires.
Depictions of Transcaspia and Turkestan in Russian cultural products did exist in the imperial period. Catherine II was among the first to literally inscribe Russian Central Asia, with her “Skazka o tsareviche Khlore” (“Tale of the Crown Prince Khlor,” 1781), about a tsar’s son kidnapped by a Kyrgyz khan. It was in response to this work that Gavrila Derzhavin penned his famous ode “Felitsa” (1782), which addressed Catherine as a princess of the Kirgiz-Kazak horde. In the nineteenth century, several renderings of Turkestan reached wide audiences: Nikolai Murav’ev published an account of his 1819–1820 journey to Turkmenia and Khiva, Vasilii Vereshchagin painted canvases showing the expansion of the Russian Empire into Turkestan in the late 1860s and early 1870s, Fedor Dostoevskii reflected on the Russian conquest of the Turkmen in the 1881 sketch “Geok-Tepe. Chto takoe dlia nas Aziiia?” (“Geok-Tepe: What Is Asia to Us?”), and Nikolai Karazin populated his fictional works, including Dvunogii volk (The Two-Legged Wolf, 1886), with bands of Turkmen. During the Silver Age, Vladimir Soloviev anthropomorphized the hot, dry winds from Central Asia in the essay “Vrag s vostoka” (“Enemy from the East”) and the poem “Panmongolism,” Nikolai Fedorov described Turkestan as a paradise lost in Filosofiia obshchego dela (The Philosophy of the Common Cause, 1903, 1913), the “Scythian” poets of the early twentieth century suggested that Russia’s energy depended on its connection to its nomadic and “wild” eastern roots, and Andrei Bely invoked earlier discourse about Turkestan in his novel Peterburg (1913 and 1922). Generally, however, depictions of

Turkmenia and Central Asia were few in pre-revolutionary Russian art and literature. If the Caucasus functioned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the focal point for imperial variants of the sublime and the Orient as literary constructs, Central Asia had no analogous widespread function in the Russian cultural imagination before the Revolution.29

Moreover, before 1921, when the Eurasianists published Iskhod k vostoku, the “Asian” element was not systematically considered constitutive for Russian culture and identity.30 This is not to say that the Russian view of Asia was monolithic in the imperial era or defined by a simple negative assessment. To the contrary, as David Schimmelpennick van der Oye has demonstrated, the bi-continental geography of the Russian Empire, along with its ambivalent relationship with Europe and the complicated nature of its encounters with Asia, made the Russian relationship to the “East” quite changeable.31 Even when Asia was most negatively portrayed in the discourse, for example in the Silver Age texts that engaged with the idea of “pan-Mongolism,” the “Asian threat” was often seen as something internal, an apocalyptic element integral to Russia, rather than an outside “other” against which Russia was defined.32

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29 On the literary Caucasus and Romantic Orientalism, see Layton, Russian Literature and Empire; Ram, The Imperial Sublime; Thompson, Imperial Knowledge; Monika Greenleaf, Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), especially Chapter 4, “The Foreign Fountain: Self as Other in the Oriental Poem.”


32 The eschatological vision of Solev’s 1894 poem “Pan-Mongolism” and his 1899 “Tri Razgovora” (“Three Conversations”) associated the ascendance of a Chinese-led rise of Asia with the end of history and set off a string of responses in the Russian avant-garde, shaping the very nature of Russian Futurism and Symbolism. Among them was a string of texts about “Scythians,” Mongols, and Huns, including Konstantin Bal’mont’s “Skify” (“Seychians,” 1899), Valerii Briusov’s “Griadushchie gunny” (“The Coming Huns,” 1905) and “My Skify” (“We are Scythians,”
Furthermore, there were instances when Russian writers engaged positively with Asia, identifying themselves with this exotic element and rejoicing in it, such as when Velimir Khlebnikov had one of his characters proclaim in a 1912 dialogue: “I know about the mind of a continent, not at all similar to the mind of islanders. A son of proud Asia does not come to terms with the peninsular intellect of the Europeans” («Я знаю про ум материка, нисколько не похожий на ум островитян. Сын гордой Азии не мирится с полуостровным рассудком европейцев»).  

For all the complexity of Russian Orientalism in the imperial period, the engagement with Central Asia that began in the early 1920s still marked a radically new vision of the region, for it revolved around a positive and material conception of the space’s connection to Russian and Soviet identity. While in the Romantic era and the Silver Age “Asia” had primarily been an idea to be inspired or threatened by, in the 1920s and especially in the 1930s the continent became a territory to be explored, mapped, and integrated. This new approach helped transform

1916), Andrei Bely’s Peterburg (Petersburg, 1913 and 1922), and Aleksandr Blok’s “Na pole Kulikovo” (“On the Field of Kulikovo,” 1908). After the Revolution, this trope took on new weight, as the Bolshevik uprisings were cast as an expression of a native Eastern energy in the Russian people that had bubbled up to destroy the artificial Western order in texts such as Aleksei Remizov’s “Slovo o pogibeli zemli russkoj” (“The Lay of the Ruin of the Russian Land,” 1917), a rewriting in prose of a medieval epic, Aleksandr Blok’s poem “Skify” (“Scythians,” 1918), and Evgenii Zamiatin’s essay “Skify” (“The Scythians,” 1918).


Central Asia into a distinct region made up of a set of delimited national republics, each with their own set of associations and roles within the Soviet imagined community that was the “Friendship of the Peoples.”

If the preceding discussion accounts for why I have chosen to open my study in 1921, it does not account for why I have chosen to close it in the year 1935, when Platonov completed *Dzhan*. The roots of this choice lie in the second trajectory I am charting, along with the emergence of Turkmenistan as a common site for Russian-language literature and film. This trajectory follows changes in cultural production and specifically in who primarily represented Turkmenia in Russian. In the era of the New Economic Policy (1921–1927), depicting Turkmenia was, essentially, a voluntary enterprise undertaken outside of a fixed relationship with the Party-State’s project of empire-building. Artists and writers did work on state commission while creating certain representations of Central Asia, as Dziga Vertov did while making the film *Shestaia chast’ mira* (*One Sixth of the World*, 1926), discussed in Chapter One. But such projects were part of a larger field of discourse that also included works by “fellow travelers” unaligned with—if sympathetic to—the Party-State. Those producing texts about Turkmenia in the Soviet Union during the NEP era may all have been implicated, in a Foucauldian sense, with the dominant culture and its discourse, but the “dynamic exchange” between individual writers, filmmakers, and artists and the process of empire-building was varied and unpredictable.  

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“Scythianism” of the Silver Age, but I would like to suggest that this point could be pushed further and applied to a much broader engagement with Asia in the 1920s, rather than just to Eurasianism.

35 I draw here on Said’s claim that he studies Orientalism “as a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped” by the empires in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced.” (Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary edition [New York: Vintage Books, 2004], 14–15.)
In the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, the Party-State’s approach to art and propaganda changed drastically. The cultural transformation that accompanied the rise of Stalinism has been well studied, and a variety of frameworks has been employed to understand it. Numerous literary historians and critics have focused on the “political control” and “repression” of artists: on how the “wolfhound age” («век-волкодав»), to quote Osip Mandelstam, sprung on artists of all types, be they wolf “by blood” («по крови») or not. But scholars have also tried to complicate the story by making sense of the change in other terms, approaching it not only as the “cultural revolution” it was said to be by the Soviets, but also as a shift from a horizontal culture to a vertical, hierarchical one (Vladimir Paperny); as a swing from an age when avant-garde formal experiments were tied to radical politics to one where “form” was “not supposed to deflect the reader’s or viewer’s attention” from a crude political message (Víctor Erlich); as the rise of an aesthetic state, or Kunststadt (Boris Groys, Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko); or as the assimilation of socialist realism as a self-managed art (Dobrenko). Regardless of where the primary stress is placed, or when exactly the “great cultural break” is imagined to have taken place, the fact that there was a major “swerve” in the trajectory of Soviet culture is undeniable. Indeed, even those who have worked to problematize this “swerve,” such

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as Groys in *The Total Art of Stalinism*, have taken it as a given that the artistic culture of the 1930s looked strikingly different from that of the 1920s.

As the “great cultural break” occurred and Soviet cultural production dramatically changed, so too did the manner in which texts about Soviet Turkmenistan and the other “national republics” were produced. This fact has thus far received relatively little critical attention, largely because the supra-national Soviet identity has masked the national multiplicity of Central Asia and because texts produced in the Russian language have often mistakenly been subsumed under the label of Russian.\(^{38}\)

Beginning in the First-Five-Year-Plan era, Soviet writers and filmmakers did not merely produce Russian-language texts exploring Asian themes when so inclined. Rather, they were *deployed* to do so as an arm of the regime. They were encouraged, and often assigned, to document the socialist transformation of Central Asia and—in the case of those living outside of the region—to visit its constituent republics. The mission of the visitors sent to Turkmenistan changed over time, as I will suggest in the pages ahead. Those who were sent in the First Five-Year Plan were expected to serve as representatives of the Soviet center and to facilitate the modernization of the Soviet periphery by explaining it to audiences elsewhere in the Union and bearing witness to it through a form of personal testimony. Those who were sent later in the 1930s, in contrast, were charged with supporting local officials and translating and amplifying “native” voices that could attest to the benefits Sovietization had brought them. As the personal

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\(^{38}\) As Kathryn Schild has argued, Soviet literature was a consciously multinational and multiethnic project, but this is often overlooked, and Soviet literature is often conflated with Russian literature. (See Kathryn Schild, “Between Moscow and Baku: National Literatures at the 1934 Congress of Writers,” PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2010.) This is especially true when it comes to western scholars’ analyses of the 1934 Writers’ Congress and the development of socialist realism as a doctrine, which have largely ignored the dialogue between those representing the “national” literatures and cultures and those representing the Party-State or Russian literature. Notable exceptions include Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter, foreword by Léon Robel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992) and Evgeny Dobrenko, “Naideno v perevode: rozhdenie sovetskoi mnogonatsional’noi literatury iz smerti avtora,” *Nepirkosnovennyi zapas* 78, no. 4 (2011), [http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2011/4/do24-pr.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2011/4/do24-pr.html).
impressions of visiting “outsiders” became increasingly devalued, that is, those who visited the republic learned to sublimate their own voices and simulate those of local “insiders.”

By 1935, when Platonov wrote Dzhan, the mantle of representational authority for Turkmenistan belonged to those cultural producers willing to depict the Central Asian republic as a transformed, Sovietized landscape and to offer, when possible, a “native” view on the space and its component places. Thanks in large part to a series of initiatives the Stalinist regime made in the mid-1930s to promote national cultural figures, bring them into the Soviet center, and, when necessary, translate their work into Russian, a high percentage of those producing Russian-language texts about Soviet Central Asia were, themselves, “national” figures working with translators. Abolqäsem Lahūtī (1887–1957) and Dzhambul Dzhabaev (1846–1945) became the most visible Central Asian cultural representatives on the All-Union stage, but scores of other figures were likewise promoted as worthy representatives. The Turkmen artist-functionary who served most prominently as a representative of the TSSR in the Soviet center at the time was undoubtedly Oraz Tash-Nazarov. He was chosen to speak on behalf of Turkmenistan at the First

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39 In developing my conception of “insiders” and “outsiders,” I drew on Fadwa El Guindi, Visual Anthropology: Essential Method and Theory (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004); Robert K. Merton, “Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge,” American Journal of Sociology 78, no. 1: Varieties of Political Expression in Sociology (1972): 9–47. My conception of “insider” is structural and depends on the ascribed status of being a “native” to Central Asia, rather than the achieved status of being an expert on the region. In this I diverge from Guindi, who has argued that “[t]here is a native within everybody, including the observer, and a potential observer in every native. It is the nature of one’s relation to the world that makes the real difference—a relation of observation, analysis, and discovery versus a relation of living and experience.” (El Guindi, Visual Anthropology, 191.)

40 Abolqäsem Lahūtī emigrated to the Soviet Union from Iran, and his given name, in Persian, was sometimes transliterated as Abul’gasem (and abbreviated as G.) and sometimes transliterated as Abul’kasim. His last name, in turn, was Russified as Lakhuti. On Lahūtī, see Lisa Yountchi, “Between Russia and Iran: Soviet Tajik Literature and Identity, 1920–1991” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2011), ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing (UMI Number 3456629); M. I. Zand, “Abul’kasim Lahuti,” in Ocherk istorii Tadzhikskoi sovetskoi literatury, ed. I. S. Braginskii (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1964), 274–336. For recent discussions of Dzhambul, see Dobrenko, “Naideno v perevode”; Konstantin Bogdanov, Rikkardo Nikolozi, and Iurii Murashov, eds., Dzhambul Dzhabaev: Prikhuchenia kazakhskogo akyna v sovetskoj strane: Stat’i i materialy (Moscow: NLO, 2013).
All-Union Writers’ Congress in August 1934, and his long poem *Batrak (The Day Laborer)* became one of the first works of Soviet Turkmen literature to be translated and published in Russian in a separate edition when it appeared in 1934.⁴¹ Those cultural producers who were not themselves “insiders,” however, often proved adept at simulating “native” voices.

In this dissertation, I touch only in passing on the work of Tash-Nazarov and other Central Asians who were promoted in translation in the mid-1930s and afterwards. Similarly, I devote relatively little attention to the “insider” depictions of Sovietized Turkmenistan that became ubiquitous in the mid-1930s in the work of both natives of and visitors to the republic, though I do analyze a few such works in Chapter Three. My focus instead is on the rise of this “insider iconography” and on how its limits were both perceived and helped set by Platonov, who tested these conventions in 1934 and 1935 when he composed *Dzhan* and the rest of his so-called “Turkmenia cycle.” As a whole, I am striving to show how the space of Turkmenia was gradually transformed into Soviet landscapes and places in Russian-language literature and film in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as how the rise of high Stalinism affected the production of texts about the region, redirecting responsibility for its representation to “insider” iconographers and those willing to pose as such.

**IV. Textual and Authorial Focus**

This study is not designed to provide a fully comprehensive overview of all the texts that depicted Turkestan and Turkmenistan in the 1920s and 1930s. Rather, it offers a set of readings of texts that I consider paradigmatic, thought provoking, or ripe for reassessment. My case studies have been chosen primarily because of their subject matter (i.e., their focus on Turkestan

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generally or Turkmenistan specifically), but I have also selected on the basis of what given texts can illustrate about the production of official Soviet cultural products related to the TSSR.

The first of these variables is rather self-explanatory, but it should be noted that I analyze only Russian-language literature (including non-fictional works and translations from Turkmen into Russian) and Russian-language documentary films. I am not working with texts in Turkmen or any other local languages, nor do I analyze works in other media. This frame reflects my focus on the cultural construction of Turkmenistan by the Russian center, as well as my interest in exploring how various generic conventions, including the inherently visual genre of documentary film, were employed to map Turkmenia.

The second variable is more subjective. Some of the writers and filmmakers I discuss, such as the Eurasianists, Viktor Shklovsky, Dziga Vertov, and Platonov, have been canonized both in Russia and abroad. In assessing their work in this context, I hope not only to connect it to the larger story of how Central Asia was depicted in the 1920s and 1930s, but also to shed new light on the “mode of originality” that has made them canonical.42 Other texts I have chosen to analyze, such as Nikolai Tikhonov’s poem cycle Iurga, were produced by “classic”—and not artistically uninteresting—Soviet artists who have since fallen out of fashion, but deserve reassessment because of the influence they had on the representation of Turkmenistan. Still other texts, such as Skosyrev’s novella Oazis (Oasis), were produced by more “unreadable” Soviet cultural producers, to use Katerina Clark’s terms.43 Including these “unreadable” writers along with the more “readable” ones is important, in my estimation, for both types of producers were


promoted within official Soviet culture, and the two groups collaborated directly on projects about Turkmenistan.

As the preceding suggests, this study includes readings of a wide range of texts and discusses a number of different cultural producers. Certain authors and filmmakers, however, receive more attention than others. In particular, the filmmaker Vertov and the writers Tikhonov and Platonov are central figures. I focus on these men not because they were the only—or even the most important—Soviet cultural producers to engage with Central Asia and bring the region to the attention of the Union as a whole. Skosyrev, Maksim Gorky, Petr Pavlenko, Grigori Sannikov, and Vladimir Lugovskoi, all of whom are discussed in passing, also did a great deal, along with many others, to make the Soviet Central Asian republics more visible in Soviet culture. Rather, I track Vertov, Tikhonov, and Platonov over time because each of them adapted his pre-existing interest in the Soviet “East” to the new circumstances of cultural production in the 1930s and responded—in his own, telling way—to the rising demand for “insider iconography.”

V. From Outsider Explorers to Insider Iconographers

This study opens with a discussion of texts by “outsiders” who positioned Turkmenia as a space worthy of exploration between 1921 and 1927. First, I examine two essay collections by the Eurasianists. The non-fictional Eurasianist writings, grounded in the discipline of geosophy and the notion of mestorazvitie, or topogenesis, approach Turkmenia as part of the shared geographic space of Eurasia, which the Eurasianists suggest is ripe for celebration and investigation. Next I turn to Vertov’s Shestaia chast’ mira. This film, one of the first to depict Turkmenistan for all-Union audiences, is rooted in a Marxist-Leninist reading of history and the notion that the new Soviet state is particularly well suited to taking the first step in what would
soon be a worldwide Revolution. Thus historical factors, not geographical factors, are seen as determinant. The last section of Chapter One analyzes two literary works by the poet Tikhonov, a “fellow traveler” who passed through Turkmenistan in the mid-1920s and was one of the first to describe the newly delimited republic in Russian literature. Despite the differences in the approaches of the Eurasianists, Vertov, and Tikhonov, I argue, all of these men envisioned Turkmenia as an undelimited space within a larger landmass that was worthy of further exploration.

In Chapter Two, I explore how “outsider” writers and filmmakers were inscribed into the Soviet project of building socialism in Turkestan during the First Five-Year Plan. First, I turn my attention to two texts about the construction of the 1,400-kilometer-long Turksib railway, the flagship construction project for Central Asia in the First-Five-Year-Plan era: Viktor Turin’s film *Turksib* (1929) and Viktor Shklovsky’s related children’s book *Turksi* (1930). In my analysis of these works, I discuss how the two texts position their authors as facilitators of modernization and as mediators between the Soviet periphery and the center. Next, I discuss the first literary “shock brigade” sent to Central Asia, in 1930, and analyze the contributions made by Tikhonov and his fellow Serapion Brother Vsevolod Ivanov to the 1932 almanac *Turkmenistan vesnoi* (*Turkmenistan in the Spring*). I suggest that Tikhonov adapted to his new roles as an official representative of Soviet Russian literature and a witness to socialist construction with special ease, while Ivanov displayed deep ambivalence about taking on new, more institutionalized responsibilities vis-à-vis the Soviet Central Asian periphery.

Chapter Three takes up the shift in official Soviet poetics toward “insider iconographers” and the changing practices of writers and filmmakers visiting Turkestan during the Second Five-Year Plan. First, I discuss Vertov’s 1934 film *Tri pesni o Lenine* (*Three Songs about Lenin*),
which I claim is paradigmatic for the turn toward native voices that characterized official Soviet culture in 1933 and 1934. Next, I describe the work of the national commissions that were set up in Moscow in advance of the first All-Union Writers’ Congress in 1934. These commissions, I argue, helped establish new conventions for the representation of space in Turkestan, pushing writers and other artists to show the region’s constituent republics as landscapes mastered by the local populations. I then analyze the almanac one of these commissions produced, *Aiding-Giunler: Al’manakh k desiatiletiiu Turkmenistana, 1924–1934* (*Aiding-Giunler: The Almanac for the Tenth Anniversary of Turkmenistan, 1924–1934*), arguing that the volume bears traces of the moves toward “native voices” and an iconography that equates Turkmenistan with the concept of a transformed, flourishing desert.

The dissertation’s final chapter examines “insider iconography” from a different perspective. Instead of focusing on texts that illustrate the paradigm in its purest form, I look at a set of literary works that attempted to accommodate it, but ultimately refracted it. Specifically, I read Platonov’s “Turkmenia cycle” as a critique of the kind of landscape production that was being practiced by the national commission for Turkmenistan and other cultural producers in the mid-1930s. Along with Platonov’s letters and journal entries from the period, this cycle, I argue, suggests that cultural producers operating in the Soviet Union were well aware of the conventions that were developing for the representation of Turkmenistan. At the same time, I maintain, the cycle represents a unique artistic achievement, one that not only encapsulates and reflects on the cultural trends that were dominant when it was produced, but also transcends its historical moment, escaping the confines of “insider iconography.”
Chapter One

Outsiders as Explorers (1921–1927)

I. Introduction

With the Revolution, the end of World War I, and the Civil War came the collapse and “territorial dismemberment” of the Russian Empire: Poland, Ukraine, Finland, and Russia’s other Baltic territories gained political independence with the Treaty of Brest-Livotsk, while much of Ukraine and Belarus were lost to Poland in 1921. Although there was active anti-Bolshevik resistance throughout Central Asia in the Civil War period, including battles with local militia groups called basmachi (from the Turkic word basma, or “assault”), Transcaspia remained a part of the larger whole of the former Russian Empire. It was integrated first into the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR), in 1918, and then into the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (TSSR), in 1924. For most of the 1920s, however, the space that had once been Transcaspia was rarely represented in Russian-language cultural products. When it did appear, it was usually depicted by outsiders looking into the territory, through very particular geographical lenses.

This chapter examines a series of renderings of Turkmenia that were produced by such “outsiders” in the wake of the Russian Empire’s collapse and in the first years of the TSSR’s existence. These stagings of Turkmenia are each motivated by specific fantasies connected with the space of the former Russian Empire. The first representations I examine, those created in the

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45 One of the main challenges to Soviet control during the Civil War was the Trans-Caspian Province Government. With the help of the British mission in Iran and British Army units, it repelled the Bolsheviks until 1920, when the Province Government collapsed. (Rafis Abazov, The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008], map 35 [unpaginated].)

46 Ibid., maps 35–38 (unpaginated).
early essays of the classical Eurasianists, view Transcaspia through the lenses of exile and environmentalism, as a part of the larger Eurasian continent.47 The next geographical projection I examine, the one in Vertov’s documentary film Shestaia chast’ mira, elides the republican distinction between Turkmenistan and the rest of the Soviet Union, approaching the whole state through the prism of an analysis of Bolshevik resource distribution. The last depictions, found in two poems and a short story by Tikhonov, present Turkmenistan as a part of the larger Soviet East, a realm fit for adventure. By reading these generically diverse works against one another, I will draw attention to the problem of how these outsider observers mediated their audience’s relationship to the little-known space of Turkmenia and attempted to package it within the larger landscapes of Eurasia, a Bolshevik state, and the Soviet East.

II. A “Scientific” View from Exile: The Classical Eurasianists

Given that this project investigates writers and filmmakers who gave Soviet Turkmenia a cultural identity in the 1920s and 1930s, it might seem counter-intuitive to begin the narrative with a discussion of the émigré Eurasianists. After all, they operated almost entirely outside of the Soviet Union and their ideological writings were, at least before the split of the movement into two factions in 1928–1929, anti-Bolshevist. The Eurasianists offer a fruitful starting point, however, for two main reasons. First, as I noted in my introduction, the Eurasianist collections that appeared in 1921 and 1922 were among the first texts in Russian intellectual history to systematically consider “Asia” a positive and constitutive element of Russian identity. Landmarks in the reorientation of Russia toward Asia in the period, they have influenced thinking about the relationship between Russia and Central Asia for nearly a century.48 Second,

47 Bassin, “Nationhood, Natural Region, Mestorazvitie,” 49.

48 Nikolai Trubetskoi’s treatise Evropa i chelovechestvo (Europe and Mankind, 1920) was well known in Soviet Russia, and the Eurasianists’ writings may have directly affected Soviet thinking about Eurasia in the 1920s.
these texts stand as one of the first significant cultural projects to reckon with the disintegration of the Russian Empire by offering a new geographical reading of its constituent territories, including Turkmenia, and their relationship to one another.

The history of the classical Eurasianist movement has been well documented in recent years, especially by Sergei Glebov. In my discussion of the Eurasians’ founding documents, the collections *Iskhod k vostoku. Predchuvstviia i sversheniia. Utverzhdenie evrazitsev* (Exit to the East: Forebodings and Events: An Affirmation of the Eurasians, 1921) and *Na putiakh. Utverzhdenie evrazitsev* (On the Way: An Affirmation of the Eurasians, 1922), I will not reassess how the thinkers interacted with one another or how they arrived at their views. Instead, I will...
focus on the scale of the Eurasianist landscape that they created.\textsuperscript{51} I will argue that while they were overtly preoccupied with establishing “scientifically” that Eurasia was a distinct space, they were likewise fixated on occluding the distinctions between territories within Eurasia and with incorporating all of them—including Transcaspia—into their vision of the continent as a whole, territorially coherent, sacralized space.

The most central element of the Eurasian ideology in these two collections, its “burden of thought,” in Riasanovsky’s terms, was the idea that “Eurasia” existed and was defined by shared natural geographical features, linguistic similarities, and experience in a land-locked environment.\textsuperscript{52} The economists, geographers, linguists, anthropologists, historians, and religious thinkers associated with classical Eurasianism each had his own particular point of view: Petr Savitskii was oriented toward the continent’s vegetation and climate, Nikolai Trubetskoii and Roman Jakobson toward its ethnographic and linguistic specificities, and Petr Suvchinskii toward its spiritual history. They all, however, shared the same primary goal: to prove that Eurasia could be charted in absolute terms as a distinct continent and mapped as a unique space.

The corollary to the argument that Eurasia existed was the idea that the boundaries between it and other continents were meaningful. In the closely related theories of Geopolitik in Weimar Germany, the “boundary” was conceived of as a “palpable and independent life form” and the “skin” of the state organism, rather than as a “line drawn in space by human beings and

\textsuperscript{51} I am well aware that in treating Eurasianist thought as a unified discourse defined by its published materials from 1921 and 1922, I run the risk of oversimplifying the different strains of Eurasianist thought. But such a move is justified, I would argue, because despite all the variations in the different Eurasianist writings and all the personal feuds among the individual Eurasianists at different moments, their program did have cohesiveness on the problem of territory and its constitutive properties.

\textsuperscript{52} Riasanovsky, “Emergence of Eurasianism,” 57.
maintained by legal agreements.” The Eurasianists, too, emphasized the importance of boundaries, but for a slightly different reason: because they were thought to divide the world’s cultures from one another and thus allow the system to function as a whole. Trubetskoi expressed this point directly in his 1921 essay “Ob istinnom i lozhnom natsionalizme” (“On True and False Nationalism”), where he wrote:

Итак, культура должна быть для каждого народа другая. В своей национальной культуре каждый народ должен ярко выявить всю свою индивидуальность, при том так, чтобы все элементы этой культуры гармонировали друг с другом, будучи окрашены в один общий национальный тон.

Thus the culture of each nation should be unique. Each nation should manifest all its individuality in its culture, and in such a way that all of its elements, which are imbued with the same national coloration, are in harmonious relation.

Here, Trubetskoi echoed his own analogy from Evropa i chelovechestvo (Europe and Mankind, 1920), in which he claimed that the world’s cultures can be envisioned as a kind of rainbow, where each major culture is represented by a color and no “natural” hierarchy among these colors and cultures exists. Implicit in both his texts was the argument that stable boundaries

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55 Nikolai S. Trubetskoi, “On True and False Nationalism,” in Exodus to the East, 74. I have modified the original translation slightly.

separated the “blues” from the “reds” and so on, allowing each to have its own meaning in relation to the others and for harmony to exist within and between the national cultures.\textsuperscript{57}

One of these boundaries was of particular importance to Trubetskoj and the other Eurasianists: the boundary between Romano-Germanic culture (“Europe”) and Eurasian culture. Not only did the Eurasianists see Europe as being a civilization on the wane, much as Oswald Spengler had in the first volume of Der Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of the West, 1918, revised 1922); they also viewed Europe as separated from its Eastern neighbors by a fixed and impermeable boundary.\textsuperscript{58} The opposition between the Romano-Germans and all the other peoples of the world is the central argument of Trubetskoj’s Evropa i chelovechestvo, but we see it in the Eurasianists’ first collections as well, especially in the collection Na putiakh. In the essay “Dva mira” (“Two Worlds”), Petr Savitskii argues that the arrival of the Russian Revolution marked “Russia’s withdrawal from the framework of European existence” («выпадение России из рамок европейского бытия»).\textsuperscript{59} In the essay “Vechnyi ustoi” (“Eternal Foundation”), Suvchinskii makes a similar claim, suggesting that, with the Revolution, a fissure opened up between Eurasian and European experience. In Russia, he argues, “fresh and unspent energy” («свежие, неизношенные силы») appeared after the Revolution, a spirit in which the development and cultivation of new ideals and methods of artistic creativity would be possible.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{57} With their discussion of boundaries the Eurasianists encouraged the essentialization of ethnic groups that Frederik Barth would help undo with his 1969 essay collection Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference. This text helped shift academic analysis away from the “cultural stuff” enclosed within ethnic groups by defining them as entities dependent on the maintenance of borders. (Fredrik Barth, “Introduction,” Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference [Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1998], 14.)


\textsuperscript{59} P. N. Savitskii, “Dva mira,” in Na putiakh, 14.

\textsuperscript{60} Petr Suvchinskii, “Vechnyi ustoi,” in Na putiakh, 114.
The Eurasianists’ fixation on Eurasia as a delimited region of habitation was bound up with their argument that geography determines the development of its constituent cultures. In their focus on mestorazvitie, or “topogenesis,” the Eurasianists employed a geographical determinism not unlike that used in the same period by Frederick Jackson Turner, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Rudolf Kjellén, Freidrich Ratzel, and others associated with the development of geopolitics.\(^1\) This approach was undoubtedly connected to traditional Romantic ideas that there was something concrete (be it soil, blood, or language) that made the constitution of a nation natural and inevitable. It is critically important, however, that, unlike the Slavophiles or other Romantic nationalists, the Eurasianists emphasized that the constitutive factor to identity was not shared ethnicity or shared language, but shared space.\(^2\) As Petr Savitskii frames it in his essay “Migratsiia kul’tury” (“The Migration of Culture”), which was published in Iskhod k vostoku:

В этой концепции образы географии и этнографии культуры суть в то же время носители конкретного содержания последней: религии и философии, поэзии и искусства, государственности и хозяйства, техники и быта.\(^3\)

According to this conception, images of geography and cultural ethnography are at the same time the essential bearers of specific cultural content: of religion and

\(^1\) For a broader discussion of contemporary geopolitical thought outside of the Soviet context, see Murphy, The Heroic Earth.

\(^2\) Boris Gasparov frames the contrast between the Romantic nationalism of the young Slavophiles and the nationalism of Eurasianism in the following terms. If the “young Slavophiles” of the 1860s–1880s, including Nikolai Danilevskii and Nikolai Strakhov, had departed from Aksakov and Khomiakov’s idea of Russia’s “special path” toward a notion of cultural-historical morphology in which Slavic and Romano-Germanic worlds were seen as different cultural types, the Eurasianists created a fundamentally different conception of the opposition between Russia and the Romano-Germanic world. This new conception “was not based on kinship,” Gasparov writes, “but rather on the character of a geographic region of habitation.” (Boris Gasparov, “Eurasian Roots of Phonological Theory: Baudouin de Courtenay in Kazan,” in Catherine Evtuhov, Boris Gasparov, Alexander Ospovat, Mark von Hagen, eds., Kazan, Moscow, St. Petersburg: Multiple Faces of the Russian Empire [Moscow: O.G.I., 1997], 53.)

\(^3\) P. N. Savitskii, “Migratsiia kul’tury,” in Shirokov, Iskhod k vostoku, 135.
philosophy, poetry and art, statehood and the economy, technology and everyday ways of life.\textsuperscript{64}

Savitskii’s specific argument in this essay is that culture is migrating toward the colder regions of the world and that Russia is destined to be a cultural leader for this reason. But the larger point for Savitskii and his colleagues is that geography bears content—or, in the terms I laid out in my introduction, that \textit{space} naturally makes \textit{place}, since shared territory generates the kind of cultural associations with which locations must be endowed to be considered \textit{places}. Remote Russian towns like Sarov and Diveev, according to Georgii Florovskii, created the “cultural creativity” of Russian Orthodoxy, just as, in Trubetskoi’s assessment, the steppes created the “exuberant daring prized by the Russian people.” Similarly, the “continental nature” of Russia-Eurasia, in Savitskii’s analysis, created an economic future distinct from that found in maritime empires like the British.\textsuperscript{65}

This focus on Eurasia as a delimited, content-generating \textit{space} is so central in Eurasianist thought that it not only appears in the content of the arguments, but also in the spatial metaphors that riddle the texts, from the titles of their first publications (\textit{Evropa i chelovechestvo, Iskhod k vostoku, Na putiakh}) onwards. In “Povorot k vostoku” (“A Turn to the East,” 1921), Savitskii compares cultural progress to the goods of a traveling merchant, suggesting that it is brought by the nomadic “Goddess of Culture” («богиня Культуры»), who moves her “tent” («палатка») from place to place, allowing different areas to flourish at different moments in time.\textsuperscript{66} In an

\textsuperscript{64} Petr N. Savitskii, “The Migration of Culture,” in Savitskii et al., \textit{Exodus to the East}, 49. I have modified the original translation.


essay in the same collection, Florovskii affirms that: “The land of the fathers,’ the land of tradition and succession, will be replaced by ‘the land of the children, undiscovered, in the faraway sea’” («Страну отцов», страну преданий и преемств сменит “страна детей, не открытая, в дальнем море»). In *Na putiakh*, Savitskii dubs Moscow and Petersburg the “provinces” («провинция») in relationship to the “capitals” («столицы») of Paris and London, while Suvchinskii predicts in the future men will work together not on their own separate Towers of Babylon, but jointly on a “domed cathedral, which would wing above the earth and cover the earth with its living burning vault, bring the sky closer to the earth, making the firmament heavenly” («купольный храм, который бы крыли над землею и своим живым и горящим сводом накрывал бы землю, и р и б л и ж а л бы небо к земле, делая тверд небесную»).

Russia, he adds, will be “one of the pillars of affirmation and abutment of this arch” («одним из столпов утверждения и устоя этого свода»).

As all of this suggests, “progress” in the early work of the classical Eurasianists was not merely a linear, temporal phenomenon, as it was in much nineteenth-century thought. Rather, it

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67 Florovskii, “O narodakh ne-istoricheskikh (strana ottsov i strana detei),” in Shirokov, *Iskhod k vostoku*, 159; Florovskii, “About Non-Historical Peoples (The Land of the Fathers and the Land of the Children”), in Savitskii et al., *Exodus to the East*, 62. Elsewhere, he compares cataclysms in world history to tears in the surface of the earth, writing: “all the cracks have opened up, the protoplastic layers are thrust to the surface, the depths have been bared…We have perceived the splitting into two of the Russian national culture” (разверзлись все трещины и щели, первозданные породы вынесены на поверхность, глубины обнажились… Мы ощутили раздвоенность русской национальной стихии»). (Georgii Florovskii, “Razryvy i sviazi,” in Shirokov, *Iskhod k vostoku*, 69; Georgii V. Florovskii, “Breaks and Connections,” in Savitskii et al., *Exodus to the East*, 14, ellipsis in original.)


69 Suvchinskii, “Vechnyi ustoi,” in *Na putiakh*, 133, emphasis in original. Suvchinskii repeatedly invokes ideas about architecture in his mystical essays. In “Epokha very” (“Age of Faith”), for instance, he notes that sooner or later architects will abandon imitation of the past and embark on “new forms of temples and monuments, because now there is something to pray for, something for which to erect monuments, something to assert.” (Petr Suvchinskii, “Age of Faith,” in Savitskii et al., *Exodus to the East*, 25.) He then suggests that in the future, “relations for the newly enlightened people in the coming age shall be determined not by impoverished collectivist theories, but by the Russian experience. They shall be developed not on the vapid basis of leveling communism, but on the mighty formulation of the human vault, in which every individual is self-asserted, and by that the whole is asserted and spiritually elevated to the heights, like a cupola spread out above us’” (ibid., 29).
was spatialized: advancements migrated toward Eurasia, lands replaced one another, human achievements took three-dimensional, arching forms. In his essay “The Ideological Principles of Prague School Phonology,” Boris Gasparov argues that Trubetskoi’s favorite metaphor is “the image of an unbroken and continuous line—not the straight line of ‘progress’, but rather a stream, smoothly changing its configuration to conform to ever new conditions but never interrupting its flow.” Gasparov then contrasts this with Jakobson’s favorite spatial metaphor, the “image of superpositions simultaneously existing in different states—the moment of departure from the stream rather than immersion in it.”70 I would suggest, however, that Trubetskoi and Jakobson were not alone in rejecting the straight line of progress and looking for more three-dimensional spatial models of historical change. Such a move was common for the early Eurasianists, who considered territory their chief ordering principle.

If, as I have suggested, establishing Eurasia as a delimited space was so important to the Eurasianists that it governed their language and metaphors, we might still ask: where are the constituent territories of Eurasia in their vision? And, in particular, where is Turkmenia? The simple answer is that neither Turkmenia nor any other “Asian” regions are in view as distinct, delimited spaces or places in the early Eurasianist essays. Sergei Glebov has argued that, despite the Eurasianists’ alignment with the colonized against the colonizers, Asia and the Asian border were significantly less important to them than Europe and the European border. The Eurasianists, he writes, “remained overall remarkably little interested in the history, languages, or cultures of ‘Eurasians.’”71 Certainly this appears to be the case in their first collections. In Iskhod k vostoku, “Europe” is mentioned nearly twice as often as “Asia” and nearly three times as often as


"Eurasia." This is not to say that Transcaspia and the rest of Turkestan are entirely absent, but rather that they are subsumed in the broader concept of "Eurasia" as a whole. It is in this vein that Savitskii discusses the average temperature and subtropical climate of Turkestan in "Migratsiia kul’tury" ("The Migration of Culture") and emphasizes that Russia existed as an "Orthodox-Moslem, Orthodox-Buddhist country" («православно-мусульманской, православно-буддистской страной») in "Povorot k vostoku" ("A Turn to the East"). In later Eurasianist writings, Turkestan received more attention. Its lowland was represented—along with the East European and the West Siberian lowlands—as one of three plains that cohered to form the geographical “torso” (tors) of Russia-Eurasia, while its deserts were conceived as a natural-geographical latitudinal zone distinct from the tundra, forest-zone, and steppes to the north of the deserts. In the first essays of the Eurasianists, however, Turkestan and its constituent region of Transcaspia appeared only in passing, as a buttress to the Russian “column” in the worldwide cupola. The “upper level” of Eurasian spatial unity, to use Nikolai Trubetskoi’s terms, was prioritized over the “lower level” of Transcaspia’s spatial differentiation.

Marlène Laruelle has concluded from the Eurasianists’ representations of “Eastern” territories that they were not ultimately aiming for an “exodus to the East,” but for a way of

72 According to the index created for the English-language edition of Exodus to the East, “Europe” is mentioned 28 times in the Eurasianists’ essays, while “Asia” appears 14 times and “Eurasia” just 10 times. “Turkestan” garners five references, “Semirech’e” four. (Savitskii et al., Exodus to the East, 175–185.)

73 Savitskii, “Povorot k Vostoku,” in Shirokov, Iskhod k vostoku, 54; Savitskii, “A Turn to the East,” in Savitskii et al., Exodus to the East, 5.


75 N. S. Trubetskoi, “K probleme russkogo samopoznaniia,” in Istoriiia, Kul’tura, Iazyk (Moscow: Izdatel’skaia gruppa rogress-Univers, 1995), 105–210. I here echo Bassin, who has argued that the “unrelenting prioritization of the upper, pan-Eurasian level must be understood in terms of the post-revolutionary context in which it was formulated.” (Bassin, “Nationhood, Natural Region, Mestorazvitie,” 52.)
rejecting the West and preserving the empire. In her account, the émigrés, powerless and unable to act in exile, “vented their hopes in an extremely complex discourse of Russian messianic identity. For the Russian exiles as a whole and for Eurasianism in particular, writing served as a substitute for action; words replaced deeds.”

Glebov, too, has argued that the reification of Eurasia is an outgrowth of the problem of exile, suggesting that the émigré Eurasianists were fixated on describing, imagining, and reinventing their Russian and Ukrainian homelands precisely because they were located outside of them and living full time in (depending on the year and the given Eurasianist) Sofia, Prague, Vienna, Paris, or London. Mark Bassin has given more weight to the post-World-War-I discourses of national self-determination and decolonization. Indeed, according to Bassin, Trubetskoi’s choice to argue for the continued integration of Russian territories into a continued geopolitical unity can only be explained in these terms. For, in itself, the Eurasianist doctrines are, as Bassin puts it, “eccentric” and “ultimately self-defeating,” restricting the Russian element and effectively undermining its dominant position.

Still, even he considers the Eurasianists’ exile to have been a factor in the geographical worldview that they devised.

While I do not take issue with these accounts of the relationship between the Eurasianists’ position in exile and their imaginative reconstitution of the Russian Empire, I would like to emphasize a slightly different point about Iskhod k Vostoku and Na putiakh. The

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76 Laurelle, Russian Eurasianism, 25.

77 Glebov, “Challenge of the Modern,” 14–15. David Chioni Moore has made a similar suggestion about Trubetskoi’s article “On Racism,” arguing that one “senses clearly that, through his treatment of the Jewish question, one is looking into Trubetzkoy’s own exiled life: into his alternating sense of pride and shame at being Russian, his difference from the majority of the society he lives in, his sense of possible assimilation as the years wear on, and his fears for the identity of the second exile generation.” (David Chioni Moore, “Colonialism, Eurasianism, Orientalism: N. S. Trubetzkoy’s Russian Vision,” Review of N. S. Trubetskoy, The Legacy of Genghis Khan and Other Essays on Russia’s Identity, SEEJ 41, no. 2 [1997]: 326.)

Eurasianists, in my reading, not only attempted to convince their audience that the Russian territories deserve continued integration, something they, facing the “identity crisis” triggered by the disintegration of the Empire, desperately desired while in exile. They did so through a discourse that presented itself as scientific, but was inextricably connected to a small-scale map of Eurasia in which individual regions like Transcaspia and Turkestan were undistinguished within the whole.

By suggesting that the Eurasia was knowable and provable with the disciplines of linguistics, anthropology, geography, and history, the Eurasianists constructed a vision of a Eurasia that was supposedly “real,” given, and objective. Their environmentalist point of view made “its ultimate reference back to the objective natural-geographical conditions of a pre-anthropological landscape,” as Bassin has argued, and this allowed the Eurasianists to lay claim to “‘scientific’ veracity.” Their picture of the continent, however, was constructed and mediated, not only by their disciplines, but also by their point of view as exile-outsiders with attachment to the Russian Empire and a belief in its future prospects. Although their central goal was to prove that Eurasia was an absolute space, they ultimately created a landscape of an indivisible Eurasia, one in which individual territories carry less eschatological and philosophical value than the continent as a singular entity.

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79 In using the phrase “identity crisis” in this context, I draw on the work of Laruelle, who argues that the émigré Eurasianists, shocked by the swift disappearance of the tsarist Empire, comforted themselves with the idea that the Russian Empire was natural and could be reconstituted quickly. (Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism, 194–5.)

80 Bassin, “Nationhood, Natural Region, Mestorazvitie,” 50.

81 Laruelle, too, discusses the eschatological and philosophical value of territory for the Eurasianists, but she focuses on the idea of territory generally, rather than on the specific power of Eurasian territory. (Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism, 33.) It seems, however, that only the whole of Eurasian territory carries real weight for the Eurasianists, and it is exactly this whole that is the cornerstone of their other theories, including that of mestorazvitie.
In this sense, the Eurasianists’ approach to the former territories of the Russian empire aligns with the approach to Christian lands that Yuri Lotman identified in many medieval Russian texts. In the medieval period, Lotman argued, every journey through space was a movement along the vertical scale of religious and moral value, since Christian territories were righteous and non-Christian lands were sinful. Whether or not one finds Lotman’s thesis overly simplistic for the medieval period, his assessment of how medieval Russians saw space dualistically is reminiscent of how the Eurasianists considered lands inside the former Russian empire sacred and worthy of being “in the picture,” while lands outside of it were excluded from analysis.

To say that there is a connection between the spatial thinking of the Eurasianists in *Iskhod k vostoku* and *Na putiakh* and that of medieval Russians as interpreted by Lotman is not to discount the particular modern and post-Kantian quality of Eurasianist thought. Certainly we see in Eurasianist writings the marks of post-Hegelian, Marxist, and neo-Kantian philosophy. Part of the Eurasianist project, it seems, is to push past the detached universal subjectivity offered by Kant and towards a more grounded, embodied, and territorialized conception of subjectivity within nature. Just as Bakhtin’s work on language warns us that no speaker can ever communicate without a listener, Savitskii’s work on *mestorazvitie* emphasizes that no subject can develop outside of a particular environment. The connection between Lotman’s thesis and Eurasianist thought is productive, however, for it helps us recognize that the landscape created by the Eurasianists was oriented not only around the border between Europe and Eurasia, but also around the border between what was sacralized (and assured of a bright future) and what

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was not. Despite its pretenses of scientific objectivity, it did not encourage its viewer to scrutinize Eurasia as a continent that contained delimited spaces, places, climates, and distinct regions of habitation. Rather, it offered the viewer the emotional satisfaction of reveling in the vastness of the Eurasian panorama and projecting utopian fantasies of control upon it.

While the classical Eurasianists were among the first to express an attachment to the Central Asian territories and to introduce positive connotations for the region, then, the “scientific” picture that they created of Eurasia did not bring Turkmenia into clear view. Through the Eurasianists’ lenses of exile and environmentalism, it was simply a swath of land within a much larger landscape.

III. A “Documentary” View from the Soviet Center: Dziga Vertov’s Shestaia chast’ mira

December 29. Russia is beginning to take shape for the man on the street. A major propaganda film, A Sixth Part of the World, has been announced. On the street in the snow lie maps of the USSR, piled up there by street vendors who offer them for sale. [....] The map is almost as close to becoming the centre of a new Russian icon cult as Lenin’s portrait.

--Walter Benjamin, Moscow Diary (1926–1927)

I turn now to another geographical projection of the former territories of the Russian empire, Dziga Vertov’s Shestaia chast’ mira: Probeg Kino-Glaza po SSSR: Eksport i import

Gostorga SSSR (One Sixth of the World: A Kino-Eye Race around the USSR: Export and Import by the State Trading Organization of the USSR), which was released on December 31, 1926. It


84 The film was produced by Goskino (Moscow) and distributed by Sovkino. I have based my analysis on the print of the film that appears on the DVD Dziga Vertov, Šestaia čast’ mira/Odinnadcatyj (Edition Filmuseum 53, 2009).

should be noted from the first that *Shestaia chast’ mira* is not, nor was it ever intended to be, a film explicitly about Turkmenistan or Soviet Central Asia. Rather, it was commissioned by the State Trade Organization (Gostorg) to highlight Gostorg’s place in the Soviet and world economy. According to Vertov, he and his team were instructed “to present a marathon run along the chain of the Gostorg machinery” and to show how Gostorg sold the food produced by peasants and used the profit to buy machinery, helping peasants to produce more food in the process.85

Despite the fact that *Shestaia chast’ mira* is not explicitly about Turkmenia, I consider it worth reexamining in this context, first because it was one of the first films to show the region to broader Russian-speaking audiences, and second because it has not been examined critically as such.86 In the early Soviet period, film was considered a particularly useful tool for enlightening the East. In part this was because cinema was believed to have few “backward” historical patterns that needed to be discarded. But it was also because Lenin had famously declared that: “Of all the arts, film is the most important, and it will have particular significance in the East” («Из всех искусств самое важное кино, и особенное значение оно будет иметь на Востоке»).87 Nevertheless, it took until 1925 for a significant number of films to be made

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86 Michael Kunichika, Martin Stollery, Oksana Sarkisova, and Emma Widdis have drawn attention to the representation of nationalities in their respective treatments of the film as a Whitmanesque ode, a representative of imperialist modernist cinema, an example of early Soviet travel film, and as a landmark in the development of the construction of Soviet space in cinema. They have not, however, engaged with how the film represents Turkmenia as such. See Kunichika, “‘The Ecstasy of Breadth’”; Stollery, “Kino-Eye’s Global Vision”; Sarkisova, “Across One Sixth of the World”; Widdis, *Visions of a New Land*.

emphasizing the national diversity of the state and depicting regions outside of European Russia. Shestaia chast’ mira was not the only film to depict Turkestan in the mid-1920s. Others made in 1925 and 1926 included Musul’manka (The Muslim Woman, Proletkino), Klokochushushchii Vostok (The Seething East, Proletkino), and Minaret smerti (Minaret of Death, Sevzapkino). Still, as one of the first portrayals of Turkestan in a Soviet travel film set in the former colonies, Shestaia chast’ mira was of immediate significance. In my reading I argue that Vertov’s kino-probeg, or “cine-race,” through the region is marked by its orientation toward the Soviet center and toward the economy of the Soviet state as a whole. Vertov acts as a surveyor not only by creating catalogues with his intertitles, much as Walt Whitman did with his verses, but also by categorizing and organizing the territory of Turkestan on behalf of a larger organization.

Shestaia chast’ mira is centered on the argument—and it is an argument, as Jeremy Hicks has rightly noted in his discussion of Vertov’s documentary film style in the 1920s—that socialist trade is categorically different from trade within capitalist countries. While capitalist trade rests on exploitation of laborers generally and colonized “slaves” (рабы, intertitle 24 and 28) in particular, the film argues, socialist trade does not. It may be a modernizing force, Vertov

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89 The first two works were shot on location, while Minaret smerti was filmed entirely in Leningrad. (Shoshanna Keller, To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia [Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001], 100–101. Engaged with myths about the Kalon minaret in Bukhara, this last film drew on the fairy-tale tradition of One Thousand and One Nights, according to one contemporary critic. (Skachko, “Kino dlia vostoka,” 4.) Its extreme popularity in Uzbekistan, even though it exoticized the republic and did not include footage of the real Bukhara, may be linked to the fact that it was one of the first films to depict the Soviet East at all. (Bartenev, “Kino v Srednei Azii,” Kino-zhurnal A.R.K. 10 [1925]: 5.)


seems to claim, but it is not an imperial one. At the heart of this argument is the film’s stable antinomy between what happens in “the land of capital,” which is depicted (and maligned) in the first reel of the film, and in the expansive Soviet state, which is depicted (and extolled) in the remaining five reels of the film.

The capitalist-colonialist world is defined by a montage of footage from foreign feature and ethnographic films, along with the following intertitles:

ВИЖУ
ЗОЛОТАЯ ЦЕПОЧКА КАПИТАЛА
ФОКСТРОТ
МАШИНЫ
И ВЫ
ВИЖУ ВАС
И ВЫ
И ВЫ
И ВЫ
ВАС ВИЖУ
НА СЛУЖБЕ У КАПИТАЛА (INTERTITLES 1–11)

I SEE
THE GOLD CHAIN OF CAPITAL
THE FOXTROT
THE MACHINES
AND YOU
I SEE YOU
AND YOU
AND YOU
AND YOU
I SEE YOU

92 In drawing the distinction between a modernizing gaze and an imperial one, I again build on the work of such scholars as Khalid and Slezkine. (See Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization”; Slezkine, “Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Socialism.”)

93 Much of the footage of the “land of capitalists” was recycled. It apparently came from a variety of sources, including imported German industrial films and the raw material of the filmmaker Nikolai Lebedev, who protested the unsanctioned use of shots he had collected for a forthcoming film entitled Po Evrope (Through Europe). (Graham Roberts, Forward Soviet! History and Non-fiction Film in the USSR [London: I. B. Tauris, 1999], 46; Sarkisova, “Across One Sixth of the World,” 28.)

94 In my quotation of the intertitles, I follow my own transcriptions. The translations are also mine, though I have compared them to the list printed in Tsivian, ed., Lines of Resistance, 187–191.
IN THE SERVICE OF CAPITAL

The “you” in the opening sequence of the first reel includes female dancers contorting themselves, women being served in their own homes, men and women smoking in petit bourgeois domestic settings, blithely enjoying themselves even, the film demonstrates, while workers are being exploited. Unlike the inhabitants of the land of capital addressed in this first sequence, Vertov’s *kino-glaz*, or “cine-eye”—his term for the camera’s vision, which he believed could see deeper truths than the naked human eye—sees these exploited workers and colonized peoples. This point is made explicit in the next sequence, which reads:

ЕЩЕ МАШИНЫ
ЕЩЕ
И ЕЩЕ
А РАБОЧЕМУ ВСЕ ТАК ЖЕ
ВСЕ ТАК ЖЕ...
ТЯЖЕЛО
ВИЖУ
КОЛОНИИ
КАПИТАЛ
КОЛОНИИ
РАБЫ
КАПИТАЛ
РАБЫ
ИЗ НЕГРОВ
СЕБЕ НА ПОТЕХУ
„ШОКОЛАДНЫХ РЕБЯТ” (INTERTITLES 14–29) ⁹⁵

MORE MACHINES
MORE
AND MORE
BUT FOR THE WORKER IT IS THE SAME
EVERYTHING IS THE SAME…
HARD

⁹⁵ Sam Wooding’s Chocolate Kiddies, an American jazz troupe, spent three months in early 1926 touring the Soviet Union and “caused a minor sensation among Soviet fans.” (Stollery, *Alternative Empires*, 113.) Apparently, critical reception of the tour was divided; some viewers were enthusiastic, while others, including the journalist Mikhail Kol’tsov, “fulminated against the dancers’ blatant sexuality and concluded that jazz was an unwholesome import.” (S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union 1917–1991*, rev. ed. [New York: Limelight Editions, 1994], 56.) Kol’tsov’s review was originally published as M. E. Kol’tsov, “Negritianki s opazdaniem,” *Krasnaia gazeta*, April 3, 1926.
I see
colonies
capital
colonies
slaves
capital
the slaves
out of negroes
for the fun of it
"the chocolate kiddies"

The individuals who appear to be colonized include male laborers digging a ditch, women working with their children in the fields, and a single African woman carrying a load on her head (see fig. 1.3), who appears after the intertitle “hatred” («ненависть», intertitle 33).


Michael Kunichika has analyzed this opening sequence, drawing attention to its multiple spectatorial modes, including that of the *kino-glaz*, the bourgeoisie “who represent a mode of capitalist spectatorship affiliated with various forms of entertainment,” and the woman in Figure 1.3, whose gaze seems to challenge the colonizers. Of the last figure, Kunichika suggests that she:

participates in a chain of spectatorship that indicts the capitalist spectator from this gaze emerging from the colonies. Her perspective, in other words, is one in which the cine-eye might share, and she might also be understood to say “I see.” But what haunts the sequence, given all the many spectators at play in it, is the possibility that the subject of “I see” shifts: that is to say that “I see,” which would seem so firmly rooted in the cine-eye, could also have been uttered by an imperialist speaker surveying goods and entertaining spectacles.

Kunichika’s reading is productive not only for the conclusion he draws from it—that the sequence emphasizes Russia’s proverbial position as both colonizer and colonized and the contrast between its imperial past and socialist present—but also because it encourages us, in the tradition of feminist and post-colonial critique, to interrogate which lines of vision lead where.

From this perspective, one of the most striking features of the sequence about the “land of capital” is that no toponyms are “visible” to the viewer: the “land” is not delimited as a *space* or *place*, but merely as a concept. We might infer from various visual clues that this “land,” as Sarkisova suggests, encompasses Germany and Western Europe, its colonies, and the United States. But the specific territories, nations, and ethnic groups who make up the “land of capital” and its colonies remain unnamed and thus partially obscured: the bourgeoisie does not see its

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97 Ibid.

98 For a film critique that engages with both the “male” gaze and the “imperial” gaze, see E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

99 Sarkisova, “Across One Earth,” 28. At 7:37, a city shot shows a sign reading “HABIG HÜTE,” which suggests that the stock footage used for the scenes of “capital” originated in Germany.
colonies, the colonial subjects cannot gaze back at the bourgeoisie enslaving it (though they may try), we as audience members are unable to piece together the fragments with which we are presented. The “gold chain of capital” is so occluding and dehumanizing, apparently, that even the penetrating *kino-glaz* seems unable to procure the relevant information for the intertitles, to inform the audience of *where* exactly the bourgeoisie are enjoying their entertainment, *which* colonized peoples are shown laboring, or *who* exactly is exploiting them. It can only provide the concept of a dehumanizing and distorting system of exchange.

It is against this hazy vision of the “land of capital” that the Soviet “sixth of the world” is defined in the next five reels of the film. In these sections, both the *kino-glaz* (as represented by the intertitles) and the viewer of the film are granted more visual and verbal access to the locations involved in the system of exchange. Appearing as direct parallels of the footage, the intertitles address themselves to the citizens of the USSR, who are identified with a range of geographically (and ethnically) marked epithets:

ВЫ, КУПАЮЩИЕ ОВЕЦ В МОРСКОМ ПРИБОЕ
И ВЫ, КУПАЮЩИЕ ОВЕЦ В РУЧЬЕ
ВЫ
В АУЛАХ ДАГЕСТАНА
ВЫ
В СИБИРСКОЙ ТАЙГЕ
[...]
ВЫ
ВЫ
ТАТАРЫ
ВЫ
ВЫ
БУРЯТЫ
УЗБЕКИ
КАЛМЫКИ
ХАКАСЫ
ГОРЦЫ КАВКАЗА
ВЫ, КОМИ ИЗ ОБЛАСТИ КОМИ (INTERTITLES 38–63)
YOU, WHO BATHE YOUR SHEEP IN THE SURF OF THE SEA
AND YOU, WHO BATHE YOUR SHEEP IN A STREAM
YOU
IN THE VILLAGES OF DAGESTAN
YOU
IN THE SIBERIAN VIRGIN FOREST
[...]
YOU
YOU
TARTARS
YOU
YOU
BURIATS
UZBEKS
KALMYKS
KHAKKAS
HIGHLANDERS OF THE CAUCASUS
KOMI FROM THE REGION OF KOMI

Dagestan, Siberia, the Caucasus and their inhabitants are visible and nameable, according to the logic of the film, because they are bound together not by capitalism and colonialism, but by Gostorg, which helps citizens all over the Union exchange the country’s natural resources (grain, reindeer, sheep, wool, cotton, gas, oil) and acknowledge each region’s contribution.

Indeed, this Soviet network, Vertov suggests, functions less like the heavy and obstructive “gold chain of capital” and more like a “channel” («русло»), to quote the film’s final intertitles, perhaps one as transparent as the brook in which Soviet sheep are bathed. Vertov declared kino-glaz cinema to be at once a “Communist decoding of world relations” and the creation of “a visual bond between the workers of the whole world.”

This stream, Shestaia chast’ mira argues, achieves something similar, flowing throughout the wide swath of the Soviet Union, connecting it “from border to border.” In the language of the intertitles (each is followed

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100 John MacKay and Charles Musser, “Shestaia chast’ mira/La Sesta Parte del Mundo/A Sixth Part of the World,” in 23rd Pordenone Silent Film Festival Catalogue (Sacile, Italy: Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), 57.
by corresponding footage that Vertov and his Kinoglaz group acquired while traveling in the Soviet republics), the Soviet network stretches:

От Кремля
до Китайской границы
от Матошкина Шара
dо Бухары
от Новороссийска
dо Ленинграда
от маяка за полярным кругом
dо Кавказских гор
от Беркута на руке киргиза
до Гагар на скалах Ледовитого океана
dо северных сов
до Чайка на Черном море (intertitles 95–106)

From the Kremlin

to the Chinese border

to Bukhara

to Matochkin Shar

to Novorossiisk

to Leningrad

to Leningrad

to the lighthouse beyond the polar circle

to the Caucasus mountains

to the golden eagle on the arm of the Kyrgyz

to the terns on the cliffs of the Arctic Ocean

to the northern owls

to the seagulls of the Black Sea

Singer and Kunichika have argued that the ethnological inventories and toponyms here link Shestaia chast’ mira to the Whitmanesque tradition, and Kunichika has explored the connections between Vertov’s rhetoric and the Russian poetic tradition.101 Certainly, the viewer familiar with classical Russian literature is reminded of the rhetorical figure Lev Pumpianskii dubbed “the formula of Russia’s expanse” («формула протяжения России») in Lomonosov’s poetry, though one could also cite other intertexts from classical Russian poetry, such as Tiutchev’s “Russkaia

101 Singer highlights the relationship between these intertitles and Whitman’s poem “Salut Au Monde!” (Singer, “Connoisseurs of Chaos,” 248.) Kunichika focuses on the connection between these intertitles and such odes as Pushkin’s “Klevengrim Rossi” (“To the Slanderers of Russia,” 1831), though he also mentions a series of other Russian poetic works. (Kunichika, “The Ecstasy of Breadth,” 60.)
geografija” (“Russian Geography,” 1848–1849), which fantasizes about Russia extending far beyond its current borders. I would argue that these toponyms not only invoke existing literary traditions, however, but also signal to the viewer that in the Soviet Union, the trade network allows individual laborers to see his world and his fellow laborers more clearly, rather than hampering their vision.

To say the film argues that the Soviet trade network is transparent is not to say that the film ultimately imparts an ability to see “a sixth of the world” in any absolute sense, however. While a number of the shots in the last five reels of film are assigned geographical indicators in their corresponding intertitles, the locations in which they were filmed are not clearly marked, and no spaces within the “sixth part of the world” are delimited from one another. The viewer sees no evidence of republican borders, for instance, nor any evidence of where a given geographical region ends and the next begins. The Caucasus are juxtaposed to the land of the “Kyrgyz” with a golden eagle in the “from…to” construction above, which suggests that they are separated from one another geographically, but the film provides no clues as to the distance between the locations. Indeed, the juxtaposition and flouting of boundaries here does more to emphasize similarity than difference. Moreover, none of the Soviet locations that appear in the film are granted the kind of thick history that would allow the reader to consider them as places. The cities of Leningrad and Bukhara appear fleetingly, for instance, but without reference to the collective memories that surround their tsarist or even Revolutionary pasts. The *kino-eye* does

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not look backward, even to the provenance of its footage. Although Vertov apparently drew on 26,000 meters of film footage from ten separate excursions around the Soviet Union when putting together his montages, the film does not provide any sense of which footage was captured in what excursion.\(^{103}\) Along with the fact that Vertov borrowed footage from foreign films for the opening reel of *Shestaia chast’ mira*, this artistic choice later opened Vertov to charges of cinematic plagiarism from works such as *Sovkinozhurnal* (*Sovkino Journal*) and Nikolai Lebedev’s as yet unreleased film *Po Evrope*.\(^{104}\)

Vertov claimed that *Shestaia chast’ mira* “managed to cover the broad expanse of our land from Novaia Zemlia to Turkestan.”\(^{105}\) Vertov’s description implies that *Shestaia chast’ mira* allowed viewers to see the various parts of this broad expanse for themselves, without distortion. Along with the fact that Moscow appears only fleetingly in the film (in an exterior shot of the Kremlin), the framing of Vertov’s comment points toward the mediation his vision included: its focus on the parts of the Soviet Union farthest away from the center suggests that Vertov was looking out on the periphery from the Soviet capital.\(^{106}\) It is no accident that Vertov chose the peripheral territories of Novaia Zemlia and Turkestan as his poles. Not only were they geographically the farthest north and south in the Soviet Union, they represented the aesthetic

\(^{103}\) N. P. Abramov, *Dziga Vertov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1962), 88; Ippolit Sokolov, “On the Film *A Sixth Part of the World*: A Letter to the Editor,” in Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 237. According to Abramov, expeditions to Dagestan, Kuban’, Novaia Zemlia, the Crimea, the Caucasus, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, Siberia, the Pechora River, and the Urals were proposed. (Abramov, *Dziga Vertov*, 85.) Presumably, these were the ten expeditions that were carried out, though the scholarship about *Shestaia chast’ mira* is opaque on this point.


\(^{106}\) Moscow’s place in the film prompted *Pravda* to criticize Vertov for giving “comparatively little attention to the center of the Soviet Union” («сравнительно мало внимания центру СССР»). (A. Fevral’skii, “Teatr i kino. ‘Shestaia chast’ mira,’” *Pravda*, October 12, 1926.)
categories of the exotic and the sublime that had been associated with the imperial Russian empire. Vertov may have been trying to upend these putative aesthetic categories with his films in the mid-1930s, but as he gazed upon the Soviet Union from the capital of Moscow, these categories still seem to have governed his sense of what needed to be included in his kino-probeg. When we attempt to focus on Turkestan as a space or place within the larger Soviet Union, moreover, it becomes particularly clear that the film’s kino-eye is not trained on puncturing conceptions of the “exotic” and “sublime” by providing information about regional boundaries or thick, ethnographic descriptions of given locations. Rather, the film allows these categories to remain stable, now in service to the territorial whole of the Soviet state, rather than the whole of the Russian Empire.

Instead of providing thick descriptions or extended montages about specific regions, the last five reels jump in a rapid montage from one part of the Soviet Union to another, following themes related to the state’s networks (natural resources, export routes) and cutting continually from one part of the Union to another. The image of four turbaned Uzbek men filling canteens from a river, for instance, which appears after the intertitle “Uzbeks” (fig. 1.4), is not located precisely within a given Soviet space (be it Bukhara, Uzbekistan, or Central Asia), nor is it tied to place through an explanation of who the men are, where they live, and how they “practice” their spot by the river by drawing water from it. The footage is simply presented as being characteristic of the Uzbek participation in the Soviet project and sandwiched between sequences that epitomize other ethnic groups (Kalmyks, Buriats, etc.). Elsewhere, images of Turkestan appear in footage about the backwardness still plaguing the Soviet Union (fig. 1.5), the progress

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107 I draw here on Michael Kunichika’s claim that Vertov and Kalatozov were seeking to establish “an aesthetic mode adequate to representing the diverse cultures of the Soviet Union, but in ways that seemed to upend the opposition of the primitive and the modern.” (Michael Kunichika, “The Penchant for the Primitive: Archaeology, Ethnography, and the Aesthetics of Russian Modernism” [PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007], 19.)
enlightening it (fig. 1.6), and the new sites of socialism (fig. 1.7). With its roving montage of different citizens and imprecisely defined landscapes, the film emphasizes the connectedness of all these different peoples within the “sixth of the world” that the Soviet Union occupies and stresses that this—more than any geographical, political, or ethnographic detail—is the most salient fact of all the peoples featured.

Figure 1.4. Footage of these men appears after the first and only intertitle that reads “Uzbeks.”

Figure 1.5. “Here and there, there are still women with their faces covered by the chador.”

Figure 1.6. A woman throws off her chador, or veil, apparently for the first time.  

Figure 1.7. A Turkmen state textile factory appears the model of a socialist plant.

I am not the first to remark on the idiosyncrasy of Vertov’s geographical vision. By the time Vertov was commissioned by Gostorg, he had already released two *kino-probeg* editions of his Kino-Pravda series, one that covered the distance between Paris and Moscow and one about the space between the Black Sea and the Soviet Arctic.\(^\text{109}\) In the process, he had begun to define the “uniquely Vertovian genre” of the *kino-probeg*, which, in Yuri Tsivian’s assessment, was marked by “impossible travels, visionary voyages, imagined pan-planetary pans.”\(^\text{110}\) Even though Vertov had already produced two *kino-probeg* films and had been commissioned to produce the Gostorg film, the approach to Soviet space in *Shestaia chast’ mira* proved nearly as controversial as its inflated budget and its departure from Gostorg’s original plan.\(^\text{111}\) A number of critics were enthusiastic about the film’s depiction of the new Bolshevik state: one praised the film as a “poem about the earth,” others hailed it for depicting the Soviet Union as a whole as “a real living body, a single organism, and not only a political unit” and for showing the “real East, the real North.”\(^\text{112}\) A fourth extolled Vertov for not producing “postcard views,” but rather making “a thing which penetrates through the eyes of viewers into their consciousness—and still

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\(^{110}\) Yuri Tsivian, “*Kino-Pravda 18*,” in *23\textsuperscript{rd} Pordenone Silent Film Festival Catalogue*, 54.


deeper.”

Still, several critics took issue with the spatial orientation of the film, accusing Vertov of exoticizing the Soviet periphery and of not taking a scientific approach to his subjects.

Ippolit Sokolov, for one, argued:

В „Шестой части мира” нет шестой части мира—СССР, а есть только экспорт. „В (sic) Шестой части мира” нет СССР, нет промышленного, культурного и политического центра, а есть только окраины. […]

В „Шестой части мира” подход к СССР—не экономический и социальный (1-2 кадра с манифестирующими толпами и митингами—не в счет), а географический и этнографический (моря и реки, флора и фауна, отсталые „экзотические” народности, нравы и обычаи. […]

В пяти частях картины тема не развернута логически, систематически: не показывается СССР в экономическом, техническом, социальном, культурном и политическом разрезе, а подаются отдельные этнографические моменты без всякой связи и последовательности.

You do not get a sixth part of the world, the USSR, in *A Sixth Part of the World*, you get only export. You do not get the USSR, you do not get the industrial, cultural and political centre in *A Sixth Part of the World*, you get only the periphery. […]

The approach to the USSR in *A Sixth Part of the World* is not economic and social (one or two shots of demonstrating crowds and meetings do not count), but geographic and ethnographic (seas and rivers, flora and fauna, backward “exotic” peoples, their customs and habits). […]

In the five parts of the film the theme is not developed logically, systematically: the USSR is not shown in economic, technical, social, cultural, and political cross-section; what is presented is disparate ethnographic elements without any connection or coherence.

Viktor Shklovsky made a comparable claim, arguing that since shots in Vertov’s films were “not secured geographically” («оказались географически незакрепленными»), the film “lost its materiality” («вещь потеряла свою вещественность») and “became transparent, like a work by


115 Sokolov, “About the Film *A Sixth Part of the World*,” 234.
the Symbolists” («стала сквозить, как произведение символистов»). Here Shklovsky built upon his own earlier reading of Vertov’s work with newsreels:

Но я считаю, что хроникальный материал в обработке Вертова лишен своей души—документальности. […] Весь смысл хроник в дате, времени и месте. Хроника без этого – это карточный каталог в канаве.117

I think that newsreel material is in Dziga Vertov’s treatment deprived of its soul—its documentary quality. […] The whole use of newsreels lies in the date, time, and place. A newsreel without this is like a card catalogue in the gutter.118

Although Shklovsky and Sokolov did not express it in exactly these terms, what bothered them most about Vertov’s montages, it seems, was that his approach to space and place was not governed by the logic of ethnography or “actuality” (dokumental’nost’), but by his drive to distinguish it from the “land of capital” and to package it, using symbols from the Soviet periphery, as a vast landscape with a bright future. They took issue, that is, with the fact that the kino-eye was trained, from its position in Moscow, on how economic resources were being distributed in the far reaches of the new Bolshevik state, rather than on the “facts” of the Soviet Union and its constituent places. Their criticism highlights the fact that, despite all of the toponyms that Vertov provided for his viewers and the geographical promise of the film’s title, a “sixth of the world” is not ultimately a geographic concept, but a Marxist one. The ultimate message of the film is that the future of socialism in the Soviet Union depends on the integration of as-yet-unmodernized places and populations into the network of exchange—not that the


Soviet State is made up of a wide range of distinct nationalities and territories with their own histories and points of view.\textsuperscript{119} While Emma Widdis is correct, then, to argue that the spatial organization of the film is not centripetal, since the different regions of the Soviet Union are not shown in explicit relation to the national center (Moscow) or as identical cogs in a state wheel, her reading of the independence of the different Soviet regions in the film underplays the importance of the supranational whole as it is depicted.\textsuperscript{120} The Soviet Union does appear to be made up of distinct cultures and peoples in Vertov’s film, but no region in the film appears unique or discrete. Certainly, no national republics are visible: the Turkmenistan Soviet Socialist Republic, which had been delimited two years before Vertov released his film, is not referred to or distinguished from the larger wholes of Soviet Turkestan and Soviet Turkmenistan. Although toponyms from across the Union are named in the intertitles, the only meaningful space in Vertov’s film is the whole of the Soviet Union, which he views through the prism of political economy.\textsuperscript{121}

In this sense, the film is paradigmatic of a particular moment in the depiction of Central Asia in Russian-language cultural products shortly after the national delimitation of the republics

\textsuperscript{119} Jeremy Hicks and Martin Stollery have made comparable arguments about the film. Stollery has offered that the film presents the diverse peoples of the Soviet Union as “a spectacle for and possession of the Russian proletariat.” (Stollery, Alternative Empires, 111.) Hicks, for his part, has stressed that these diverse peoples are “ultimately made emblematic of a perceived backwardness, which the film suggests developed socialism will erase…While A Sixth Part of the World’s camerawork pays passing tribute to these peoples, they are ultimately to be civilized and Sovietised by the socialist society their pelts help develop.” (Hicks, Dziga Vertov, 49, ellipsis mine.) I am less convinced than either Stollery or Hicks that the film predicts the erasure of cultural difference among these people, but like them I see an imperial element in the imprecise mapping (and muddling) of the cultures featured.

\textsuperscript{120} Widdis, Visions of a New Land, 110.

\textsuperscript{121} I draw here on Yuri Tsivian’s claim that, “the space which Vertov’s intellectual editing explores is the space of political economy,” as well as Tsivian’s idea of “Marxian economy excursions.” (Tsivian, “Introduction,” in Tsivian, Lines of Resistance, 11–12.)
in 1924. Given that the “national question” and the borders between the new republics were critical issues during the NEP period, it might be assumed that they would be approached in imaginative works as distinct territories in their own right. In reality, however, there was a tension between a push toward regional national specificity and a pull toward emphasizing the universality of the Soviet experience. In a number of the Bolshevik works that engaged with the problem of the Civil War as it was fought in the region—such as Dmitrii Furmanov’s Miatezh (Mutiny, 1925) and Aleksandr Neverov’s novella Tashkent – gorod khlebnyi (Tashkent: City of Bread, 1927)—Central Asia is positioned in relation to the Union-wide Civil-War experience, and the specific local experience is overshadowed. Shestaia chast’ mira, too, gestures toward multiple national specificities, but ultimately privileges the vision of Soviet spatial universality over any delimited visions of national territories. The film ultimately suggests that Turkmenistan is functionally identical to all other parts of the Soviet Union: it offers up its resources, struggles to fight its own particular backwardness, and engages in the project of building a socialist society. The Central Asian resources (sheep, cotton, gas) and backwardness (Islam, the chador, a lack of water) might be different from those resources and challenges faced elsewhere, but the

122 The borders were fixed for the Soviet Socialist Republics of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Kara-Kyrgyz (later Kyrgyz), Kirgiz (later Kazakh), and Karkalpak Autonomous Oblasts in 1924. Tajikistan became a Soviet Socialist Republic only in 1929; Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan gained the status of Soviet republics as late as 1936. For an illustrated overview of the delimitation process, see Abazov, Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia, maps 37 and 38 (unpaginated).

123 See Dmitrii Furmanov, Miatezh (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1925); A. S. Neverov, Tashkent: Gorod khlebnyi (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1972; originally published as A. S. Neverov, Tashkent—gorod khlebnyi (Moscow: Zemlia i fabrika, 1927); trans. as Alexander Neweroff, City of Bread (Westport, Conn., Hyperion Press, 1973 [reprint of 1927 edition by G. H. Doran]). V. A. Shoshin suggests that Central Asian territories were more realistically described in memoirs in this era. Specifically, he points to V. Kropachev, “V Fergane” (“In Fergana”); A. Buisnyi, “Kranaia Armiia na vnutrennem fronte” (“The Red Army at the Internal Front”) and “Delo v kishlake Khasan” (“The Affair in the Village Khasan”); A. Sytin, “V peskakh Karakuma” (“In the Sands of the Kara-Kum”), “Pod iuzhnym solntsem” (“Under the Southern Sun”), and “Prishelets s Zapada” (“The Newcomer from the West”); and A. Listovskii, “Poslednii pokhod” (“The Last Campaign”). (V. A. Shoshin, Poet romanticheskogo podviga: Ocherk tvorchestva N. A. Tikhonova, 2nd ed. [Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1978], 134.)
Central Asian territories are within the same trade and belief network as all the other regions of the Soviet Union, undistinguished from any other Soviet space.

IV. A Poet-Adventurer’s View from Turkmenistan: Nikolai Tikhonov’s “Priglashenie k puteshestviu,” “Polustanok v pustyne Kara-Kum,” and “Biriuzovyi polkovnik”

Thus far in this chapter I have examined visions of Soviet Turkmenia that are marked by the distance from which they were created and the manner in which the region was elided into larger geopolitical landscapes. I now turn to three representations of Turkmenistan that were created by an outsider exploring the same territory from a closer remove: “Priglashenie k puteshestviu” (“An Invitation to a Journey”), “Polustanok v pustyne Kara-Kum” (“A Way Station in the Kara-Kum Desert”), and “Biriuzovyi polkovnik” (“The Turquoise Colonel”), all of which Nikolai Tikhonov composed after a visit to Turkmenistan in 1926. Before turning to the works I have selected for analysis, I will pause briefly to sketch out Tikhonov’s place in Soviet literature, since—unlike the classical Eurasianists and Vertov—he has been largely forgotten by contemporary scholars.

For decades, Nikolai Semenovich Tikhonov (1896–1979) was a prominent figure in the Soviet literary establishment. Born into a lower middle-class barber’s family in Petersburg, Tikhonov spent his late teens and early twenties at war: from 1914 to 1918, he fought at the front in the cavalry; from 1918 to 1921, he served in the Red Army (having volunteered soon after being demobilized from the cavalry). Although he had published a few stories as early as 1918, Tikhonov’s literary career began in earnest in 1921, after he left the army and began to build a literary life for himself in the city of his birth, which had recently been renamed Leningrad. There, Tikhonov became briefly associated with the Acmeist poet Nikolai Gumilev, who served as Tikhonov’s mentor before being executed by the Cheka in August 1921, and more
permanently associated with the literary group The Serapion Brothers, which he joined in November 1921.124

Throughout the 1920s, Tikhonov was known primarily as a poet. His early poems, including those in the collections \textit{Orda (The Horde, 1922)} and \textit{Braga (Homebrew, 1922)}, earned high praise from many of the writers who would go on to be canonized on Russian shores and abroad. Maksim Gorky wrote in 1922 that he valued Tikhonov more than Sergei Esenin, while Boris Pasternak claimed in 1928 that he considered Tikhonov “almost a younger brother,” as well as a poet of his world and understanding.125 Tikhonov became particularly famous for his ballads, especially “Dezertir” (“The Deserter”), “Ballada o sinem pakete” (“The Ballad of the Blue Parcel”), and “Ballada o gvozdiakh” (“The Ballad of Nails”), all of which were first published either in \textit{Orda} or \textit{Braga} in 1922. Yuri Tynianov, for instance, considered Tikhonov’s experimentations with the genre a major event. He wrote:

Впечатление, произведенное тихоновской балладой, было большое. Никто еще так вплотную не поставил вопроса о жанре, не осознал стиховое слово как точку сюжетного движения. Тихонов довел до предела в балладе то направление стихового слова, которое можно назвать гумилевским, обнаружил жанр, к которому оно стремилось.126

124 Felix Raskolnikov, “Nikolai Tikhonov’s \textit{The Horde} and Brew: A Romantic at the Crossroads” [PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1988], 25, ProQuest, UMI Publishing (UMI Number NL46446). The lesson of Gumilev’s death was not lost on Tikhonov: he wrote in 1922 that he was detained by the Cheka and that he would “sometime be hanged” on account of his anarchist ferment. In the meantime, he was, he noted, “writing lyrics.” (Boris Frezinskii, \textit{Sud’by Serapionov} [St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2003], 145.)


The impression made by Tikhonov’s ballads was great. No one else had yet posed the question of genre so seriously, or understood the poetic word as a point of plot development. In the ballad form, Tikhonov took to its limits that orientation of the poetic word that we might call “Gumilevian” and exposed the genre to which it aspired.

Tikhonov’s engagement with the Romantic tradition did not end with the ballad form, however. It also extended, throughout the 1920s, to an engagement with “exotic” landscapes, in his case with the Soviet Union’s own “East.”

Tikhonov’s adventures in the “Orient” began, if his recollections are to be trusted, in his youth, which he spent reading about the world beyond European Russia. As a schoolboy he particularly loved reading Lermontov’s poems and prose, he recalled, “because they offered me pictures of such a splendid and at the same time distant, even non-existent world, that they seemed to come from a fairy tale” («потому что представляли мне картины такого роскошного и вместе с тем такого далекого от меня и даже несуществующего мира, что казались порождением сказки»). It is unsurprising that the young Tikhonov was drawn to Lermontov’s “pictures” of the “far-off, even non-existent” world of the Caucasus. Nor is it surprising that Tikhonov was apparently an ardent admirer in his youth of James Fenimore Cooper, Pushkin, and Gogol. Countless Russian children and would-be Romantic writers had been inspired by such a constellation before.


127 Nikolai Tikhonov, Vmesto predisloviia,” in Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1985), t. 1, 23. This edition of Tikhonov’s collected works will hereafter be abbreviated as SS.


What is unique about Tikhonov is that his inclination toward the “East,” adventure novels, and Romanticism drove him not only to write about “far-off worlds” that he had never been to, such as Afghanistan (in “Afganskaia ballada,” or “Afghan Ballad,” 1923) and India (in the narrative poema Sami), but also to begin traveling extensively within the Soviet Union and recording his impressions in prose and verse. By the late 1920s, he was distinguished within Soviet literature by the geographical scope of his work and had even been commissioned by Samuil Marshak to write about an adventurer for the children’s journal Novyi Robinson (The New Robinson). (For that assignment, Tikhonov chose the legendary Hungarian Turkologist, ethnographer, and traveler Ármin Vámbéry, who had traveled from Budapest to Khiva in the 1860s, becoming the first Western European to successfully travel through Central Asia.)

Most of Tikhonov’s early travels were through the Caucasus, which he began frequenting in 1923, and Central Asia, which he first visited in 1926, when he traveled to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The two regions were tightly intertwined in his writings of the 1920s, and in fact remained so throughout his career, as this recollection from 1973 suggests: “My passion for the East led me first to Georgia, Armenia, and the Northern Caucasus, and then soon after to the republics of Central Asia” («Мое увлечение Востоком привело меня сначала в Грузию, Армению, на Северный Кавказ, а потом вскоре и в республики Средней Азии»).

Elsewhere in the same essay, Tikhonov described his first trips to the “East,” as defined here by the Caucasus, in the following terms:

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130 “Afganskaia ballada” was first published in Braga (Moscow-Petersburg: Krug, 1922); Sami was written in 1920 and first published in Krasnaia nov’ 4 (1922). Both appear in Tikhonov, SS, t. 1.

131 Shoshin, Nikolai Tikhonov. Ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva, 47, 55.


133 Tikhonov, “Vmesto predisloviia,” 27.
Beginning in 1923, I spent a great deal of time studying our Caucasian and Transcaucasian republics. Almost every year I penetrated to the farthest regions of the mountains, made my way by foot or sometimes on horseback on the paths to alpine villages and auls, and over the years I accumulated a huge amount of material that to this day has not been entirely utilized.

I crossed through icy and snowy passes, cut across virgin forests, ascended heights, slept in mountain meadows and in wooded thickets, lived the simple and harsh life of the highlanders.

In Tikhonov’s account of his travel, we see how his self-fashioning as a literary and physical trailblazer were closely bound up with one another: his travels were stimulating, he suggests here, because they provided him with a “huge amount of material” for his work. But what also comes through, especially in Tikhonov’s transitive verbs (emphasized in boldfaced type above), is the pride of an explorer-conqueror who revels in adventure for its own sake. The experience of traveling, Tikhonov’s account suggests, gave him much more than literary inspiration: it gave him great pleasure.

Throughout his life, Tikhonov never lost the lust for travel and adventure that comes across so clearly in the passage above. Beginning in the early 1930s, however, the nature of Tikhonov’s traveling began to change, as he began working as a kind of literary diplomat for the Party-State, frequently representing Russian literature in the national republics and Soviet culture outside the borders of the Union. (I will discuss his work on one of his first such projects, the 1930 writers’ brigade to Turkmenistan, in Chapter Two.) By the time Tikhonov died in 1979, he had served as the first chairman of the Soviet Peace Committee for thirty years and had traveled

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134 Ibid., emphasis mine.
extensively throughout the Soviet Union and the non-aligned world. As a result, his legacy in
Soviet criticism was that of an archetypal internationalist, a bard of the “friendship of nations,”
and an ally of such nations as Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Pakistan, and India.\(^{135}\)

Perhaps because of his later role as an entrenched representative of the state, the older
Tikhonov not only characterized his first trips to the “East” as adventures when reflecting back
upon them, as in the passage above, but also in more overtly politicized terms. Thus he writes
elsewhere in the same essay quoted above:

Я увидел воочию наш Восток и его борьбу с темным прошлым, его
стремление сломать мрачные формы окостеневшего быта и зажить дургой,
светлой, свободной жизнью. Дружба народов родилась в трудовом единении
передовых сил, при помощи великого русского народа, помогшего сбросить
вековое ярмо невежества и насилия.\(^{136}\)

I saw with my own eyes our East and its struggle with the dark past, its striving to
break down the dismal forms of its ossified way of life and to begin to live a
different, light and free life. The friendship of peoples was born in the workman’s
unity of progressive forces, with the help of the great Russian people, which
helped throw off the centuries-old yoke of ignorance and violence.

In this characterization, Tikhonov’s first trips to the Caucasus and Central Asia convinced him to
assist in the enlightenment of “our East” and to represent the “great Russian people” while doing
so. Tikhonov’s first creative writings from Turkmenistan, in contrast, do not convey such a
strident political message. They do, however, display the same inclination to view Turkmenistan
as part of the larger, monolithic and exotic landscape of the “East.” All of this large swath of

\(^{135}\) V. A. Shoshin, Letopis’ druzhby. K probleme internationalizma v sovetskoi literature (Leningrad: Nauka, 1971),
13, 20, 53–54; Shoshin, Nikolai Tikhonov, 5. The importance of Tikhonov’s persona as an internationalist is
reflected in a 1973 collection on his work, for instance, which includes such essays as “Tikhonov and Georgia,”
See V.A. Kovalev and V. A. Shoshin, eds., Tvorchestvo Nikolaia Tikhonova. Issledovaniia i soobshcheniia. Vstrechi
s Tikhonovym. Bibliografija (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973). In the 1980s and 1990s, two monographs also appeared
about Armenia and Azerbaijan in relationship to Tikhonov’s work. (See Kiamal Gasanov, Azerbaidzhan v
tvorchestve N. S. Tikhonova [Baku: Obshchestvo “Znanie” Azerbaidzhanskoi SSSR, 1984] and Robert Bagdasarian,
Nikolai Tikhonov i Armenia [Erevan: Izdatel’stvo “Gitutiun” Nan Ra, 1995].)

\(^{136}\) Tikhonov, “Vemesto predisloviia,” 27.
territory was, for this Russian poet looking in on it from the outside, part of one larger “East” that the Soviet Union—and Tikhonov himself—had appropriated. We can see this particularly clearly in three works Tikhonov wrote after his first visit to Turkmenistan in 1926, the poems “Priglashenie k puteshestviu” (first published 1932) and “Polustanok v pustyne Kara-Kum” (first published 1928), and the short story “Biriuzovyi polkovnik” (first published 1927).

Tikhonov wrote a series of poems in response to his first visit to Turkmenistan: not only “Priglashenie k puteshestviu” and “Polustanok v pustyne Karakum,” but also “Fininspektor v Bukhare” (“The Accountant in Bukhara”), “Shakal” (“The Jackal”), “Tigrinyi chai” (“Tiger Tea”), and “V otkrytom more” (“In the Open Sea”).137 A theme implicit in all of these poems is made explicit in “Priglashenie k puteshestviu,” which encourages the reader to break out of his regular routine and explore the world. The poem undoubtedly engages with earlier examples of the “invitation to travel” genre. In particular, Baudelaire’s “L’invitation au voyage” (published in 1857 and adapted into Russian by Merezhkovskii in 1885) and Gumilev’s “Priglashenie v puteshestvie” (“Invitation on a Journey,” 1918) both seem to be important intertexts for the poem.138 Unlike Baudelaire and Gumilev, however, Tikhonov does not address a woman or use traveling as a metaphor for a love affair.139 Rather, his speaker presents travel itself as an erotic encounter: a universal stimulant with which every reader should engage, if not in his own life, then through evocative poetry.

137 Tikhonov, SS, tom 1, 761. These poems were later collected, along with poems written after his 1930 visit to Turkmenistan, in the poem cycle “Iurga” and published in an edition of Tikhonov’s collected poems. See Nikolai Tikhonov, Sobranie stikhotvorenii v dvukh tomakh, t. 2 (Leningrad-Moscow: GIKhL, 1932).


139 Shoshin even suggests that Tikhonov’s poem contains a hidden polemic with Gumilev’s, since Gumilev’s rests on the romanticization of the exotic. (V. Shoshin, Gordyi mir: Ocherk tvorchestva N.S. Tikhonova [Moscow: GIKhL, 1966], 71.)
The poem opens, as does Gumilev’s, with an allusion to staid, city life, where routine can be stultifying and emasculating. It is worth noting here that the meter in the first two stanzas is iambic tetrameter, which as a form of cultural memory triggers associations with classic nineteenth-century Russian poetry. Tikhonov’s meter is irregular, and clearly bears the traces of modernism, but it is recognizable nonetheless:

Обычной тенью входит день.
Одежда та же: тесен ворот —
Попробуй возьми его, переодень.
Скажи, что меняешь обычай и город.

Он будет выть, от страха седой,
Вопьется ногтями, от крика устав,
Он будет грозить нищетой и бедой,
Он выложит все счета.

The day enters like an ordinary shadow. The clothing is the same: the collar is too tight — Try to take it, change its clothes. Say that you are changing custom and city. // It will howl, grey from fear, claw you with its nails, tired from screaming, it will threaten poverty and misfortune, it will lay out all the accounts.  

With a string of imperatives in the third and fourth lines, the first stanza issues a provocative challenge to the reader. The speaker then raises the stakes of this challenge in the second stanza, with a list of possible obstacles to adventure that need to be overcome.

Breaking free from habit and tradition is valuable, Tikhonov’s speaker stresses in the following stanzas, because it provides new perspectives on the world and allows the traveler to see how the world dances, to see “what a smile it has.” The opening word of stanza three is crucial: on the pivot of the conjunction “but” («но»), the speaker begins unveiling the full range of poetic and experiential possibilities that breaking from tradition can offer. Poetically, new meters can startle the reader. Exactly in the third stanza, Tikhonov begins ostentatiously skipping

140 I am grateful to Ron Meyer for his feedback on this translation.
stresses, including inversions, using amphibrachs. Reading the poem takes effort here—for it involves a switch from a semi-regular to irregular meter:

Но, как пересохший табак, распыли
Причычки — сбеги с этажей.
Увидишь, как пляшут колени земли,
Какая улыбка у ней.

А может быть, ярость? А может —
Одно дуновенье ресниц далеко
Тебя заведет, чудесами изложет,
Оставит навек чудаком?

But, like dried-out tobacco, send habits scattering—run down from the upper stories. You will see how the knees of the earth dance, what a smile she has. // Or perhaps fury? Or perhaps—One waft of eyelashes will take you far afield, will gnaw you with wonders, will leave you an eccentric forever?

After gesturing toward what is available to the daring reader in the third and fourth stanzas with irregular meters and pronounced enjambments, Tikhonov’s speaker returns to a more regular meter in the fifth and sixth stanzas as he implores the reader directly to go adventuring and encounter the landscape that emerges from his words:

Соглашайся немедля! Из дому
Задумано бегство. Ведь надо же знать,
Как люди живут и жуют по-другому.
Как падает заново слов крутизна.

Как бродят народы, пасясь на приволье.
Как золотом жира потеет базар,
Как дышит—ну, скажем, за Каспием,
что ли, —
Менялы тучней черноглазый фазан.

Agree at once! Escape from home is devised. For one must know how people live and chew differently. How the steep slope of words falls anew. // How peoples wander, grazing on the open expanse. How the bazaar sweats with the gold of grease, how—well, say, beyond the Caspian, for instance—the black-eyed pheasant puffs up fatter than the moneychanger.
Here, the meter becomes part of the message, as Tikhonov seduces his reader with metrically less difficult lines: their very ease testifies to the delight of traveling. With the repetition of the phrasal structure “Kak…” and the exuberant list of what “one must know,” Tikhonov alludes to the richness of the world, suggesting that the world’s treasures are innumerable and captured only partially by the specific details he includes. At the same time, Tikhonov’s play with sound underlines the sheer joy of travel. In the line “Как люди живут и жуют по-другому” (“How people live and chew differently”), the repetition of the fricative “zh” and the vowel “u/iu,” along with the internal rhyme between “zhivut” (live) and “zhuiut” (chew), create a comic effect and suggest, playfully, that peoples are defined as much by what and how they chew as where and how they live. (Perhaps, “we are what we chew”?) Tikhonov then ties the exuberance of these sounds to traveling by connecting them, in the next lines, to the experience of seeing people wander the steppes, watching a bazaar glisten with fat, finding one’s way beyond the Caspian, where black-eyed pheasants and money changers roam. All of this, the last stanzas of the poem suggest, can energize the speaker, reminding him of his connection to that “mountain” of life and the vastness of the world.

No “real” or mappable space is visible in “Priglashenie k puteshestviu.” Tikhonov’s phrase “beyond the Caspian” directs the reader to the Transcaspian region of Central Asia (including Turkmenistan), and his references to the color gold, to the bazaar, and to wandering peoples conjure up landscapes of nomadic Central Asia, perhaps as figured by the Russian painter Vasilii Vereshchagin (1842–1904), whose canvases of Turkestan, marked by a golden palette, had been wildly popular. At the same time, however, Tikhonov’s reference to a “sharp slope of words” conjures up the Caucasian landscapes promulgated in the poetry of Romantics like Lermontov, as does his use of iambic tetrameter. Together these signals lend Tikhonov’s
proposed landscape the verticality (and demonstrated literary sublimity) of the Caucasus as well as the horizontality of the Transcaspian steppe. The result, I would suggest, is that the region “beyond the Caspian” is presented as part of a larger territory valuable mainly to Russian readers as a relief from the stultifying life of their European cities. A separate world, it is valued for the respite it offers.

Tikhonov’s poem “Polustanok v pustyne Kara-Kum,” in contrast to “Priglashenie k puteshestviu,” depicts a specific place in Turkmenistan: the expansive Kara-Kum Desert. Even here, however, Tikhonov’s speaker is focused on the contrast between the oppressive heat and horizontality of Transcaspia and other spaces the adventurer-traveler has penetrated before. Experienced from a train compartment, the Kara-Kum is figured as a site to be passed through and overlooked. Certainly, the poet’s attention is not turned toward the history of the desert or the associations it carries for the local population. The poem’s opening stanza, addressed to the desert itself, establishes that this landscape poem will be centered on the monotony of the Kara-Kum, as experienced by an outside explorer treating it with an inattentive glance:

Так вот ты какая...
Направо—жара, солончак, барханы,
Налево—бархан, солончак, жара,
Жара—окаянная дробь барабана—
По всем головам барабанит с утра.141

So you’re like that... To the right—broiling heat, salt marsh, sand dunes, to the left—sand dune, salt marsh, broiling heat. The heat is the cursed tapping of a drum—from morning onwards it drums on all heads.

The first, truncated line of the stanza establishes that the poem is intended to serve as a representation of what it is like to be in the Kara-Kum, despite—the ellipsis suggests—the difficulty of rendering such a space with words. The remaining four lines of the stanza then

141 Nikolai Tikhonov, “Polustanok v pustyne Kara-Kum,” in Izbrannye stikhi (Moscow: Ogonek, 1928), 34–35, ellipsis in original. The poem also appeared in the 1928 almanac Turkmenistan v stikhakh.
attempt to translate not only the visual picture offered by the space, but also the full range of sensations. Tikhonov’s four-stress dol’nik—which reads like an amphiambraphic tetrameter, with caesural truncation in lines two and three and final iambs in lines three and five—mimics both a beating drum and a rumbling train. The repetition of words, meanwhile, simulates the experience of encountering a monotonous landscape from a train. It also signals that there are just four key elements of the landscape: heat (the word zhara appears three times and thus is the dominant element), salt marsh (solonchak is repeated twice), sand dunes (barakhan is used once in the singular and once in the plural), and drum (the noun baraban appears just once, but it is echoed by the verb barabanit, which shares the same root, and contains the repetitions ba ba and ba ra ban within itself). The approximate rhyme of the repeated roots barakhan and baraban ties these four elements more tightly together. The impression from this stanza is that Tikhonov’s semantic range is limited by the desert itself, which stifles lush descriptions as much as it does vegetation.

The next two stanzas build on this first one, emphasizing the boredom that the desert inspires and the oppressiveness of its heat and dust. Only in the fourth and fifth stanzas do the horizons of the poem begin to expand, offering an implicit point of comparison to the reader:

Когда паровоз из сумрака чалого
Рванет полустанок, сорвет с якорей—
Прохлада седьмую минуты качает
Людей и дрова на дворе.

Здесь главная служба—сидеть, потеть,
Когда ж человек отпотеет впустую—
Он вытянет ноги в пыли, в желтоте.
Вселенная, я протестую!142

When the locomotive from the flecked twilight jerks the railway stop, tears it off its moorings—coolness for seven minutes rocks the people and the firewood in the courtyard. // The main duty here is to sit, to sweat, and when a person has

142 Ibid., 35.
finished sweating in vain— he will stretch his legs into the dust, in the yellowness. Universe, I protest!

The appearance of the locomotive and the railway stop in the fourth stanza establishes firmly that the speaker’s view of the desert has been framed—both “to the right” and “to the left”—by the train line. This, in turn, strengthens the impression that the speaker is only a temporary visitor and will soon be moving onward. The poem offers no alternative to the landscape he has created, but the speaker’s “protest” against the “yellowness” and broiling heat of the Kara-Kum, along with his definition of it as “a cumbersome, sandy hell” («громоздкий, песчаный ад», stanza seven) and his yearning for “coolness,” suggest that the speaker will be traveling onwards to a more inviting climate, one where the main duty is not “to sit, to sweat.” Tikhonov’s assessment of the Kara-Kum is governed by a comparison with other spaces that are cooler, more conducive to action, more varied, and, possibly, more vertical. It seems certain that the speaker will make but a stop in the Kara-Kum, on his way to further adventures—and perhaps less monotonous climes. In the end, not only the railway stop, but also the desert itself is defined as but a way station for the Russian visitor.

The two poems discussed thus far portray Transcaspia and the Kara-Kum Desert as sites of exploration for Russian visitors, eliding them into larger wholes and excluding any local points of view. The final text by Tikhonov that I will discuss here, the short story “Biriuzovyi polkovnik,” takes a different approach, presenting a space in Turkmenistan through the eyes not of a visiting Russian traveler, but of a local inhabitant. The narrative still bears traces, however, of Tikhonov’s foreignness (he chooses a transplanted Russian inhabitant as his protagonist), his pan-Eastern Romanticism, and his stance as a traveler with a predilection for specific landscapes.

“Biriuzovyi polkovnik,” first published in the journal Zvezda in 1927, was republished

143 Ibid., 36.
the same year in the collection *Riskovannyi chelovek (An Adventurous Man)*, along with seven other stories set in Baku, Bukhara, Tblisi, Erevan, and Persia, all variants of Tikhonov’s “East.”¹⁴⁴ Unlike Tikhonov’s poem about the Kara-Kum, the story takes place in a lush, verdant environment: that of the village of Firyuza, which is located in the Kopet-Dag, Turkmenistan’s largest mountain chain, not far from Ashgabat and the border with Iran. (Tikhonov renamed the village “Biriuzovyi,” or “Turquoise,” in the story, and claimed that the village had gained its name because of the color of the sky above it.) Although the plot involves other secondary characters, at the heart of the text is the relationship between the Russian protagonist, a colonel named Vedernikov, and the natural environment around him, which Vedernikov is desperate to remake. Having lived in Turkmenia since before the Revolution, Vedernikov dreams of modernizing his corner of the world, which is described as being at the “most desolate end of the Soviet Union” («самый глухой конец Советского Союза», 10).¹⁴⁵ Vedernikov is so dedicated to his dream of improving life in his village that he spends his evenings working on an elaborate plan for how the village might be in twenty-five years, after a complete transformation. In Vedernikov’s vision of the future, the green “empire” of the jungle has been vanquished, electrification has transformed the village, and a tram runs through it. There are huge dormitories for the workers who have been sent out to all the peaks of the mountains surrounding the gorge, and these workers are dressed in identical silk blouses and pants created by mechanical tailors in communist workshops. Electric fans spin on the ceilings, no one curses, all is tidy, there is no vodka.

¹⁴⁴ The subject of these stories is always, as Ilya Erenburg notes in a 1928 review, “the Russian man in a world that is at once wild to him and at the same time deeply akin to him” («русский человек в мире, который ему дик и в то же время—глубоко сродни»). (B. Frezinskii, “Publikatsii. Vospominaniiia. Soobshcheniiia. Kakie byli nadezhdy! [Il’ia Erenburg—Nikolaiu Tikhonovu: 1925–1939; o Nikolae Tikhonove: 1922–1967],” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 3 [2003]: 242.)

Within the world of the story, Vedernikov’s vision achieves little, despite the fact he sends the complete manuscript to a “big Bolshevik” in Moscow whom he has earlier met. The Russian surveyors who visit Vedernikov’s village ridicule his suggestions, and Vedernikov—not a Party member, though he had attempted to become one earlier in his life—receives no response from the “big Bolshevik” himself. Even as he confronts setbacks with his proposal, however, Vedernikov continues to try to improve the world around him and cooperate with the Party: he tutors a young Turkmen, he writes an article about the opening of an agricultural boarding school for students from all nationalities, which is to breed silkworms, to feed its students off its own land, and to create its own educational cinema. In the story’s closing lines, an acquaintance of Vedernikov’s questions him about this article, saying, “This is a utopia, brother, that they’re not going to test” («Утопия, брат, это, не проверят»). The colonel’s response to this charge—“Eh, Revko, you don’t love the beautiful life” («Эх, Ревко, не любишь ты красивой жизни», 52)—ends the story, suggesting that Vedernikov will go on, working as always to transform his adopted homeland.

Vedernikov’s Kopet-Dag, then, is a kind of blank slate for future Russo-Soviet development in “Biriuzovyi polkovnik.” Tikhonov’s Kopet-Dag, however, is a zone of conflicting temporalities, a place not yet tamed by Soviet progress: “The gorge, through which the highway led, had not yet exhausted its natural hatred of order” («Ущелье, по которому ведет шоссе, еще не исчерпало свою природную ненависть к порядку», 10). This wilderness, undoubtedly, attracts the Russian writer, even if it is the enemy of his Russian character. Tikhonov’s delight at the wild outgrowth of the Kopet-Dag is reflected in the full page he dedicates to a description of the site’s flora. The passage opens with the following sentence:

Что касается растений, то золотой сияющий зверобой, рабочие ветви арчи, веселый странствующий актер—звездный фиолетовый касатик, красный
As for plants, there is the golden, shining St. John’s wort, the working branches of juniper, the star purple iris—a cheerful, wandering actor; the red tulip—good-natured, suffering from fatty degeneration of the heart; the white sultans of feather grass, marching in all directions; the thistle, rosy like cheeks in the north, the gloomy astragalus, dressed in khaki, the bureaucrat of the jungle; the white and yellow sweet briar, the poplar and maple, the Ajaxes of the gorge; the buckthorn, pink peas, the wild grapes, the yellow globes of onion, and all the innumerable nameless shrubs and grasses were witnesses of the great life of the gorge.

This corner of the Soviet Union, the passage suggests, is not so desolate as might be supposed: rich in vegetation, these jungles are also thick with literary inspiration, spawning sentences such as the one above, the convoluted syntax of which reflects the overgrown landscape described in it. If the Kara-Kum limited Tikhonov’s semantic range and drove him to repetition, the Kopet-Dag expands it and moves him to a poetics of excess, driving him to highlight both the landscape’s semantic richness and its material richness. In both cases, Tikhonov’s descriptions are marked by his particular predilections as a visiting adventurer.

Given Tikhonov’s narrative exuberance about the Kopet-Dag, it is unsurprising that, according to an essay that he published in 1930, the picturesque “landscape” («пейзаж») of the region was in fact the genesis of the story:

Тогда я странствовал по Туркмении первый раз. Воздух Копет-Дага, очертания его скал, люди в высоких шапках, пестрые встречи, пешее мое блуждание, занятое и рискованное, любопытные бытовые положения уже таили в себе схему рассказа, требовали изображения их в дисциплинах повествования. Пейзаж тоже не захотел оставаться немым, только увиденным и забытым. Он просился на бумагу. [...] Окружающая меня природа была такой буйной и литературной, что целыми часами я играл в

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At the time I was wandering around Turkmenia for the first time. The air of the Kopet-Dag, the contours of its cliffs, the people in high hats, the colorful encounters, my wanderings on foot, entertaining and risky, the curious life circumstances already contained the rough sketch of a story, demanded representation through the discipline of narration. Even the landscape did not wish to remain mute, to be seen and forgotten. It begged to be put on paper. […] The nature surrounding me was so lush and literary that for hours on end I played with the amazing names of the plants, sorting through them like rhymes for verse.

It is worth noting that according to this passage Tikhonov was not only taken by this landscape, replete with remarkable hats, “colorful meetings,” and the breath-taking verticality so familiar from Russian narratives about the Caucasus. He was also convinced of its literariness: the natural world not only struck him as being not only “lush”; it also “begged to be put on paper,” presumably because it seemed to fit into the models he had for Romantic tales. The inspiration for Tikhonov’s character of Vedernikov, an older Russian who had a “monstrous project to remake this wild locale into the heavenly gardens of the future” («чудовищный проект преобразования этой дикой местности в райские сады будущего»), also struck Tikhonov as a natural subject, according to the same essay. He was a “conventional literary character” («литературно-условный характер»), in Tikhonov’s eyes; even his dog reminded the visiting Russian writer of a tale by Kipling.

Beyond providing a sense of how the poet Tikhonov began to write short fiction, the passage quoted above about the genesis of “Biriuzovyi polkovnik” suggests that Tikhonov viewed Turkmenistan through a distinct literary prism when visiting the republic in 1926.

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148 Ibid., 135.
149 Ibid., 136
Conditioned by years of reading Romantic tales of “the East,” he was primed to focus his attention on that which was ornate, colorful, “Oriental.” He was also, we might suppose, conditioned to choose details for his stories that resonated with existing “Eastern” tales, even if they were originally set in the Caucasus or India, as in Kipling, and not Central Asia. It seems likely, for instance, that Tikhonov was drawn to describe a game of chance in “Biriuzovyi polkovnik”—the local contest featured is a gun battle called “kukushka,” or “Cuckoo,” not unlike Russian roulette—in part because of its resonance with the encounters of fate in Lermontov’s Geroi nashego vremeni (Hero of Our Time, 1839–1841) or the duels of Pushkin. At the very least, it seems Tikhonov was predisposed to set his story about Turkmenistan in the most lush, most seemingly Caucasian, of its landscapes.

This is not to say that Tikhonov was unaware of his inclination toward the sublime. Elsewhere in the essay about the genesis of “Biriuzovyi polkovnik,” he states explicitly that he is disposed toward embellishment. He writes, citing Pushkin’s 1830 poem “Geroi” (“The Hero”):

Я украсил природу ущелья больше, чем она того заслуживает. На самом деле Фирузинская щель совсем не так замечательна, как я ее раскрасил. Мой «возвышающий» все обман казался мне во много раз дороже «низких истин» повседневного быта.¹⁵⁰

I made the nature of the gorge more beautiful than it deserves. The Firuza crevice is actually not nearly as remarkable as I painted it.

My deception making everything “sublime” seemed to me much more valuable than the “low truths” of everyday life.

Still, even if Tikhonov was aware of his aversion to “low truths,” it does not change the fact that his frame of reference, for Turkmenistan, was very much that of a Romantic adventurer. No less than the poems “Priglashenie k puteshestviu” and “Polustanok v pustyne Kara-Kum,” the story “Biriuzovyi polkovnik” is oriented toward the experience it offers for a visiting outsider seeking local color. The “color” and lush vegetation offered by the Kopet-Dag are significantly more

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 141.
attractive to Tikhonov than the monotony and aridity that he encountered in the Kara-Kum, but
in all three texts the landscape is filtered through the poet as an experiential subject.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed six works from the early Soviet era that projected
geographical fantasies onto the former Russian imperial territory of Transcaspia and the new
Soviet republic of the TSSR: *Iskhod k vostoku, Na putiakh, Shestaia chast’ mira,* “Priglashenie k
puteshestviu,” “Polustanok v pustyne Kara-Kum,” and “Biriuzovyi polkovnik.” Although these
texts were among the first in the Russian language to engage with Soviet “Asia” as a region
worthy of exploration and inquiry, in none of them is Turkmenia delimited as a space or a set of
places with specific associations. In the Eurasianists’ first two essay collections, Transcaspia is
occasionally alluded to, but only in terms of its relationship to the larger whole of Eurasia, which
is sacralized and endowed with a glorious future. In Vertov’s film, sites in Turkmenistan proper
appear rarely: one of the only images locatable to the republic is the exterior shot of the
Turkmenistan textile factory. Republics do not register in the gaze of the *kino-eye,* which is
trained from its position in Moscow on the Soviet periphery. Only regions such as the
“Caucasus” and “Turkestan,” which encompassed the republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan,
as well as Turkmenistan, are marked in Vertov’s landscape of the Soviet state, which is defined
by its potential and its socialist distribution of resources.

Unlike the Eurasianists’ essays and *Shestaia chast’ mira,* Tikhonov’s three texts invite
readers of Russian to gaze upon Turkmenistan itself, promising to lead them out of their
stultifying routines and introduce them to specific sites that they might otherwise never
encounter. In contrast to Vertov’s footage of the TSSR, the provenance of Tikhonov’s
Turkmenistan’s texts is on full display. His well-documented travels in the republic qualify him,
in theory, as a guide. Ultimately, however, Tikhonov’s Turkmenistan likewise is elided into a larger whole. In this case, the TSSR is enfolded into the Soviet “East,” a space that is defined, by the poet-adventurer, as a realm of exploration for urban visitors from European Russia, one that offers relief from modernity, encounters with sublimity, and access to Romantic experience.
Chapter Two

Outsiders as Facilitators of Socialist Construction (1928–1932)

«Мы приехали сюда не как туристы, не ради простого любопытства, мы не просто путешествуем...»

We did not come here as tourists, out of simple curiosity. We are not simply traveling...

--Vladimir Lugovskoi, March 31, 1930

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I turn to a set of cultural producers who, while still “outsiders” to the region when the category is determined by the ascribed status of birth place, approached Turkestan from on the ground as facilitators of “socialist construction,” and more specifically as mediators and witnesses of it. I open the chapter with a discussion of two texts produced to document the construction of the Turkestan-Siberian (“Turksib”) Railway: Viktor Turin's film Turksib and Viktor Shklovsky’s related children’s book of the same name. I include a discussion of these texts, despite the fact the railway did not penetrate into Turkmenistan proper, because the new line stretched to the existing Trans-Caspian railway through Turkmenistan and thus connected the republic to Siberia and the larger Soviet rail network (figs. 2.1 and 2.2). Moreover, since the railway was associated with the region of “Turkestan” as a whole rather than just with Kazakhstan and Siberia, depictions of its construction effectively extended to Turkmenistan. Indeed, in the eyes of Soviet audiences, works about the Turksib railway like Turin’s film “showed how quickly socialism penetrated the desert” («показывал, как быстро входит

151 “Udarnaia brigada pisatelei u tekstil’shchikov,” Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (hereafter abbreviated as RGALI), f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 27, l. 51.
социализм в пески»), rather than into any one specific delimited republic.¹⁵² Next I turn to the first writers’ brigade sent to Turkmenistan, in 1930, and analyze three of the works published in the brigade’s collective almanac, Turkmenistan vesnoi (Turkmenistan in the Spring). Together, I argue, the Turksib texts and Turkmenistan vesnoi illustrate a range of approaches that facilitator-outsiders adopted when they traveled to the region on behalf of the state during the First Five-Year Plan and approached the theme of socialist construction, from that of visiting modernizer to that of self-parodying guest.

¹⁵² Shoshin, Poet romanticheskogo podviga, 136.
Figure 2.1 Map depicting the Trans-Caspian Railway (built 1879–1886), which stretched through the TSSR. Source: Map 38 in Rafis Abazov, The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), unpaginated.
Figure 2.2. The plan for the Turkestano-Siberian Railroad, which effectively extended the Trans-Caspian Railroad northeast to Semipalatinsk via the Kazakh ASSR (from 1936 the Kazakh SSR). Source: Matthew Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 32.

II. Outsiders at a “Socialist Construction” Site: Turin, Shklovsky, and Turksib

The 1400 kilometer-long Turksib railroad line from Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, to Frunze (now Bishkek), Kyrgyzstan, was built between December 1926 and January 1931. Several other Central Asian construction projects from this period were well documented in Russian-language cultural works. Konstantin Paustovskii wrote a popular children’s novel entitled *Kara-Bugaz* (1932, adapted to film in 1935) about the bay in Turkmenistan where an

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153 For a recent historical account of Turksib’s construction and the *korenizatsiya* (nativization) policies that affected it, see Matthew Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001).
industrial salt-extraction plant was created during the First Five-Year Plan,\(^{154}\) while Bruno Jasiński gained fame for his industrial novel *Chelovek meniaet kozhu* (*Man Changes His Skin*, first published in *Novyi mir* 1932–1933, adapted to film 1979), about the construction of a 150-meter-long irrigation canal for the Vakhsh valley in Tajikistan.\(^{155}\) The Turksib railway, however, was the flagship construction project for Central Asia and Kazakhstan and, along with the Dnepr Dam, one of the major undertakings of the First Five-Year Plan.

Unsurprisingly, given its prominence and the Soviet production practices of the First Five-Year Plan, the Turksib railway project was heralded in dozens of films and literary works, mostly non-fictional, especially in the period 1929–1931. Notable documentary films about the project include Viktor Ermolaev’s *Pervomaiskii podarok trudiaschchimsia strany* (*A May 1st Gift to the Laborers of the Country*, 1930) and G. Room’s *Turksib otkryt: kino-ocherk* (*Turksib is Open: A Cinema Sketch*, 1930).\(^{156}\) Literary texts range from collections of articles written by participants in the construction process to “On the Turksib Roads,” a work by the Uzbek poet G’afur G’ulom (Russified as Gafur Guliam, Anglicized as Gafur Gulam) that was published in


an English translation by Langston Hughes.\footnote{Matthew Payne lists the following texts in his account of how the railroad was depicted: A. Briskin, \textit{Na Iuzhnuturksibe: Ocherki Turksiba} (\textit{On the Southern Turksib: Sketches of Turksib}, Alma–Ata, 1930); Vit. Fiodorovich, \textit{Konets pustyni: Ocherki} (\textit{The End of the Desert: Sketches}, Moscow, 1931); Komitet Sodeistviia postroike Turkestano-Sibirskoi zheleznoi dorogi pri SNK RSFSR, \textit{Turkestano-Sibirskoi magistral’}: \textit{Sbornik statei} (\textit{The Turkestano-Siberian Thoroughfare}, Moscow, 1929); Z. Ostrovskii, \textit{Turksib}; \textit{Sbornik statei uchastnikov stroitel’stva Turkestano-Sibirskoi zheleznoi dorogi} (\textit{Turksib: An Anthology of Articles by Participants in the Construction of the Turkestano-Siberian Railroad}, Moscow, 1930); Zinaida V. Rikhter, \textit{Semafory v pustyne: Na izyskaniakh Turkestano-Sibirskoi zheleznoi dorogi} (\textit{Semafores in the Desert: On the Findings of the Turkestano-Siberian Railroad}, Moscow, 1929); O. Romancherko, \textit{Kogda ostupaiut gory: O stroitel’stve Turksiba} (\textit{When the Mountains Retreat: About the Construction of Turksib}, Moscow, 1968); Gafur Gulam, “On the Turksib Roads,” trans. Langston Hughes and Nina Zorokovina, \textit{International Literature} 4 (October 1933): 87–89; I. Ilf and E. Petrov, “Zolotoi telenok” (“The Golden Calf”), in \textit{Sobranie sochinenii} (Moscow, 1961), 2: 289–328. (Matthew Payne, “Viktor Turin’s \\textit{Turksib} (1930) and Soviet Orientalism,” \textit{Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television History} 21, no. 1 [2001]: 58, n14.)} I have chosen to focus on Turin’s \textit{Turksib} (1929) and Shklovsky’s \textit{Turksib} (1930) because they stand as paradigmatic examples of two complementary types of outsider-facilitator texts about the construction of socialism in Turkestan: that of an author witnessing and contributing to the modernization of the periphery, and that of an author reporting back to the center about the periphery. The “mediating” dimension of Turin’s text has not received as much critical attention as the alleged “Orientalist” elements of the film, but in my reading the film stands as a metatext about the revivification of Turkestan through contact with representatives from the center. Shklovsky’s children’s book \textit{Turksib}, although produced in conjunction with Turin’s film, represents the other type of text, one in which the author mediates information by presenting his narrator as a bearer of experience from the periphery to the center.

\textbf{Viktor Turin’s Turksib}

Shot by Evgenii Slavinskii and loosely based on a screenplay Turin had written with Shklovsky, Aleksandr Macheret, and Iakov Aron, \textit{Turksib} was the first major feature of the film studio Vostok-Kino, which had been established in March 1927 to propagandize the Party-State’s nationalities policy and enlighten the “backward” East of the Russian republic, including...
the Crimea, the North Caucasus and Volga regions, Siberia, and Buriat-Mongolia. Much like Vertov’s *Shestaia chast’ mira*, Turin’s *Turksib* departed substantially from what had originally been planned by the filmmaker and approved by the studio. Granted a great deal of personal discretion—perhaps, as Matthew Payne speculates, because of the “impeccable subject matter”—Turin quickly deviated from the original script and the budget constraints, shooting 10,000 rather than 7,000 meters of film and working on sixteen separate locations. Possibly because of his truculence while making *Turksib*, Turin was unable to make another film for nearly ten years.

Turin’s experimentations proved popular with Soviet and foreign audiences, at least in the short run. The film had a slow start when it premiered in October 1929, initially being booked in only three of Moscow’s least prestigious theaters for matinee performances. With the financial support of Vostok-Kino and critical approval by the Association of Workers of Revolutionary Cinematography (Assotsiatsiia Rabotnikov Revoliutsionnoi Kinematografii, or ARRK), the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (Rossiiskaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskikh Pisatelei, or RAPP), and the press, however, *Turksib* soon became a hit among audiences and critics in the Soviet capital. The film was marked as a model for emulation in a September

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158 On Vostok-Kino, see Payne, “Viktor Turin’s *Turksib*,” 38; J. Hoberman, “A Face to the Shtetl: Soviet Yiddish Cinema, 1924-1936,” in *Inside the Film Factory*, 137. One of Vostok–Kino’s other films of this period was Iuli Raizman’s *Zemlia zhazhdet* (*The Earth Thirsts*, 1930, re-released in 1931 with a postsynchronous soundtrack), which depicts a group of idealistic young engineers (one Russian, one Turkmen, one Jew, one Ukrainian, one Georgian) coming together to build a canal in a remote village in Turkmenistan. (Hoberman, “A Face to the Shtetl,” 137.)

159 Payne writes: “The shooting schedule became a protracted nightmare as Turin insisted on unplanned shots. Of 135 days shooting, [production manager] Kim later claimed that 89 had been spent getting from one to another location.” (Payne, “Viktor Turin’s *Turksib*,” 47.)

160 Turin made just one more film after this, *Bakintsy* (*Men of Baku*, 1938). (Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, 163, n12.)

161 Payne, “Turin’s *Turksib*,” 48–52. *Turksib* grossed over 62,000 rubles in four months (October 1929–January 1930) in the theaters and, after SovKino’s cut was deducted, it made a profit of about 15,000 for Vostok-Kino.
1929 government resolution\textsuperscript{162} and was screened, along with ten other movies, at the First All-Union Olympiad of the Arts in Moscow, in a festival highlighting the best of contemporary Soviet cinema.\textsuperscript{163} Moreover, it met with immediate success when it was shown abroad, playing to full houses in Berlin, Vienna, Rotterdam, and London and influencing the shape of documentary filmmaking there.\textsuperscript{164} Yet, in the later 1930s, Turin’s \textit{Turksib} fell out of favor in the Soviet Union, most probably because it did not highlight the Party’s leading role in socialist construction: it was pulled from circulation in 1936, along with a number of other films.\textsuperscript{165}

Before it disappeared from view, however, Turin’s \textit{Turksib} helped to generate a strand of Soviet discourse about the successful modernization of Central Asia with the help of representatives from the Soviet center.\textsuperscript{166} The precise angle of \textit{Turksib}’s view of Central Asia’s

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These, according to Payne, were quite respectable figures for a first-run feature, especially a documentary, or “\textit{kul’turfil’m}.” (Ibid., 50.)
\end{flushright}


\textsuperscript{163} Among the other films chosen for the Olympiada was a second one about Central Asia, broadly defined: Vsevolod Pudovkin’s \textit{Potomok Chengis-khana (The Descendent of Genghis Khan}, in English usually called \textit{Storm Over Asia}, Mezhrabpomfilm, 1928), which focuses on Mongolia. A. Vladychuk’s \textit{Beloe zoloto (White Gold}, Turkmenfilm, 1929) was on an early list of films recommended for screening but was not, in the end, shown at the festival. (Bohlinger, “Compromising Kino,” 54, 52.)

\textsuperscript{164} Payne, “Turin’s \textit{Turksib},” 52. The film seems to have proved especially influential in Great Britain, where the canonical film \textit{Night Mail} (dir. Harry Watt, 1936) is often discussed as a kind of British translation of \textit{Turksib}. On this, see Scott Anthony, \textit{Film Classics: Night Mail} (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 39–41 and the DVD \textit{The Soviet Influence: From Turksib to Night Mail} (British Film Institute, 2011).


\textsuperscript{166} I echo Payne here, who argues that the film “was not simply reflective of a Stalinist Orientalism, but generative of it,” maintaining that “\textit{Turksib} helped to create an Orientalist vernacular in which these national myths were expressed.” (Payne, “Viktor Turin’s \textit{Turksib},” 56.) Payne sees echoes in the films \textit{Three Songs of Lenin} (dir. Vertov, 1934) and \textit{Moskva-Kara Kum-Moskva} (dir. Tisse, 1930). (Ibid.) For more on Orientalism and Soviet film, see Michael G. Smith, “Cinema for the ‘Soviet East’: National Fact and Revolutionary Fiction in Early Azerbaijani film, \textit{Slavic Review} 56, no. 4 (1997): 645–678; Alexander V. Prusin and Scott C. Zeman, “Taming Russia’s Wild East:
modernization is debatable, as Anne Dwyer has recently suggested in an analysis of the film’s contrast between camel and railroad. Emma Widdis has read the film as a depiction of the transformation (preobrazhenie) of the lands opened up by the railway, rather than their mastery (osvoenie), suggesting that, in the film, “the new railway is harmoniously integrated into the ‘natural world,’” becoming “part of a new vision of nature.” Matthew Payne, in contrast, has argued that the film revolves around the problem of domination, suggesting that “the documentary made explicit a conflict of nature against man, the primitive against the machine, and ancient sloth against modern industry” and embodied these battles in ethnic terms, as “‘advanced’ Europeans in the film oppose ‘backward’ Kazakhs.” There is scholarly disagreement, in other words, over whether the film presents the construction of the railway as an “adventure of exploration and discovery,” to quote Widdis again, or as a battle between opposing forces.

For my part, I am inclined to read the film in terms closer to Payne’s, and not only because the film announces a “war on the primitive” in its final reel and echoes Soviet discourse from the period about the “battle with the desert,” one of the key Bolshevik wars on nature. I am also disposed to take this view because of the film’s explicit focus on the experience of the surveyors (izyskateli) who enter Turkestan and Kazakhstan and create landscapes of the region.


168 Widdis, Visions of a New Land, 105.

169 Payne, “Victor Turin’s Turksib,” 53. Payne also argues that Turksib can fit into Michael G. Smith’s categories of “national realism” and suggests that it belongs to a large body of Soviet films with Stalinist Orientalist strains. See Smith, “Cinema for the ‘Soviet East.’”

170 Widdis, Visions of a New Land, 104.
that are marked by specific visions of its development and transformation. The film may ultimately emphasize harmonious cooperation between Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs, camels and trains, as Widdis suggests, but in order for this harmony to be reached at the end of the film, the outsiders must enter the space of the Turksib railway, map it, and lay the groundwork for its future. A closer look at the film sheds light on how Turin’s approach to Turkestan foregrounds the figure of the modernizing intermediary.

Turin’s *Turksib* consists of a prologue and five “acts”: “Water,” “The Barrier Between,” “Out to the Hills and the Steppes,” “The Attack is Launched,” and “From North to South — From South to North—.” The prologue establishes that the film will serve as an introduction to Turkestan and its physical and economic climate: from its first intertitle, “Turkestan, in Central Asia — a land of burning heat,” the film clearly frames Turkestan and the economic challenges it faces for those unfamiliar with it. The territory is a natural environment for growing cotton, the prologue argues (with opening shots of blooming cotton plants), but much of Turkestan’s good cotton land is sacrificed for grain, since, according to the fourth intertitle, “the people must eat.” The solution, the prologue suggests, is to bring grain from Siberia and “free the land for cotton,” but there is an obstacle to this plan: between the two territories lies the desert, which is defined in the intertitles as a “barrier” and a “problem for Turkestan — for Siberia — for the Soviet Union.”

After this prologue—which presents footage only of cotton in various stages of development, not grain or the railway of the film’s title, suggesting that the “blossoming” of the Turkestan is the primary goal of the undertaking—the film moves on to a more detailed presentation of its argument. The first reel depicts, in the words of its first intertitle, “the parched

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171 Here and in my analysis below, I use the English chapter titles and intertitles in the 1930 English version prepared by John Grierson. (See the DVD *From Turksib to Night Mail*, BFI, 2011.)
fields of Turkestan.” This reel emphasizes that the skies here produce little rain and that the cotton fields worked by the dekhany, or Central Asian peasants, are nearly always short on water, as are the canals that crisscross the fields. Although the middle portions of this reel show “snow-capped heights” from which water flows, as well as grain fields, the dominant geographical landscape of this reel is the cracked takyrs, or mudflats (fig. 2.3), which represent the water shortage of Turkestan even more starkly than the dry cotton fields that also appear within the film. The dominant inhabitants of this landscape, meanwhile, are the male laborers who are stuck “waiting” and “helpless,” to quote two different intertitles, for water that all too rarely arrives. Occasionally these men are shown working: in one sequence they spring to their feet as water fills a canal; in another, they pick cotton alongside women. The majority of the footage, however, depicts them as dormant as the landscape, awaiting the water that will put them to work, and for the grain that will free up more space—and more water—for the cultivation of grain (fig. 2.4).

Figures 2.3 and 2.4 The takyr of Turkestan; Turkestan’s male laborers sit dormant. Source of these stills and all stills from Turksib below: From Turksib to Night Mail (BFI, 2011).

The second reel of Turksib, which Graham Roberts calls “a travelogue with an economic message,” focuses on the inhospitable landscapes that form a “barrier” between Turkestan and
Siberia and on the challenge of overcoming these barriers. In this section, the viewer is once again provided explanatory information about life in these territories, including the facts that gathered wood constitutes “[t]he fuel of Central Asia,” that sheep are “[f]attened on the summer pastures of Kazakhstan,” and that a rocky, mountainous route leads to market from “the depths of Kazakhstan.” At the center of this reel, however, is the juxtaposition of two processions: one of caravans that travel through the deserts of Turkestan, and another—“A THOUSAND MILES BEYOND,” to quote the capitalized intertitles—made up of horse-drawn sleds that traverse the snow. On occasions “when the North-East is still,” the film emphasizes, the passage of the caravans across the desert is smooth, albeit slow. “But when from the North-East—” the powerful wind, or “SIMOON,” arrives, the journey across the desert is life-threateningly treacherous, suggests the most famous (and expensive) sequence in Turksib: that of the caravan hit by a horrific sandstorm. The sleds in the north, meanwhile, seem to face fewer obstacles. Their main problem is that, while they are connected to train yards and grain-processing facilities, they are not linked up to Turkestan, since, according to the final intertitle of this reel, “THE WAY IS CLOSED.” If Gostorg was a fully functional trade network binding “one sixth of the world” together in Vertov’s film, this trade network seems fractured and incomplete, in desperate need of connectors.

In the third reel of Turksib, these connectors begin to appear in the form of surveyors. While the first two reels depict the stasis of Turkestan and suggest that the caravans across the Soviet Union should be connected to one another (so that Turkestan can be awakened and “opened up”), this is the first reel to suggest that a particular group should (and will) be

172 Roberts, Forward Soviet!, 111.

173 According to Payne, the budget for the film “ballooned from 29,000 to 35,000 rubles,” with the sandstorm scene “jumping from an estimated 355 to 3900 rubles.” (Payne, “Viktor Turin’s Turksib,” 47.)
responsible for this task: “[t]he first patrol,” “[t]he advance guard of a new civilization.” This vanguard, according to Turksib, is made up of an airplane that assesses from above and a group of male surveyors who travel about the steppe—sometimes on foot, sometimes by truck— with binoculars and other inspection equipment. That the men assess the land from a wide range of views is emphasized by the varying camera angles from which they are shot: the head-on, medium shots of the men (fig. 2.5) emphasize that they use their individual perspectives to catch details on the ground, while the long shots from above (fig. 2.6) suggest that the men also take in large stretches of territory by moving together in vehicles across the space.

Figures 2.5 and 2.6. The surveyors travel on foot through the steppe, arrive by truck into a yurt camp.

These surveyors, who are not explicitly tied to the Party, travel about gathering data and bringing local communities into the Soviet fold, as their encounter with the residents of a yurt camp they visit suggests. As the visitors approach this camp, the residents are shown to be napping (fig. 2.7), as dormant as the laborers waiting for water. As the outsiders approach, however, these residents begin to stir. At first they are shown to be deeply suspicious: they look worriedly out of their yurts; the intertitles proclaim “Strangers” and then “STRANGERS.” Once they have contact with the surveyors, however, the residents become supportive of the visitors’
mission (one woman happily serves them food) and even entertained by them. As the prospectors prepare to depart the camp, men, women (Figure 2.8), and children swarm around the truck—defined, in quotation marks, as “a devil’s chariot” in one of the intertitles—to bid them goodbye. The arrival of the surveyors, much like the arrival of water in the first reel, awakens the population, including groups of women, largely absent from the first two reels, who now seem coquettishly overjoyed at the visitors’ arrival. Their visit promises to reinvigorate not only the male laborers working the fields (the first line of contact offered to outsiders), but also the women tending their domestic realms (the second, more protected line).

Figures 2.7 and 2.8: Kazakh women sleep before the surveying party arrives, but are awake and joyful as the surveyors depart.

Only toward the end of this reel, when the “plan of the line” appears on screen (fig. 2.9), does it become clear that the surveyors are working on the Turksib train line. The surveyors’ connection to the Turksib railroad is made explicit as a stop-motion animation of their tools and documents leads directly into an animated map (fig. 2.10) of the route planned for the Turksib line. The sequence is reminiscent of early Hollywood films about travel to Africa, which often showed maps to help their viewers make sense of the “dark” continent and the travelers’ progress.
As in those films, the map here confirms that the surveyors are helping to master and control Turkestan and Kazakhstan, paving the way for the replacement of the desert caravans with more efficient means of transportation and, thus, for a better integration of these peoples into the Soviet Union. They are the first heroes of the film: it is their knowledge, it seems, that makes their surveying tools dance of their own device, in an animation sequence very similar to those found in Vertov’s *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*).

With the planned Turksib line now introduced, the film moves on, in the fourth reel, to footage of the actual construction of the railroad. Here, the next wave of heroes appears, including the Kazakh and Russian laborers who dig rail beds (figs. 2.11 and 2.12) and the pneumatic drills and mechanized excavators that prepare the “dour land” (figs. 2.13 and 2.14). Within this set of heroic laborers, the Russians are glorified as individual, sexualized protagonists, while the local Kazakh workers appear undistinguished one from the next. When a Russian man is showing digging a ditch, he is barely clothed, and the camera shoots him straight on in a mid shot, lingering on his solitary exertion as a master of the space around him. He is the dominant figure in the landscape produced by Turin and his filmmakers. The Kazakh laborers, in

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contrast, are shown fully clothed, working in groups, filmed from above in a wide shot. Although they appear to be transforming the land around them, they are not granted the same dominant status as the individual Russian laborer—or, for that matter, the man penetrating rock with the pneumatic drill and the excavator that is shot in close up. The Kazakhs’ labor, according to the logic of the film, is less heroic than the visitors’, apparently because it depends upon the visitors’ stimulation to begin.

Figures 2.11, 2.12: Russian and Kazakh laborers dig.

Figures 2.13, 2.14: The machines that labor alongside the men: a pneumatic drill that serves an extension of man, an anthropomorphized excavator in profile.

Gradually, the railbed extends “into the wild,” to quote an intertitle, and emerges from the rubble. As it appears, the railroad is presented as a novelty for the nomadic populations of the
steppe. One group on horses and bulls is shown surrounding a train engine in seeming confusion (fig. 2.15) and then breaking into a gallop alongside the train, apparently trying—and failing—to outrace it.\(^{175}\) The new technology of Turksib, the end of this reel suggests, is a challenge to the way of life of the nomads and to their existing modes of transportation (represented in fig. 2.16 by the camel).

![Figures 2.15 and 2.16: Nomads and their animals make sense of the new railway.](image)

This last theme is explored in more detail in the final reel of the film, which suggests that the completion of the Turksib railway will not only enable an exchange of Siberian grain for Turkestan cotton. It will also coincide with irrigation of the parched Turkestan fields and a “WAR” being waged “ON THE PRIMITIVE,” to quote two intertitles. With the arrival of the

\(^{175}\) Payne takes particular umbrage at this scene, arguing that “the Kazakhs, who in their own environment are displayed as efficient and business-like as they break camp, are weak and ridiculous when faced with modern technology. Not only does the train defeat every rider, but since the nomads are riding all sorts of animals totally inappropriate for speed (such as a bullocks and camels), it humiliates them.” (Payne, “Turin’s Turksib,” 53.) Payne goes on to note that scenes such as this are rare in Russian and Soviet iconography, since horsemen were often “coded as a romantic vision of revolutionary support,” as in representations of the Red Cavalry or in films such as Chapaev (1934). (Ibid., 54.) Widdis interprets the “race” sequence quite differently, as a mark of the harmonious integration of the railroad into the “‘natural’ world.” She writes that “the end of Turin’s Turksib shows a train metaphorically ‘galloping’ across the landscape, accompanied by cheering children, Kazakhs on horseback, and camels.” She then adds that “the final frame sees a lone camel investigating the tracks and then calmly settling to graze around them.” This comment suggests that Widdis saw a version of the film that did not include the fifth and final act. (Widdis, Visions of a New Land, 105.) My own reading of the film more closely aligns with Payne’s than Widdis’s, but the latter’s interpretation is a provocative one.
train, *Turksib* suggests, the local populations will become literate and adept at such heroic Soviet professions as tractor-driving and train-signaling. Individual Central Asians, in other words, will bloom like the cotton plants that are once again featured in the conclusion of the film, during an increasingly rapid montage that also cuts among various parts of a train in motion, its movement along rails, mills at work, and the number 30. This montage confidently pronounces, eventually, that Turksib “WAS COMPLETED” in the year 1930.176

What is most striking about Turin’s *Turksib* in the context of the present discussion of outsiders is how it emphasizes the importance of the visiting surveyors. The outsiders’ penetration, observation, and documentation of Turkestan are crucial for the construction teams at work on the Turksib line and to the local populations; without them, according to the logic of the film, the railway would remain unbuilt and the Central Asians dormant. Their appearance marks the turning point in the film, and apparently a turning point in the history of Turkestan. The particular weight granted the surveyors in the film is evident in the fact that their point of view is explicitly represented in a series of shots that appear to be filmed through leveling instruments (figs. 2.17 and 2.18). It is important to recognize, however, that these reframed shots focus on the surveyors themselves, rather than on the local populations or on given stretches of territory. By concentrating on the intermediaries documenting the landscape, these shots direct our attention to the processes of observation, measurement, and documentation, encouraging us to compare the surveyors’ devices with those of the filmmakers. Both the filmmakers and the surveyors, it seems, are not merely visitors to the republic: they are privileged, and critically important, modernizers.

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176 The pronouncement of the date in the film was clearly propagandistic, as the original plan for the railway called for Turksib to be completed by 1932. As it happened, the railway line was completed in 1931, still ahead of schedule.
Figures 2.17 and 2.18: The surveyors’ perspective is explicitly represented.

There are, of course, important distinctions between the filmmakers and the surveyors in the film. The surveyors create landscapes out of the uncharted spaces of Turkestan and Kazakhstan to facilitate the railroad’s construction, and their implied audiences are the engineers and bureaucrats directly engaged with the building of the Turksib. The filmmakers, on the other hand, create landscapes out of the construction project that is transforming the spaces of Turkestan and Kazakhstan, and their implied audiences are viewers not directly connected to the railway project. Despite these differences, the viewer of the film is invited to identify the filmmakers with those who are remaking Turkestan and to support them as facilitators of the Party-State’s project. The film, in effect, agitates for the Turksib construction project by transporting the viewer to the railway’s sites and implicating him in the development of the Soviet periphery. The September 1929 resolution by RAPP that lauded Turksib also labeled cinema “one of the factors facilitating socialist construction as a whole” and “the branch that promotes the growth of the national economy as a whole,” by mobilizing the masses around the measures adopted by the Party and Soviet power. Although the resolution did not identity Turksib as an agitational film that promotes the growth of the national economy and mobilizes

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Kirshon et al., “RAPP Resolution on Cinema,” 275, emphasis in original.
the masses around the principle of “socialist construction,” it well could have, for *Turksib* aims to do just this: it is clear propaganda for the Turksib project and its potential, as well as for the very metaphor of “socialist construction” that was so common during the First Five-Year Plan.

Importantly, Turin emphasizes that the figures whose perspective is most critical for the transformation of Turkestan and Kazakhstan are those of the outsiders who are participating in the project. The filmmakers themselves are not characters in *Turksib*, but they are represented in the form of these surveyors, who enter the community from the outside, record their observations, and return to their urban bases with visions of the land that are explicitly marked—as the surveying shots make clear—by their particular perspectives. Much like canals delivering fresh water from the mountains, these surveyors leave a revivified landscape in their wake: one ripe for drilling, blossoming, and construction.

**Viktor Shklovsky’s *Turksib***

Viktor Shklovsky’s children’s book *Turksib*, produced in conjunction with Turin’s film, takes a similar stance in terms of the role of outsider-facilitators for the transformation of Turkestan and the Kazakh steppe. Shklovsky’s text diverges from the film in a crucial way, however: it introduces a mediating narrator, who brings the Turksib project into Russian homes and domesticates it by explaining and translating it into terms comprehensible to readers unfamiliar with Central Asia or the Turksib project. While Turin’s film focuses on the figures engaged in the construction project and implicitly aligns the filmmakers with the surveyors and laborers it features, Shklovsky’s text focuses on the narrator as a link between the Turksib project and the Union center. If Turin’s *Turksib* is focused on agitating for and assisting in the remaking of Turkestan and Kazakhstan by transforming it into visual landscapes, Shklovsky’s
Turksib is focused on mediating and explaining the construction project by transforming it into verbal landscapes.

Shklovsky’s verbal mediation begins on the cover of his book (fig. 2.20), where Shklovsky’s signature is figured as the steam coming out of a Turksib engine. Dwyer has recently argued that the placement of Shklovsky’s hand-written name “announces the writer’s presence” and suggests that “he might help negotiate old and new forms of transportation and production.” I am fully persuaded by her claim that Shklovsky’s name “mediates graphically between the caravan and the railway,” but to this I would add that it mediates in a very particular way: by suggesting that Russian language (here in the form of the letters of his name) is a critical component to the Turksib railway project, for it connects the construction to the rest of the Soviet Union. This dimension of Shklovsky’s Turksib becomes even clearer when its marketing is contrasted with the marketing of Turin’s film in the poster for it by Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg (fig. 2.19).

Dwyer, “Standstill as Extinction.”
In the Stenberg poster, Turin’s film is promoted as primarily a product of “Vostok-Kino” (the studio’s name appears below the title of the film, in the upper right-hand corner), and only secondarily as a work of “author-director” Viktor Turin, whose name appears in a smaller font in the bottom left-hand corner of the poster, along with the names of the assistant writer-director (E. Aron) and the cinematographers (B. Frantsisson and E. Slavinskii). The poster promises, moreover, a direct confrontation between the train and the viewer: the train heads straight toward the audience, much like the train in the Lumière Brothers’ *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895),
passing unceasingly through the men who herald its arrival. Shklovsky’s text, in contrast (Figure 2.20), is prominently branded as a work of a specific author, in this case a famous writer and theoretician of formalism. His cover’s layout, moreover, suggests that the project is fully under Shklovsky’s control as author. Both the train and the camel caravan are bracketed by horizontal lines, neatly separated one from the other by Shklovsky’s name and the title of his work. Given the angle of their processions, it is likely, as Dwyer suggests, that these two caravans will meet. The cover, however, suggests that their meeting will not be violent or unsettling. Neither the train nor the camel caravan threatens confrontation with one another or the reader; rather, they harmoniously move into their respective distances, protected by the mediating force of Shklovsky’s horizontal signature, the (Russian-language) title of the book, and a vast empty space in the middle of the cover, which evokes the breadth of the Union and the scale of the Turksib project.

Within the text itself, which consists of stills from Turin’s film and written text by Shklovsky, the author further domesticates the railway and the territories through which it passes for the Russian-reading children who constitute his audience. In this sense, Shklovsky’s *Turksib* functions much like other travel literature by Europeans about non-European parts of the world, which according to Mary Louise Pratt helped create the “domestic subject” of Euroimperialism. This strategy is nowhere more apparent than in the opening of the book, where a section entitled “Obyknovennye veshchi” (“Ordinary Things”) frames the work as an explanation of how cotton goods are produced, and defines the Turksib railway project as a thoroughfare that brings these goods to “our” homes and tables. It is clear from these opening

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lines that the text and its accompanying photographs are addressed to children living outside of Central Asia and unfamiliar with it. I quote this first section in full:

Вот, например, есть простыни. Тяжелые, наощупь холодные, очень прочные. Они—льяные. А есть простыни полегче, наощупь теплее, они легко желтеют. Говорят, что они — бумажные.180

What a great distance these things traveled in order to gather together on our table in the morning. The traveler from furthest away is the tea: it came from China. The white bread is from somewhere in the Northern Caucasus. The butter is from Vologda.

But if we were to explain the history of each thing, so much time would pass that we would sit at the table all through morning tea, and breakfast, and lunch, and dinner.

Take bedsheets, for example. Heavy, cold to the touch, very durable. These are linen. But there are lighter sheets, warmer to the touch; they turn yellow easily. They say they are papery.

Although the exact location of “our table” is not specified, the presumed location of the speaker and audience is somewhere in Soviet Russia that is far from China, the Northern Caucasus, Vologda, and any place where cotton is a familiar crop. The film still on this page, together with its accompanying caption, emphasizes that the pamphlet is concerned with framing the region for those outside of it and explaining, by means of a simulated (Russian-language) conversation, how Turkestan relates to the rest of the Soviet Union. A wide, establishing shot of a desert landscape devoid of people is accompanied by the following text:

Пустыня. Видны ребра песчаных дюн. Эти ребрышки образуются от ветра и пересыпаются во время песчаной бури. Среди сыпучего песка торчат полузасыпанные сухие кусты, которые оживают только весной. Вдали видны телеграфные столбы вдоль тракта, ведущего от Семипалатинска к Алма-Ате. На самом горизонте—горы (2).

180 Viktor Shklovskii, Turksib (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1930), 2. Parenthetical citations in the body of the text will refer to this edition.
The desert. The ribs of the sand dunes are visible. These little ribs are formed by the wind: during sandstorms they disperse and form anew. Half-buried, dry bushes stick out of the loose sand, only coming to life in the spring. In the distance telegraph poles are visible along the tract that leads from Semipalatinsk toward Alma-Ata. At the very horizon are the mountains.

The rest of Shklovsky’s *Turksib* functions much like this caption, orienting the (Russia-focused) reader in a particular network that connects them to Turkestan and Kazakhstan and pointing out various facts that would remain unknown to them, were it not for the willingness of Shklovsky’s narrator to travel and present his findings. In effect, Shklovsky’s experiences are transformed into “discoveries” as he presents them in the text: outside of this framework, they would remain merely pieces of information about the region, well known to locals and not in need of “being discovered.” The narrator’s confidence as a scout for his domestic audience is reflected throughout the text, especially in his translations of local words and customs. He frequently glosses words that relate to the reprinted film stills: *aryks* are defined as “canals” («каналы», 10), *malakhai* as a “Kazakh hat” («казацкая шапка», 19). Moreover, he explains local practices and bears witness to the arrival of the modernizing state, discussing how people in Central Asia live in *yurts* of all sizes (11) and noting, flatly, that “[a]utomobiles here are called *shaitan-arba*, which means ‘devil’s cart,’” («[a]utomobili здесь зовут шайтан-арба, что значит “чортова телега”», 10). The narrator even reenacts his own scouting (*razvedka*) of the territory, explicitly leading his readers, via first-person-plural verbs, from one new find to the

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181 I draw here on Pratt’s discussion of Victorian discovery rhetoric in Chapter 9 of *Imperial Eyes*, 197-223.

182 Generally, *kazatskaia*, the adjective that Shklovsky uses here, designates something “Cossack,” rather than something “Kazakh.” I have chosen to translate *kazatskaia* as Kazakh, however, because throughout *Turksib* Shklovsky uses the noun *kazaki* to denote Kazakhs, not Cossacks, and it seems that he derived the adjective *kazakskiaia* from this noun. See note 184, below.
next. Shklovsky writes, under the “scouting” heading: “If we go through Kazakhstan, the Kazakhs will receive us in felt yurts, stretched across wooden frames. They will treat us to wine from horse milk—*kumys*” («Если мы поедем через Казакстан, казаки примут нас в войлочных юртах, натянутых на деревянные основы. Они угостят нас вином из лошадиного молока—кумысом»). Elsewhere, he assures his scouts that “They eat bread in Central Asia, just like us” («В Средней Азии, как и у нас, едят хлеб», 11).

Shklovsky’s narrator not only includes himself in the collective subject of adventure, but also inserts himself repeatedly into his ethnographic accounts. He claims, for instance, that he was responsible for the famous shot in *Turksib* in which the camel sniffs the rails (fig. 2. 15): “I myself saw this camel myself and told Turin, the director who shot the film *Turksib*, about it. The camel became popular; I see it in all the magazines” («Я этого верблюда сам видел и рассказал о нем Турину—режиссеру, который снимал кино-картинку “Турксиб”. Верблюд понравился, я его вижу во всех журналах», 14). Elsewhere, under the heading of “O pustyne i o tom, kak po nei kochuiut” (“On the desert and on how nomads live within it”) and above a photograph of a camel labeled “Pustynia” (“The desert”), Shklovsky explains the expansion of deserts and the practices of nomadism with a mixture of facts and his own experience as a traveler:

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183 On *razvedka* and its place in Soviet discourse, see Widdis, *Visions of a New Land*. Dwyer also discusses Shklovsky’s turn toward *razvedka* in his *Turksib* and *Marko Polo: Razvedchik* (*Marco Polo: Scout*, 1936). (Dwyer, “Standstill as Extinction.”)

184 Shklovsky here and elsewhere in *Turksib* uses the word *kazaki*, which in modern Russian usually refers to “Cossacks,” to denote “Kazakhs.” (He does not use the term *kazakhi*, the word for “Kazakhs” most commonly used in Russian today.) I am convinced that Shklovsky’s “kazaki” refers to “Kazakhs” and not “Cossacks” because the cultural specifics that he refers to—including yurts and *kumys*—are markedly Central Asian. Moreover, according to a dictionary from the 1930s, *kazaki* at the time could be used to refer to the Turkic people that made up the majority nationality in Kazakhstan. See “kazaki,” in Dmitrii Ushakov, *Tolkovyi slovar’ russkogo izyka v 4 t.* (Moscow: Sovetskai entsiklopediia: OGIZ, 1935–1940), t. 1, [http://feb-web.ru/feb/ushakov/ush-abc/11/us1c8002.htm?cmd=2&istext=1](http://feb-web.ru/feb/ushakov/ush-abc/11/us1c8002.htm?cmd=2&istext=1).
За полупустыней лежит пустыня. Люди живут и в пустыне. В ней растет кое-какая трава, кочуют кочевники. Не думай, что кочевники кочуют как попало. Они идут кольцами. Огромным кругом, который замыкают каждый год.

Стада, когда съедят всю траву, идут дальше, за стадами идут люди. Идут вечно смыкающимся кольцом.

Идут стада. Съедают траву, взрыхляют копытами почву. Дует ветер, подымает пыль, взметает ее, несет на поля. Пустыня наступает.

Я знал одну деревню в Нижнем Поволжье. В ней был сход. Говорили о том, что нужно сажать иву, чтобы остановить песок.

Beyond the semidesert lies the desert. People live in the desert as well. Some kind grass grows in it, nomads lead their nomadic existence. Don’t think that nomads wander at random. They move in rings. In a huge circle that they complete every year.

When they eat up all the grass, the herds move on; the people follow the herds. They go in an eternal, closed ring.

The herds move. They eat the grass, they loosen the soil with their hooves. The wind blows, throws up the dust and whirls it around, carrying it to the fields. The desert advances.

I knew one village in the Lower Volga region. It had run-off in it. They talked about how it was necessary to plant a willow to stop the sand.

Dwyer has noted, in reference to this passage, that Shklovsky uses a very similar phrasing in his novel Zoo; ili Pis’ma ne o liubvi (Zoo, or Letters Not About Love, 1923), when he likens the artist to a nomad in search of new literary devices. She has suggested, moreover, that “Shklovsky projects onto his discussion of the Kazakhs’ annual migrations (nomadic in an anthropological sense) the figure of the artist as nomad (nomadic only in a metaphorical sense).”

I would argue, however, that Shklovsky explicitly defines his position against that of the nomads and people of the desert. His “I” emerges from his ethnographic description of their behavior as having distinct patterns from theirs: he follows a larger, more complex trajectory that takes him throughout the Soviet Union and allows him to compare practices from the Lower Volga to those in Central Asia and to explain all he has seen to his young Russian readers. Perhaps because he had been the victim of a vicious state-led campaign earlier in 1930, Shklovsky seems eager to

185. Dwyer, “Standstill as Extinction.”
prove he is an able and trustworthy participant in the Party’s modernization project, not a nomad-in-disguise. He brings his narrator into view as a mediator who—even if not directly participating in the modernization of Turkestan and Kazakhstan—can bring the story of the modernization of Central Asia back home to Russian-reading audiences.

Turin and Shklovsky as Facilitators

When Turin and Shklovsky’s two texts are read against one another, Turin stands as an outside agent trying to effect change in Central Asia by bringing Soviet culture (and audiences) to the region, while Shklovsky stands as an outsider trying to explain change in Central Asia by bringing the culture of the worker-Kazakhs («[р]аботники-казаки», 19) back to his Russian-speaking audiences. Whereas Turin’s visual landscapes bring his audience to Turkestan, Kazakhstan, the construction site, and the laborers transforming the Soviet periphery, Shklovsky’s verbal landscapes deliver the experience of discovering Kazakhstan and working on the Turksib film to readers located outside of the region, ready to sit at “our table” and ponder the relationships among the different territories of the Soviet Union. Shklovsky’s narrator should not be assumed to express Shklovsky-the-author’s thoughts and experiences (it is uncertain, for instance, whether the historical personage of Shklovsky ever in fact learned about a willow tree in the Lower Volga region), but his text suggests that there is little distance between the author so authoritatively announced on the book’s cover and the guide featured within its pages.

Although both Turin and Shklovsky’s works are packaged as non-fiction, Turin’s presents itself as a contribution to the modernization of Central Asia, while Shklovsky’s offers an account of socialist construction, as witnessed by one man. Both Turin and Shklovsky, however, function here as participants: Turin by taking his audiences to the Soviet periphery, and Shklovsky by bringing that which he learned back to his Russian readers and translating it for them.
III. Outsiders at the Construction of a “Socialist Republic”: The First Writers’ Brigade to Turkmenistan

Figure 2.21. A poster advertising a Mostorg exhibition of photographs of Soviet writers. Petr Pavlenko, Nikolai Tikhonov, and Vsevolod Ivanov are pictured on the camel.
Source: Literaturnaia gazeta, May 17, 1933.

From Turin and Shklovsky’s depictions of a specific construction project ranging across Turkestan and Kazakhstan, I turn now to three texts that depict the general phenomenon of “the construction of socialism” in the delimited space of the republic of Turkmenistan. The works I will focus on are Nikolai Tikhonov’s poems “Liudi Shirama” (“The People of Shiram”) and “Iskateli vody” (“Seekers of Water”) and Vsevolod Ivanov’s Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna (The Tale of the Brigadier M. M. Sinitsyn). These texts offer visitors’ impressions of the transformations taking place in Turkmenistan, prepared for audiences unfamiliar with the republic. The two authors, however, take diametrically opposed stances as observers of Turkmenistan. While Tikhonov embraces the tasks of representing the republic for Russian-reading audiences elsewhere in the Union and in facilitating the cultural Sovietization of Turkestan, Ivanov parodies the writers’ brigade and raises questions about the very prospect of representing the “socialist face” of the republic in literature. Before examining the texts and their stances, however, I will outline the circumstances under which they were produced, since they
were created during a groundbreaking attempt to redirect outside literary interest in the “East” toward specific socialist goals and specific socialist republics.

The First Writers’ Brigade to Turkmenistan

On March 22, 1930, six well-established Russian literary figures departed Moscow for Turkmenistan as the first literary shock brigade sent to Central Asia. The brigade included the poets Tikhonov, Grigorii Sannikov (1899–1969), and Vladimir Lugovskoi (1901–1957), as well as the prose writers Ivanov (1895–1963), Leonid Leonov (1889–1994), and Petr Pavlenko (1899–1951). Although of this group only Tikhonov was known for visiting and writing about Turkmenistan, most of the brigade members had some sort of pre-existing relationship with the “East” writ large, a fact that was publicized throughout the writers’ collective excursion, as though it qualified them to write about the new republic. Sannikov, a former Proletcult poet and a member of the literary group The Smithy (Kuznitsa) throughout its existence from 1920–1931, had traveled around the South Caucasus and Persia as a correspondent for the journal Zaria Vostoka (Dawn of the East) and published a cycle of poems about the regions in the collection Molodoe vino (Young Wine, 1927). Pavlenko had spent time in Asia Minor and published the story collection Aziatskie rasskazy (Asian Stories, 1929). Tikhonov’s fellow

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187 Sannikov noted during a meeting in Ashgabat on March 28, 1930 that the choice of writers for the brigade was not random, citing many of the same biographical facts that are provided above. (“Tovarishcheskaia vstrecha,” undated and unsourced newspaper clipping, RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 27, l. 49.)


189 See P. Pavlenko, Aziatskie rasskazy (Moscow: Federatsiya, 1929).
Serapion Brother Vsevolod Ivanov was undoubtedly best known, by this point, for his Civil War trilogy set in Siberia and the Far East, which included the volumes *Partizany* (*The Partisans*, 1921), *Bronepoezd 15-69* (novella 1922, play 1927), and *Tsvetnye vetra* (*Colored Winds*, 1922). Ivanov was also recognized, however, for his ongoing connection to Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Born in Semipalatinsk to a Kazakh mother (he supposedly could speak Kazakh fluently as a child), Ivanov had spent much of his youth in those regions and had traveled to them repeatedly throughout the 1920s. He had also set many of his works in the short story collections *Eksoticheskie rasskazy* (*Exotic Stories*, 1925), *Pustynia Kuub-Toia* (*The Desert Kuub-Toia*, 1926), and *Gafir i Mariam* (1926) there, though not specifically in Turkmenistan.

Only Lugovskoi, author of the poetry collections *Spolokhi* (*Northern Lights*, 1926) and *Muskul* (*Muscle*, 1927), and Leonov, famed for his novels *Barsuki* (*The Badgers*, 1924) and *Vor* (*The Thief*, 1927), had no existing personal relationship to “the East” that could be trumpeted as a qualification. Leonov had written two early tales experimenting with *skaz* and “Eastern” voices in the early 1920s. *Tuatamur* (written 1922, first published in a separate edition 1924) had evoked the world of Tatar-Mongol warriors during the 1223 Battle of the Kalka River, while “Khalil’” (1922, first published in *Nashi dni* in 1925) had explored the point of view of a Persian

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191 Ivanov spent part of the summer of 1925 in the Kyrgyz republic, and planned, at least, to spend the spring of 1926 in Khiva, Bukhara, the Pamir mountains, and Semirech’e and a portion of the spring of 1928 in Turkestan. (V. V. Ivanov – A. M. Gor’komu, 7 oktiabria 1925, in Vs. Ivanov, *Perepiska s A. M. Gor’kim. Iz dnevnikov i zapisnykh knizhek*, comp. T. V. Ivanova and K. G. Paustovskii [Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1969], 29; V. V. Ivanov – A. M. Gor’komu, 20 dekabria 1925, in Ivanov, *Perepiska*, 36; V. V. Ivanov, – A. M. Gor’komu, ianvar’-fevral’ 1928, in Ivanov, *Perepiska*, 53.)

poet and had played with the Persian poetic form of the *qasida*.\(^{193}\) These were isolated experiments, however, and the writer had not followed them with sustained forays into “Eastern” literature.

Invited by the People’s Commissariat for Education (Narkompros) of Turkmenistan, organized on the initiative of Pavlenko,\(^{194}\) and working under the aegis of *Izvestiia* and Gosizdat,\(^{195}\) the six writers were charged with using their varying experiences with the “East” to complete a specific, if wide-reaching, task: they were to depict “the face of the new Soviet Turkmenia as it builds socialism” («лицо новой советской Туркмении, строящей социализм»).\(^{196}\) When they arrived in Turkmenistan, the writers spent eight days in the capital city of Ashgabat, then ventured onwards to the city of Merv (Mari in Turkmen) and the town of Kushka (present-day Serhetabat), on the border with Afghanistan. In the Merv region they visited *kolkhozes* populated by Turkmen, while in the Kushka region they toured *kolkhozes* populated by Beluchi, an Iranian ethnic group living within Turkmenistan. Next the brigadiers saw Iolotan’ and Bairam-Ali, two industrial towns and cotton-growing centers in the Murghab Oasis, and then went on to the town of Kerki, where they toured a frontier *kolkhoz* and were plied with information about the recent battles against locusts and about attempts to revivify the ancient river bed of the Uzboi. They also traveled into the Kara-Kum Desert and saw the

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\(^{196}\) “Dlia chego my priekhali v Turkmeniiu. Beseda s uchastnikami pervoi brigady pisatelei,” *Turkmenskaia iskra*, April 1, 1930, in RGALI, f. 3256, op. 1, d. 90, l. 1–2.
Bassaga-Kerki Canal, which was built in 1930 to help irrigate the desert. Finally, the brigade traveled by boat up the Amu-Darya River to the town of Chardjou, where efforts at collectivization were ongoing.\textsuperscript{197}

Figure 2.22. Geological map of the TSSR in 1929, by P. M. Vasil’evskii, A. V. Danov, and I. I. Nikshich. I have modified the map to show the English names and approximate locations of the main sites visited by the 1930 writers’ brigade. Source: Komissiia ekspeditsionnykh issledovanii, \textit{Turkmeniia}, t. 2 (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1929), map unpaginated. In all, the writers covered some 2170 versts [1440 miles] by railroad, 805 versts [535 miles] by car, 221 versts [146 miles] on horseback, and 300 versts [199 miles] by water.\textsuperscript{198} As they traveled, the writers met with the Chairman of the Turkmen Soviet Council of Peoples’

\textsuperscript{197} “Put’ brigady. Beseda s L. Leonovym”; Prilepin, \textit{Podel’nik epokhi}, 313; Petr Pavlenko, \textit{Puteshestvie v Turkmenistan} [Moscow: Moskovskoe tovarishchestvo pisatelei, 1933], 20; Shoshin, Nikolai Tikhonov, 62.

\textsuperscript{198} “Brigada moskovskikh pisatelei v Turkmenii. Chast’ pisatelei vyekhzla v Moskvu, chast’ prodlit svoe prebyvanie v TSSR,” undated, unsourced newspaper clipping, RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 27, l. 52.
Commissars (Sovnarkom), the chairman of the Turkmen Central Executive Committee, and the Secretary of the Turkmen Central Committee of the Party. They also attended lectures, were shown films, were treated to a series of banquets, and were supplied, according to Lugovskoi, with reams of literature about Turkmenia. In addition, they gave a series of readings, fielded questions at workers’ clubs, factories, and theaters, and had a number of adventures that became mythic to the participants involved—including a near-fatal truck accident that went unreported in the Soviet press.

Tikhonov and Lugovskoi seem to have particularly reveled in the travel, for they chose to continue exploring the Kushka region on horseback and to visit the Kopet-Dag Mountains even after the others had departed by train. The two adventurers remained in the Kushka region for an extra week, riding some 100 versts [66 miles] together along the Afghan border and then another 54 versts [36 miles] to see Kerim-khan, a “feudal lord” who was the leader of 25,000 Beluchi from British India. There, according to Lugovskoi, they encountered such exotic elements as: tents in the desert steppes; plov, tea, and hunting; a khan with four beautiful wives and bodyguards; young khans in picturesque costumes; silhouettes of camels against a starry night, and a “wild cross of Sovietization and feudalism” («дикая помесь советизации и

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199 Natal’ia Gromova, Uzel. Poety: druzhby i razryvy [Moscow: Ellis Lak, 2006], 140.

200 The program for the first of these readings, held in the state theater in Ashgabat, suggests that the writers highlighted the “Eastern” themes of their work when possible. After an introduction by the editor of the newspaper Turkmenskaia iskra (The Turkmen Spark), Pavlenko read an as-yet-unpublished story describing the way of life of the Northern Caucasus, Tikhonov read a series of his poems related to Turkmenia, Sannikov read several of his poems about the East, and Ivanov read a story about how he had once worked as a fakir. Lugovskoi read a set of poems about the epoch of socialist construction, while Leonov read from his 1930 novel Sot’ (occasionally translated as Soviet River). (“Literaturnyi vecher v gosteatre,” undated and unsourced newspaper clipping, RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 50.)

201 Shoshin, Nikolai Tikhonov, 63; Prilepin, Podel’nik epokhi, 318.

202 Shoshin, Nikolai Tikhonov, 62.
The Romantic nature of the trip was so striking to Lugovskoi that, according to Ivanov, he continued talking about their visit to Turkmenistan for years afterward, apparently after Ivanov himself had grown weary of the topic.

While visiting the republic, the writers divided up the themes deemed relevant to the construction of socialism in Turkmenistan and produced a series of works based on their impressions. Tikhonov published the book of sketches Kochevni (Nomads) and the poem cycle Iurga, Petr Pavlenko the novella Pustynia (The Desert) and the travelogue Puteshestvie v Turkmenistan (Travel to Turkmenistan), Leonid Leonov the novella Saranchuki (The Locusts), Vsevolod Ivanov the collection Povesti brigadira Sinitsyna (Tales of Brigadier Sinitsyn) and the play Kompromiss Naib-Khana (The Compromise of Naib-Khan), Sannikov the “novel in verse” V gostiakh u Egipitian (Visiting the Egyptians), and Lugovskoi the collection of poems Bol’sheviki pustyny i vesnoi (For the Bolsheviks of the Desert and the Spring). In addition, all six of the writers contributed to the 1932 almanac Turkmenistan vesnoi (Turkmenistan in the Spring), and several contributed to accounts of the brigade’s trip in the Soviet press.

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203 Gromova, Uzel, 143.

204 Ivanov notes in a February 6, 1932 diary entry: “…Leonov is still talking about Turkmenistan” («...Leonov все еще рассказывает о Туркменистане»). (Ivanov, Perepiska, 329.)

205 Pavlenko summarizes the division of material thus: “N. Tikhonov described Hawdan, where he went with the Gostorg workers to conclude some kind of negotiations, V. Lugovskoi [described] the daily life of women based on the findings of the Women’s Committee, V. Ivanov and I were acquainting ourselves with irrigation issues, and L. Leonov was photographing living history as it passed through the city in caravans, and was becoming interested in the anti-locust campaign” («Н. Тихонов рассказывает о Гаудане, куда он ездил с госторговцами заключать какие-то договора, В. Луговской—о быте женщин по материалам женотдела, мы с В. Ивановым упражнялись в знании водных дел, а Л. Леонов снимал живую историю, караванами проходящую через город, и начинал интересоваться саранчевой кампанией»). (Pavlenko, Puteshestvie v Turkmenistan, 9.)

The brigade and the works produced by its members proved to be significant landmarks in the development of Soviet cultural myths about the new Central Asian republics and their representation in Russian-language literature. They marked a transition between the more idiosyncratic representations of the 1920s and the more standardized representations of the mid-1930s, by which point specific sights had been named and sacralized in Soviet iconography. Moreover, they proved to be the first (rather shaky) steps in a concerted effort to make Sovietized Central Asia visible to citizens from around the Union. Within a few years of this first brigade, commissions would be set up in Moscow to “study” the national literatures; a slew of delegations would be sent to the national republics to facilitate their incorporation into the Soviet Writers’ Union; and Central Asian literary figures such as the Kazakh bard Dzhambul and the Iranian-cum-Tajik poet Lahūtī would begin to be translated widely into Russian and promoted as authorities on—and embodiments of—their national cultures. While the 1930 brigade to Turkmenistan was not the only organized attempt to study Turkmenistan, it did herald in a new era of organized literary efforts to make the Soviet Central Asian republics more familiar to the Soviet Union as a whole, to acquaint Russian readers with Turkmenia, and to put Turkmen literature on the Soviet literary map.

207 I draw here on Dean MacCannell’s suggestion that “the first stage of sight sacralization takes place when the sight is marked off from similar objects as worthy of preservation,” in what he calls “the naming phase.” (Dean MacCannell, The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class, rev. ed. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 (first published 1976)], 44, emphasis his.)


209 In 1934, I. Borozdin summarized the effect of the 1930 brigade in these terms: “The Soviet writers’ brigade excursion in the spring of 1930 played a large role in acquainting readers with Turkmenia. […] All these writers gave reports about their trip in prose and poetry, creating a whole slew of curious compositions that acquainted us with the current stages of the socialist construction of Turkmenia.” (Большую роль в деле ознакомления читателей с Туркменней сыграла поездка бригады советских писателей весной 1930 г. […] Все эти писатели в прозе и стихах отчитались о своей поездке, дав целый ряд любопытных произведений, знакомящих нас с тогдашними этапами социалистической стройки Туркмении.) (I. Borozdin, “Sotsialisticheskoe stroitel’stvo Turkmenii v sovetskoi khudozhestennoi literature,” Turkmenskaia iskra, April 6, 1934, preserved as RGALI, f. 631,
The 1930 brigade and the literature it produced offer us more than just insight into a specific moment in the cultural construction of Soviet Central Asia, however. They also shed light on how the participating Russian writers were being mapped along with the Soviet Turkmenistan they were describing. For when we look at the work of this group in the period of 1930–1932, we see processes of transformation occurring not only in the Central Asian landscapes being depicted, but also among the artists themselves, as each of them works to adapt his own preexisting artistic interest in “the East” to fit the goals of the First Five-Year Plan and the emerging imperial poetics of the Party-State. In particular, I would suggest, we can see the writers struggling to establish new trajectories vis-à-vis three distinct and novel features of the literary field: 1) the growing constraints on what was publishable and politically acceptable; 2) the increasingly imperial methods by which the Russian center was exerting dominance over the Soviet periphery; and 3) the relatively new practice of Soviet “writers brigades” and collective authorship.

The first pressure facing Sannikov, Pavlenko, Ivanov, Tikhonov, Lugovskoi, and Leonov was the fact that the possibilities for acceptable literature were narrowing. Themselves mostly “fellow travelers” not officially aligned with the Party, the brigadiers who went to Turkmenistan in 1930 were well aware of the difficulties writers of their kind had begun to confront in the increasingly repressive Soviet climate. In the months leading up to the 1930 departure of this “brigade,” Shklovsky had—as mentioned above—become a victim of a state-organized campaign (1930), much as Boris Pil’niak and Andrei Platonov had the year before (1929). And as they were traveling in Turkmenistan, Russian literature endured one of its greatest casualties, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 22–24.) Borozdin, a member of the Soviet Writers’ Union orgkomitet devoted to Turkmen literature when he made this statement in 1934, no doubt had a vested interest in promoting the power of writers’ brigades, but his words are nonetheless telling, for they point to the tremendous visibility of the brigade and its products within the official discourse.
when Vladimir Mayakovsky, the great poet of the Revolution, killed himself on April 14th. In his suicide note, he wrote that there was no way out for him and included the (now) famous verses “love’s boat / was wrecked upon the everyday” («любовная лодка / разбилась о быт»).

These lines would come to be associated not only with Mayakovsky’s idiosyncratic romantic circumstances, but also with the failures of the Revolution and the growing difficulty of finding a role as an artist in the evolving Soviet state.  

Indeed, Mayakovksy’s specter not only haunts us as we retrospectively assess how Soviet culture was institutionalized in the late 1920s and 1930s; it also haunted the brigade participants themselves, who received news of his suicide while they were in Turkmenistan. The shocking information prompted responses such as this letter from the poet-brigadier Lugovskoi to his wife:

Только что среди невероятной работы урвал час времени, чтобы написать обстоятельное письмо, как пришло ужасное и немыслимое сообщение о смерти Маяковского. Мне очень трудно говорить об этом, очень больно и непонятно. Много страшного. Поэтому лучше я все обдумаю и напишу после, или совсем не напишу.

Just as I managed to steal an hour to write a substantial letter, amidst an unbelievable amount of work, we learned the awful and inconceivable news of Mayakovksy’s death. It is very difficult for me to speak about it, it is very painful and incomprehensible. There is so much that’s frightening. So it’s better for me to think everything over and write later, or maybe not write anything at all.

As the writers traveled around Turkmenistan, Mayakovksy’s death served as symbolic proof that the field of Soviet literature was becoming further constrained and that it might be best to “think everything over and write afterwards,” or perhaps even “not write anything at all.”

210 Victor Erlich, for instance, chose to conclude his study of Russian modernist literature “in transition” with Mayakovsky’s suicide, writing: “[I]n retrospect the shot on April 14, 1930 must be seen also as a symbolic event: it signalized the end of an era, a collapse of the increasingly precarious modus vivendi between the literary-artistic avant-garde and the regime ushered in by the October Revolution.” (Erlich, Modernism and Revolution, 265).

211 Gromova, Uzel, 140. The news also led Nikolai Tikhonov to recall later that on the eve of their departure, Mayakovksy had approached him in the restaurant at the House of Writers restaurant and asked where they were headed. Having learned they were going to Central Asia, Mayakovksy said that he would happily accompany them, but that he had too many things to which he had to attend. (Ibid.)
The second major change in the literary field to which the writers needed to adapt was the emerging imperial poetics of the Soviet State. For much of the 1920s, it had been possible to write about the “East” from a variety of standpoints, and most of the writers on the brigade had done just that. But by the middle of the First Five-Year Plan, it had become clear that to write about the “East” now meant something different. The writers were expected to direct their imaginations towards specific, circumscribed themes related to the “construction of socialism”: the “liberation” of Central Asian women, the reclamation of the desert, the state of kolkhozes and sovkhozes, the war against the locusts. The writers were, moreover, now expected to act as representatives of the Russian center when approaching Central Asian subject matter. The following excerpt from a contemporary account of the brigade in a Turkmen newspaper emphasizes the stance the brigade was expected to take vis-à-vis the Central Asian Soviet periphery:

Приезд бригады московских писателей, составленной из лучших мастеров художественного слова, красноречиво опровергает все буржуазные басни о «литературном империализме». Товарищи приехали в Туркмению, как посланцы русской литературы, для того, что бы установить еще более крепкую, неразрывную связь между культурами всех народов, населяющих великий Союз, чтобы ознакомиться с нашим строительством и нашими несомненными успехами. [...] Приезжающие к нам иногда московские гости ищут подчас в Средней Азии «восточную экзотику», вдохновленные славой Седого Востока, восхваляют старые «дедовские обычая» и всю тут рухлядь прошлого, которую республики Советского Востока выбросили в мусорную яму истории. Приезжие издалека гости, в погоне за «экзотикой» — уходящим днем, не замечают изумительного по своей культурной и творческой насыщенности расцвета сегодняшнего дня Средней Азии, не видят всех исключительных по своей исторической важности социальных сдвигов.

The arrival of the Moscow writers’ brigade, composed of the greatest masters of the artistic word, eloquently refutes all the bourgeois fables about “literary

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212 „Goriachii, tovarishcheskii privet masteram slova, priekhavshim izuchat’ Sovetskii Vostok,” undated and unsourced newspaper clipping, RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed kh. 27, l. 49, emphasis mine.
The comrades arrived in Turkmenistan as envoys of Russian literature, to establish an even stronger, inextricable connection among the cultures of all the peoples inhabiting the great Union and to become acquainted with our construction and with our indisputable successes. [...] Sometimes guests visiting us from Moscow seek the “eastern exotic” in Central Asia, bowing before the “wisdom of the grey-haired East,” celebrating the old “grandfatherly customs” and all the stuff of the past that the republics of the Soviet East threw in the trash pit of history. In pursuit of the “exotic” of yesteryear, guests from far away do not notice the astonishing intensity of the cultural and creative dawn that is present in contemporary Central Asia. They do not see all the socialist leaps forward in their exceptional historical importance.

As “envoys” of Russian literature, the writers were charged not only with strengthening the “unbroken connection” between the Turkmen and Russian literary traditions, but also with challenging the idea of the “Eastern exotic” so familiar to Russian readers. The writers were especially equipped to do this, the official discourse suggested, because they had come not as tourists and not out of simple curiosity, but rather because they were trying to study the way of life of Turkmenistan. When these writers grew acquainted with contemporary Turkmenistan, the belief went, they would “bring Turkmenia into artistic Russian literature” («введут Туркмению в художественную русскую литературу»), not as a literary colony, but as a brother republic.

Despite the discourse against “literary imperialism” (decades before Edward Said) and the “Eastern exotic,” there was a clear imperial dimension to the brigade’s work, as the following excerpt from a May 8, 1930 article signed jointly by the brigade suggests. In it, the writers stress their support of the “Europeanization” of the Kerki region in the following terms:

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213 The quotation that serves as the epigraph this chapter comes from Lugovskoi’s remarks at a meeting at a textile factory during the writers’ tour of Turkmenistan: “We came here not as tourists, out of simple curiosity. We are not simply traveling, but trying to study the way of life of Turkmenistan.” («Мы приехали сюда не как туристы, не ради простого любопытства, мы не просто путешествуем, а стараемся изучить быт Туркменистана.») (“Udarnaia brigada pisatelei u tekstil’shchikov,” March 31, 1930, unsourced newspaper clipping, RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 27, l. 51.)

214 This was predicted in the account of the March 28th meeting with the writers at the Turkmenskaia iskra office. “Tovarishcheskaia vstrecha,” undated and unsourced newspaper clipping, RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 27, l. 49.
In twenty-two *kolkhozes* the Asiatic equipment has been thrown out and replaced completely by European stock. Thanks to a workers’ initiative mobilized into a planting campaign, it was possible to take the majority of *chigirs* [Persian water wheels] out of use, as well as to replace the even more ancient “nova” elevated canal system with the implementation of tractor-powered water pumps on the *aryks* [irrigation ditches]. A tractor replaces 180 *chigirs*, which otherwise take 540 camels and 360 people out of commission every day.215

Sannikov’s summary of the trip, which was printed in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on May 19, reflects a similar attention to the “Europeanization” of the republic. In the conclusion of that article, Sannikov writes:

> Мы видели, как на смену азиатской системе обработке земли омачом, выступали тракторные колонны, как весь азиатский сельскохозяйственный инвентарь изымался из обращения и заменялся инвентарем европейским. Мы видели, как прививается, насаждается в этой стране “египтянин” (египетский хлопок), явление первостепенной важности для Туркмении и всего Союза. Мы видели, наконец, как успешно развивается здесь шелководство, как возрождается через организацию женских артелей замечательное, мировое по своему значению, искусство Туркмении ковроделие.

> Всего, что мы видели, не расскажешь в такой небольшое заметке. Я бесконечно рад, что мне удалось быть в этой красочной, интересной, обновляющейся стране в историческую эту весну тридцатого года.216

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216 Sannikov, “Vesna Turkmenii.” Also preserved as RGALI, f. 3256, op. 1, ed kh. 90, l. 20.
here, and the remarkable, internationally renowned Turkmen art of carpet-weaving reborn through women’s cooperatives.

You can’t convey all that we saw in such a short note. I am eternally happy that I had the chance to be in this colorful, interesting, regenerating country in the historic spring of 1930.

These articles suggest that the writers involved in the 1930 brigade were very aware that they were expected to celebrate the “European” over the “Asian,” to employ Bolshevik rhetoric about the triumphs of modernization, and to highlight the role of Central Asia in the economic development of the Union as a whole. Sannikov’s last lines—with their explicit expression of happiness—also suggest that the writers knew how important it was to demonstrate their enthusiasm.

The final challenge—the practice of traveling together as a collective through Turkmenistan—is closely bound up with the two challenges named above. In the writers’ struggles to adapt to traveling around Turkmenistan as a group, we can see traces of their efforts to adapt to the increasing dominance of the Party-State and to the group strictures on how they should observe and represent “the East.” The concept of a literary “brigade” had existed since at least the sixteenth century, when the French Renaissance poets who had organized themselves into the “Pléiade” became known as the “Brigade.” In the Soviet context, however, the concept took on new meaning as an initiative of the Party-State. Still a new phenomenon in 1930—only three years later would Gorky send writers to the White Sea Canal and the national republics—the expectations in place for Tikhonov, Ivanov, and their traveling companions were not entirely clear.

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That the practice of working together as a literary collective was novel for the writers is evident in several of the brigadiers’ accounts of the trip. In advance of the adventure, Ivanov described the group to Gorky in the following terms: “We have a big and funny crew, including Leonov, and Nikolai Tikhonov, and Lugovskoi, and Sannikov. This undertaking of ours was awarded the title of ‘First Shock Brigade of Gosizdat’ [the State Publishing House]. Almost an army” («Компания наша смешная и большая, тут и Леонов, тут и Тихонов Николай, и Луговской, и Санников. Предприятию этому присвоено звание Первой Ударной бригады Госиздата. Почти армия»).218 In his account of the journey written after its completion, Pavlenko, the brigade organizer, vividly describes the complexities of traveling in such an “army”:

Поеzdки писательей коллективами—дело молодое и еще не определившееся, но с будущностью. [...] Ездить коллективом все-таки трудно, хотя и полезно. Трудно тем, что толкаешься между разных приемов работы и разных установок на вещи, теснишься или теснишь соседа, но очень полезно, как тренинг, когда одно и то же явление жизни прорывается перед сознанием несколько раз, смотря по тому, сколько в группе людей. В одиночку писатель чувствует себя деятелем, в коллективе—работником. В коллективе заостряются точки зрения на вещи и происходит обмен писательским опытом, которого иначе нигде и никак не поставишь—ни в клубах, ни в кабинетах по изучению творчества, ни тем паче дома за чашкою чая. Нужно неделями есть их одной миски, спать, укрывшись одним одеялом, неделями видеть всем одно и то же, но воспринимать каждому по-разному.219

Writers’ trips in collectives are a new, and not yet established, phenomenon, but one with a future. […] To travel as a collective is difficult, albeit useful. It is

218 V. V. Ivanov – A. M. Gor’komu, mart 1930, in Ivanov, Perepiska, 54. After the trip Ivanov wrote again to Gorky, this time apparently ecstatic at what he had seen: “I saw the most surprising and pleasant things there. What a people! What heroes! If it works out, I will tell you everything in person, but in these two months I saw what I had not managed to see in the last five years—and what I saw was good and not just show, but, as it were, the roots of the good, the real and the important.” («Видал там удивительнейшие и приятнейшие вещи. Какой народ! Какие герои! Буде удастся, расскажу вам лично, но в эти два месяца я увидел то, что не удавалось мне увидеть во все последние пять лет — и увидел хорошее и не показное, а, так сказать, корни хорошего, настоящего и важного.») (V. V. Ivanov – A. M. Go’rkii, avgust 1930, in Ivanov, Perepiska, 55.)

219 Pavlenko, Futeshestvie, 31–2.
difficult in that, as you bump up against different ways of working and different orientations towards things, you constrain your neighbor and feel constrained yourself. Still it’s very useful, as training, when one and the same phenomenon plays out before a consciousness several times, as many times as there are people in the group. Alone a writer considers himself a man of influence; in a collective, he is a worker. In a collective, points of view on things are sharpened and an exchange of writerly experience takes place, of a kind that you otherwise could not find anywhere else—not in clubs, not in master classes, much less at home over a cup of tea. It takes weeks of eating from the same bowl, sleeping under the same blanket, weeks of everyone seeing one and the same thing, but perceiving it each in his own way.

Pavlenko here seems to struggle as much to convince himself of the “useful” dimension of collective writers’ outings as to convince his reader. For all his assurances that the exchange of ideas is sharper in a group, the lasting impression from his assessment is that the writers on the brigade did not quite know what to do with themselves: they seem to have struggled to eat “from the same bowl,” sleep under the same blanket, stay out of one another’s way, make their divergent perspectives resonate with one another, and make sense of their collective purpose. Tikhonov and Lugovskoi enjoyed themselves so thoroughly, we might infer, only because they designed their own addition to the trip, one that allowed them to escape the official task at hand and indulge their Romantic self-fashioning—the other writers had dubbed them the “Jules Vernes” because of their constant stories about their adventures.220

Given the writer-brigadiers’ awareness of their ever-more constrained positions as “Soviet writers,” “envoys of Russian literature,” heralds of Europeanization, and members of a collective, one might expect that all the literary works they produced would be straightforward endorsements of the Soviet development of Turkmenistan, each comparable to the next formally and thematically, each vociferous in their de-Romanticization of the Soviet East. In fact,

220 Tellingly, while Tikhonov and Lugovskoi were traveling together, Lugovskoi’s favorite song from childhood became their anthem: “Through hell, through heaven, go ever forward/ And you will find the country of El Dorado!” («Через ад, через рай, все вперед поезжай, / И найдешь ты страну Эльдорадо!»). (Gromova, Uzel, 142.)
however, their compositions diverge quite sharply from one another, not only aesthetically, but also in how they position the author-outsiders in relationship to the republic of Turkmenistan.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will look more closely at works by two of the brigadiers that typify opposite stances taken by the brigade members as they defined their new positions as witnesses and facilitators of the construction of socialism.

Nikolai Tikhonov’s “Liudi Shirama” and “Iskateli vody”

After his 1926 visit to Central Asia, Tikhonov published the collection of short stories *Riskovannyi chelovek* (*The Adventurous Man*), penned a series of poems, and worked on a film script called *Liudi pustyni* (*People of the Desert*), about the construction of a road through the desert. In the wake of his second visit to Turkmenistan with the writers’ brigade, Tikhonov published the poem cycle *Iurga* (1932), which included works from 1926 as well as new ones from 1930. A number of these new poems also appeared in the brigade’s almanac *Turkmenistan vesnoi* and were featured, thanks to Petr Pavlenko, in a May 1930 exhibition entitled “Pisatel’ i sotsstroitel’stvo” (“The Writer and Socialist Construction”) at the literary museum of the Herzen House.

As the inclusion of his poems in the Herzen House exhibition suggests, the poems Tikhonov wrote about Turkmenistan in 1930 were considered model texts about socialist

221 Shoshin, *Poet romanticheskogo podviga*, 135.


224 “Pis’mo P. A. Pavlenko N. S. Tikhonovu,” 8 July 1930, in *Mezhdu molotom i nakoval’nei*, 107.
construction. If the outsider Tikhonov initially oriented his Turkmen landscapes around the values of literariness, sublimity, verticality, and the primeval, he now focused on the axes of modernization and Soviet transformation. Particularly good examples of this new approach to Central Asia are the poems “Liudi Shirama” and “Iskateli vody.” The first is one of the only two poems in the 1930 cycle that Tikhonov felt was “to his liking” («по душе»). The second is Tikhonov’s composition that the brigade leader, Pavlenko, valued most.

“Liudi Shirama” is set at the Shiram reservoir, in the southeast of Turkmenistan near the Afghan border. Its opening stanzas establish that the poem will be in dialogue with the generic conventions of the ballad. Metrically, they evoke the balladic convention of alternating three-stress lines with four-stress lines: the first stanza is written in anapestic tetrameter, while the second and third stanzas move to anapestic trimeter. The content of the stanzas, however, challenge the expected orientation, or ustanovka, of the balladic genre toward the “East”:

Ананасы и тигры, султаны в киразе,  
Ожерелья из трупов, дворцы миража —  
Это ты наплодил[а?] нам басен,  
Кабинетная выдумка, дохлая ржа.  

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225 Emma Widdis has argued that texts produced around the time of the “Great Break” (velikii perelom, 1929) were governed by an interest in exploring peripheral territories, while those created during the next period of Stalinism were geared toward osvoenie, or mastering the periphery. (Emma Widdis, “To Explore or to Conquer: Mobile Perspectives on Soviet Cultural Revolution,” in Dobrenko and Naiman, The Landscape of Stalinism, 219–240.) In making my claim about Tikhonov, I am challenging Widdis’s periodization, though I consider her models of exploration and conquering productive.

226 “N. Tikhonov — V. Lugovskomu,” in Gromova, 450. The other poem Tikhonov felt satisfied with was “Podrazhannie staroturkmenskomu” (“Imitation of Old Turkmen”), which appeared in both Iurga and Turkmenistan vesnoi. About the others, Tikhonov writes: “The others are melancholic or choleric, but all are some kind of exotics” («Остальные меланхолики или холерики, но все, какие-то экзоты»). (Ibid.)

227 “Pis’mo P. A. Pavlenko N. S. Tikhonovu,” July 8, 1930, in Mezhdut molotom i nakoval’nei, 107.

228 I draw here on Tynianov’s definition of ustanovka as not only the dominant (dominanta) of a work (or genre), but also as the function (funktciia) of the work (or genre) in relation to the extraliterary speech series closest to it. (Tynianov, “Oda kak oratorskii zhanr,” in Poetika, 278.)

229 The variant of the poem that appears in Tikhonov’s Sobranie sochinenii (1985) uses the feminine verb naplodila in the third line of this stanza, rather than the masculine naplodil, which appears in Turkmenistan vesnoi. The
Нет в пустыне такого Востока,
И не стоишь ты, как ни ворчи,
Полотняных сапог Куперштока
И Гуссейнова желтой камчи.

Это люди с колодца Ширама,
Из ревкома советских песков,
Обыденностью самой упрямой,
Самой хмурой и доблестной самой,
Опаленные до висков.230

Pineapples and tigers, sultans in cuirasses, necklaces from corpses, the palaces of a mirage, — It was you who mass-produced fables for us, armchair fabrications, dead rust. // In the desert there is no such East, and no matter how much you grumble, you are not worth the canvas boots of Kupershtok and the yellow kamcha [whip] of Hussein. // These are the people from the reservoir of Shiram, from the revkom [revolutionary committee] of the Soviet sands, with a most obstinate commonness, most gloomy and most valiant, scorched up to their temples.

In the first two stanzas, Tikhonov distances his ballad from the genres of the fable and the armchair fantasy, implying that his poem will not romanticize the “East,” as they do, but rather take up the “real” narrative of the desert. In the third stanza, Tikhonov introduces the heroes of this space and stresses their apparent novelty with the only five-line stanza in the poem. They are, Tikhonov asserts, contemporary, prosaic figures. Burned to the temples with commonness, their bodies show marks of the “Soviet sands,” not some lush landscape resplendent with pineapples, tigers, and sultans. Hailing from a specific reservoir, they are defined as much by the additional vowel allows the line to scan evenly as anapestic tetrameter with an extra unstressed syllable, which suggests that perhaps the verb was intended to be feminine.

230 Tikhonov, “Liudi Shirama,” in Turkmenistan vesnoi, Al’manakh pervoi pisatel’ skoi brigady Ogiza i “Izvestii Tsik SSSR,” sovershivshei poezdku po Turkmenistamu vesnoi, edited by Leonid Leonov (Moscow: GIKhL, 1932), 375. Further citations in the body of the text will refer to this edition. The variant of the poem that appears in Tikhonov’s Sobranie sochinenii (1985) has slightly different punctuation: there is an extra comma in line two, as well as an extra en-dash in line three. In addition, the demonstrative pronoun “eto” is replaced by the demonstrative adjective “eti.” The first three stanzas in the SS read: “Ананасы и тигры, султаны в кираке, / Ожерелья из трупов, дворцы миража, — / Это ты наплодила нам басен — / Кабинетная выдумка, дохлая ржа. // Нет в пустыне такого Востока, / И не стоишь ты, как ни ворчи, / Полотняных сапог Куперштока / И Гуссейнова желтой камчи. // Эти люди с колодца Ширама, / Из ревкома советских песков, / Обыденностью самой упрямой, / Самой хмурой и доблестной самой / Опаленные до висков.” (Tikhonov, SS, t. 1, 188, emphasis mine.)
place as by the adjectives that Tikhonov pairs with Shirama in feminine rhymes: upriamoi ("obstinate") and samoi ("most").

Even as the opening of the poem rejects the romanticization of “the East” and promises an alternative approach to “the desert,” the narrator’s position in the poem is still clearly that of a European outsider packaging a chosen section of “Oriental” territory. Moreover, this narrator has a specific implied audience: readers of Russian who are unfamiliar with the space of the TSSR and its inhabitants. Tikhonov first begins to establish the confines of his heroes’ environment in the fourth and fifth stanzas, suggesting as he does so that the world is geographically distant from that of his readers:

Вручено им барханное логово,  
Многодушье зверей и бродяг,  
Неизбежность, безжалостность много, —  
Все, о чем скотоводы гудят.  
И когда они так, молодцами,  
Прилетят в Ак-тере, как гонцы,  
Это значит, что снова с концами  
Сведены бытовые концы.  

Their is a sandy lair, filled with beasts and vagrants, the inevitability, the cruelty of many things—everything, about which the herdsmen drone on. // And when they thus, like fine lads, fly to Ak-Tere as messengers, this means, that again the ends of daily life were made to meet.

The landscape that Tikhonov establishes here for his readers is a harsh outpost in the sand, populated by herdsmen, beasts, vagrants, and the “fine lads” who are the subject of his poem. While Tikhonov’s narrator is not precise in his geographical locales—he does not define where Ak-Tere is located in relation to Shiram—he establishes that his heroes roam within a fixed local environment (from their “lair” to Ak-Tere) and that their trajectories are shaped by the worthy missions of the revkom.

In the ballad’s next four stanzas, the narrator’s appeal to a domestic audience becomes
even more pronounced, as he repeats the explanatory construction “This means…” («Это значит…») twice more, adds details to his heroes’ desert landscape, and glosses a number of Turkmen words into Russian:

Это значит, в песчаном корыте,  
От шалашной норы до норы  
Чабаны — пастухи — не в обиде  
И чолуки — подпаски — бодры.

Что сучи — водоливы — довольны, —  
Значит, выхвачен отдыха клок,  
Можно легкой камчею привольно  
Пыль сбивать с полотняных сапог,  
Пить чай, развалясь осторожно,  
Так, чтоб мавзер лег не под бок,  
Чтоб луна завертела безбожно  
Самой длинной беседы клубок…

И — по коням… И странным аллюром,  
Той ю р г о й, что мила скаакуам,  
Вкось по дюнам, по глинам, по бурым  
Сакаулам, солончакам…

This means that in the sandy ditch, from den to makeshift den, the *chabans*—shepherds—are not taking offense and the *choluki*—herding boys—are in good spirit. // That the *suchi*—water pumpers—are satisfied, — It means, when a wisp of rest is seized: one can freely knock off the dust from [one’s] canvas boots with a light whip, // To drink teas, reclining carefully, so that [one’s] Mauser is not underneath [one’s] side, so that the moon godlessly spins out the yarn of the longest conversation… // And—to the horses…and with a strange gait, that *iurga* so dear to horsemen, aslant along the dunes, the mud, the ruddy saxauls, the salt marshes…

Here, the Russian reader is given to understand that *chabany* can be translated and thought of as *pastukhi*, or shepherds, while *cholukhi* can be interpreted as *podpaski*, or boys who herd and *suchi* as *vodolivy*, or water-pumpers.231 The *iurga*, meanwhile, is highlighted with emphatic

231 In the variant of this ballad that is printed in Tikhonov’s 1985 *Sobranie sochinenii*, the em-dashes of stanza six are replaced by hyphens, which lessens the sense that *chabany*, *choluki*, and *suchi* are being glossed and Russianized. (In the later variant, we encounter *chabany-pastukhi* and *choluki-podpaski*, which read as hybrid Turkmen-Russian figures.) (Tikhonov, SS, vol. 1, 188–9.)
spacing and explained to the Russian reader unfamiliar with Turkmen horses as a “strange gait” («странным аллюром») that is helpful for moving askance across the local landscape, the character of which Tikhonov now further explicates by alluding to its flora (saxaul plants, salt marshes) and topography (it is riddled with dunes, mud, and mounds). Not every single foreign word is glossed: kamcha, a Turkic term for whip, is not translated into Russian. The high density of translated words, however, signals that the ballad’s narrator is keenly aware of the need to orient his readers in the foreign landscape he is depicting.

What is most striking about how Tikhonov renders Turkmenistan knowable, however, is how he treats the experiences of the “people of Shiram” as universally familiar Soviet revolutionaries. In the poem’s middle stanzas, the narrator implies that the men’s actions—lying down while carrying a Mauser, dusting off their boots with a whip—need no translation, even if the topography of their landscape does. In the closing stanzas, the narrator’s identification with the heroes appears to intensify as he lionizes their behavior with a string of verbs in the infinitive (we are reminded here of Tennyson’s “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,” or, as it was translated into Russian by Konstantin Bal’mont, «Искать, найти, дерзать, не уступать»):

Чтобы пафосом вечной заботы,
Через грязь, лихорадку, цынгу,
Раскачать этих юрт переплеты,
Этих нищих, что мрут на бегу.

Позабыть о себе и за них побороться,
Смертных схваток принять без числа, —
И в бессонную ночь на иссохшем колодце
Заметить вдруг, что молодость прошла!

That with the pathos of eternal concern, through the mud, the fever, the scurvy, the bindings of these yurts might gently rock these impoverished people that are dropping on the run. // To forget about oneself and to fight a bit for them, to take

on endless deadly battles—And one sleepless night by the dried-up well, to notice suddenly, that youth has passed!

Although Tikhonov’s subjects are bound to the “yurts” that they apparently inhabit and the wells that they visit, they are not inscribed within their “foreign” landscape. Tikhonov’s narrator invites his reader to view his eponymous heroes outside of their geographical realm, as warriors governed by Revolutionary desires and, even more universally, as people who will “notice suddenly, that youth has passed.” The implication, here, is that these men share the same “pathos of eternal concern” as Tikhonov’s committed readers, as well as the same temporality, since the “people of Shiram” are fighting for the Soviet cause and fighting against the passage of time.

While the narrator suggests that his non-Turkmen readers need to be oriented within Turkmenistan and the Turkmen language, then, he implies at the same time that his heroes’ will to battle needs no explanation or translation. Ideologically familiar, unmarked by ethnicity or nationality, the “people of Shiram” are presented to the Russian reader as identifiable Soviet revolutionaries. As promised in its opening stanzas, the ballad refrains from invoking stock images of the “East” such as tigers and sultans. Tikhonov trades in other of the genre’s Romantic conventions, however, by choosing a character type as his subject and valorizing their actions and guiding principles. “Liudi Shirama” thus remains in dialogue with the form of the ballad and stands as an example—not unusual among the 1930 brigade’s work—of an adapted Soviet Romanticism.233

In “Iskateli vody,” as in “Liudi Shirama,” Tikhonov’s commitment to the Soviet project is the principal lens through which he views Turkmenistan. The poem opens with a gloss of the

233 That the writers romanticized their adventures on the trip is particularly clear in the non-fictional recollections of the trip. Pavlenko’s Puteshestvie v Turkmenistan, for instance, includes a number of asides about the Romantic nature of the vistas he saw in Turkmenistan, including this one about Turkmen cities: “So looked, I thought, the old little cities on the Caucasian line during the times of the late Lermontov” (‘Так выглядели, думаю я, старые городки на Кавказской линии при покойнике М. Ю. Лермонтова’). (Pavlenko, Puteshestvie, 24).
Turkmen term “Kuiu-ustas” and builds on this to construct a vision of the republic’s desert as a site of modernization:

Кую-Устас зовут того, кто может
Своим чуьтеем найти воды исток.
Сочти морщины на верблюжьей коже,
Пересчитай по зернышку песок, —

Тогда поймешь того кую-устаса дело,
Когда, от напряженья постарев,
Он говорит: «Колодец ройте смело,
Я сквозь песок узнал воды напев».

Kuiu-Ustas is what they call someone who can find the source of water by means of his own intuition. Count the wrinkles on camel skin, count sand grain by grain, — // Then you will understand the work of the kuiu-ustas, when, aged through exertion, he says, “Dig this well confidently, I have recognized the melody of water through the sands.”

These stanzas—which are written in a regular, generically neutral iambic pentameter—provide two complementary translations for the word “Kuiu-Ustas.” The first renders the concept “water diviner” paraphrastically in Russian, while the second focuses on the difficulty involved in water divination. Tikhonov’s speaker thus addresses himself in these two stanzas and his two imperative verbs (sochiti and pereschitai), to readers of Russian who are unfamiliar with both the Turkmen language and with desert terrains in which water divination is practiced.

As the poem progresses, Tikhonov’s speaker provides yet another translation of the term kuiu-ustas, defining it now in terms of the Soviet modernization project and addressing himself

234 Tikhonov, “Iskateli vody,” in Turkmenistan vesnoi, 377–378. In the revised version that appears in Tikhonov’s Sobranie sochinenii, the character “Kuiu-Usta” (his name has no “s” on the end in this version) is referred to as “the Turkmen” in the first line of stanza two, which emphasizes that his work is not just personal, but also “Turkmen” work more generally. The opening of the stanza reads: «Тогда поймешь того туркмена дело...» (“Then you will understand the work of this Turkmen…”). (Tikhonov, Sobranie sochinenii, 190.)

235 M. L. Gasparov has argued that iambic pentameter is the most neutral of Russian classical meter and is thus equally adaptable to any literary trend. (M. L. Gasparov, Sovremennyi russkii sitkh. Ritmika i metrika [Moscow: Nauka, 1974], 108.) Elsewhere, Gasparov has noted the connection between iambic pentameter and the Romantic elegy, the epic, Russian drama, and dramatic monologues. (M. L. Gasparov, Ocherk istorii russkogo sitkha [Moscow: Fortuna Limited, 2000], 123–125.) The association between iambic pentameter and the elegy is particularly strong in shorter poems with a philosophical overtone, but in texts not of this type, the generic associations of the meter are weak in Russian prosody.
to committed readers ready to locate Turkmenistan on the continuum of progress. The shift toward the ideologically grounded reading of the term is signaled by the contrastive conjunction “But” («Но») in the opening of the third stanza:

Но он — кустарь, он только приключенец,  
Он шифровальщик скроменьких депеш,  
В нем плана нет, он — как волны свеченье,  
И в нем дикарь еще отменно свеж.

Его вода равна четверостишью,  
Пустыне ж нужны эпосы воды, —  
Он — как бархан, он времени не слышит,  
Он заметает времени следы.

Но есть вода Келифского Узбоя, —  
Но чья вода? Победы или беды?  
И там глядят в ее лицо рябое  
Глаза иных искателей воды.

Они хотят вести ее далеко —  
Через Мургаб, к Теждену, — оросить  
Все те пески, похожие на локоть,  
Который нужно все же укусить.  

But he is a craftsman, he is merely an adventurer, he is a cryptologist of modest little messages, there is no design in him, he is like the luminescence of a wave, and the savage in him is still perfectly fresh. // His water is like a quatrain, but the desert needs epics of water, he is like a sand dune, he does not hear the times, he sweeps away the tracks of time. // But there is the water of the Kelifskii Uzboi—But whose water? Victory’s or misfortune’s? And there looking into its pockmarked face are the eyes of other seekers of water. // They want to lead it far away—through Murgab, toward Tedzhen, to irrigate all those sands that seem so near, but still have to be reached.

In these lines, the concept of the water diviner takes on a specific temporal meaning as the word now connotes not only a Turkmen and desert concept, but a “savage” practice out of sync with modernity. By adding these connotations to his translation of kuiu-ustas, Tikhonov signals that he is addressing not only readers unfamiliar with the Turkmen language and the desert landscape, but who are also modernizers. Tikhonov’s implied audience demands poets who “hear

the times” and sides with the Soviet engineers, those “other seekers of water.” The vision of Turkmenistan that Tikhonov provides for them is that of a desert ripe for their investment. Specifically, his landscape is marked by the utopian project of reawakening the ancient river of the Kelif Uzboi, “Through Murgab, toward Tedzhen.”

In “Iskateli vody,” Tikhonov does not explain the exact idea behind redirecting the water of the “Kelif Uzboi,” though he does note, in the next two stanzas, that the goal of the project is to “To break through the sands, to unchain the desert” («Пробить пески, пустыню расковать») and to plant “thousands of hectares” («десятки тысяч га») of cotton there. The engineering project to which Tikhonov alludes was the revivification of the ancient river bed, or uzboi, that ran across the southeastern part of the Kara Kum Desert from Kerki west toward the Murghab and Tedzhen Rivers.237 (The Kara-Kum Canal was later planned for this space, but as of 1930, only the small Bassaga-Kerki Canal had been constructed.) It is a grand utopian project, and Tikhonov’s speaker seems hesitant to guarantee its success. In the final stanzas of the poem, as published in the 1932 almanac Turkmenistan vesnoi, the outcome of the face-off between the old diviner of water and the new “seekers of water” eyeing the Kelif Uzboi, was likely, but not assured. The last stanza of the poem ends with the image of the engineer and the kuiu-ustas as two competing gamblers:

Твои колодцы что же, — это крохи…»
И стоя так, они не видят, что
Они стоят сейчас, как две эпохи,
Два игрока в Великое лото! 238

237 Skosyrev, Soviet Turkmenistan, 228.

238 Tikhonov, “Iskateli vody,” 378. The trope of the lottery and gambling was popular throughout the 1920s. To my knowledge, however, it was rarely invoked, as it is here, in connection with quasi-colonial modernization projects in the Soviet periphery.
Your wells, nevertheless, are still tiny little things…” And standing thus, they do not see, that they now stand like two epochs, two players in the Great Lottery!

Even if Tikhonov’s speaker is hesitant to predict the outcome of this confrontation between the two epochs, his sympathy clearly lies with the coming, modern era of irrigation and engineering. While his landscape accommodates traditional figures such as the kiuu-ustas, the organizing vision Tikhonov offers his readers is that of a remade and redeveloped Turkmenistan.

Together, “Iskateli vody” and “Liudi Shirama” position Tikhonov as a herald of coming change and a representative of the Soviet project, rather than as an adventurer or detached observer. Tikhonov declares himself comfortable defining places within Turkmenistan (such as Shiram) as sites of current revolutionary activity, just as he signals his willingness to frame spaces within Turkmenistan (like the Kara-Kum Desert) as landscapes of future development.

Tikhonov acknowledges that “backward” practices still exist—including those of the kiuu-ustas and of the vagrants living near the “people of Shiram”—but he clearly defines them against the progress being made by the Party-State, which is represented by the revkom and the “seekers of water” who aspire to remake the Kelif Uzboi. In both poems, moreover, Tikhonov signals his willingness to translate Shiram, Kara-Kum, and its inhabitants into the language of the Soviet center (Russian) and to herald their achievements in simple, comprehensible meters. Tikhonov later claimed that he tried to “be a Turkmen” («быть туркменом») while writing these poems. He would even, he explained, “climb into his robe from the Khiva bazaar” («влезал в халат с хивинского базара») in order to get in character. His comments are hardly surprising, given

In the revised version of the poem that appears in Tikhonov’s 1985 Sobranie sochinenii, the victory of the “great fisher of waters” is assured: «“Твои колодцы что же, это крохи… / Мы Узбой наполним наконец…” — / Они стоят сейчас, как две эпохи, Но победит великих вод ловец!» (“Your wells, nevertheless, are still tiny little things… / And we will fill up the Relic River finally…” — / They stand now, like two epochs, / But the seeker of great waters will triumph!”). (Tikhonov, SS, t. 1, 191.)

Gromova, Uzel, 450.
that the poems betray no anxiety about the poet’s ability to portray the experience of the “people of Shiram” or explain the divination practices of the Kara-Kum Desert.

In this respect, Tikhonov’s 1930 poems about Turkmenistan can be read in the tradition of colonial poetry and specifically against the work of Rudyard Kipling. To say that Tikhonov’s poetry from the early 1930s is “Kiplingesque” is not to make a new or contentious claim, for within Soviet Russia Tikhonov was connected to Kipling from the earliest stages of his career. Tikhonov’s association with the English poet stemmed from the fact that Tikhonov’s first two collections of poems, Orda and Braga, had contained a number of “Kiplingesque” ballads featuring strong narratives, proactive heroes, colloquial speech, and vigorous rhyme schemes; as well as a number of “Kiplingesque” poems featuring exotic, “Eastern” settings. But it was also because Tikhonov himself encouraged the connection, listing Kipling as one of his greatest literary influences in a 1926 autobiographical sketch and recommending the Englishman as a model for young proletarian poets in 1930, suggesting that they should strive to write poems with as much strength, imagination, and pathos as Kipling’s 1896 “The Mary Gloster.” The link between Tikhonov and Kipling had not, moreover, gone unnoticed among critics of Soviet literature. Shklovsky, for instance, had noted in Gamburgskii schet (Hamburg Account, 1928) that Tikhonov was studying English and Kipling’s verse in the early 1920s. The influence on Tikhonov of Gumilev, who was himself identified as a “Russian Kipling,” likely solidified the connection in many critics’ minds.

In “Liudi Shirama,” “Iskateli vody,” and Tikhonov’s other 1930 poems about

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242 Viktor Shklovskii, Gamburgskii schet (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo pisatelei, 1928), 90.
Turkmenistan, however, Tikhonov’s “Kiplingism” is reflected not only in Tikhonov’s formal choices, but also in an imperial stance vis-à-vis the republic’s landscapes. Katharine Hodgson has read another of Tikhonov’s poems from the 1930 cycle, “Vesna v Devnau, ili nochnaia pakhota traktorami ‘Vallis’” (“Spring in Deinau, or Night Plowing with ‘Vallis’ Tractors”) as a Kiplingesque text, arguing that in its depictions of tractors plowing through the night in Turkmenistan, it sets “the forces of progress, epitomized in the tractor” against the “background of ‘diabolical night’, superstition, disease, and slavery.” She continues:

Fired by enthusiasm, Tikhonov’s communists argue while Asia ‘listens in silence.’ Actual human representatives of this silent continent are absent from the scene. […] In true colonial style, the colonizer appears to take possession of an empty landscape that waits to be informed with meaning or reclaimed from chaos.243

Hodgson’s reading is productive, for it encourages us to look beyond Tikhonov’s own claims about his rejection of exoticism and imperialism. It fails, however, to account for the particular qualities of Tikhonov’s so-called “colonial style” in his poem cycle about Turkmenistan from the early 1930s.

Specifically, Hodgson does not provide a nuanced account of how Tikhonov creates landscapes out of Turkmenistan. While he does suggest that the space of the TSSR can be mastered and “informed with meaning,” he does not in fact create entirely “empty landscapes.” Nor does he indiscriminately exclude local populations or even Asians writ large from his vision of the new Turkmenistan. In “Vesna v Devnau,” the poem that Hodgson provides an example of Tikhonov’s colonialism, the poet’s focus is on the fields being plowed by inanimate tractors, but, importantly, he also populates his landscape with two contrasting types of people. The

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“communists” that Hodgson mentions are contrasted in the following manner against a more “backward” figure:

В пустыне бай, — а может, и подале,
И вместо всей халатной толчеи,
Три выдвиженца спорят в гулком зале,
И Азия внимает молча им. 244

There is a bai is in the desert, or maybe, farther off, and in place of negligent crowds, three administrators argue in a resonant hall, and Asia silently heeds them.

In Tikhonov’s rendering, Turkmenistan is a site of ongoing modernization, one where worker-administrators—the representatives of the “new” Turkmenistan—are battling against bais—representatives of the “old,” “indolent” Turkmenistan. Importantly, while Tikhonov positions his “worker-administrators” against “Asia,” he does not exclude the possibility that the revolutionary vanguard might include “Asians” in its midst. Tikhonov’s communists could themselves be local inhabitants, that is, and possibly even ethnically Turkmen. Tikhonov acts as an agent of the Soviet empire, much as Kipling was an agent of the British Empire, and Tikhonov’s viewpoint is that of a willing participant in the writers’ brigade project to map Soviet Turkmenistan as a site of socialist construction. This does not mean, however, that Tikhonov’s imperial prism occludes all local figures from his vision. They are simply inscribed, with Tikhonov’s revolutionary Romanticism, into the Soviet project.

Vsevolod Ivanov’s Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna

Unlike Tikhonov’s “Liudi Shirama” and “Iskateli vody,” which present seemingly unmediated visions of Turkmenistan and reflect no anxiety about the collective project of the writers’ brigade, the short stories that Vsevolod Ivanov wrote in the wake of the excursion thematize the difficulties involved in the undertaking. The self-reflexivity of the three stories—

244 Nikolai Tikhonov, “Vesna v Deinau, ili nochnaia pakhota traktorami ‘Vallis,’” in Turkmenistan vesnoi, 377.
which were published together under the heading of *Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna*—is immediately apparent, as all three are narrated by a writer’s brigade member (Sinitsyn) on a tour of Turkmenistan. But in my reading, the tales are not just self-reflexive: they are self-parodic.

The works that constitute *Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna* touch on familiar themes from First-Five-Year-Plan literature, including the problem of saboteurs, the battle against tribalism, and the campaign for the language-based version of nativization (*korenizatsiia*). There is a disjunction in these texts, however, between what Yuri Tynianov might call their “first” and “second lives.” If their “first life” represents citizens of Turkmenistan experiencing “the construction of socialism,” their “second life” revolves around the question of how Turkmenistan is being represented, both by citizens of the republic and by the outsider Sinitsyn. By introducing this parallel dimension to his *povest’* tales, Ivanov emphasizes the multiplicity of representational possibilities, using parody much as it functioned in classic drama, when, according to Caryl Emerson, it celebrated the “perpetual human appetite for alternatives other than what you see.”

Each of the *povest’* tales has both a first and “second” life. In “Otvetstvennye ispytania inzh[enera]. Nur-Klycha” (“The Major Tests of Engineer Nur-Klych”), which takes place near

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245 The first phase (1923–1927) of Soviet indigenization policies was ethnicity based, while the second (1927–1934) was language based. For a discussion of *korenizatsiia* in Turkmenistan, see Edgar, “Ethnic Preferences and Conflicts,” in *Tribal Nation*, 70–99.

246 Tynianov, “Dostoevskii i Gogol’ (k teorii parodii),” in *Poetika*, 199.

247 Caryl Emerson, “Sinyavsky’s Rozanov, Tertz’s Pushkin, and Literary Criticism as Creative Parody,” in *Against the Grain: Parody, Satire, and Intertextuality in Russian Literature*, ed. Janet G. Tucket (Bloomington: Slavica, 2002), 169, emphasis in original. This capacious definition of parody, Emerson suggests, resembles Gary Saul Morson’s formulation of “sideshadowing,” his term for narrative strategies that unsettle our sense of inevitability and linear sequence. It is worth noting that, for his part, Morson contrasts “sideshadowing,” which creates a sense that “something else” was possible and thus conveys the sense that “actual events might just as well not have happened,” with parody. “Parody, in the usual meaning of a text that alludes to and discredits another,” he writes, “may be regarded as an unwelcome sideshadow.” (Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994], 118, 151.)
station “N.,” not far from the port of Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea, the ostensible central conflict is between the eponymous “positive” hero and a “negative” hero named T. S. Davli, who is still attached to traditional Turkmen dress, polygamy, and the historical legacy of his Teke tribe. 248 By neglecting his duties and wasting his time trying to trick Nur-Klych, the backward telegraph agent Davli nearly causes a train passing through station N. to crash. It is only thanks to the watchfulness—and ideological commitment—of Nur-Klych that the accident does not occur.

Rather than marking Davli’s and Nur-Klych’s behavior as models for what is “really” to be found in Turkmenistan, however, Ivanov’s depiction of the two characters encourages us to read them as literary fabrications. Ivanov, in effect, breaks the “circuit of reader-character identification” often found in conventional narratives by parodying the ideological positions of his two main characters and rendering their conflict as an absurd battle over Soviet representational practices. 249 Davli’s thirst for power comically manifests itself in his building his own private “skilled relief of Turkmenia with mountains, sand dunes, wells, paths, and saxaul thickets” (“искусный рельеф Туркмении с горами, барханами, колодцами и тропами и саксаульными зарослями”). 250 While Davli ineffectually challenges Soviet knowledge production, Nur-Klych internalizes it in a dysfunctional manner. Even his great moment of

248 I allude here to Katerina Clark’s claim that socialist realist narratives include not only a positive hero, but also a negative, “intellectual or bourgeois hero whose psychological and ideological makeup puts him out of step with the new age.” According to Cark, after the mid-1930s, the negative pattern was “rather poorly represented in novels,” since Soviet society by then “had evolved to the point where most remaining bourgeois and intellectuals were deemed either class enemies or socialized to a degree.” (Clark, Soviet Novel, 45.)

249 I draw here on the work of Alfred Appel Jr., who argues that parody can be used to break reader-character identification by directing the reader to the authorial sensibility ordering it. (Alfred Appel Jr., “‘Lolita’: The Springboard of Parody,” Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 8, no. 2 [1967]: 215–216.)

250 Vsevolod Ivanov, Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna, in Turkmenistan vesnoi, 153. Further citations from the work will appear parenthetically within the body of the text.
heroism, when he prevents a train from crashing, is presented as a bumbling attempt to make sense of competing Soviet directives:

He reached his right hand to his left, in which he ought to have been carrying the banner from the Lenin corner, but he had forgotten that banner! Nur-Klych was ashamed, but on the other hand, he could not blame himself: he had been distracted by questions about the production of ozokerite [a naturally occurring mineral wax]. He could make an important announcement at the ozokerite workers’ production meeting. However, at the same time he needed to stop the train. And then, comrades, he pulled out his little red book, which every conscientious worker of our socialist state ought to have, and raised this little book over his head.

Although the passage praises Nur-Klych as a “conscientious worker of our socialist state,” the suggestion that the character is a figment of Soviet narratives shadows the valorization of his actions. The idea that Nur-Klych would be distracted in the midst of one act of heroism by thoughts of another (increasing ozokerite production) appears so absurd that it casts doubt on Nur-Klych’s very position as a “positive hero.” The digression into his thoughts about ozokerite effectively points to the tale’s “second life,” raising questions about the plausibility of Soviet narratives that feature completely committed “positive heroes.”

The “first life” of “Bukhgalter G. O. Surkov, chestno pogibshii za svoiu ideiu” (“The Accountant G. O. Surkov, Who Honestly Perished for His Idea”) centers on the eponymous character’s involvement with the construction of the 37-kilometer-long Arak-Su Canal, near the city of Kerki in southeastern Turkmenistan. More specifically, the tale is structured around the story of how Surkov died at the hands of local leaders while trying to combat tribalism and
promote the incorporation of the Turkmen language in Soviet construction projects. Beside this storyline, however, is a second plot focused on the fate of Russian literature about Turkestan. On this level of the story, Surkov is defined not so much as an “honest” accountant, but as an archetypal Russian reader. First, Surkov is defined as an admirer of the (imperial) writer Nikolai Karazin, one drawn to Turkestan by Karazin’s descriptions of the land:

Приехал он потому, что, всегда интересясь литературой, купил он на толче в Калуге за полтора рубля романы и повести писателя Н. Каразина, который творил в старое время о Туркестане. (175)

He came because, having always been interested in literature, he had on an impulse bought, for a ruble and a half at a market in Kaluga, the novels and novellas of the writer N. Karazin, who had written in the old days about Turkestan.

Not only is Surkov a fan of imperial Russian literature, he is also a critic of contemporary Soviet literature, as the following exchange with the narrator Sinitsyn suggests:

«Зачем вам надобно читать такую заведомо империалистическую дрянь, бухгалтер?» Он мне тихо и скромно так отвечает: «Чувствую, что дрянь», — и глаза потупил. Из этого потупления глаз понял я, что сомневается он в ценности и любопытности книг, вырабатываемых нашей советской литературой, и даже в понятности их. «Да, — отвечает мне бухгалтер Г. О. Сурков, — сомневаюсь я. Пробовал я по совету многих в целях обогащения своего сознания в непонятные места добавлять свое, но в таких случаях столь неведомая грязь и перхоть лезет в мозги, что лучше уж читать мне Н. Каразина. Если гад, то что же с гада и спросишь?» Речи его эти я не одобрил и признал, то он еще своего мировоззрения не выковал, с чем он и согласился. (175)

“Why do you want to read such obviously imperialist rubbish, accountant?” He quietly and modestly answered me: “I sense that it is trash,” and lowered his eyes. From this lowering of his eyes I understood that he doubted the value and interest of books manufactured by our Soviet literature, and even doubted their comprehensibility. “Yes,” answered the accountant G. O. Surkov, “I do doubt it. On the advice of many and in hopes of enriching my mind, I tried to add something of my own in the unclear places, but in those moments such unthinkable filth and drivel came crawling into my head, that it’s much better for me to just read Karazin. If you’re dealing with vermin, what more can you expect?” I did not approve of his words and suggested that he had not yet forged his [revolutionary] consciousness, with which he agreed.
In these passages, the narrator Sinitsyn questions Surkov’s taste in literature, casting doubt on the literary worth of Karazin’s “novels and novellas” about Turkestan in the “old time” and declaring his disagreement with Surkov’s evaluation of current literary trends. Ivanov’s position toward the literature about Turkestan in the story is less clear, however, since he parodies the idea that a properly forged revolutionary consciousness will make opaque passages of Soviet literature legible. Ivanov’s inclusion of a character who is drawn into “comprehensible” works by Karazin, but not into the “incomprehensible places” of contemporary texts, suggests that he is well aware of the weaknesses and potential pitfalls of ideologically “correct” art. Surkov’s dual existence as an accountant and a reader encourages us to interpret the tale as being as much about Soviet literature as nativization policies.

If the Nur-Kalych and Surkov tales raise questions about Soviet literature in general, the third Sinitsyn tale, “Ostrozetis iz sovkhoza Bairam-Ali” (“Sharp-tooth from the Sovkhoz Bairam-Ali”), thematizes the potential problems of the writers’ brigade itself. In this story more than in the others, the line between the “first” and “second” levels is blurred. Sinitsyn here does not merely introduce his reader to local citizens living in the new Turkmenistan; he and his fellow brigadiers are central to the story itself. The integration of Sinitsyn into the fabric of the narrative is reflected also in Ivanov’s use of skaz, which is also more prominent than in the other tales. The opening passage gives a good sense of how Ivanov’s use of skaz invites the reader to attend to Sinitsyn’s point of view and the points of view of the whole brigade:

«По всей среднеазиатской территории Союза преобладала в день нашего знакомства с рабкором Ама-Он-Беги облачная или пасмурная погода с дождями, например в районе совхоза Байрам-Али за сутки выпало от 8 до 13 мм. Аба-Он-Беги, маленький и худенький туркмен, внешне и внутренне мне очень понравился; но прежде тем переходить к обстоятельствам его жизни и причинам, по которым он получил прозвище Острозубца, я не премину вам рассказать о знакомстве нашем с неким Егором Петровичем Зотовым,
“On the day of our acquaintance with the rabkor [worker correspondent] Aba-On-Begi, cloudy or overcast weather prevailed across all of Central Asia; in the region of the sovkhoz Bairam-Ali, for instance, between 8 and 13 millimeters of rain fell in a 24-hour period. I liked Aba-On-Begi, a small and thin Turkmen, very much both internally and externally; but before moving on to the circumstances of his life or the reasons why he received the nickname “Ostrozubets” [“Sharp-Tooth”], I should not neglect to tell you about our acquaintance with one Egor Petrovich Zotov, zavkhoz [logistics manager] in the pedteckhnikum [pedagogical technical school] of the sovkhoz Bairam-Ali, a colossal man, big nosed, with a big head, covered in black hair, who in the realm of his fatherly love had a beautiful daughter Valentina.

Here, Ivanov mixes elevated locutions (e.g., “I will not neglect to tell you about our acquaintance with one Egor Petrovich Zotov,” “in the realm of his fatherly love”) with the narrative style of contemporary newspaper reports (8 to 13 millimeters of rain are said to have fallen in 24 hours; rabkor, sovkhoz, zavkhoz, predteckhnikum and other Soviet neologisms riddle the speech) and the personal observations of Sinitsyn (Zotov’s description, which is not justified and appears unmotivated, clearly reflects judgments inappropriate for a newspaper). This stylistic pastiche not only highlights the comic elements in Sinitsyn’s voice, but also, I would argue, encourages the reader to doubt Sinitsyn’s control over his narrative and to question his ultimate authority.

As the lines quoted above suggest, the tale “Ostrozubets” focuses on a literary brigade’s visit to the sovkhoz Bairam-Ali, and specifically on their encounters with a worker-correspondent—and poet—named Aba-On-Begi. While the narrative itself is certainly fictional, details about the brigade’s visit apparently are based on the experience of the real writers’ brigade, since the narrative in several spots echoes Leonov’s non-fictional sketch “Poezdka v Margian” (“Journey to Margian”), which was also published in the almanac Turkmenistan.

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251 The closing quotation marks appear only at the end of the first section of the narrative, after two pages of text.
Both Ivanov’s short story and Leonov’s sketch, for instance, describe an encounter between the writers’ brigade and an old Turkmen claiming to be a snake hunter working under contract with the State Trade Organization (Gostorg). The differences between the two accounts, however, are striking. Leonov’s sketch, which accounts for the writers’ brigade visit to the ancient site of Merv,²⁵² describes the snake catcher as a skilled and experienced artisan who, although eccentric, is an indispensible link in the economic network fueling industrialization:

Зато внизу нас ждет новая встреча: это — охотник за змеями. Его инструмент — суковатый посох с заточенным гвоздем, которым он метко пробивает голову своей добычи, уже ходит по рукам спутников моих. Старик лукаво смеется, он хитер и не по годам быстр в движениях; непонятная горловая речь его весела, видимо, ему очень нравится его ремесло, и втайне он хочет, чтоб все в мире тоже охотились за змеями. Госторг платит ему по четвертаку за каждый добротный метр змеи, он успел набить их уже полтысячи за два прошлых месяца. Из этих полупрозрачных шкурок, которые глухо шуршат в проворных руках охотника и которые подорожают во много раз после переезда границы, изысканные буржуазки нашьют себе сумочки, туфельки и буквально ещё небывалые манто. Со времен самого Санджара Европа еще никогда не рядилась в змеиную кожу; это модно и, значит, красиво, но оттого и дорого. Хорошо проделанная кожа всегда стоит своих денег. Алло, Европа, меняем змеиные шкурки на тракторы!²⁵³

But down below a new acquaintance awaits us: a snake hunter. His tool, a knotted staff with a sharpened nail with which he neatly pierces the head of his prey, is already being passed around among my companions. The old man laughs slyly; he is cunning and quick in his movements in a way that belies his age. His indecipherable, guttural speech is cheerful; apparently, he likes his craft very much and secretly wishes that everyone in the world also hunted snakes. Gostorg pays him twenty-five kopeks for every solid meter of snake. He managed to kill five hundred just in the last two months. From these semi-translucent skins, which quietly rustle in the nimble hands of the hunter and which will sell for a great deal more abroad, refined bourgeois women will make for themselves little bags, little shoes, and literally unimaginable mantas. Since the time of Sandzhar himself, Europe has not dressed itself up in snakeskin; it is fashionable, which means

²⁵² Old Merv, Leonov notes in his sketch, is alternately called Merv, Marg, Margian, and Mouru, the name given it by Alexander the Great. (Leonid Leonov, “Poezdka v Margian,” in Turkmenistan vesnoi, 425.) It is telling that the title of Leonov’s sketch refers to “Margian” and not “Merv,” since in this essay Leonov dwells on his confrontation with the past.

²⁵³ Ibid., 427–8.
beautiful, and therefore also expensive. Well-made skin is always worth the money. Hello, Europe, we’re offering snakeskin in exchange for tractors!

The account of the same meeting in “Ostrozubets” takes on a comic dimension, as the narrator Sinitsyn questions the identity of the old man and raises doubts about the Russian brigadiers’ tendency to believe what they hear in Turkmenistan:

Встретили мы там также охотника с змеями — старичка-туркмена в оборванном халате. Старичок расхвастался: говорит, что за последний месяц 300 штук змей ушиб и продал их Госторгу, который будто бы их за границу отправляет. Против Госторга и его выдумок я не сомневаюсь, но старикашка ввел меня в думы, так как он явно кичился страшным своим ремеслом и много врал, а вернее, что это был просто боссяк, лумпен-пролетарий, и кроме того у него из кармана явно торчали полбутылки и в кошелке для змей лежала одна жалкая шкурка. Я не спорю, может быть, эта полбутылка была и с водой, и вся эта чисто туристская поездка была б неважна и недостойна воспоминания, если б на обратном пути нам не встретился Аба-Он-Беги, который, видимо, шагал в старый Мерв для поисков вдохновения. (143)

We also met a hunter with snakes: an old Turkmen in a tattered robe. The old man was bragging: he was saying that in the last month he had knocked off 300 snakes and sold them to Gostorg, which supposedly sends them abroad. I do not doubt Gostorg or its contrivances, but the little old man got me thinking, since he was clearly putting on airs about his dreadful craft and lying a great deal, that he was merely a tramp, a lumpen-proletariat, and besides a half-bottle was clearly sticking out of his pocket and there was only one pathetic skin in his snake-bag. I won't argue, the half-bottle may have just contained water, and this whole purely touristic trip would have remained unimportant and unworthy of recollection, had we not, on the way back, run into Aba-On-Begi, who, apparently, was wandering to old Merv in search of inspiration.

If Sinitsyn is correct in his doubts about the snake catcher (who here is said to catch only 300 specimens a month, rather than 500), then the Turkmen is trading on the fantasies of the Russian writers. If Sinitsyn is not correct, then he is an overly cynical outsider blind to the way that Turkmenistan really operates. Either way, Ivanov positions his Russian brigadier as a potentially fallible mediator and draws attention to the limits of his knowledge and his hesitancy. By littering Sinitsyn’s speech with false assertions like “I do not doubt” and “I won’t argue”—Sinitsyn clearly does suspect the Turkmen’s fabrications, even if he does not question Gostorg—
Ivanov draws attention to the potential for garbled conclusions and misinterpretations on the part of Russian observers. When Sinitsyn’s account is read against Leonov’s sketch, we cannot help but doubt Leonov’s version and wonder what else Russian writers visiting Turkmenistan for a limited period of time might have gotten wrong.

In addition to highlighting the potential inaccuracies of Sinitsyn’s view of Turkmenistan and its residents, Ivanov’s story “Ostrozubets” directly parodies the literary relationship between the Central Asian periphery and the Russian center. The relationship between the brigade and the Central Asian workers at the sovkhoz is central from the opening of the story, when Sinitsyn and his colleagues get into a minor skirmish about their accommodations. M. M. Medvedev—the only brigadier besides Sinitsyn who is given a voice in the tale—complains about both the “filth” (gadost’) in the classroom assigned to them and their guide’s treatment of them, proclaiming: “Is this the way to speak to Muscovites?” («Так ли нужно говорить с московскими!..», 137). The guide yields and promises accommodations more in accordance with the “rank and dignity” («чину и сану», 138) of the writers from the capital. The whole exchange, while thoroughly comic, raises the question of what, exactly, the visiting writers’ “rank” is in relation to the local population. It also poses the question of whether outsider Russian observers might perceive local sites differently from locals, spying “filth,” for instance, where local citizens do not.

This question of the literary relationship between center and periphery is then explored further, as the brigade members meet the worker-correspondent and poet Aba-On-Begi and the central plotline (or “first life”) of the tale begins to unfold. This narrative revolves around Aba-On-Begi and his literary relationship to Valentina Zotova, the beautiful daughter of Egor Petrovich Zotov, whom Aba-On-Begi wishes to impress. When Aba-On-Begi meets the brigadiers, he explains that Zotova has been encouraging him to take on new subjects for his
poetry, arguing that with his Turkmen roots, he ought to write about Turkmen topics and specifically about old and new Merv. He should, she maintains, “praise the mausoleum of sultan Sandzhar, the graves of Bairami and Ali, and the remains of the fortress” («воспеть мавзолей султана Санджара, могилы Байрами и Али, остатки крепости», 140). Even while trying to push Aba-On-Begi toward themes more in keeping with his nationality, Zotova has recently begun to tutor him in Russian meters by giving him lessons in the sovkhoz kitchen, during which she bangs in time upon the kazan, a large iron pot used in Turkmenistan. Try though he might, Aga-on-Begi tells the brigadiers, he has trouble understanding the differences between iambics, trochees, and hexameters, even when they are physicalized for him this way, since, in his words, “we Turkmen compose verses avoiding wherever possible both rhymes and European meters” («мы, туркмены, стихи сочиняем, избегая по возможности и рифмы и европейского размера», 141).

The major development in Aba-On-Begi and Zotova’s relationship takes place during a carnival protesting the celebration of Easter, while the writers’ brigade is visiting. Impressed by Medvedev’s status as a Moscow writer, Zotova asks him for advice on how to teach Aga-On-Begi about Russian meter. In the course of their discussion, Medvedev attempts both to seduce the beautiful Valentina and act as an ambassador for Russian poetry, asking her which rhythms are closer to her heart—iambics or trochees—and boasting: “This is the kind of verses and meters we have in the red capital” («Такие-то у нас стихи и размеры в красной столице», 146). Eventually, the private literary lesson comes to an end when Zotov crawls so close to the duo that he disturbs the structure holding up the nearby kazan. As a result, the cooking pot falls onto Zotov’s head and shoulders and, in a near literalization of the idiom “nesti nazakanie” (“to take one’s punishment,” literally “to wear the punishment”), Zotov publically “wears” the kazan, as
Zotova, Medvedev, Aga-On-Begi, the Komsomol members taking part in an anti-religious procession, and the entire Moscow brigade looks on.

I dwell in such detail upon the carnivalesque plot of “Ostrozubets” because, with it, Ivanov comically confronts the hierarchical relationship among new Central Asian worker-poets (like Aba-On-Begi), the local “teachers” trying to push them toward national content and Russian form (like Zotova), and the Russians from the “red capital” (like Medvedev) who provide the last word on questions of literary form and socialist progress. Ivanov’s chaotic tale subverts this hierarchy by showing it to be absurd at every level. Aba-On-Begi can hardly be called a poet, since it takes him three years to compose a poem about May 1st, the Soviet Labor Day, and he imagines it will take him fifteen years to write one about Merv. Zotova is both a poor and misinformed teacher: the only thing she is able to teach Aba-On-Begi about hexameter is that it is “feudal” and “Greek.” Medvedev, for his part, is a self-serving and disinterested representative of Moscow: he is appalled by details of Turkmen life and seems motivated mostly by his lust for Zotova.

Michael Holquist has argued that Mikhail Bakhtin’s monograph Formy vremeni i khronotop v romane (Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel, 1937–1938) and his book Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul’tura srednevekov’ia i Renessansa (Rabelais and His World, 1937–1940, 1963–1965) challenge the “Stalinist version of tightly compartmentalized space and static time that had won the battle of chronotopes” by the 1930s.254 “Bakhtin’s essay of 1937, by insisting on the historical relativity of all cosmologies, both explained what the contest had been all about and kept open the possibility for the formulation of alternative models,” Holquist argues, while “the Rabelais book is a full-fledged historical illustration of how

such an alternative model was in fact articulated.\textsuperscript{255} I do not want to overstate the connection between Ivanov’s tale and \textit{Rabelais and His World}, but in Ivanov’s use of the carnivalesque and the parodic here, I see a comparable challenge \textit{via carnival} to Stalinist discourse. With his upended hierarchies, Ivanov seems to be challenging the relationship between the Central Asian periphery and the Russian center. He points to the absurdities of constructing national poets, assigning them national topics, and putting them into a hierarchical relationship with Russian literary figures. He even raises questions about the merits of writers’ brigades.

\textbf{Tikhonov and Ivanov as Witnesses to Socialist Construction}

In Tikhonov’s rendering, Turkmenistan is a battlefield in the war for modernization. The “people of Shiram” and the “seekers of water” are romanticized as combatants for Sovietization, battling \textit{bais}, vagabonds, and the backward customs of the Turkmen swath of “Asia.” Tikhonov confidently predicts a more verdant future for them and their republic, which he depicts as landscapes of socialist construction, and accepts the role assigned him by the writers’ brigade with apparent ease. In Ivanov’s \textit{Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna}, Turkmenistan looks radically different. Although Ivanov sets his stories in three different locations around the republic—near Krasnovodsk, Kerki, and Bairam-Ali—these places themselves do not come into sharp focus, and they are certainly not granted stable definitions in relation to the rest of the republic, the Soviet project, Turkmen history, or the future development of the republic. Rather, Ivanov’s settings exist as sites of contestation among his characters and between the first and second lives of his parodic tales. Ivanov himself may not figure in \textit{Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna}, but by depicting members of the writers’ brigade and raising questions about the stakes of representation, the writer defines himself as a self-parodic observer of the socialist construction of Turkmenistan and its depiction in landscapes, rather than a full participant in its Sovietization.

\textsuperscript{255} Ibid.
IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on five texts from the First Five-Year Plan era that position Turkestan and the TSSR in relationship to the all-Union effort to “construct socialism”: Turin’s *Turksib*, Shklovsky’s *Turksib*, Tikhonov’s “Iskateli vody” and “Liudi Shirama,” and Ivanov’s *Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna*. The Turin and Shklovsky works provide their audiences with a clear argument for what makes Turkestan and the Kazakh steppe unique, why the network binding these two regions must be improved, and how these territories come alive as landscapes through contact with the (male) gaze of the Russian filmmaker, surveyor, formalist, and translator. They do not fix their attention on republican borders or work to attach specific meanings to sites within Turkestan. Nor does the TSSR come into direct view. They concentrate, rather, on the relationship between the cultural ties that bind Turkestan to the rest of the Union and on the role of the modernizing figures who mediate between the center and the periphery.

Unlike the *Turksib* texts, which only tangentially relate to the TSSR, and the works analyzed in Chapter One, which elide Turkmenia into larger landscapes, the poems and short stories by the 1930 writers’ brigade take the delimited republic as their starting subject. In these works, Turkmenistan and its constituent places begin to accrue identities as “sights” within the Soviet Union. The definitions of all of the places within Turkmenistan are not stable, however. For Tikhonov, the republic is a knowable space defined by revolutionary activity and development, but for Ivanov it is resistant to cultural inscription by the Soviet center. The discrepancy points to the fact that the “meaning” of Soviet Turkmenistan was, as of 1930, still elastic, as well as to the fact that visiting outsiders could adopt radically different stances vis-à-vis the republic, so long as they were at least superficially supportive of the Sovietization efforts. Ivanov was able to parody the same project that Tikhonov so easily embraced: depicting the
“face of socialism” in Turkmenia and packaging the republic in landscapes for the consumption of readers unfamiliar with the republic, its places, language, and customs.

As a whole, these works from 1928–1932 point to a historical moment when competing visions for Soviet Central Asia were tolerated within Russian-language film and literature. On the one hand, works that treated the area with an “imperial gaze” were accepted and often heralded, even if this resulted in the primitivization of local populations, as in Turin’s *Turksib*, or the presentation of Turkestan and Kazakhstan as discovered territories, as in Shklovsky’s *Turksib*. On the other hand, the rhetoric that surrounded the first writers’ brigade points to a burgeoning impulse within official Soviet discourse to combat “cultural imperialism” by encouraging visiting outsiders to enter into a more reciprocal “looking relation” with the local populations, even if the looks in both directions focused only on the positive dimensions of Sovietization. The rubric for the new “insider” iconography was not firmly established or controlled, which is why Tikhonov and Ivanov could produce such different texts in response to their official tours of Turkmenistan. The fact that there was a shift in the First-Five-Year-Plan period toward visiting republican sites, leaders, and workers was significant, however, for it marked the beginning of a shift toward the privileging of “native” voices over the experiences of individual subjects touring the region.

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257 I refer again to Kaplan here. She reserves “the term ‘look’ to connote a process, a relation, while using the word ‘gaze’ for a one-way subjective vision.” (Ibid., xvi.) In my analysis, I do not mean to suggest that official Soviet discourse privileging participant-observers over outsider-observers was liberatory, just that it was more relational. On the concept of “reciprocal vision,” see also Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 81.
Chapter Three

Adopting Insider Iconography (1933–1934)

I. Introduction

During the First Five-Year Plan, as we have seen, a number of Russian-language products celebrated the “construction of socialism” in Central Asia. There was an *ad-hoc* quality to the effort to make Turkestan and Turkmenistan visible to All-Union audiences, however. Such projects as the first writers’ brigade sent to Turkmenistan were undertaken outside of a set framework for the promotion of the Soviet periphery, and as a result there was room within these undertakings for a range of artistic approaches.

In the early 1930s, the production of artistic works about Turkmenistan became more standardized. The centralization of Soviet film and literature in the early 1930s is often associated with the dissolution of RAPP and all other literary groups on April 23, 1932, the increasingly stringent regulation of literature and film production, the rise of socialist realism as the official Soviet aesthetic, and the promotion of folklore and folk content (*natsional’nost*). It also involved a shift in *how* the “national” republics were represented culturally, however, and in *who* was entrusted to do it. In the case of the representation of Turkmenistan, the shift toward

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258 In the wake of the dissolution of RAPP and the All-Union Organization of Associations of Proletarian Writers (VOAPP), the organizational committee for the Soviet Writers’ Union was formed.


socialist realism and “folk content” came with a corollary modification in the approach to the republic’s space: writers and filmmakers were increasingly expected to present the landscape through “native” eyes, even if they were themselves outsiders to the region, and to obscure any ambivalent or subjective reactions to the space. Denis Cosgrove has argued that landscape is traditionally “the view of the outsider, a term of order and control, whether that control is technical, political or intellectual,” and has stressed that it is a way of seeing that “separates subject and object, giving lordship to the eye of the single observer.” What was effectively valued in this era of Soviet cultural production was a new form of landscape production: one that asserted control over the space of Turkmenistan, but attributed that control to the collective subjects of the TSSR, rather than to any single observer, and stressed the objective nature of its perspective.

In this chapter, I turn to the period 1933–1934 and examine a film and an almanac about Soviet Turkmenistan that represent the shift not only toward “socialist realist” iconography, but also toward the inclusion of “insider” perspectives. First, I offer a discussion of Vertov’s film *Tri pesni o Lenine* (Three Songs about Lenin) as a meta-text for the shift toward “insider” perspectives about the Soviet “East’s” integration into the Union. Although Vertov was himself an outsider to Turkmenistan and the other republics documented in the film, he positions the film as the authentic testimony of local, predominantly female, citizens about their experience with Sovietization. I then shift my focus to three literary works that appeared in the 1934 volume *Aiding-Giumler: Al’manakh k desiatiletiiu Turkmenistana, 1924–1934* (Radiant Days: The Almanac for the 10th Anniversary of Turkmenistan, 1924–1934): Petr Skovskyev’s novella *Oazis*, Oraz Tash-Nazarov’s translated poem *Bairam-Ali*, and Grigorii Sannikov’s cycle of poems “Peski i rozy” (“Sands and Roses”). I analyze these works in the context of the “national

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259 Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, 36, 262.
commission” for Turkmenistan that was established by the Writers’ Union organizational committee in 1933, arguing that the commission and these literary works proselytized on-site collaboration between outsiders visiting the republic and insiders living there and a set iconography for the republic from the point of view of “native” citizens. As a whole, the chosen set of works, I suggest, attests to the priority placed in this period on creating a stable iconography for Turkmenistan and nativizing its perspective on the Soviet progress supposedly being experienced there.\(^\text{260}\)

II. Dziga Vertov’s *Tri pesni o Lenine*

*Tri pesni o Lenine* was commissioned in late 1931, released in 1934 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Lenin’s death, and reedited in 1935, 1938, and 1970 (apparently to reflect the shifting place of Stalin in Soviet culture).\(^\text{261}\) In all of its variants, the film presents itself as the record of how “Eastern” subjects view the Soviet Union and the modernization project completed in Lenin’s name. The centrality of the “insider” perspective is emphasized in the film’s opening intertitles, which instruct the viewer to approach the documentary as a set of authentic, “national” texts collected from villages throughout the Soviet East:

\(^{260}\) To say that “insider” narratives were especially valued in this period is not to say that no works from a visitor’s perspective were produced. For examples of travelogues from the Second-Five-Year-Plan era, see El’-Registan’s account of the road race from Moscow to the Kara-Kum and back (El’-Registan and L. Brontman, *Moskva, Kara-Kum, Moskva* [Moscow: Sovetskaia literatura, 1934]) and Loskutov’s account of traveling in the Kara-Kum (Mikhail Loskutov, *Trinadsatyi karavan* [Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1933]).

\(^{261}\) Analyzing archival evidence about early editions of the film, John MacKay has demonstrated that the three major reedits coincide with the “full-scale inauguration” of Stalin’s personality cult in 1933–1937, the “complete establishment of the Stalin cult” by the purge years of 1937–1938, and the “ongoing anti-Stalinist revisionism of the early ‘stagnation’ period” of 1969–1970. (John MacKay, “Allegory and Accommodation: Vertov’s Three Songs of Lenin (1934) as a Stalinist Film,” *Film History: An International Journal* 18, no. 4 [2006]: 377.) By establishing that earlier versions of the film more heavily featured Stalin, MacKay has challenged readings of the film that presume Vertov excluded the leader as a matter of poetics, including Oksana Bulgakowa’s claim that by having Stalin present “only in metonymic indicators […] Vertov follows Islamic tradition: the prophet is present everywhere, but he is invisible.” (Oksana Bulgakowa, “Spatial Figures in Soviet Cinema of the 1930s,” trans. Jeffrey Karlsen, in Dobrenko and Naiman, *The Landscape of Stalinism*, 59.) Since the appearance of Stalin is not directly relevant to my discussion, and since the “Eastern” footage does not seem to have been significantly edited, I include stills from the 1970 version of the film within the body of the text.
Это документы народного творчества о Ленине, народные песни о Ленине.

В разных концах земного шара,
в странах Европы и Америки,
в странах Африки и за полярным кругом
поют песни о Ленине,
o друге и избавителе каждого
порабощенного человека.
Никто не знает безымянных авторов этих песен, но песни эти
передаются из уст в уста.
Из юрты в юрту,
из кишлака в кишлак,
из аула в аул, из селения в селение.
Материалом для нашей фильмы послужили песни бывшей “царской
тюрьмы народов”, песни нашего раскрепощенного Востока.
Это песни об Октябрьской революции.
О женщине, которая скинула чадру.
o том, что это и есть Ильич-Ленин.
Это песни о лампочке, которая приходит в аул.
Это песни о воде, которая наступает на пустыню,
o том, что это и есть Ильич-Ленин.
Это песни о неграмотных, которые стали грамотными,
o том, что это и есть Ильич-Ленин.
Это песни об улыбке на наших лицах,
o том, что это и есть Ильич-Ленин.
Это песни о радио, о тракторе,
o “человек-птице” (аэроплан).
О цветах и яслях, о новой, счастливой жизни,
o том, что это и есть Ильич-Ленин.

В свете этих и других образов народного творчества, в свете образов
туркских, туркменских и узбекских народных песен проходит перед
зрителем—слушателем вся фильма о ЛЕНИНЕ. 262

These are documents of national art about Lenin, national songs about
Lenin.

In different corners of the earth,
in the countries of Europe and America,
in the countries of Africa and beyond the Polar Circle
they sing songs about Lenin,
about the friend and savior of every
enslaved person.
No one knows the nameless authors of these songs, but these songs are
passed from mouth to mouth.

From yurt to yurt,

from kishlak to kishlak,
from aul to aul, from village to village.
Songs of the former tsarist “prisonhouse of nations,” songs of our liberated East, served as material for our film.
These are songs about the October Revolution.
About a woman who has taken off her chador,
about how this is precisely Il’ich-Lenin.
These are songs about the lightbulb that arrives in an aul.
These are songs about water that arrives in the desert,
about how this is precisely Il’ich-Lenin.
These are songs about the illiterate who became literate,
about how this is precisely Il’ich-Lenin.
These are songs about the smile on our faces,
about how this is precisely Il’ich-Lenin.
These are songs about the radio, about the tractor,
About the “man-bird” (the airplane).
About flowers and nurseries, about the new, joyous life,
about how this is precisely Il’ich-Lenin.
In light of these and other images of national creativity, in light of images of Turkic, Turkmen, and Uzbek national songs, the whole film about LENIN passes before the spectator-listener.

Much like the ethnological inventories and toponyms in Shestaia chast’ mira, this list attests to the breadth of the Soviet Union and the ties that bind it together. The focus here, however, is not on the expanse of the Union itself or on how Vertov’s kino-eye can assist the viewer in seeing this expanse without distortion. Rather, the emphasis is on how Vertov’s film gives voice to the “national creativity” that Lenin has engendered. This prelude positions the film as the testimony of insiders from the Soviet East, as updates from Soviet auls (settlements in the Caucasus and Turkestan), kishlaks (settlements in Turkestan), and yurts (nomadic dwellings) that attest to the local mastering of the land and offer insight into the local experience of Sovietization.

After these opening intertitles and a prologue that focuses on Lenin’s living image in the village of Gorki, where he spent his last years and died, Tri pesni o Lenine begins to construct the “inside” perspective of the “East.” The first section of the film, entitled “V chernoi tiur’m bylo litso moe” (“My Face Was in a Dark Prison”), is set almost exclusively in this “East” and
framed as the universal experience of a formerly veiled woman. The lyrics of the song, which appear to be represented in translation in its intertitles, is illustrated by accompanying footage of various “Eastern” women, which suggests that each of them shares the same point of view with respect to their liberation. The viewer first sees a woman in a medium shot walking down the street in a paranji and chachvon veil (though it is labeled as a chador in the intertitles, which suggests that ethnographic accuracy is less important to Vertov than the symbolic power of the veil).263 Soon this opening sequence gives way to footage of an unveiled female activist who attends meetings in a Turkic women’s club and then to other unveiled women driving tractors and attending university (see figs. 3.1–3.2). Vertov does not rely on any montage “tricks” here—there are no animation sequences of the kind that bring the dolls of the bourgeois to life in Shestaia chast’ mira—or the kind of cinematic self-referentiality that was the trademark of his Chelovek s kinoapparatom. Rather, he uses a slow montage and a more “factographic” documentary approach to show the life of “Eastern” Soviet women “before” and “after” Lenin affected their lives.264 Once their veils were lifted, the first song suggests, the women became free not only to work on the land as equals with men, but also to pursue education, activism, and full participation in the Soviet project.

As Jeremy Hicks and John MacKay have noted, the image of the veil is a consistent motif in Vertov’s work, from his Leninist Kino-Pravda and Shestaia chast’ mira onward, and one consistently tied to the idea that Muslim women could not properly see and confront their

263 The Uzbek word paranji refers to the body covering or veil worn by Uzbek women, while chachvon (also Uzbek) refers to the face veil worn by women there. The paranji often involves a long cotton robe with false sleeves, while the chachvon is a mesh garment made of woven horsehair. (Northrop, “Glossary,” in Veiled Empire, 365.)

oppressors—as had the “colonized” woman in Shestaia chast’ mira—until the Revolution liberated their vision.265 There is a logical fallacy in Vertov’s association of the veil with blindness. After all, as Hicks has written, “the veil blinds or restricts the vision not of the woman wearing it but of the person looking at her,” including the filmmaker.266 In Vertov’s presentation, however, a veiled woman lacks a controlling consciousness: only unveiled can she provide filmic testimony about the experience of Sovietization, and only unveiled can she make her world and its institutions her own. With the unveiling inspired by Lenin, a state farm becomes, in the intertitles, “my sovkhoz” («мой совхоз»), the country “my country” («моя страна»), the land “my land” («моя земля»), the university “my university” («мой университет»), the Party “my Party,” («моя партия»), and so on. Liberated, she is able to master the space around her. Although “Lenin” is not directly labeled “my Lenin,” the sequence suggests that he, too, became the property of those who were unveiled in the wake of the Revolution. Vertov later wrote that Lenin appeared as a “close friend and great leader” to the “doubly, the triply emancipated woman of the Soviet East.”267 In his estimation, the October Revolution offered more to the subjects of this first song—as women, formerly colonized subjects, and workers—than to almost anyone else in the Union.268 It follows that Vertov would value their perspective on Lenin and his legacy, though it is still striking that in this film—unlike in his earlier work—the Soviet Union is seen primarily through their eyes.

265 Hicks, Dziga Vertov, 93; MacKay, “Allegory and Accommodation,” 381. As I noted in Chapter 1, discussions of the Soviet deveiling campaigns that took place in Central Asia can be found in: Massell, The Surrogate Proletariat; Edgar, “Emancipation of the Unveiled”; Northrop, Veiled Empire; Kamp, New Woman in Uzbekistan.

266 Hicks, Dziga Vertov, 93.

267 Dziga Vertov, “My Latest Experiment,” in Michelson, Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov, 137.

268 I here echo Stollery’s interpretation of “triple emancipation.” (Stollery, Alternative Empires, 137.)
Figure 3.1. In the first song, a unveiling herself supplants a woman in a “chador.” Source of this and all further stills: Vertova-Svilova and Furtichev, Tri pesni o Lenine, unpaginated.

Figure 3.2 The first song tracks unveiled women as they build socialism.
In the second segment of the film, “My liubili ego” (“We Loved Him”), we continue to see the world through the eyes of the Soviet “Eastern” women, though they are no longer the only subjects of the film. Instead, they share the stage with Lenin himself, as the film cuts between footage of Lenin’s funeral and close-up portraits of “Eastern” women apparently mourning his death. While Stalin, Ordzhonikidze, Kalinin, Dzerzhinskii, Krupskaia, Lenin’s sister Mar’ia Il’inichna, Klara Tsetkin, and Budennyi are shown in medium and close-up shots attending Lenin’s funeral, the Easterners are the only unknown and unnamed mourners to be granted such filmic attention.269 Intercut with these mourners is footage of canons firing (apparently during the Civil War) and of figures wandering through a desert. Set to classical music (Wagner and Chopin), the material in this song helps create the “mythographic” effect, idealizing the state and its leaders and conveying the message that the vast state is unified under strong leadership.270 Lenin and the October Revolution have reached all corners, this song suggests, including its most inhospitable territories and the populations that were most repressed under the Russian Empire. Importantly, the sequence not only collapses the distance between Moscow—where Lenin’s funeral was held—and the rest of the Soviet Union, as a number of critics have noted.271 It also equates the “Eastern” women with the “desert”; both become semantically equivalent to the Eastern “frontier.” These women are at the outer limits of Soviet subjectivity, just as “their” periphery provides the geographic testing ground for Soviet power.

269 This list of mourners is drawn from Vertova-Svilova and Furtichev, Tri pesni o Lenine, 17.

270 On the “mythographic” components of the second song, see Prunes, “Dziga Vertov’s Three Songs about Lenin,” 271.

271 Hicks, Dziga Vertov, 93; Widdis, Visions of a New Land, 164.
Figures 3.3. In the second song, “Eastern” women look on as Lenin is mourned.

Figure 3.4 The perspective of an “Eastern” woman is equated with the desert.
In the third song, “V bol’shom kamennom gorode” (“In a great stone city”), Vertov shifts away from how the East sees its Soviet experience and focuses instead on how the Soviet center gazes upon its Eastern subjects. Reviewing the film in Izvestia in 1934, Boris Aganov charted the third part’s movement as being centrifugal, outward from Moscow:

И начинается третья песня. Она начинается великолепными снимками ночной Москвы и потом — кругами, кругами расходится на весь Союз, охватывает все—стратостат, Днепрострой, металлургию, уголь, Кара-Кум, челюскицев, авиацию, — все, что нам дорого, чем мы гордимся. […] Вот идея пространства и огромности страны, она сквозит в песках, в караванах, в радиомузыке.272

And the third song begins. It begins with splendid shots of Moscow at night and then—in circles and circles it widens out to the whole Union, encompassing everything—the high-altitude balloon, Dneprostroi, metallurgy, coal, the Kara-Kum, the Cheliuskin crew members, aviation—everything that we value and take pride in. [...] There is the idea of the space and enormity of the country, it shows through the sands, the caravans, the music on the radio.

In my reading, however, the movement of this song is centripetal: the “great stone city” of Moscow is not the starting point for Soviet citizens and Soviet accomplishments, but rather the end point to which they flow, the vision of modernity that encompasses national differences from across the Union.273 Specifically, this last song revolves around the idea that Lenin’s mausoleum in Red Square welcomes citizens from all over the Union, including—once again—the “Eastern” women already featured in the film’s first two segments.

The lyrics on which this segment is based read:

В большом каменном городе на площади стоит кибитка, и в ней лежит Ленин...
И если у тебя большое горе, подойди к этой кибитке и взгляни на Ленина.
И печаль твоя разойдется, как вода,


и горе твое уплывет, как листья в арыке.274

In the great stone city, on the square, there stands a kibitka, and in it lies Lenin…
And if you have great grief, approach this tent and look at Lenin.
And your sadness will disperse, like water,
and your grief will sail away, like leaves in a canal.

This portion of the film opens with a woman seated next to a kettle (fig. 3.5), apparently in mourning, given that the intertitle preceding her image is “…and if you have great grief” («...и если у тебя большое горе»). It then cuts to Lenin’s mausoleum, establishing that, while the structure might literally be a stone building that is fixed in place, it also functions as a “kibitka.”

The use of the untranslated word kibitka—which a contemporary dictionary defined as a “[l]ight portable dwelling among the nomadic peoples” («легкое переносное жилище у кочевых народов»), from the Arabic “kubbat,” meaning “vault” or “cupola”275—signals that Moscow welcomes not only residents of “stone cities,” but also nomadic, “national” populations. It also allows Vertov to suggest that Lenin’s mausoleum contains—to anachronistically employ the terms laid out by Vladimir Paperny—both “vertical” and “horizontal” energy.276 That the angles of a Kremlin light show match the angles of canals in a desert provides a further suggestion that the Soviet periphery, along with the other sites featured in the song, is bound to Moscow. The women we have followed throughout the film thus become as aligned with the Soviet capital as with the frontier desert to which they have previously been semantically bound.

274 Vertova-Svilova and Furtichev, Tri Pesni o Lenine, 18, ellipsis in original. According to MacKay, the song’s full lyrics, housed in RGALI f. 2091, op. 2., d. 422, l. 26 under the title “Written down in Kirghiz-Kishlak, Fergana region, in February 1926,” read thus in translation: “In Moscow, in a big stone city, / Where those chosen by the people gathered, / There is a nomad’s tent on a square, / And in it Lenin lies. / If you have great sadness, / And nothing comforts you, / Go up to this tent, / And look upon Lenin, / And your woe will disperse like water / And your sadness float away like leaves in an aryk.” (MacKay, “Allegory and Accommodation,” 384, 390 n55.)


276 Cf. Paperny, Architecture in the Age of Stalin. I invoke Paperny’s study generally here, rather than his specific discussion of how the temporary Lenin Mausoleum that was erected in 1924 was replaced in 1930 with a stone monument “built to last.” (Ibid., 17.)
Figure 3.5. Lenin’s “kibitka” offers solace to a mourning woman and collapses the distance between the peripheral desert and Moscow.

Figures 3.6. National dance forms are equated to Russian gymnastics on Red Square, Moscow light shows to Central Asian aryks.
As this overview suggests, the organizing consciousnesses in each of the three sections belongs to “Eastern” women, and it is through their (unveiled) eyes that we see the Soviet world. Although sites such as Gorki and Dneprestroi are depicted in passing, the main spaces that occupy the viewer’s attention—and Vertov’s—are the women’s “Eastern” homes and Moscow. A number of scholars have responded to this fact. Oksana Bulgakowa has argued, for instance, that, while in the 1920s Vertov’s work revolved around the dichotomy between the rest of the world and the socialist one-sixth of the globe, in the 1930s “this opposition was replaced by a new one: center and periphery.” Emma Widdis has claimed that, “through montage, Vertov is able to suggest that as the bells ring in the Kremlin, they are heard in Central Asia,” while Martin Stollery has emphasized that the film “posits the apparently unproblematic, gradual incorporation of Central Asian into Soviet culture, and represents the Leninist regime under whose aegis these developments take place as non-coercive.” What has thus far received less attention is that Vertov’s Soviet “East” is not purely equivalent to one geographical territory. No references to specific delimited spaces—such as “Turkestan,” “Central Asia,” “the Caucasus,” or specific national republics—appear in the film. What spaces exactly comprise “our liberated East” remains opaque here. The references to “Turkic, Turkmen, and Uzbek national songs” and to auls, kishlaks, yurts, and chadors in the prologue signal that Vertov has Turkestan and Muslims in mind, but he provides no clues in the film as to which republics or nationalities can be counted within the “East.” Moreover, as in Vertov’s earlier film, the provenance of the footage in Tri pesni o Lenine is not identified, which prevents the viewer from clearly locating the Soviet “East” or distinguishing one part of it from another. For these reasons, it seems, critics have


278 Widdis, Visions of a New Land, 164; Stollery, Alternative Empires, 130.
alternately read the “East” as a figuration of the “periphery” or of “Central Asia,” but rarely as a depiction of specific republics or other geographical spaces.

But what if we attempt to dissect Vertov’s landscape of the “East”? Can we determine its constituent parts? Can we detect any patterns in its iconography? Apparently, Vertov chose to orient his film around Lenin around “national” songs and the perspective of Eastern women only in late 1932, nearly halfway through the production.\(^{279}\) This discovery has led to various critical speculations about Vertov’s motivations. Vlada Petrić has suggested that Vertov structured his film around the “folk imagination” because he wanted to offer an alternative myth of Lenin from the one promoted by the Party, while Hicks has proposed that Vertov happened to hear a folk song about Lenin while at work on the film and this folk song changed the whole concept of the film.\(^{280}\) More convincing, however, are MacKay and Bulgakowa’s suggestions that Vertov switched tracks to keep up with the shifting tide toward “folk sensibility” in official Soviet poetics. Vertov’s shift may have, as Hicks claims, “anticipated Maxim Gorky’s famous endorsement of folklore at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers,” but it did not do so in a void, as MacKay and Bulgakowa have pointed out.\(^{281}\)

I am less interested in why Vertov decided to incorporate “Eastern” folk content, however, than in what constitutes his landscape of the “East,” replete with the sovkhozes and universities over which his female subjects claim ownership. According to MacKay, when creating the scenario for *Tri pesni*, Vertov selected three main songs from a wide range of mostly

\(^{279}\) For accounts of Vertov’s incorporation of folk material, see the excerpts from his 1936 diary reprinted in Vertova-Svilova and Furtichev, *Tri Pesni o Lenine*, 107. A working plan for the film “About Lenin” from August 1932 contains no references for any significant “folk content.” (MacKay, “Allegory and Accommodation,” 383 and 390, n50.)


\(^{281}\) Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, 95; MacKay, “Allegory and Accommodation,” 383; Bulgakowa, 55–6.
anonymous works produced in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in and around 1924. The exact origin of the songs, however, is unclear, as McKay has stressed: although Vertov’s team collected songs, he may also have drawn on translations that had appeared previously in Pravda, where his friend Mikhail Kol’tsov worked, and he may have incorporated pseudo-folk literature that was produced by professional writers living in Moscow and the republic’s capitals. The authenticity of the “folk content” in the film is thus dubious, as is the authenticity of much of the Soviet folklore published in Russian in the 1930s.

If the songs Vertov chose may not have been authentic, his claim to have used found texts for inspiration points to his desire to position the “insider” perspective he offered on the Soviet “East” as legitimate. So too do his descriptions of his team’s expeditions to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan in the spring of 1933 to gather visual and audio material for the film. (It is worth noting that the republics he visited were not necessarily the same ones that generated his song texts, a fact that suggests national borders meant little to his conception of the “East.”)

According to Vertov, he searched for material and listened to “national singers” in the Turkmen cities of Ashgabat and Merv the Uzbek cities of Old Margilan, Samarkand, and Bukhara. In one account, Vertov romanticized his trip as a scientific excursion, emphasizing the richness and diversity of the source material available:

282 McKay, “Allegory and Accommodation,” 383–4 and 390, n53. In 1924 Glavpolitprosvet (the Political Education Department of the Commissariat of Enlightenment) had sent regional workers out to record examples of songs, stories, poems, and proverbs about Lenin. Some of this material was published in an anthology, Lenin in Russian Folk Stories and Eastern Legends, or Lenin v russkoi narodnoi skazke i vostochnoi legende, ed. A. V. Piaskovskii (Moscow: Molodaiia gvardiia, 1930). (Stollery, Alternative Empires, 136.) This almanac does not seem to have been Vertov’s exact source. Its publication, however, speaks to the wealth of material of this type that already existed by 1931, when Vertov’s film was commissioned.


Elsewhere, Vertov focused less on the fruitfulness of his exposure to the singers and settlements of the Caucasus and Central Asia. In a 1933 letter to the film studio Mezhrabpomfil’m, which was producing Tri pesni o Lenine, Vertov wrote:

Сегодня нет денег даже на извозчика, чтобы перевезти аккумуляторы. В Чарджоу мы ходили по 12–15 верст с аппаратом, под солнцем, чтобы хоть сколько-нибудь снять. Средств передвижений там никаких (без денег) не было.287

Today there is no money even for a driver to transport the batteries. In Chardjou we walked twelve or fifteen versts [roughly ten miles] with the camera, under the sun, just in order to shoot a little bit. There were no means of conveyance (without money).

Vertov even linked the excursion to the breakdown he suffered in the midst of the film production. An entry from 1934 includes the following assessment:


286 Vertov here quotes the poem “Portretov Lenina ne vidno,” by Nikolai Poletaev (1889–1935).

Само производство фильма в Средней Азии протекало в ненормальных условиях, в обстановке сыпного тифа, отсутствия средств передвижения и нерегулярного получения денег. Иногда по три дня ничего не ели. Иногда чинили часы местному населению, чтобы заработать на обед без хлеба. Ходили с ног до головы увешанные нафталином, намазанные воночими и едкими жидкостями, с раздраженной, недышащей кожей—боролись против наступавших на нас вшей. Все время поддерживалось нервное состояние, которое подавлялось силой воли. Мы не хотели сдаваться. Мы решили драться до конца.288

The shooting of the film itself was done in Central Asia under abnormal conditions, in the midst of typhus, with no means of transport and irregular pay. Sometimes we wouldn’t eat for three days at a time. Sometimes we repaired watches for the local people in order to earn money for a meager dinner. We went about covered from head to foot with naphthalene, smeared with stinking, caustic liquids, our irritated skins unable to breathe—all to fight off attacks of lice. Our nerves were always on edge, and we controlled them by willpower. We did not want to give up. We had decided to fight to the finish.289

While incorporating the material he gathered in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan into his film, Vertov glossed over the personal experiences he and his team had had—including the budgetary shortages, typhus, lice, and tremendous heat.290 Instead of reflecting upon his subjective experience of visiting the region, as Ivanov had in 1930, or encoding Central Asian society as a set of logistical obstacles to European advancement, as he might have,291 Vertov created a positive image of the “East” through the eyes of its female population. This sublimation of his own, “outsider” experience in favor of “insiders’” views testifies not only to Vertov’s willingness to operate as a proto-socialist realist iconographer of the Party-State, but also to his


289 Dziga Vertov, “On My Illness,” in Kino-Eye, 188. I have modified the original translation slightly.

290 For another account of the logistical difficulties Vertov’s team faced, see D. Surenskii’s statement in Rot-Front, August 14, 1934, reproduced in Vertova-Sviîova and Furtichev, eds., Tri pesni o Lenine, 111. Surenskii recalls that he and Vertov covered the whole distance between the city of Merv (in Turkmenistan) and Fergana (in eastern Uzbekistan) on foot, carrying their Eyemo camera and a rucksack full of film and a minimum of necessary equipment.

291 Cf. the discussion of travel writing about Spanish America in the 1820s, in Pratt, Imperial Eyes, 145.
correct intuition that the new norms of cultural production for the national republics favored local perspectives on the Soviet control of given landscapes, rather than outsider ones.

When it came to editing the film, Vertov used his footage from Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in a fairly predictable pattern as he constructed his “insider” landscape of the Soviet East. Uzbekistan supplied much of the footage of the unreformed cities. The sequence of the veiled woman in the first song, for instance, was most likely shot in Bukhara or Tashkent.\(^\text{292}\) Azerbaijan, meanwhile, was the main locus of the “reformed” Eastern women: the female activist featured in the first song and the portraits of women mourning in the second song were all filmed in Baku.\(^\text{293}\) If those republics were the ones primarily responsible for the footage of the “Eastern” women casting off their veils and taking command of their environments, Turkmenistan, it seems, was the origin of much of the desert footage. Although the Kara-Kum is not labeled within the film, it seems likely that the woman “mourning” beside her kettle (fig. 3.5) and the man standing alone in a desert landscape (fig. 3.4) were both shot there, as was the footage of the canals flooding with water (fig. 3.6), since Vertov wrote in 1934 about filming in the Kara-Kum and underlined the importance of an experience he had there with a blind Turkmen singer.\(^\text{294}\)


\(^{293}\) According to MacKay, the female activist is “almost certainly one Aishat Gasanova, a Party activist who worked among women in her native Azerbaidzhan and later in Daghestan.” (MacKay, “Allegory and Accommodation,” 382.) According to E. Vertova-Svilova, one of the sources for this segment may have been a meeting between Vertov and a young woman named Mirzoeva in a Baku women’s club. (Vertova-Svilova and Furtichev, Tri pesni o Lenine, 108.)

\(^{294}\) Dziga Vertov, “Iz rabochikh tetradei,” in Vertova-Svilova and Furtichev, eds., Tri pesni o Lenine, 108. The Turkmen sequence in the original draft of the screenplay also suggests that Turkmen songs from the Kara-Kum were crucial to Vertov’s conception of the film. This part of the script reads: “This is a song / of a Turkmen poet—/ a song about Lenin” («Это—песня / туркменского поэта—/ песня о Ленине»). (Ibid.)
A number of critics have discussed the hagiographic dimension of Vertov’s film. Annette Michelson has argued that the presence of the women of the socialist republics, together with the quotidian images of Lenin, allows _Tri pesni o Lenine_ to function as a “kinetic icon” and “a veritable iconostasis” to the Lost Leader; in the register of imagery that celebrates saints and martyrs, she argues, the film serves as a monument that elevates Lenin to the “sublime inane.”

Oksana Bulgakowa, meanwhile, has argued that Vertov compresses the Soviet Union into “a few signifying topoi, even to a single object, in which signifying energy is concentrated as a mystical image.” She continues: “The entire space of industry is reduced to Dneproges, the entire space of the capital to Lenin’s mausoleum […]. A spatial figure becomes an emblem and an object, a part standing for the whole.”

If we build on this discussion of the film’s iconography, we could say that the entire space of “the East” is compressed into the cities of Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan and the desert of Turkmenistan, which the film promises will be remade and bound tighter to the Russian center as the landscape is further developed in the future. If the women of Tashkent, Bukhara, and Baku stand as symbols of the state’s ability to reach the most marginalized individuals, the Kara-Kum Desert stands as a symbol of the state to reach—and remake—the most distant and desolate expanses and integrate them into the Union. A contrast between it and Red Square exists—and is highlighted by a sequence that jumps from one to the next—but the film promises a semantic unity that fills the gap between the center and that which was once distant, remote, inhospitable.

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297 Bulgakowa has claimed that the “contrast between the deserts and Red Square, separated from each other by two thousand to three thousand kilometers, is not essential; that distance thus loses its concrete characteristics. The space of the whole country is drawn together and filled by semantic unity” (ibid., 58). I disagree with this view, since the
landscape of the East is associated with the concept of a temporal and geographical frontier within the Union, distinct from the rest of it.

As a whole, then, we can make the following observations about Vertov’s landscape of the Soviet East. First, although it lays claim to the spaces depicted, it is packaged as an “insider’s” rendering of the space. Recorded, translated into Russian (in the intertitles), and translated into images (in the footage), the songs on which Vertov’s film are based are all mediated. Still, their key structural role in the film encourages the viewer to process Vertov’s picture of the Soviet East as a “native” view, grounded in authentic visual, textual, and audio material from the region. Second, Vertov’s landscape of the Soviet “East” elides the various locations in which he and his team filmed, and thus privileges regional identity over the specificities of national republics or other geographical designations. This elision, which suggests that the “East” carried more symbolic meaning as an iconographic landscape for Vertov than “Central Asia,” Turkestan,” or “Uzbekistan,” “Turkmenistan,” and “Azerbaijan,” can occlude our understanding of the film as a text that primarily documents Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan. Finally, Vertov’s “East” relies on a set of specific symbols: unveiled Azeri women represent the individual liberation that accompanied Sovietization, while the Kara-Kum Desert represents the frontier of Soviet development, the physical embodiment of the “Eastern” consciousness. The space of Turkmenistan, in Vertov’s film, thus signifies both unreformed nature and the reach of Soviet power. If its deserts irrigated, then any space can be transformed by Soviet modernization, the intertitles suggest.

Since *Tri pesni o Lenine* does not define itself as a film about Turkmenistan, it is rarely read as such. I would argue, however, that it stands as an early example of “insider iconography”
about the republic. With this documentary, Vertov not only helped the Party-State package the republic for the rest of the Union as the desert frontier within the federation’s “East.” He also helped establish a convention in Russian-language film and literature that I will explore in greater detail in the remainder of this chapter: the representation of Soviet Turkmenistan as a transformed space at the outer edges of the Union through (ostensibly) “insider” eyes.

III. The National Commission of Turkmenistan

The same year that Vertov set out for Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, seeking local voices that could assist him in rendering the Soviet “East” as an “insider’s” landscape, the newly created Writers’ Union signaled that it, too, was interested in amplifying local voices and allowing the national republics to speak for themselves about their respective territories. On August 27, 1933, when the Union’s new organizational committee (or orgkomitet, as it was known in abbreviation) met to discuss the preparations for the First All-Union Writers’ Congress, one of the main items on their agenda was the formation of groups “[f]or the study of the state of literature of the brother republics and the peoples of the RSFSR” (“для изучения состояния литературы братских республик и народов РСФСР”).

This was not the first time the cultural relationship between Soviet Russia and the “brother republics” had received attention from the central literary institutions. In the fall of 1932, the orgkomitet of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) had established a “national section” (natsional’naia sektsiia) of “national” writers living in Moscow as well as a “special group” (spetsial’naia gruppа) of comrades to study the literatures of Central

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298 “Iz protokola №10 zasedaniia sekretariata Orgkomiteta SSP SSSR,” August 27, 1933, in Mezhdu molotom i nakoval’nei, 262.
Asia. And at the first plenum (October 29–November 3, 1932) held in preparation for the All-Union Writers’ Congress, it became clear that the state of national literatures and their relationship to the Writers’ Union would be central to the debates leading up to the event. At that plenum, the Kazakh representative Sabit Mukanov claimed that one of the main reasons for the April 23, 1932 resolution dissolving RAPP was “RAPP’s incompetent leadership at the national level” («неумелое руководство РАПП’а национальными организациями»). The Uzbek representative Madzhidi, meanwhile, emphasized the need for assistance from Russian writers, but stressed that writers visiting the national republics must take their work seriously, rather than just appearing and creating ethnographic sketches about how the local population spends its time in teahouses. Madzhidi declared: “Such a depiction of Uzbekistan, a depiction of laborers sitting in a teahouse drinking kokchai [a kind of green tea] is a clear example of great-power chauvinism, which cannot be tolerated” («Такое изображение Узбекистана, изображение трудящихся, сидящих в чайхане пьют кокчай—есть явное проявление великодержавного шовинизма, которого терпеть нельзя»). The Turkmen representative, Chariev, made a similar request, asking the following “small favor” («маленькая просьба») of the orgkomitet: “When you send writers to the national republics, please check them out first”

299 E. Pel’son, “Chitki, sviaz’ s mestami, litkrughhi,” Literaturnaia gazeta, October 5, 1932. The national section was made up of Abul’kasim Lahuti (chairman), Sham’ Usmanov (answering secretary, otv. sekretar’), Perest Markish, Iosif Rabin, Konrad Iokum, Emil’ Madaras, and a certain Zvonkov. Temir-Bulat Beibulatov led the special group studying Central Asia. (Ibid.)

The prominence of the “national literatures” question as early as August 1932 is reflected in Petr Skosyrev’s article of August 29, “All-Russian or All-Union? How the First Congress of Soviet Writers Should Be,” published when the Congress was still to be held that fall. (P. Skosyrev, “Vserossiiskii ili vsesoiuznyi: Kakim dolzhen byt’ pervyi s”ezd sovetskikh pisatelei,” Literaturnaia gazeta, Aug 29, 1932.)

300 RGALI, f. 631, op. 1, d. 7, l. 5.

301 RGALI, f. 631, op. 1, d. 6, l. 96–7, emphasis in original; Schild, “Between Moscow and Baku,” 47.
If allowed to operate completely independently, Chariev suggested, visiting writers would pass along false impressions of the kind visible in the play *Kaban (The Wild Boar)*, which, Chariev claimed, made it seem as though *kulaks* (affluent peasants) were everywhere in Turkmenistan, that the Party organizations were not fighting the class enemies, and that all the *batraks* (day laborers) and *bedniaki* (poor peasants) were under the influence of *kulaks*. Much of the conversation about the literary relationship between the Central Asian republics and the Soviet center, as this suggests, revolved around the problem of how outsiders—akin to the writers and filmmakers Turin, Shklovsky, Tikhonov, and Ivanov—had behaved when visiting the republics during the First Five-Year Plan.

Despite all this attention to the national literatures in the earlier stages of the Congress preparation, the meeting on August 27, 1933 marked a significant step in the institutionalization of the cultural relationship between the center and the periphery. The establishment of the national commissions created centralized fora for the celebration and study of the “brother republics.” Moreover, although it was not phrased as such, the creation of these national commissions signaled that the Soviet center wanted to update and standardize the manner in which “insider” narratives were integrated into the representation of the national republics as Sovietized landscapes.

Initially, eleven national commissions were proposed, one each for the study of the literatures of Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Tataria, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the autonomous republics and regions of the RSFSR, and the non-autonomous

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302 RGALI, f. 631, op. 1, d. 8, l. 97a; Schild, “Between Moscow and Baku,” 47.

303 RGALI, f. 631, op. 1, d. 8, l. 97a.
regions of the RSFSR. (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which were not yet full Soviet Socialist
Republics, did not receive their own national commissions.) The groups were to consist of the
following members, including, as will be noted, some of the leading figures of Soviet literature
and all of the members of the 1930 writers’ brigade to Turkmenistan (Tikhonov, Ivanov,
Sannikov, Pavlenko, Lugovskoi, and Leonov):

1. Ukraine: Stretskii, Fadeev (leader), Il’enkov (deputy leader), Kovalenko, Azarkh, V. Kataev, Gladkov, O. Forsh.  
5. Azerbaizhan: Averbakh (leader), Slonimskii, Zuev, M. Iurin, Mstislavskii, Pil’niak, Zhiga.  
8. Tajikistan: Lakhuti (leader), P. Romanov, Karavaeva, Anisimov.  

The main goals of the groups were outlined in the following terms:

304 In the protocol, the name Bagritskii also appears in the Ukraine group, but it is crossed out and has the word “deceased” (umer) next to it.  
305 RGALI f. 631, op. 1., d. 33, l. 22–25 (full protocol is 22–30). Reprinted as “Iz protokola №10 zasedaniia sekretariata Orgkomiteta SSP SSSR,” 27 August 1933, in Mezhdu molotom i nakoval’nei, 262–263.
I. Группам по изучению литератур республик, областей и краев поручается: 1. собрание и изучение всего литературного материала, характеризующего творчество писателей и состояние литературной организации каждой республики, края и области; 2. выезды на периферию в целях укрепления живой связи и конкретной помощи лит[ературным] организациям. Регулярная товрищеская переписка; 3. организация переводов на русский язык, продвижение в печать лучших лит[ературных] художественных произведений писателей союзных, автономных республик, областей и переводов с русского на языки народов СССР.
II. На группы возлагается ответственность за широкое освещение в местной центральной прессе творчества и работы писателей всех литорганизаций СССР.
III. Группа должна приступить к работе немедленно. Созыв за руководителями групп.

I. The groups for the study of the literatures of the republics, regions, and areas are charged with the following: 1. the collection and study of all literary material that characterizes the work of writers and the state of literary organization in each republic, region, and district; 2. visits to the periphery to strengthen the live connection with and provision of concrete assistance to local litorganizations [literary organizations]. Regular comradely correspondence; 3) organizing translations into Russian and arranging the publication of the best literary works by writers from the Union republics, the autonomous republics, and the regions, as well as translations from Russian into the languages of the peoples of the USSR.
II. The groups are responsible for wide coverage in the local centralized press of the creative work and labor of the writers of all the litorganizations of the USSR.
III. [Each] “group” ought to begin work without delay. Convening [the groups] is the responsibility of the group leaders.

By the time these national commissions for “visiting” and “studying” the national republics were formed, a number of brigades were already in development, including the most famous from this period, the one to the White Sea Canal in August 1933. Announcing the formation of these groups and brigades in an orgkomitet meeting on September 7, Gorky drew a

306 RGALI f. 631, op. 1, d. 33, l. 25–26; Mezhdu molotom i nakoval’nei, 263.

307 The brigade created the volume Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina. Istoriiia stroitel’stva (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo “Istoria fabrik i zavodov,” 1934). The work was billed as being collaboratively designed, composed, and edited by thirty-six different writers, though final editorial credit was given to Gorky, Averbakh, and Firin. For two recent analyses of the Belomor canal monograph, see Cynthia A. Ruder, Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal (Gainesville: Florida UP, 1998); Nicholas and Ruder, “In Search of the Collective Author.”
sharp contrast between the commissions devoted to the national literatures and the White Sea ("Belomor") Canal brigade, stating:

Некоторые из вас ездили на Беломорско-Балтийский канал. Это очень хорошо и является выражением желания понять действительность. Но надо знакомиться не только с результатами, но и с процессами, как это делается.\(^{308}\)

Some of you went to the White Sea-Baltic Canal. That is very good and is an expression of your desire to understand reality. But it is necessary to acquaint ourselves not only with results, but also with processes, how this is done.

In Gorky’s schematic, these commissions would encourage writers to actively participate in the process of change, rather than just facilitating it through mediation and documentation. Izvestiia framed Gorky’s remarks by claiming that his speech “pointed to the inattention toward the literatures of the Union republics and regions that has existed up to this point” («указал на невнимательное отношение к литературам союзных республик и областей, которое проявляется до сего времени»).\(^{309}\) In so doing, Izvestiia emphasized Gorky’s orientation toward cooperation between visitors and locals and reiterated the message Gorky had delivered at the meeting of the secretariat on August 15, 1933, when Gorky had spoken of the need for greater attention to the literatures of the brother republics.\(^{310}\) The brigades were thus billed as a rectification of earlier mistakes made by literary figures.

If Petr Pavlenko’s September 20, 1933 letter to Nikolai Tikhonov is to be believed, Gorky’s idea for the national brigades had been inspired by Pavlenko himself and his plan of


\(^{309}\) “Podgotovka k vsesoiuznomu s’ezdu sovetskikh pisatelei.”

\(^{310}\) “Programma vsesoiuznogo s’ezda pisatelei rashirena. Gor’kii—predsedatel’ Orgkomiteta Soiuza SP SSSR,” Literaturnaia gazeta, August 17, 1933.
going to Dagestan—an idea that may have stemmed, in turn, from the 1930 brigade that he led to Turkmenistan:

Оргкомитетские дела сумбурны. Ал[ексей] Макс[имович] эту зиму проведет в СССР, в Крыму, т[ак] что надо ожидать сильного заседательского столоверчения вплоть до самого съезда. Из газет ты уже знаешь, наверно, о национальных бригадах оргкомитетов. Горький “украл” наши махачкалинские мысли и создал бригады, которые должны изучить соответствующие литературы к съезду путем поездок на места.311

The orgkomitet work is muddled. Al[eksei] Maks[imovich] [Gorky] is spending this winter in the USSR, in Crimea, so we can expect representatives to be conjuring his ghost right up until the congress. You already know from the newspapers, most likely, about the orgkomitet’s national brigades. Gorky “stole” our Makhachkala thoughts and created brigades, which are supposed to study the respect[ive] literatures before the congress by way of trips to the sites.

Wherever Gorky’s inspiration came from, the idea was clear: the (mostly Russian) writers assigned to each national commission were to gather as much information as possible about the national literatures, to help publicize them, to visit relevant “sites” (mesta) within the republic, and to bolster the literary organizations operating there. Vertov’s work on Tri pesni o Lenine had suggested that incorporating authentic examples of “national creativity” and “insider” voices was critical to accurately representing the republics. Gorky, in effect, took this idea a step further, suggesting that the primary goal of cultural producers visiting the republics should be helping the local populations—and the lands visited—to express themselves more fully.

As it turned out, the process of organizing these national commissions was muddled—more like Pavlenko’s description, in other words, than the crisp language of the original orgkomitet resolution might suggest. For one thing, the brigade assignments changed significantly after the first resolution about them was issued, as Kathryn Schild has noted. Some brigadiers, such as the writer Andrei Platonov, were assigned to brigades much later than August

311 “Пис’мо П. А. Павленко Н. С. Тихонову,” in Mezhdu molotom i nakoval’nei, 270.
27. Other writers changed their assignments, switching to a group better suited to their taste, taking on extra assignments, or ignoring the call to brigade work altogether. Pasternak and Ol’ga Forsh, for instance, switched from their original assignments to the (seemingly most desirable) Georgian commission, while Kirpotin worked with two different brigades, visiting both Georgia and Armenia. Lahūtī found himself alone in the first “brigade” to Tajikistan, after the others originally assigned to it refused to go.

Likewise, the activity of the brigades in the periphery was not as standardized as it might be assumed. While the brigades generally performed similar activities in the republics—they usually gave readings; visited assorted kolkhozes, sovkhozes, and construction sites; and met with writers, Party officials, and publishers—the output of each brigade was slightly different. Some brigades published almanacs and anthologies within a year of their travel, while others left little trace of their existence in the Russian-language press beyond a few newspaper articles. The brigades were presented in the Soviet press as helping to collectively prepare the “national” soils for literary development—as the cartoon reproduced as fig. 3.7 suggests—but some were more active than others.

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312 As will be discussed in greater detail below, Platonov was named to the Turkmenistan brigade on March 13, 1934. (RGALI f. 631, op. 6, ed kh. 27, l. 12; Rozhentseva, “Opyt dokumentirovaniia ,” 400.)

313 Schild suggests that “Georgia was a particularly compelling destination for Russian writers, as it combined attractive travel opportunities, inspiration from a thriving literature with roots in antiquity, and a literary culture that needed less assistance than most other national literatures.” (Schild, “Between Moscow and Baku,” 70.) Ruder and Nicholas have argued that the 1933–1934 brigades to Central Asia were considered less prestigious than the excursion to the White Sea Canal. (Nicholas and Ruder, “In Search of the Collective Author,” 223.)

314 Schild, “Between Moscow and Baku,” 70.

315 RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, d. 35, l. 6; Schild, “Between Moscow and Baku,” 71.
Figure 3.7 “The Georgian brigade of the USSR orgkomitet (comrades Pasternak, Pavlenko, and Nikulin) successfully contribute to the habitat of the fragrant flowers in the South Caucasian gardens of literature.” Pasternak switched into this brigade, abandoning his original assignment.

Source: Literaturnaia gazeta. February 14, 1934. Cartoon by the Kukryniksy collective.

The Turkmenistan national commission was one of the most productive, meeting repeatedly in Moscow, sending a writers’ brigade to Turkmenistan in the spring of 1934, and producing an almanac in November, in time to celebrate the republic’s tenth anniversary.316 When gathered in Moscow, the commission focused on three main issues. First, it organized a series of presentations on Turkmen national resources, culture, literature, music, and theater in Moscow in the fall of 1933, as well as a set of literary evenings and meetings with Turkmen writers.317 Along with assuring that the commission was well informed about Turkmenistan in

316 The meetings of the Turkmenistan commissions are better documented than those of the Tajik and Uzbek commissions, which reflects its comparatively high level of organization. On the Turkmenistan commission, see RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 27; RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 57. On the Uzbekistan commission, see RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 29; RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 66. On the Tajikistan commission, see RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 7; RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 25; RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 58.

317 RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 58–60; RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 56.
advance of the brigade’s trip, these efforts were apparently directed toward increasing the profile of Turkmenistan and the other Central Asian republics in Moscow, a larger effort that also involved joint literary events with the Turkmen, Uzbek, and Tajik delegations during the Party Congress and the participation of the Turkmen commission in the exhibition of national literatures at the First All-Union Writers’ Congress.318

The second major issue that the commission discussed was the leadership and makeup of the brigade it would send to the TSSR. Sannikov, a veteran of the 1930 excursion to Turkmenistan, was entrusted to lead the expedition. This Russian poet-functionary—Sannikov was at the time the poetry editor of Krasnaia nov’ (Red Virgin Soil) and would increasingly devote himself to editorial work in the coming years, rather than composing his own verses—was officially charged with leading the commission.319 It was announced from the first, however, that Sannikov would answer to K. S. Atabaev, chairman of the Turkmen Soviet Commissariat of Nationalities (Sovnarkom), with whom the commission met on February 10, 1934.320 The rank and file of the commission was expanded repeatedly, first on January 20, 1934 and then again on March 13, when the following list of participants of the brigade was approved:

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318 See the records of the meetings held on January 20, February 10, and February 28, 1934. (RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 56; RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 8; RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 10–11; RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 10–11.)

319 Between November 1925 and November 1954, Sannikov was sequentially an editor of Oktiabr’ (October), head of the poetry section of Krasnaia nov’ (Red Virgin Soil), head of the poetry section at Novyi mir (New World), and an editor again at Oktiabr’. (Daniil Sannikov, “Nashedshie drug druga,” 6.) He wrote very little poetry between the mid-1930s (after this second brigade) and the 1950s, busying himself instead with editorial work. (Ozerov, “Zhizn’, poezia, poisk,” 15.)

320 “Tematicheskii plan,” RGALI, f. 3256, op. 1, ed. kh. 429, l. 3. Georgii Korabel’nikov, a former RAPP member and a participant of the writers’ brigade to the White Sea Canal, became another deputy head of the brigade at the commission’s meeting on February 28, 1934. (RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 10–11; Rozhentseva, “Opyt dokumentirovaniia,” 399.) On Korabel’nikov, see Dobrenko, Making of the State Writer, 373 and 388.
Poetry: Sannikov, Lugovskoi, Shengeli, Tobidze, and translations.
Drama: Bill’-Belotserkovskii, Pogodin and Shestakov.
Literary Prose (*khudozhestvennaiia proza*): Maksimov, Paustovskii, Kozin, Skosyrev, Odoev, A. Platonov, Muguev, Smirnov, Bol’shakov, Loskutov.
Film Scripts: I. G. Trabskii.
Academy of Sciences expedition: to include Platonov, Nemchenko, Odoev, Smirnov, Muguev, Loskutov, Shestakov. 321

In the end a slightly different group traveled to Turkmenistan: Paustovskii, for instance, did not go with the others. What is striking about this list is not its exact concordance with the final brigade membership, but the fact that it was developed in conjunction with the orders of Atabaev and the Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, Popok, and in fact approved by them. 322 The involvement of the officials in the development of the brigade’s composition and its leadership emphasizes that the commission was intent on presenting itself as a *cooperative* venture between visitors to the republic and “native” writers and officials.

The third topic covered by the Turkmenistan commission while they were still in Moscow was the question of what the brigade should produce. As early as January 20, 1934 the commission had settled on the idea of an anthology celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Turkmenistan. 323 On February 10, 1934, a tentative plan for the anthology emerged, as Sannikov proposed that it include various different kinds of artistic works—especially plays, opera librettos, and dramatic scripts—and depict relevant achievements

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321 RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 12; “Opyt dokumentirovaniia,” 400. At the meeting on January 20, 1934 it was resolved that the commission should be expanded to include not only Maksimov, Sannikov, Korabel’nikov, and Ivanov, who had originally been assigned to the commission, but also Smirnov, Borozdin, Paustovello, Trabskii, and Kozin. (RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 56.)

322 At the meeting on February 10, 1934, it had been resolved that Popok and Atabaev would approve the list of writers. (RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 8. See also: “Pisateli u predsovnarkoma Turkmenskoi SSR t. Atabaeva,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, February 14, 1934; Rozhentseva, “Opyt dokumentirovaniia turkmenskih poezdok A. P. Platonova,” 398–399.)

323 RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 56. “Potokol No. 3. Zasedaniia Turkmenskoi brigady ot 20/1 34 g.” See also Rozhentseva, “Opyt dokumentirovaniia turkmenskih poezdok A. P. Platonova,” 398.)
in industrialization, collectivization, and cultural construction. At the same meeting, it was decided that the plan should be reworked by Professor Borozdin to incorporate the instructions received from K.S. Atabaev.\textsuperscript{324} At the next meeting, five days later, a thematic plan for the brigade’s anthology was proposed and approved by Atabaev, and it was agreed that any further changes and additions be vetted by the representative of the TSSR permanent mission (\textit{postpredstvo}), one O. Atabaev (a different Atabaev than the chairman of the Sovnarkom).\textsuperscript{325}

The accepted plan read as follows:

\textbf{Тематический план.}

Сборника и отдельных художественных произведений подготовляемых к 10-летию Туркменской ССР.

1. Индустриализация Туркмении. Характеристика/ история/ фабрик и завода ТССР. Показ Турменского пролетария.
2. Колхозное строительство. Революция в ауле. Колхозник дехканин. С разделами I-й и II-й связана тема перелома человека.
3. Хлопок. Классовая борьба на хлопковом фронте.
4. МТС в Туркмении. Работа Политотделов МТС. \textit{Животноводство}\textsuperscript{326}
5. Освоение недр. Карабутаз. Нефтедаг. Нефть и сера.
6. Наступление на пустыню. Освоение Каракум.
7. Проблем воды. Обводнение Западной части Туркменской ССР.
8. Национальности в Туркмении—Велужди, Джемшиты. Переводы кочевников на оседлость.
9. Культурное строительство. Туркменская школа. Новый алфавит. Женщина в новой Туркмении. Борьба с пережитками родового строя и с религиозными предрассудками.
10. Ремесла. Ковер.
11. Воспоминания о гражданской войне. Басмачи. \textit{Оборона границ ТССР}\textsuperscript{327}
12. Сухие субтропики. Насаждение субтропических культур.\textsuperscript{328}

\textsuperscript{324} RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 8. See also: “Pisateli u predsovnarkoma”; Rozhentseva, “Opyt dokumentirovania,” 398–399.

\textsuperscript{325} RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 7.

\textsuperscript{326} This entry was added between numbers four and five by hand (the rest of the plan is typed).

\textsuperscript{327} The entry in cursive appears in handwriting on the document.

\textsuperscript{328} RGALI, f. 3256, op. 1, ed. kh. 429, l. 3.
Thematic plan.

Of the anthology and individual works being prepared for the 10th anniversary of the Turkmen SSR.

1. The industrialization of Turkmenia. Characteristics/history of mills and factories of the TSSR. A display of the Turkmen proletariat.
2. The construction of kolkhozes. Revolution in the aul. The collective farmer. The theme of the remaking of man is connected with sections I and II.
6. The offensive against the desert. Mastering the Kara-Kum.
7. Water problems. The irrigation of the western part of the Turkmen SSR.
8. National minorities in Turkmenistan—the Beludzhi, Dzemshity. The settling of the nomadic populations.
11. Memories of the Civil War. Basmachi. The defense of the borders of the TSSR.
12. The dry subtropics. The cultivation of subtropical crops.

A document attached to this plan introduced the goals of the brigade, stressing that the participants would be studying not only the literature of Turkmenistan, but also the place itself. Moreover, it emphasized that the brigade’s trip to Turkmenistan was a shared undertaking between Moscow and the Turkmen regional government. As this comprehensive plan and its explanatory note suggest, the commission was adamant even before the brigade departed that its participants would write about a wide range of topics and cover all that was deemed most important to the local Turkmen advisers. Pavlenko, Tikhonov, Lugovskoi, Leonov, Ivanov, and

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329 The MTS maintained the agricultural machinery used in kolkhozes.

330 An acronym for “Oil Mountain,” from the Russian word for “oil” and the Turkmen word for “mountain,” Neftedag refers to the mountain called Nebit-Dag in Turkmen, which was successfully mined in the early 1930s. (E. M. Pospelov, Geograficheskie nazvaniia mira: Topomicheskii slovar' [Moscow: AST, 2001], http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc_geo/3417/He6rr.)
Sannikov had been able, in 1930, to choose their subject matter while on the ground in Turkmenistan, based on what they found most interesting. With this second brigade, those visiting the republic were far more constrained in their choice of material and far less encouraged to follow their own interests wherever they may lead.

Soon after the plan for the anthology was approved, the writer Vladimir Kozin gave a follow-up presentation about the planned almanac. In addition to discussing technical details, such as the length of the publication, Kozin argued that the sketches and stories should emphasize animal husbandry, Karakul sheep husbandry (karakulevodstvo), and horsebreeding (konevodstvo), and maintained that he should edit the collection along with Vs. Ivanov, Sannikov, Borozdin, Paustovskii, and the Turkmen representatives Min’kov and Veselkov. Presumably Kozin considered the non-Turkmen in this group worthy because each had spent significant time studying Turkmenistan. Some of them also visited the region: Ivanov and Sannikov during the 1930 brigade, Paustovskii while writing the novel Kara-Bugaz, and Il’ia Nikolaevich Borozdin as a professor with the Academy of Sciences and an editor of the journal Novyi vostok (The New East, 1922–1930). Kozin himself was born in the Turkmen mountains near Kushka and worked in Turkmenistan. The inclusion of the two Turkmen representatives in the editorial collective, however, is telling: it signaled that this almanac—unlike earlier works about Turkmenistan—would not be exclusively the work of visitors.

The national commission’s archive suggests that much of the brigade’s work was sketched out before it left Moscow. It was already decide who would write in what genre and

331 RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. kh. 27, l. 12; Rozhentseva, “Opyt dokumentirovaniia,” 400.

332 On Borozdin’s life and work, see P. A. Borozdina et al., eds., Zhizn’ i sud’ba professora Il’i Nikolaevicha Borozdina (Voronezh: Izd-vo Voronezhskogo gos. universiteta, 2000).

333 Borozdin, “Sotsialisticheskoe stroitel’stvo Turkmenii.”
what topics needed to be covered to convey the desired message about the republic and its place in the Soviet Union. What remained for the brigade—supposedly—was simply to tour Turkmenistan and gather “insider” knowledge by cooperating with local writers and organizations. In reality, the work of the brigade was more scatter shot than the preparation suggested. First, the brigade’s departure from Moscow was delayed. Originally planned for March 15, it was postponed first until March 25 and then again until March 27.334 Second, when the brigade finally did depart from Moscow’s Kazan station on March 27, only some of the participants were present; the rest arrived in Ashgabat later.335 Third, once the brigade arrived in the republic, the movements of the brigade members were not as coordinated as might be expected. There were certain collective gatherings that all the members of the brigade currently in the TSSR apparently attended, such as the meeting with the orgkomitet of the Writers’ Union of Turkmenia upon the brigade’s arrival on April 2.336 And a number of the visiting writers did take scheduled trips around the republic to help organize regional writers’ conferences in Merv, Chardjou, Tashauz, Kerki, Bairam-Ali, and Iolanti—many of the same places visited by the 1930 writers’ brigade.337 The excursions to gather material for selected topics, however, seem to have progressed idiosyncratically.

334 Rozhentseva, “Opit dokumentirovaniia,” 400. An article in Pravda Vostoka announced that the departure was scheduled for March 25. (See “Brigada Orgkomiteta Soiuza pisataei vyezhaet v Turkmeniu,” Pravda Vostoka, March 27, 1934.)


337 Sannikov, Borozdin, and Lugovskoi, “Brigada Orgkomiteta SSP SSSR v Turkmenii.”
Andrei Platonov’s experience—the best documented of all the participants’—provides insight into the highly fractured nature of this supposedly collective and well-regulated undertaking of iconography and landscape production. Before examining the record of Platonov’s trip, I must emphasize that his inclusion in the writers’ brigade to Turkmenistan was extremely significant for his career, since it marked his reemergence onto the Soviet literary scene. Platonov’s troubles had begun in 1929, when RAPP had accused him of falling under the influence of Boris Pil’niak. Platonov’s position within the ever-more-consolidated official literary establishment grew even more precarious after the 1931 publication of the novella “Vprok” (“For Future Use”), which was read as a satire of collectivization and which, famously, earned condemnation from Stalin himself. As a result of this controversy, Platonov was not published for three years, though he made active efforts to find his way back into the literary world by appealing to Gorky and others.

With the dissolution of RAPP in 1932, the most vocal persecutors of Platonov in the late 1920s and early 1930s—including Leopold Averbakh, Aleksandr Fadeev, and Aleksei Selivanovskii—had been quieted, and Platonov had had a chance for rehabilitation. But as it had turned out, Platonov had remained on the fringes of the official Soviet literary scene throughout 1933. Publishing houses continued to refuse his work and he was denied a place in the White Sea-Baltic Canal expedition in 1933, even though he had already written about the construction of canals in “Epifanskie shliuzy” (“Sluices of Epiphany,” 1927) and “Gorod Gradov” (“The City of Gradov,” 1927) and had written letters to both Averbakh and Gorky asking that he be included in a brigade trip.338 Gorky’s responding to Platonov’s application for help in September 1933 and

inviting him on the Turkmenistan trip thus signaled a significant change in the official view of the writer and opened up new possibilities for publication.

Platonov’s time in Turkmenistan consisted of a number of embedded excursions. After arriving in Ashgabat on April 2, he departed for Krasnovodsk and the oil-producing mountain Neftedag (alternately called Nebit-Dag) on April 4, where he spent approximately ten days. After this, he and three other writers visited the village of Bagir (30km from Ashgabat) and then he and several writers, including the dramatist Vladimir Bill’-Belotserkovskii and the fiction writer Konstantin Bol’shakov went to see the laboratory of a physicist who was studying the artificial catalyzation of rain at the Ashgabat rain institute.339 Platonov then spent April 16–26 traveling around the Central Kara-Kum, visiting Repetek, a research center studying the desert, and touring Bairam-Ali.340 On May 7, Platonov crossed into Uzbekistan on his way home, leaving before a planned expedition with the Academy of Sciences to study the resources of Turkmenia and missing the opening of the Turkmen Writers’ Conference, which he apparently did not want to attend.341

Platonov’s letters to his wife and son about his time in the region make it clear that the writers were a fractured group. In his letter of April 2, Platonov first notes his discomfort with the collective and the manner in which it is accommodated, writing:

Мне дали номер в гостинце, где живут другие писатели; пока в номере я один, но вскоре ко мне вселят второго писателя […] Недавно в первый раз обедал—кормят так обильно, что стыдно есть. Но мне не нравится так праздно пребывать, и я что-нибудь придумаю. Кроме того, и публика не по

I was given a room in a hotel where the other writers are staying. For the moment I am alone in my room, but soon they will put another writer in here with me [...]

Not long ago I had my first dinner—it is shameful how much we are fed. But I do not like to remain so idle, and I will think up something. And anyway, the constant company isn’t for me,—I like to watch everything alone, then I see better, think more precisely.

Two days later, he described his (literal and figurative) split from the other writers, who remained in Ashgabat while Platonov ventured on with Atabaev to Krasnovodsk:

I spent barely three days in Ashgabat. Now I am sitting in the saloon carriage of Atabaev, the chairman of Turkmenia’s SNK [Sovnarkom]. I am heading to Krasnovodsk. All the other writers remained in Ashgabat; tomorrow, it seems, Sannikov and the others are arriving, but I’ve broken away from them all.

Then, on April 10, Platonov explored the tensions between him and the other writers in greater detail, questioning his relationship as a “brother writer” of the others:

The brother-writers have had quite enough of one another. Around the 15th or 16th everyone will disperse. More than half of the brigade is made up of trash or of jokers like Kos’ka [presumably Konstantin Bol’shakov] or the fool Kozin.

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342 Platonov, pis’mo 5 (2 aprelia 1934g), in Arkhiv A. P. Platonova, 505.

343 Platonov, pis’mo 6 (4 aprelia 1934g), in Arkhiv A. P. Platonova, 505.

344 Platonov, pis’mo 9 (12 aprelia 1934g), in Arkhiv A. P. Platonova, 508. In her commentary to the letters from Turkmenistan, Rozhentseva notes the parallel with the following entry in Platonov’s notebook: “A brigade of writers is a gathering of the unlucky (sometimes of cheats)” (“Бригада писателей—собрание несчастных (изредка жуликов)”). (Platonov, Zapisnye knizhki, 137.)
The attitude toward me constantly has that overtone that you know about, but I am not paying any attention. I came on account of serious business, on account of the desert and Asia.

Finally, on April 15, Platonov explicitly stated that the other writers bothered him:

Мне здесь вчера в достаточно серьезной форме было сделано предложение остаться надолго работать в Туркмении в качестве «министра без портфеля». Это пустяки. Но важно, что я здесь, следовательно, не на плохом счету. Да это еще писатели мне мешают. Вот убогие люди! Здесь я их еще яснее разглядел, даже более чем в Москве.345

Yesterday it was proposed, in a fairly serious manner, that I stay for a while in Turkmenia to work in the capacity of “minister without portfolio.” This is nonsense. But it is important that I am therefore not in bad standing here. Even though the writers are still bothering me. These wretched people! I have seen them even more clearly here than in Moscow.

Platonov’s aversion to the other writers on the brigade may well have been unique, as may have been his desire to escape Ashgabat, to avoid the Turkmen Writers’ Congress, and to devote himself to the study of the “serious business” of Asia and the desert. I will take up the uniqueness of Platonov’s strategy for representing Turkmenistan in Chapter Four. For the moment I want only to stress that—even if particular to his circumstances—his reflections offer insight onto the brigade as a whole, since they suggest that it was less a collective than a collection of individuals operating relatively autonomously within a larger state project. This same conclusion is bolstered by the fact that it is difficult to determine, from the historical record, just who was involved in the project.346 While the 1930 brigade was defined in

345 Platonov, pis’mo 10 (15 aprelia 1934g), in Arkhiv A. P. Platonova, 510. For an account of the opening of the congress, see “Otkrytie 1-go Vseturkmenskogo s’ezda Sovetskikh pisatelei,” Turkmenskaia iskra, May 10, 1934, preserved as RGALI, f. 631, op. 6, ed. khr. 27, l. 31–32.

346 Sources diverge over the final composition of the brigade. The almanac produced by the national commission claims that nineteen writers worked in Turkmenia in the spring of 1934: B. Bill’-Belotserkovskii, Konst. Bol’shakov, I. Borozdin, Azat Vshutni, Vladimir Kozin, Mikhail Loskutov, Vladimir Lugovskoi, Georgii Maksimov, Khadzhi-Murat Mugev, M. Nemchenko, N. Odoev, Andrei Platonov, Viktor Popov, G. Sannikov, Petr Skosyrev, A. Smirnov, Titsian Tobidze, Georgii Shengeli, N. Shestakov. (G. Sannikov, ed., Aiding-Giunler: Al’manakh k desiatiletiiu Turkmenistana, 1924–1934 [(Moscow?): Izd. Jubileinoi komissii TSIK-TSSR, 1934], 223.) A recent piece of scholarship suggests that the prose writer Nikolai Nikitovich Trishin also took part in the
contemporary news coverage and in later Soviet scholarship as the joint mission of six visiting writers, the 1934 brigade was defined more broadly as an undertaking of the Writers’ Union. Just who was involved, apparently, was deemed less important than the fact the new centralized literary organization had commissioned it and that it was undertaken with the support of local Turkmen officials like K. S. Atabaev.

We can draw a similar conclusion from the remarks that Sannikov delivered about the brigade at the All-Turkmenistan Writers’ Congress, which commenced on May 8, 1934 and was attended by a number of the visiting writers after their individual trips around the republic. During a speech entitled “Za ukreplenie bratskoi sviazi literatur narodov SSSR” (“For the Strengthening of the Brotherly Connection between the Literatures of the Peoples of the USSR”), Sannikov outlined the goal of the national commissions as follows:

Всесоюзный оргкомитет, по инициативе Максима Горького, создал национальные комиссии по изучению литератур всех народов Советского Союза. Задачи комиссий огромны: укрепление связи братских литератур, взаимное ознакомление творческим опытом, помощь в работе по организации писательских сил и новых литературных кадров, изучение и отбор всего лучшего, передового в литературе.

The All-Union orgkomitet, on Maksim Gorky’s initiative, created national commissions for the study of the literatures of all the peoples of the Soviet Union. The tasks of the commissions are enormous: the strengthening of the connection between fraternal literatures, mutual acquaintance through creative experience, excursion. (Rozhentseva, “Pis’ma iz poezdkii v Turkmeniiu 1934, 1935gg.,” in Arkhiv A. P. Platonova, 505, n1.) Earlier Soviet scholars claimed that twenty-five writers and poets—six more than the almanac suggests—visited the republic in conjunction with the brigade. (G. A. Kulieva and Z. G. Osmanova, eds., Ocherk istorii turkmenskoi sovetskoi literatury [Moscow: Nauka, 1980], 60.)

347 Some remaining writers also participated in preparatory meetings in Ashgabad, including a large meeting at the TsK KP(b)T with the participation of the TsK secretary Popok and the Sovnarkom chairman Atabaev. (G. Sannikov, I. Borozdin, V. Lugovskoi, “Brigada Orgkomiteta SSP SSSR v Turkmenii.”) At the conference itself, Sannikov, Oraz Tash-Nazarov, Mamedov, and Azat Vshguni, from Armenia, gave presentations. (“Otkritie 1-go Vseturkmenskogo s’ezda Sovetskikh pisatelei.”)

348 RGALI, f. 3256, op. 1, ed. khr. 100, l. 18. Drafts of the speech are preserved in RGALI, f. 3256, op. 1, ed. khr. 100, l. 4–17.
help in the organization of writerly forces and new literary cadres, the study and selection of all that is best and most progressive in the national literatures.

When discussing the brigade, Sannikov commented on how it had worked on site with local comrades and carried out the wishes of Gorky and strengthened the “connection of the brotherly literatures.” His emphasis on on-site collaboration with national representatives is especially striking in the sentence below (the emphasis is mine):

Наши писательская бригада всесоюзного оргкомитета, выполняя задачи, поставленные Максимом Горьким, вместе с вами, товарищи, туркменские писатели, плечо в плечо работает над вопросами развития туркменской литературы, вместе с вами проводила районные и окружные писательские конференции и сейчас с почетными для нас делегатскими билетами от Мерва, Чарджуя, Ташауза, Керков и других районов участвует на первом всeturкменском съезде советских писателей.349

Fulfilling the goals put forth by Maksim Gorky, our writers’ brigade of the All-Union orgkomitet is working shoulder to shoulder with you, comrades, Turkmen writers, on questions related to the development of Turkmen literature; along with you it carried out the regional and district conferences and now, as honorary delegates from Merv, Chardjou, Tashauz, Kerki and the other regions, the members of our brigade are taking part in the first All-Turkmen Congress of Soviet writers.

While Sannikov’s account of the 1930 brigade had drawn attention to all that the writers had managed to witness in Turkmenistan, from the replacement of the wooden plow to the resusciation of the carpet-weaving industry, this account did not position the visiting writers as witnesses. Rather, it positioned them as collaborators and emphasized how the brigade had helped local comrades develop their own literary apparatus in very specific sites throughout the republic.

A similar assessment of the brigade’s work appeared in Literaturnaia gazeta after the conclusion of the writers’ congress. Signed by Sannikov, Borozdin, and Lugovskoi, it reads:

349 Ibid.
While in Turkmenistan the writers’ brigade had as its main goal the composition of a literary-artistic collection dedicated to the 10th anniversary celebration of the Turkmen republic. The brigade reworked the thematic plan of its work, refining it on site.

Each of the participants took a defined theme and set off into a region to collect the material he needed. In the opinion of the brigade participants, all sides of the socialist construction of Turkmenia ought to be reflected in this publication: the problem of the industrialization of the country, the development of the Turkmen proletariat, new constructions, the participation of Turkmen youth in science, etc.

Writers of Turkmenistan were called to participate in the collection. New works are being created, translations from Turkmen into Russian are being prepared.

Along with its main creative work the brigade energetically participated in preparation for the first congress of writers. The brigade participants, together with representatives of the Turkmen organizational committee, traveled to the regions to prepare for and conduct the regional writers’ conferences. Conferences were conducted in Merv, Chardjou, Tashauz, Kerki, Bairam-Ali, Iolotani. In connection with the conferences, work on the organization of a mass literary movement was undertaken.

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350 Sannikov, Borozdin, and Lugovskoi, “Brigada Orgkomiteta SSP SSSR v Turkmenii,” boldfaced type mine. “Popok” and “Atabaev” are in boldfaced type in the original, rather than underlined.
Eleven literary pages were published, in district and regional publications. A whole series of literary evenings, presentations, and meetings in district and regional locations were conducted by members of the brigade together with Turkmen writers.

After returning from the regions for the opening of the all-Turkmen writers’ congress, the members of the brigade took part in preparatory meetings. A large meeting about current questions of Turkmen literature took place at the TsK KP(b)T with the participation of the TsK secretary, comrade Popok, and Sovnarkom secretary, comrade Atabaev.

The main messages sent about the brigade, I would suggest, are related to the phrases I have put in boldfaced type above. First, Sannikov and his colleagues emphasize that the writers worked on site, penetrating into various regions of Turkmenistan, publishing material there, and helping establish cadres in the outposts considered most critical to the Party-State’s project (Merv, Chardjou, Tashauz, Kerki, Bairam-Ali, Iolanti). Second, the article asserts that the brigade worked together (sovместно is repeated twice) with Turkmen colleagues (Turkmen is repeated twice, once in reference to the local оргкомитет and then in reference to local writers). It is telling that the membership of the brigade was not invoked: the individual faces of the national commission were not, according to the rhetoric of the brigade, as relevant as the fact it was at work inside Turkmenistan and that it was collaborating with local comrades to help the land speak for itself.

IV. Skosyrev’s Oazis, Tash-Nazarov’s Bairam-Ali, and Sannikov’s “Peski i rozy”

After the brigade’s return to Moscow, the Turkmen commission began assembling the planned anthology celebrating the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the TSSR. As with their preparatory meetings, the commission’s work in the wake of the brigade was highly structured and well documented. At a meeting on July 16, 1934, the national commission met to discuss five main topics related to the anthology: 1) the status of each writer’s contributions; 2) whether the material in the almanac could include materials published elsewhere; 3) what kind of articles should introduce Turkmen literature and the almanac as a whole; 4) what type of
illustrations the book would include; 5) what the title of the almanac should be and what type of
cover it should have.\textsuperscript{351} Notable moments in the discussion included the announcement that
Paustovskii, the author of \textit{Kara-Bugaz}, was breaking away (\textit{otpadaet}) from the commission (he
had not traveled with it to Turkmenistan), and various claims about what the almanac should
achieve as a document about Turkmenistan and as an almanac, as opposed to a journal. During
the discussion of the almanac’s illustrated material, for instance, the brigadier Borozdin stressed
that, since the goal of the project was “to depict the new Turkmenia, under construction”
(«отображать Туркмению новую, строящуюся»), a range of media should be represented,
including “not only paintings by Turkmen artists or Russian artists who have been in Turkmenia,
but also photos of the new Ashgabat and new constructions” («не только картины художников
turkmenских или русских, бывших в Туркмении, но и фотоснимки нового Ашхабада и
других новостроек»).\textsuperscript{352} A discussion about the almanac’s cover, meanwhile, led to a debate
about whether it should show a rug or whether that was hackneyed, since, in the words of
Nemchenko, “Everything that concerns Turkmenia begins with a carpet” («Все, что касается
Туркмении, начинается с ковра»).\textsuperscript{353} Nemchenko’s comment suggests that clichéd signs for
Turkmenia were already hardening in the Soviet imaginary.

Most striking in the transcript, however, is Sannikov’s assessment of how the almanac
might function vis-à-vis the almanac published just two years before, following the first writers’
brigade to Turkmenistan. During a discussion over whether material appearing in the almanac
could also be published elsewhere, Sannikov argued that the almanac should serve as a capstone

\textsuperscript{351} RGALI, f. 3256, op. 1., ed. khr. 101, l. 1a-30.

\textsuperscript{352} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{353} Ibid., l. 13.
to the commission’s work promoting Turkmenistan within the wider Soviet Union. As such, he argued, it should include work from other writers and not just those who participated in the spring 1934 excursion. Sannikov, however, was very specific in his assessment of who might be appropriate to include:

Альманах должен явиться обобщением опыта работы бригады; все наиболее основное в Туркмении должно быть собрано в этом альманахе. В этом отношении я считаю, что могут войти некоторые вещи, скажем, Тихонова. У Всеволода Иванова, Леонова мы вряд ли сможем взять, а у Тихонова можно взять.

The almanac should appear as the summation of the experience of the brigade’s work; all that is most fundamental in Turkmenia ought to be collected in this almanac. In this regard, I consider that a few pieces of, say, Tikhonov could be included. We could hardly take anything of Vsevolod Ivanov’s or Leonov’s, but it would be possible to include something by Tikhonov.354

According to the transcript, this was one of the only moments in the meeting when earlier Russian-language cultural products about Turkmenistan were acknowledged. It would seem, however, that the previous almanac hung over the whole undertaking. Unlike Turkmenistan vesnoi, Sannikov effectively declared here, the new anthology had no space for ambivalent, self-reflexive works such as Ivanov’s Povest’ brigadira M. M. Sinitsyna. Only works like Tikhonov’s 1930 poems—which now appeared to be ahead of their time in their privileging of the Turkmen experience over the visitor’s—would be acceptable. Moreover, unlike the earlier volume—which had featured only poetry and fiction by the six visiting writers, on the subjects they had personally chosen—the new collection was to be fully comprehensive, with not only fiction and poetry written in Russian, but also an introduction, non-fiction essays, illustrations, and translations from Turkmen into Russian.

354 Ibid., l. 4.
After a summer of work and debate about its shape, the brigade’s volume was published in November 1934 as *Aiding-Giunler*. The collection included work by twenty-two writers, as well as photographs, drawings, reproductions of paintings, and, despite Nemchenko’s protestations over it, a cover embossed with the image of a Turkmen carpet. The almanac also contained an introduction by Ivanov and Lahūtī, who by 1934 had already become a leading representative of Central Asian culture in Moscow.\(^{355}\)

As a whole, the almanac presented itself as a complete overview of the republic and its resources, one attesting to the unity of the brigade and the uniformity of its message. The fractures visible in the historical record of the brigade’s work are not evident here: rather, the almanac appears to be an authoritative statement by the collective, one authorized by leading Soviet and Turkmen officials, as well as a few well-known figures in Soviet literature. Portraits of Stalin, Gorky, Ia. A. Popok (secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, or TsKKP(b)T), Chary Velikov (secretary of the TsKKP(b)T), Aitakov (chairman of the TSSR’s Central Executive Commitee, or TsIK), and Atabaev (chairman of the Sovnarkom of the TSSR), featured in the almanac’s front matter, lent their endorsements to the volume, while a title partly in Turkmen emphasized that the collection was not a purely Russian endeavor. ("*Aiding-Giunler*,” Turkmen for “Radiant Days,” was translated into Russian as “*Luchezarnye dni*” only in the introduction.) The introduction signed by Ivanov and Lahūtī ensured that the material had been vetted by two leading representatives of Soviet Central Asia,

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\(^{355}\) That Lahūtī represented not only Tajikistan in the mid-1930s but also Central Asian culture more generally is supported by the fact that he frequently hosted Central Asian cultural delegates when they visited Moscow. For instance, Lahūff attended and spoke at the evening of poetry about Lenin from the peoples of the Soviet Union in February 1934, the evening of Kazakh literature hosted at the Writers Union’ *orgkomitet* on March 17, 1934, the evening of Tajik art that was hosted at the House of the Soviet Writer on September 2, 1934, the evening of Kyrgyz poetry that was held on December 2, 1936, and the evening at the House of the Soviet Writer in honor of the Uzbek *dekada* of May 1937. (“Lenin v poezii narodov SSSR,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, February 11, 1934; “Vecher kazakskoi literatury,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, March 16, 1934; “Otlichnye rastut liudi. Na vechere tadzhikskogo iskusstva,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September 3, 1934; RGALI, op. 6, ed. khr. 99, l. 17–25; “V chest’ uzbekskikh gostei,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 30, 1937.)
including a non-Russian one, and again assured readers that the book was not a Moscow-centered project featuring only Russian voices, but rather an initiative of the Turkmen government built “on the foundation of the collaboration of Russian and Turkmen authors” («на основе сотрудничества русских и туркменских авторов») as well as “on the foundation of the writers’ brigade expedition” («на основе этой поездки бригады писателей»). The introduction also underlined the comprehensiveness of the almanac, noting that the anthology’s plan was for a “complete understanding of the life and socialist construction of the republic” («всестороннего охвата жизни и социалистического строительства республики»). Every major theme, the introduction assured, had been covered by the mixed-nationality team “with great thoroughness” («с большой полнотой»), including the way Turkmen women, Turkmen proletarians, and Turkmen kolkhozniki were living in the country. Even the theme of industrialization—not touched in fiction or poetry—was represented, the introduction claimed, by an academic essay.356

If the front matter, illustrations, and non-fictional essays in the almanac establish its comprehensive nature, the literature in the volume echoes this message by providing a seemingly wide-ranging set of texts that thematize various dimensions of life in the republic, from the place of the railway to the state of animal husbandry at State sovkhozes to the emancipation of women. Despite its apparent diversity, however, the approach of the fiction and poetry in Aiding-Giunler is quite standardized. The texts depict the republic as a set of transformed and transforming landscapes, generally through the eyes of citizens of Turkmenistan or from an impersonal, seemingly objective point of view. When these texts have clear organizing consciousnesses, they belong not to visiting outsiders, but to locals. To provide a sense of the consistency of the

356 Sannikov, Aiding-Giunler, 3. Further citations from Aiding-Giunler will appear parenthetically within the body of the text.
message offered in the almanac, I will briefly touch on three topographically themed works in the volume: Skosyrev’s Oazis, Sannikov’s poem cycle “Peski i rozy,” and Tash-Nazarov’s narrative poem Bairam-Ali.

Skosyrev’s novella Oazis follows Mamed Dzhafarov, an accomplished Persian kolkhoz supervisor and winner of the prestigious Order of Lenin, as he recollects the circumstances that aided him in his evolution as a Soviet citizen. Important for our purposes is that the visiting Skosyrev masks himself within the text, structuring his story instead around Dzhafarov’s perception of the space in which he lives and Dzhafarov’s development as a “positive hero.” Skosyrev does not allude to his own presence within the novella; instead, his narration follows Dzhafarov’s perspective on the republic and its constituent landscapes. In Oazis, Dzhafarov begins his journey in a backward, pre-Revolutionary Ashgabat divided by cleavages among the various ethnic populations. Skosyrev writes in the novella’s opening:

Ашхабад в то время еще назывался Ашкабадом.357

Ещё деревья на улицах, в саду возле мечети с большим куполом и в саду Гасана были молодые деревья и не давали тени. Ещё на ночь жены чиновников тщательно запирали окна тяжелыми ставнями и до рассвета прели в собственном поту на российских, вывезенных из Саратова или Тамбова пухлых перинах, боясь свежего воздуха, так как на свежем воздухе — там, где-то близко, под самым городом — притаились разбойники-текинцы.

Впрочем текинцы на разбойников походили мало. […]

На разбойников скорей были похожи русские.

Они каждый вечер кричали и ругались, напиваясь пьяными, и если затевалась драка, пыряли друг друга—спьяну, правда, не попадая куда хотели—складными маленькими ножами…

Однако отец называл туркмен разбойниками, а русских—дураками.

(15)

At that time Ashgabat was still called Ashgabat.
The trees in the streets, in the garden in front of the mosque with the big cupola, and in Gasan’s garden were young trees and did not provide any shade. At

357 Ashgabat was known as “Ashkhabat” until 1919, when it was renamed “Poltoratsk.” It 1927, the city was renamed “Ashgabat,” or “Ashkhabad” («Ашхабад») in Russian. (“Ashgabat,” in Rafis Abazov, Historical Dictionary of Turkmenistan [Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005], 18.)
night the officials’ wives still carefully boarded up their windows with heavy shutters and sweat until dawn as they lay on the Russian featherbeds they had brought with them from Saratov or Tambov, fearing the fresh air, since out in the fresh air—out there, somewhere close, outside their very city—bandits from the Teken tribe were hiding.

It must be said, the Teken did not look much like bandits. [...] The Russians more closely resembled bandits. Every evening they shouted and fought, having drunk themselves silly, and if a fight broke out, they stabbed each other—drunkenly, true, not hitting where they meant to—with little pocketknives...

Nonetheless, his [Mamed’s] father called the Turkmen bandits, and the Russians—fools.

Over the course of the narrative, Mamed’s essentialist understanding of ethnic groups (Persians as good and honest, Turkmen as bandits, Russians as fools) is shown to weaken as he progresses out of the backward environments in which he was raised, such as a colonial Russian school and the home of an abusive mullah. Eventually, Mamed signs up for the Komsomol, officially Sovietizing himself, and then commits himself to working on a kolkhoz. Importantly, Mamed is said to take these final steps in his evolution in newly Bolshevized Ashgabat, after hearing a speech by a Jewish woman from Tashkent who is committed to the Communist cause. His final conversion moment is described as follows:

Еврейка, по фамилии Зусман, приехавшая из Ташкента, держала речь о мировой революции, после которой не стыдно будет называться ни персом, ни русским, ни туркменом, ни евреем. Еврейка Зусман говорила горячо и понятно, и когда улыбалась, у неё можно было сосчитать все зубы во рту, как и у Ай-Гюль, которая осталась в песках с нелюбимым мужем, — и Мамед записался в комсомол. 

The Jewess, Zusman by name, just arrived from Tashkent, was giving a speech about the world revolution, after which no one would be embarrassed to call himself a Persian, a Russian, a Turkmen, a Jew. The Jewess Zusman was speaking heatedly and comprehensibly and smiled so widely that it was possible to count all the teeth in her mouth, just as it was with Ai-Giul’, who remained in the sands with her unloved husband, — and so Mamed signed up for the Komsomol.

358 Ibid., 20.
The suggestion of the story, given this description, is that Dzhafarov’s progress in how he conceives of himself is connected with an “upward” migration in Soviet space (away from the environments of pre-Revolutionary Ashgabat and “the sands” and towards more sacralized Bolshevized spaces like socialist Ashgabat and Tashkent). Dzhafarov thus learns to conceive of himself as a “double-assimilated” citizen—one defined not only by his Persian nationality, but also by his identification with the state—by moving away from “the desert” and toward the “oases” created by Sovietization.

In Skosyrev’s story, as in much of the other fiction in the almanac, Turkmenistan is a landscape that is unmediated by the impressions of a visiting outsider. It relies on the contrast between the desert and the new transformed spaces springing up among it, but not the intervention of observers or writers, who are generally left out of the picture entirely. The illustrations that accompany Oazis encourage the reader to perceive the narrative as an “insider’s” perspective on Turkmenistan. The text is interspersed by illustrations of the old and new Turkmenistan, none of which is framed by a surveyor or visitor. The first illustration is an etching by I. M. Mazel’ of a bazaar, which appears as a banner above the novella’s first chapter (fig. 3.8). The other two illustrations printed within the pages of the novella include a full-page, color painting of a Turkmen in a traditional hat (“Etude,” by N. G. Kotova, fig. 3.9) and a rayonist sketch of a domestic scene in which a woman takes care of three children (“V kibitke,” or “In the kibitka,” by Iu. V. Obolenskaia, fig. 3.10). Together with the engraving of the bazaar,

359 Cf. Clark, “Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space.”

360 Hirsch argues that technologies of rule such as the census, map, and museum facilitated the process of “double assimilation,” or the assimilation “of a diverse population into nationality categories and, simultaneously, the assimilation of those nationally categorized groups into the Soviet state and society.” (Hirsch, Empire of Nations, 14.) I would suggest that fiction such as Skosyrev’s also facilitated this process—or at least attempted to facilitate this process—by depicting it in positive terms.
these two works present a picture of pre-Sovietized Turkmenistan, giving texture to the world described by Skosyrev. The kibitka appears as a potential space of oppression, whereas the bazaar recalls the Ashgabat of Dzhafarov’s youth and the impressionistic “etude” reads as elegiac, evoking a Romanticized East in need—according to the story’s framework—of modernization. The photograph that follows Skosyrev’s novella, meanwhile, tells a different story. Unattributed and entitled merely “Turkmenka” (fig. 3.11), it shows a Turkmen woman staring straight at the camera, seemingly free from oppression and proud to be photographed by a Soviet lens. Read against Oazis, the photograph emphasizes that progress has already occurred in Turkmenistan, that the public spaces are not only for men (as in the bazaar etching of the story’s opening), that women need not only be the caretakers of children inside the kibitka, and that a woman can be both a representative “Turkmenka” and a participant in the Soviet project. In addition, it lends credence to the idea that Skosyrev’s tale expresses a genuine “insider” perspective by connecting a contemporary Turkmen face with the narrative.

Figure 3.8. A sketch of an Ashgabat bazaar, by I. M. Mazel’. Source: Sannikov, Aiding-Günler, 13.
Figure 3.8. “Etude,” by N. G. Kotova.  

Figure 3.10. A *kibilita*, by Iu. V. Obolenskaia. Source: Sannikov, *Aiding-Gişnler*, 25.  
Like Skosyrev’s novella, the poem cycle by Grigorii Sannikov also published in *Aiding-Giunler* favors the perspective of local citizens on their native space over that of visitors. Sannikov, the editor-in-chief of the almanac, contributed a cluster of poems collectively entitled “Peski i rozy,” including “V Pustyne” (“In the Desert”), “Voda v Pustyne” (“Water in the Desert”), “Khorezmskii oazis” (“Khorezm Oasis”), and “Turkmenskii kover” (“The Turkmen Carpet”). These four poems describe, in turn, the desert before transformation, the desert as a newly irrigated space, Khorezm as a new site of Turkmen identity, and the Turkmen carpet as a lasting symbol of Turkmen culture.

The first poem focuses on the plight of a camel that falls behind while a caravan is traveling. The first two stanzas establish the point of view and message of the poem, which reads as a firm, impersonal assessment of “the way things are” in the desert:

В пустыне законы жестоки.
И когда не под силу кладь
И отказываются у верблюда ноги,
Отказываются шагать,

Его подбадривают ударами
Безжалостные погонщики,
Пока не падает старое
Животное на пески. (61)

In the desert the laws are cruel. And when a camel’s legs refuse, refuse to stride under a load beyond their strength, // The pitiless drivers encourage him with beatings until the old animal falls onto the sands.

The absence of a speaker here encountering the desert landscape and its “pitiless drivers” suggests that the poem objectively expresses an eternal quality of the desert and does not depend on any personal observations of the visiting poet. It is such a powerful space, the poem suggests in the final stanza, that every being must harden himself to it and keep moving, no matter what calamities are faced:
В пустыне законы жестоки,
И каждому свой черед.
Живи для людей, умирай одинокий
И не грусти об ушедших вперед.

In the desert the laws are cruel, and everyone has his own turn. Live for people, die alone, and do not mourn for those who depart before you.

In this world, according to “V pustyne,” the hard-heartedness of the drivers is less a mark of cruelty (as we find in Nikolai Nekrasov’s famous poem about a horse being beaten, “O pogode,” or “About the Weather,” written 1858–1865), and more a survival skill: without such hard-heartedness, it would be impossible to withstand this landscape.

While this first poem is atemporal, the next poem in Sannikov’s cycle pushes the desert landscape into a specific time and context: one where the Soviet project is remaking the space into a livable place. Thus, in “Voda v pustynе,” we are no longer located in a nameless desert, but specifically in a Kara-Kum improved by Soviet construction and water:

И вдруг вода в пустыню голую,
В Келифский хлынула Узбой,
Вода, как свет, вода, как молодость,
Пескам подарок дорогой.

И там, где ветер прежде, шествуя,
Раскуривал барханов сны,
Там трактор поступью железною
Открыл хлопковый фронт страны.

И вот на земли эти мертвые,
Вводя колхозы в обиход,
Рассада хлопка первосортного
Организованно идет.

И на песка встают оазисы.
И, славя первый водомет,
Унылая пустыня Азии
Себя в лицо не узнает. (62)

And suddenly water rushes into the naked desert, into the Kelif Uzboi, water, like light, water, like youth, a dear present to the sands. // And there, where once the
marching wind puffed up the slumbering sand dunes, the tractor with its iron tread opened the cotton front of the country. // And thus onto these dead lands, the seeding of first-rate cotton proceeds in an organized fashion, as the kolkhozes set to work. // And oases grow up in the sands. And, praising the first jet of water, the dejected desert of Asia does not recognize its own face.

Here, in a passage reminiscent of Aleksandr Blok’s “Neznakomka” (“The Unknown Woman,” 1906, also written in iambic tetrameter), Sannikov conjures a moment when the “Asian desert” becomes a stranger to itself, thanks to the canal bringing water into the Kelif Uzboi through the resuscitation of a relic river bed. The repetition of the word “water” (voda) and the repeated similes attached to it emphasize that irrigation has allowed the state to bring this territory into the state network “in an organized fashion,” circumnavigating the “cruel laws of the desert” that were established in the previous poem of the cycle. It is worth noting, however, that there are still no individual speakers or heroes in this poem. It, like “V pustyne,” is narrated from an impersonal point of view, with a wandering perspective that moves across the landscape. The poem directs the reader not to fix their eyes on one camel or caravan, but rather to move across wells and the Kara-Kum sands, resting on tractors as they prepare the land to grow cotton. No human actors of any sort, let alone visiting outsiders, populate or mediate the landscape.

In the third poem of the cycle, “Khorezmskii oazis,” the desert recedes further from view as Sannikov turns his attention to the historical region of Khorezm, in the lower flow of the Amu-Darya River. Khorezm, which thrived off of Silk-Road trade for centuries, existed as the powerful state of the Korezmshakh dynasty between the third and 12th centuries A.D., when Genghis Khan razed it, and then again in the 14th and 15th centuries, until Timur destroyed its center of Koneurgench. Although Sannikov here chooses a historical site as his focus, he defies expectations that his poem will dwell on previous glories. Instead, the poet denounces the past, when the glory of Khorezm spread “along the waters of the Neva. / Along the Ganges,

Euphrates, / along the blue seas / To the yellow and white / And black kings” («по водам Невы. 
/ По Гангу, Ефрату, / по синим морям /К желтым и белым / и черным царям»), on the 
grounds that the Turkmen did not have the power of self-determination during that period:

Рослый, могучий
туркменский народ,
Чужой караул
у хорезмских ворот.
Русский купец
и хан феодал,
Под гнетом двойным
Хорезм пропадал. (62)

The big, powerful, Turkmen people, a foreign guard at the Khorezm gates. A 
Russian merchant and a feudal khan, Khorezm was languishing under a double 
yoke.

Instead of its ancient past, the present (and the implied future) of the Khorezm oasis is 
glorified: the oasis becomes a Soviet place when defined by its relationship to cotton and the 
Shavat Canal. To testify to Khorezm’s flowering in this era, and by extension all of 
Turkmenistan’s flowering, a first-person speaker enters Sannikov’s cycle for the first time:

Вижу Хорезм я
в разливе зари.
Дали песчаные
сыты водой,
Крепнет в Хорезме
советский строй.
Свой караул
у хорезмских ворот,
Хороший, прямой
в Хорезме народ.

I see Khorzem in an eruption of dawn. The sandy expanses are saturated with 
water, the Soviet order grows strong in Khorezm. Its own sentry by the Khorezm 
gates, the people in Khorezm are good and honest.

Although the speaker inserts himself into his depiction of Khorezm, it is worth noting that he 
establishes no character for himself, and that his interaction with the landscape is minimal. The
speaker merely attests to the power of the “Soviet order” and the local people. He does not identify himself with any biographical information as a visitor to the republic, nor does he present himself as a necessary conduit of information (as Shklovsky’s narrator did in his book *Turksib*) or reflect on the presence of a visiting writers’ brigade (as Ivanov’s Sinitsyn character did). The poet merely confirms, as a kind of universal observer, that the republic has a glorious future ahead of it, thanks to the involvement of the local population in the present construction of socialism.

The final poem of the sequence, the long ballad “Turkmenskii kover” (“The Turkmen Carpet”), departs from the first three: where the earlier poems focus on landscapes and their Soviet splendor, this last one tells a story of two individual characters, a Turkmen husband who sacrifices his life in battle and the wife who weaves a carpet to commemorate his death. Like Skosyrev’s novella *Oazis*, the ballad presents itself as traditional work about “insiders” living in the republic. In this case, the text appears to be a transcription of a bakhshi’s song into a Russian poetic form:

Про большого генерала
Рассказали ей сарыки,
И в пустыне за арыком
Над холмом она рыдала...

[…]

Плавал пламень по узорам,
И в дыму ночной кибитки
Не она, а вдовье горе
Шевелило эти нитки. (65)

The Saryks [members of a Turkmen tribe] told her about the great general, and she wept in the desert, beyond a canal on a mound... // […] The flame floated among the patterns, and in the nightly smoke of the *kiбитка*, it was not she, but the widow’s grief that moved these threads.
When Sannikov does refer to the wider Union outside of Turkmenistan, he does so only to emphasize the power of the national. In stanzas two through six, which are together subtitled “Pende-giul’—kover Turkmenii” (“Pende-Giul’: The Carpet of Turkmenia”), apparently in reference to a particular kind of pattern on a carpet, Sannikov relates Turkmen culture to Russian culture to emphasize the parity of the former with the latter. Specifically, Sannikov compares Turkmen carpets and the songs of a bakhshi to Russian books and a Russian musical march:

Пенде-Гюль — ковер Туркмении

Цветом роз многоугольных,
Сном песков в тумане розовом
Он — пустыни друг достойный
И по виду и по возрасту.

В перепевах разных ниток
Две судьбы узором связаны.
Много в нем чего рассказано
Не написанного в книгах.

Если взять и сверить с песнями,
Что поют бахши в народе,
Он приходится ровесником
Маршу русского похода.

Он — свидетель мрачной доблести,
Как в огне, в крови, в разгуле,
Завоеванные области
Генералу присягули.

А теперь в своей республике
Пенде-гюль — ковер Туркмении
Под портретом В. И. Ленина
Пламенеет в клубе рика. (63–4)

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362 I am grateful to Rafis Abazov, author of *Culture and Customs of the Central Asian Republics* (Westwood, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), for fielding my questions about the possible meanings of “Pende-Giul’.”
Pende-Giul’: Carpet of Turkmenia

With the color of polyangular roses, like a dream of the sands in a rosy fog, it is a worthy friend of the desert, in both appearance and age. // In the reiterations of different threads, two fates are connected by a pattern. Much that is not written in books is expressed in it. // If you take it and compare it to the songs that the bakshshi sing among the people, the carpet’s pattern emerges as a contemporary to the Russian march forward. // It is a witness to gloomy valor: how in fire, in blood, in revelry, the conquered regions swore allegiance to the general. // And now in its own republic, Pende-giul’ — carpet of Turkmenia, glows in a club of the regional executive committee, under the portrait of V. I. Lenin.

The tone and perspective of Sannikov’s poem cycle contrast sharply with those of Sannikov’s contribution to the 1932 almanac Turkmenistan vesnoi, the metrically experimental “novel in verse” V gostiakh u egiptian (Visiting the Egyptians), of which the ballad “Turkmenskii kover” was originally a part. Narrated in the first person, that “novel” tells the story of a man witnessing the development of the cotton industry in Central Asia during the First Five-Year Plan, using a wide range of poetic forms and experimenting freely with the inclusion of tables of statistics (in stanzas XII and XIII of Chapter Six), allusions to poets like Mayakovsky (in stanza I of Chapter 7), avant-garde elements, and found documents (the last chapter is in prose). Chapter 3, stanza VI of V gostiakh u egiptian frames the poet’s ballad about the Turkmen carpet as an exercise by a specific poet, on assignment with a brigade, addressed to a Turkmen audience as a gift from the visiting poet just learning about Turkmen art and culture:

Составив первую бригаду,
Я обошел твои колхозы, —
И вот зажег салорской розой
Ковровые Туркменбаллады.
Прими и от меня на память —
Подарок бедного поэта.
Я твой ковер поднял, как знамя
Национального расцвета.
Супрематисткие узоры;
Пески, оазисы, кочевья,
Племен железное упорство
И новое их назначенье —
Все в этих красках отразилось,
Они живут, поют и дышат
Над взводимой в стройке крышей
И над безвременной могилой
Твоих бойцов, сраженных в битвах
С басмачеством, идущим густо.
Ковровый труд глухих кибиток—
Отец туркменского искусства.

Туркменбаллады
Советскому Туркменистану
От автора на память

As a part of the first brigade, I traveled around your kolkhozes, and there I emblazed carpet-like Turkmen ballads with a Salor rose. Take them from me as a memento — The gift of a poor poet. I lifted up your carpet, as a banner of national flourishing. Suprematist patterns: Sands, oases, camps, the iron perseverance of the tribes and their new mission — everything was expressed in these colors, they live, drink and breathe over the roof cocked in construction and over the premature grave of your warriors, struck down in battles with the basmachi advancing thickly. The carpet labor of remote kibitki is the father of Turkmen art.

Turkmen Ballads
To Soviet Turkmenistan
From the author as a memento

While in the 1930 almanac Sannikov’s ballad about the Turkmen carpet read as a simulation of the Turkmen experience by a visiting outsider, in the 1934 almanac it reads as an “authentic” example of an “insider’s” ballad about the power of Turkmen art and its state-sponsored variant. By removing the introduction above about his own poetry from “Turkmenskii kover” and almost entirely removing his poetic “I” from the cycle “Peski i rozy,” Sannikov suggests that the vision he provides of the republic’s “sands and roses” is unaffected by his position as a visitor. The country presents itself this way, he suggests, to any and all who look upon it.364

While Skosyrev and Sannikov’s contributions to the almanac indicate the stance taken by the writers visiting Turkmenistan in 1934, an excerpt from Oraz Tash-Nazarov’s narrative poem


364 Cf. Pratt, Imperial Eyes, 59.
Bairam-Ali sheds light on the compositions that were translated from Turkmen to Russian for the anthology. In the early 1930s, Tash-Nazarov was considered one of the premier representatives of Turkmen culture. In this period his long poem *Batrak (The Day-Laborer)* was regularly praised as the cornerstone of Turkmen proletarian literature, and he served both as chairman of the Turkmen *orgkomitet* in preparation for First All-Union Writers’ Congress and as the representative of Turkmenistan at the Congress itself. The excerpt, which is entitled “Rasskaz Aidzhana” (“Aidzhan’s Story”) and translated by V. Nasedkin, takes the form of a legend being passed along from mother to son and includes occasional exchanges between the two of them. At the center of the narrative is the tale of an orphan boy named Nedir who, after his parents’ death, suffers abuse at the hands of the rich uncle who takes him in. This uncle separates Nedir from his beloved Maral—another orphan living with the uncle—telling the boy that if he goes to work as a shepherd for the *bai*, after some years he will be able to earn enough to buy his way into marriage with Maral. Nedir works for years, dreaming only of his future independent life with Maral, but in the end finds out that the uncle has given away the girl to another man. Angry, Nedir rises up against his uncle and travels to Khiva to make his own way in the world. There, too, he suffers only abuse, running into an exploitative *bai* at a bazaar who humiliates him and punishes him for not knowing principal Islamic laws.

The excerpt ends there, without any resolution to the story of Nedir and Maral or any clear lesson being imparted from the mother telling the story to her son. There is a strong correspondence between this liberation narrative and the others in the almanac, however, as well as in the way Turkmenistan is depicted as landscapes through the eyes of a local citizen. Just as we find the Central Asian “positive hero” of Skosyrev’s *Oazis* leaving the oppressive conditions.

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365 See, for instance, Chariev’s comments about Turkmen literature at the *orgkomitet* plenum on October 31, 1932. (RGALI, f. 631, op. 1, ed. khr. 8, l. 96.)
environments of his youth, so, too, we find Nedir seeking release from the flat and punishing land of his birth by traveling to a more enlightened territory. And just as we see the “sands” as a space in need of reform in Sannikov’s poem cycle, the desert and steppe in this *poema* are the oppressive spaces from which Nedir must escape:

Having fallen, as though from heaven, he sprang up and looked worriedly around for a long time. Again — sagebrush, the bleating of goats, the sheep went to pasture from the stall. // With his crooked stick on his shoulders Nedir is going again — he follows behind the flock; he had grown weary of such a life; steppe alone you take in with your gaze.

[...]
back anymore. // In the sandy hills and in the lowlands he wandered. In want of water … in the heat… How his legs grew tired! He hid his head from the sun in the grass, and, in the end, arrived at a large road. // —Where, mother, does the road lead? / —It leads to Khiva, my son, far away…/ It has existed for many centuries—no one knows for how long.

The excerpt from *Bairam–Ali* contains no reference to Soviet power or Soviet transformation. Unlike the other translated poems in the almanac, which more directly address the recent history of Turkmenistan, the *poema* takes place in an unspecified period, outside the context of any industrialization, collectivization, or Soviet “socialist construction.” The fact that *Bairam–Ali* is authored by a leading representative of Soviet Turkmen literature, however, allows it to carry weight as an “authentic” Turkmen narrative about the liberation from the oppressive steppe that is available to the citizens of Soviet Turkmenistan. When read against Skosyrev and Sannikov’s contributions, as well as the rest of the almanac, Tash-Nazarov’s *poema* affirms that spaces all over Turkmenistan are being transformed from “desert” to “oasis” as self-empowered citizens of the republic liberate themselves and join the Soviet project. The similarity in the approach of the three writers, moreover, encourages the reader to view the republic in iconographic terms, for it suggests that the visiting and local colleagues share the same vision of the republic and its constituent spaces, including Ashgabat, the Kara-Kum Desert, and the territory near Bairam-Ali.

**V. Conclusion**

Taken together, *Tri pesni o Lenine* and the work of the Turkmenistan national commission of 1933–1934, including the commission’s almanac *Aiding-Giunler*, provide insight into the moment in the early 1930s when Turkmenistan began to be represented iconographically in Russian-language cultural products by Turkmen voices, or at least simulated “insider” perspectives. Vertov’s film presents a view of Turkmenistan within the monolithic landscape of
the Soviet “East,” where the Turkmen desert stands for the far reaches of the Soviet periphery, and where its irrigation is equated to the liberation experienced by unveiled “Eastern” women. Since Vertov’s “native” sources in his expeditions were anonymous and his source texts may well have been pseudo-folkloric texts fabricated by writers for Pravda, his film cannot said to be coauthored by Central Asians, Caucasians, or any other “Easterners.” Still, it stands as a strong example of the shift toward insider iconography in Russian-language texts about the Soviet “East” as a whole.

If Tri pesni o Lenine represents a new kind of simulated “insider” view of the Soviet “East,” the work of the Turkmenistan national commission illustrates a new stance toward Soviet Turkmenistan specifically. The work of the commission in Moscow, of the brigade in Turkmenistan, and of the writers contributing to the almanac Aiding-Giunler signify a centralized attempt to update and standardize Russian-language depictions of Turkmenistan during the Second Five-Year Plan. The national commission was as convinced as Vertov that outsider producers should visit Turkmenistan before depicting it. But even more than Vertov, they pushed for visible collaboration with Turkmen officials and Turkmen cultural producers and the effacement of an “outsider” perspective. The subjectivity of individual artists visiting the region was consistently downplayed in favor of the collective’s role representing the literary organizations of the Soviet center, even if the work of the collective was not as standardized as might have been expected from its preparatory work. Those working for the national commission in 1934 created visions of Turkmenistan from the point of view of citizens of the republic. The commission and its almanac made a point of proselytizing the success of the Soviet project in Central Asia, of amplifying “national” voices about the transformation of life in the region, and of deemphasizing the role of outsiders in facilitating this transformation. Along with Tri Pesni o
*Lenine*, the work of the Turkmenistan national commission sent the message that the best way to represent the TSSR was by allowing it to speak—and make landscapes—for itself, in the voice granted it by Sovietization. The most common strategy for representing the TSSR this way was by simulating the view of a “native” on the land. Whatever strategy the artist might choose, however, it was critical that they function only as a conduit for the space itself.
Chapter Four

Andrei Platonov’s “Turkmenia Cycle”
at the Limits of Insider Iconography (1934–1925)

В Норвегии—ландшафт, как счетоводство, в Туркмении—как растрата, расточительство etc…

In Norway, the landscape is like bookkeeping, in Turkmenia, like wasteful spending, squandering, etc.

--Andrei Platonov’s notebooks from 1934366

Up until this point, I have created a cultural history of how the representation of the Soviet “exotic” changed over time by focusing on texts that demonstrate the dominant line of development in the production of Russian-language literature and film about Soviet Turkestan and Turkmenistan in the 1920s and early 1930s. In this chapter, I switch genres slightly as I focus on a single writer, Andrei Platonov, and on three works that he created in the course of one year.

My motivation for changing tacks to more straightforward literary analysis is twofold. First, reading Platonov’s work from 1934–1935 in this context provides new insight on the cultural trend that I have investigated in my previous chapters. His writings about the space of Turkmenistan demonstrate that he was well aware of the conventions that were developing for the representation of the Soviet “East” in the 1930s, which in turn suggests that the cultural producers who engaged with the depiction of the national republics were generally conscious of the constraints under which they were working. But besides giving us an awareness of this fact, Platonov’s attempt to work within the emerging conventions helps elucidate how the limits of these conventions were set. Tracing which of Platonov’s renderings of the TSSR were deemed acceptable for the Soviet public, and in which forms, allows us to recognize what kinds of

366 Platonov, Zapisnye knizhki, 139.
representations were out of bounds in this period—something that is especially important for the study of socialist realism, since its meaning was codified less by a set definition than by a set of exemplary texts—\textsuperscript{367}\textemdash and enables us to understand that Platonov’s work may have helped Soviet functionaries to clarify the limits of acceptable representational strategies.

Second, understanding the cultural context of Platonov’s approach to Turkmenistan makes it clear that his depictions of the republic represent a unique artistic achievement as well as a prescient cultural critique. Platonov’s supposedly “socialist realist” texts from the 1930s and 1940s are often considered accommodationist, less “original” and “Platonovian” than his works from the 1920s. It is often suggested, moreover, that Platonov had to sacrifice much of his originality to continue publishing after the controversy over “Vprok” in 1931. When his works from the 1930s are read synchronically against other texts from their time, rather than just diachronically against his oeuvre as a whole, however, they yield nuances that would otherwise remain unseen. Certainly, I will argue, this is the case with his works about Turkmenistan.

In this chapter, I thus hope to provide a new perspective on the rise of “insider iconography” that I have been tracking thus far and to make a new contribution to Platonov studies by reading his so-called “Turkmenia cycle” as a refraction of the paradigm for representing Soviet Central Asia that had emerged by 1934. Specifically, I will explore how Platonov both accommodated and inverted the conventions of representing the republic as a flowering Soviet desert that spoke for itself with his so-called “Turkmenia cycle” of 1934–1935: the short story “Takyr” (“Takyr,” also translated as “Mud Flats,” 1934); the non-fiction sketch “Goriachaia Arktika” (“Hot Arctic,” written 1934 or 1935, first published in 1975); and the novella Dzhan (Dzhan, also translated as Soul, first published in fragments in 1938, published in

\textsuperscript{367} Cf. the discussion of socialist realism as a “master plot” in Clark, \textit{Soviet Novel}. 
I will argue that, with these works, Platonov challenged the kind of representation being practiced in 1934 by Vertov and the brigade sent to Turkmenistan in three interrelated, but distinct ways: first, by drawing attention to the subjectivity of vision involved in landscape production; second, by presenting the republic as a set of places with historical and mythical associations that were generally left out of the iconography emerging in the mid-1930s; and third, by constructing landscapes of the republic framed by hybrid, rather than purely “native,” eyes. As I will demonstrate, while each of these strategies is present to some extent in all the texts of Platonov’s “Turkmenia cycle,” a different strategy is dominant in each of the works.

Platonov visited Turkmenistan twice in the mid-1930s, first as a part of the 1934 writers’ brigade and then again, on his own, from January 14 to early March 1935. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, Platonov’s trips to Turkmenistan reflected a (limited) renewal of trust from the Soviet literary establishment and a chance for him to begin supporting himself and his family.

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368 “Takyr” first appeared in Aiding-Giunler and Krasnaia nov’’9 (1934): 82–93. “Goriachaia Arktika” was first published with letters to Platonov’s wife and other sketches as “Zhivia glavnoi zhizn’iu (A. Platonov v pis’makh k zhene, dokumentakh i ocherkakh),” Volga, no. 9 (1975). Dzhan was first published in fragmentary form as “Vozvrashchenie na rodinu” (“Return to the Motherland”) in Literaturnaiia gazeta, August 5, 1938 and as “Schast’e vblizi cheloveka” in Ogonek 15, no. 13 (1947): 15–16. The text was first published in a full, though still bowdlerized version, in Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh, t. 1 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1978), 429–541. The first complete publication of Dzhan was in A. P. Platonov, Proza (Moscow: Slovo, 1999), 437–534.

369 In this chapter, I build on and amend my earlier work on Platonov’s Central Asian cycle, including my master’s thesis “An Oasis of Socialism Becomes a Poor, Flat Space: Similes and the Desert in Andrei Platonov’s “Takyr” and Dzhan” (Columbia University, 2007) and my article “Collective Authorship and Platonov’s Socialist Realism,” Russian Literature 73, no. 1/2: Special Issue: Andrej Platonov (2013): 57–83.

370 Natal’ia Kornienko, “‘Razmyshleniia chitatelia’: Nikolai Nikitin—retsenzent rasskaza ‘Takyr’,” in “Strana filosof” Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva, vypusk 5, comp. and ed. N. V. Kornienko (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2003), 733, 736. Platonov had permission to visit Turkmenistan until March 14, 1935, but apparently he finished earlier than that date, as archival work has suggested that he was in Leningrad between March 10 and 15, 1935. (Ibid., 736; Antonova, “A. Platonov—inzhener tresta ‘Rosmetroves,’” 792.)
The visits to Turkmenistan carried more than logistical significance, however, for they had a profound effect on Platonov as a writer. Indeed, according to his letters and journals from the period, Platonov found a great deal of inspiration in Turkmenistan. In a letter to his wife and his son from March 30, 1934, he wrote: “I hungrily look at everything that is unfamiliar to me. […] I never would have understood the desert, if I hadn’t seen it—books cannot convey this” («Я смотрю жадно на все, незнакомое мне […] Я никогда не понял бы пустыни, если бы не увидел ее—книг таких нет»). On April 15, he sent them confirmation of the Kara-Kum’s power, noting: “The desert under the stars made an enormous impression on me. I understood something that I had not understood before” («Пустыня под звездами произвела на меня огромное впечатление. Я кое-что понял, чего раньше не понимал»).

Platonov’s notebooks from the period, meanwhile, include dozens of pages of notes about Turkmenistan, not only ideas for fictional works, but also observations about the relationship between ancient and modern Turkmenistan, about the construction of wells, and about the connection between Russians and Turkmen. Many of these notes conform to the official Soviet discourse of the period, emphasizing how Soviet progress is transforming the region. These entries speak to Platonov’s sincere efforts in the period to find themes that would be deemed acceptable for publication. Other comments in Platonov’s notebooks, however, point to his interest in the region as a homeland of the human race and as a place of deep philosophical

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371 Geller draws attention to the Central Asian trip as an important source of funds for Platonov. (Mikhail Geller, Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast’ia [Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Mik,” 1999], 339.)

372 Platonov, pis’mo 3 (30 marta 1934g), in Arkhiv A. P. Platonova, 504.

373 Platonov, pis’mo 10 (15 aprilia, 1934g), in Arkhiv A. P. Platonova, 510.
import, an interest seemingly bound to his reading of the philosopher Nikolai Fedorov. At one moment, for instance, Platonov observes the following: “It is amazing that the homeland of man is so deserted. What was it that tied people together here?” («Удивительно, что родина человечества столь пустынна. Что здесь связывало людей?»). Platonov’s attention to Central Asia as an early homeland of man echoes Fedorov’s belief that the original Eden had been in the region and that the bones of Adam were buried somewhere in the mountains.

These two dimensions of Platonov’s interest in Turkmenistan—the officially aligned attention to progress and the more idiosyncratically philosophical—are reflected to various degrees in the three works Platonov produced in the mid-1930s. In all of them, however, Platonov’s vision of the space of Turkmenistan is also bound up with elements of his poetics that remained consistent throughout his career, most notably his interest in the geography of deserts and the poetics and thematics of spatial transformation. A great deal has been written about how Platonov approaches specific spaces, such as “the East” and the desert, as well as spatial

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374 The points of intersection between Platonov’s work and the philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov are many and varied, as Ayleen Teskey and others have suggested. (See Ayleen Teskey, Platonov and Fyodorov: The Influence of Christian Philosophy on a Soviet Writer [Amersham: Avebury, 1982]; Elena Tolstaia-Segal, “Ideologicheskie konteksty Platonova,” in Andrei Platonov: Mir tvorchestva, comp. N. V. Kornienko and E. D. Shubina [Moscow: Sovremenennyi pisatel’, 1994], 56–63.) Particularly relevant to the present discussion is Fedorov’s assessment of Central Asia in Filosofiia obschego dela (Philosophy of the Common Cause, 1903, 1913) and in several of his published letters. Nikolai Fedorov’s interest in Central Asia intensified in the year he spent in Ashgabat (1899–1900) with his disciple and collaborator Nikolai Pavlovich Peterson, who had been appointed a member of the District Court there. (George M. Young, Jr., Nikolai F. Fedorov: An Introduction [Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland Publishing Company, 1979], 72.) That Platonov consulted the work of Fedorov and his followers has been confirmed by Natal’ia Kornienko, Platonov’s chief archivist, who notes that the work of Fedorov’s followers on Turkestan was of special importance to Platonov. Platonov’s other sources included Nikolai Murav’ev’s account of traveling to Turkmenia in 1819 and 1820. (Kornienko, “Primechaniia,” in Platonov, Zapisnye knizhki, 368; Natal’ia Kornienko, “Istoriia teksta i biografiia A. P. Platonova (1926–1946), Zdes’ i teper’ 1 [1993]: 226.)

375 Platonov, Zapisnye knizhki, 137.

concepts such as “emptiness” and “borders.” Thus far, however, critics have not explored the relationship between Platonov’s depictions of Turkmenistan and the prevailing conventions for representing it as a landscape dominated by its local observers and the Soviet state, and it is this relationship that I would like to address. In taking this approach, I build on three main lines of inquiry. First, I draw on Kornienko’s claim that Platonov’s depiction of Turkmenia diverged from that of other writers involved in the first and second writers’ brigades to Turkmenistan with “its rejection of the ‘civilized’ gaze at the past and future of the East” (“неприятием “цивилизованного” взгляда на прошлое и будущее Востока”). Second, I build on Thomas Seifrid’s hitherto unexplored hypothesis that Platonov’s Central Asian works of the 1930s might constitute an “oblique form of response” to the Soviet regime, which aggressively promoted itself visually with spectacles, public celebrations, military parades, and show trials. Finally, I engage with Dmitrii Zamiatin’s suggestion that in Platonov’s writing

[л]андшафтов нет, ибо постоянное движение платоновского письма при его чтении смазывает, нарушает создания, построения устойчивых статичных видов, картин читаемого текста. Точка зрения, киноглаз Платонова,

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378 Kornienko, “Andrei Platonov: Turkmeniia — strana ironii,” 108. Kornienko has argued that Platonov in his work about Turkmenistan reacted in particular to the writings of Petr Pavlenko, with whom Platonov had been in dialogue since at least 1932. On February 1 of that year, Pavlenko had presided over the meeting of the All-Russian Union of Writers as it discussed Platonov’s “Vprok” and the issues surrounding it. In response, Kornienko notes, Platonov had used Pavlenko as the basis for the comic character Fushenko in his tragedy “14 krasnyh izbushek” (“Fourteen Little Red Huts,” 1932–1933). (Ibid., 108–109.) Kornienko does not provide a detailed analysis of how “Goriachaia Arktika,” “Takyr,” and Dzhan compare to contemporary works about Turkmenistan in terms of landscape production, however.

There are no landscapes, for the constant motion of Platonov’s writing, when it is read, smears, destroys the creation, the erection of stable static visions, pictures of the text being read. The point of view, the cine-eye of Platonov, being always in motion, on the road, displaces any other point of view, exteriorizing the reader’s desire to enter into, to fall deep into the text. […] Platonov does not have landscapes—he has a zone, a belt; the visions merge into one, becoming a symbol of the middle of the earth, not located anywhere, located in the nowhere.

Like Zamiatin, I will attend to how Platonov frustrates the creation of “static visions” and traditional “landscapes,” though my focus will not be on the supposed “cinematic” techniques Platonov uses or how his settings merge into one. Rather, I will concentrate on how Platonov responded to the emerging iconography of Soviet Turkmenistan by trying to work within it, on the one hand, and defying it, on the other. By positioning Platonov’s “Turkmenia cycle” as a reaction to the emerging paradigm for representing the national republics, I will build on Kornienko and Seifrid’s suggestions that Platonov’s attention to the framing of Central Asian space in these works is bound up with his reaction to official Soviet discourse. Ultimately, however, I will depart from their scholarship to make a new claim about Platonov’s relationship to the emerging socialist realist conventions for representing the Soviet “East.”

I. “Takyr” and Vision

As might be expected, given that it was published in the 1934 writers’ brigade almanac Aiding-Giumler along with the works I analyzed at the end of my third chapter, “Takyr” to some extent conforms to the norms of the national commission for Turkmenistan. The story revolves around an “insider’s” socialist experience, tracking a young girl’s escape from slavery in the

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mudflats (takyrs) of the Turkmen plain and her return there as a Soviet citizen and scientist. A half-Persian, half-Kurdish slave born into captivity in Turkmenistan, Dzhumal eventually finds her way to Ashgabat and Tashkent, where she earns a degree in agricultural science before finally returning to the land of her birth to set up horticultural experiments and work in a desert preserve. Attending to this plotline, Philip Ross Bullock has called the story an illustration of “the liberation of a young girl from the repressive codes of a patriarchal society by her conversion to Soviet socialism.” It is telling, however, that the text’s title is “Takyr” and not, say, “Dzhumal Tadzhieva,” after the name she creates for herself based on her Persian mother’s, for ultimately this is not the story of the transformation of Dzhumal. Of the story’s nine numbered sections, only the last one mentions her life after leaving the takyr, and even this one provides no information about her exploits outside of the land in which she was born. Instead, the story devotes most of its narrative attention to the problem of how Dzhumal’s mother, Zarrin-Tadzh, came to live in Turkmenistan while pregnant, how Dzhumal was raised in the takyr, and how an Austrian soldier named Stefan Katigrob helped the young girl survive after her mother’s death. Of primary concern to the story as a whole is not Dzhumal’s development as a “positive hero” or the ongoing development of the takyr, but its status as a landscape created by multiple visions. While other works by writers involved in the 1933–1934 national commission expressed control over Turkmenistan by creating “native” landscapes in which the dominant local perspective on the republic explicitly or implicitly endorsed Soviet development, in “Takyr” Platonov provides multiple local visions of spaces in Turkmenistan, none of which perfectly aligns with a state narrative. In the process, Platonov draws attention to the idiosyncrasy of the

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individual “insider” gaze and subtly challenges the dominant paradigm for representing the TSSR, even as he works within it.

The story opens with a geographical indicator locating the narrative precisely in space (and less precisely in time, which points to the comparative significance that space will be accorded): “A long time ago, in the night, forty or more riders were traveling peacefully in the Firyuza Valley on the edge of a river stream” (“Давно и в ночной время сорок или больше всадников ехали мирным шагом в долине Фирюзы по краю речного потока”). This line establishes that the first scene takes place in the lush territory near the Kopet-Dag mountains and the border with Iran—a space also featured in Tikhonov’s “Biruuzovy polkovnik,” discussed in Chapter One. As the riders and their captive slaves move closer to the takyr and the desert homeland of the riders, where the majority of the narrative will be set, the absolute rendering of Turkmenistan as a space dissolves, and it begins to take shape as a practiced place, largely through similes that emphasize different characters’ perspectives.

Our first point of access is Zarrin-Tadzh, a fourteen-year-old slave captured in the Khorasan province of Persia. Her first impressions of the gorge are tied to ancient Persian myths and to the contemporary reality in her homeland. Immediately after her character is introduced, we gain a “Persian” perspective on the territory: “Sometimes she heard sounds from far off, above the noise of the stream; she thought then that it was likely the train departing Iran for Turan, which Zarrin-Tadzh had seen once in childhood and remembered for how its escaping

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Lokher has commented on the dual nature of this first line, pointing to both its fable-like temporal marker “A long time ago, in the night” (reminiscent of the Bashkirian tales that Platonov and others retold in the 1940s) and the rest of the narrative, which does not carry the markers of fables or fairy tales. (Ia. P. Lokher, “Rasskaz Platonova ‘Takyr’ i tema Vostoka,” in “Strana Filosofov” Andreia Platonova, vypusk 4 (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2000), 293.
smoke whistled” («Иногда ей слышались издали звуки, помимо шума потока, она думала тогда, что это наверно из Ирана в Туран уезжает поезд, который Заррин-Тадж видела однажды в детстве и запомнила, как гудит его бегущий дым»). The poetics of this fragment are, as Kornienko has pointed out, no doubt indebted to the Zoroastrian opposition between Iran, which was associated with the kingdom of the god Ormazd (as well as goodness, light, and peace), and Turan, which was a symbol of the kingdom of Ahriman (as well as evil, war, darkness). Iran, of course, was the homeland of the Persians, while Turan was believed to be located in a sandy space to Iran’s north, in present-day Turkmenistan, and to be inhabited by nomads. As I will discuss in greater detail below in the analysis of Dzhan, Platonov was well aware of these Zoroastrian myths, as was Fedorov, who positioned Russia as a bearer of the “Iranian” work of settling nomads and protecting against invasions by such warriors as Atilla, Genghis Khan, and Timur (or Tamerlane).

Soon after, Zarrin-Tadzh’s impressions becomes less generically “Persian” and more idiosyncratically personal, as we see a specific landscape in the Firyuza Valley through her eyes:

Ночной ветер медленно дул из Персии по ущелью, слышен был запах цветов, одинокая птица напевала где-то далеко в слепых горах, потом она умолкла; лишь река неслась и работала на камнях—всегда и вечно, во тьме

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383 The entry “A train set off from Iran to Turan” («Из Ирана в Туран пошел поезд») appears in Platonov’s 1934 notebook from Turkmenistan. (Platonov, Zapisnye knizhki, 131.)
385 Kornienko notes that the opposition between Iran and Turan appears in much Persian and Tajik poetry, as well as in the work of the eighteenth-century Turkmen poet Makhtumkuli. She suggests that Makhtumkuli’s poem “To the Heart” depends on a comparable dramatic line as that of “Takyr,” quoting the following lines: “Having closed my eyes I remained on the path to Iran; // Transported by fate I wound up in Turan.” (Ibid.) Makhtumkuli’s poem can be found in Russian translation in Makhtumkuli, Izbrannoe, trans. B. Karryev et al. [Ashgabat: Turkmenskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1960], 60.)
и в свете, как работает раб в туркменской равнине или неостывающий самовар в чайхане. 387

Персиянка поглядела на старинную чинару—семь больших стволов разрасталось из нее и еще одна слабая ветвь: семь братьев и одна сестра. Нужно было целое племя людей, чтобы обнять это дерево вокруг, и кора его, изболевшая, изъеденная зверями, обхватанная руками умиравших, но сберегшая под собой все соки, была тепла и добра на вид, как земляная почва. Заррин-Тадж села на один из корней чинары, который уходил вглубь, точно хищная рука, и заметила еще, что на высоте ствола росли камни.

Должно быть, река в свои разливы громила чинару под корень горными камнями, но дерево вело себе в тело те огромные камни, окружило их терпеливой корой, обжило и освоило и выросло дальше, кротко подняв с собою то, что должно его погубить. «Она тоже рабыня, как я!—подумала персиянка про чинару. —Она держит камень, как я свое сердце и своего ребенка. Пусть горе мое врастет в меня, чтобы я его не чувствовала». Заррин-Тадж заплакала. Она была беременна второй месяц от курда-пастуха, потому что ей надо было любить хотя бы одного человека.»

387 A note in Platonov’s notebooks from Turkmenistan suggests that heard this particular comparison while visiting: “The virgin bakhshi: / I will work, like a samovar in a chaikhana, always…” (“Бахши девственник: / Буду работать, как самовар в чайхане, всегда…”). (Platonov, Zapisnye knizhki, 130.)
As the phrases I have set in boldface suggest, this passage is filled with analogies that connect the Firyuza gorge back to Zarrin-Tadzh. The first analogy in the passage is, of course, the one comparing the work of the river to that of a “slave on the Turkmen plain” and of an “ever-steaming samovar in a teahouse.” In this first simile, the river is effectively compared to Zarrin-Tadzh herself, who is a slave headed for the Turkmen plain, though she is not explicitly mentioned. When the next two similes appear, they compare the bark of the tree to “the earth’s soil” and a root to “a predatory hand.” Again, while neither of these analogies directly compares the landscape to Zarrin-Tadzh, both underline the dominant idea of the passage: that she and the tree are alike; they can grow up among obstacles and survive as captives. This central message is then repeated in Zarrin-Tadzh’s own speech, which includes a direct exclamation about the tree’s status as a slave and yet another simile: “She is also a slave, as I am! [...] She holds stones, like I hold my heart and my child.” By the end of the passage, these repeated comparisons have made it impossible to ignore the connection between Zarrin-Tadzh and the tree with which she identifies. The description of the gorge attaches Zarrin-Tadzh’s experience to the space around her, rendering it a place touched by individual practice and a landscape constructed around her particular vision, not the space’s relationship to the Soviet project.

As the story progresses, the spaces of Turkmenistan described in the story gain further associations with the characters’ fields of visions and their registers of comparison, as similes and metaphors remain critical to Platonov’s construction of Turkmenistan as a set of competing landscapes. First, we gain access to other geographical spaces through Zarrin-Tadzh’s eyes. The desert is introduced thus:

На утро верховые туркманы вывели пленников из гор Копетдага; тогда некоторые курдские и персидские женщины, как только увидели чужую пустыню и странное небо с другим светом, чем на родине, заплакали от наступившей печали. Но Заррин-Тадж не плакала: выросшая в нагорной
In the morning the Turkmen riders took the captives away from the Kopet-Dag mountains; then a few Kurdish and Persian women, as soon as they caught sight of the foreign desert and the strange sky with a different light than in their homeland, began crying from the sadness that came over them. But Zarrin-Tadzh did not cry: having grown up in a highland grove of Khorassan, she looked with curiosity at the empty light of the Turkmen plain, tedious, like a child’s death, and she did not understand why people lived there.

Clearly, this description provides access to Zarrin-Tadzh’s thoughts about the comparative “tediousness” and “emptiness” of the “foreign” Turkmen desert. But it also, in my reading, links the Turkmen space to Zarrin-Tadzh through more indirect means, namely the simile about the child’s death (she is, it should be remembered, only fourteen years old). In the next sections of the story, Zarrin-Tadzh acclimates to life as a nomad. Still, she sees the desert from a distinct, displaced perspective, and this perspective marks the territory for the reader. In its description of the caravan’s movement, the story notes that the nomads often cross long stretches of takyr “where the heat of the sun is maintained without cooling off, like the sadness in the heart of a slave, where God once kept his martyrs, but even these martyrs died, dried up into light branches, and the wind carried them off” («где жара солнца хранится не остывая, как печаль в сердце раба, где бог держал когда-то своих мучеников, но и мученики умерли, высохли в легкие ветви, и ветер взял их с собою», 50, emphasis mine). Just as an earlier simile linked the always-working river to the always-working slave on the Turkmen plain, this one connects the unceasing heat of the takyr with the unceasing sadness in the heart of a slave, and thus with the unceasing sadness in the heart of Zarrin-Tadzh. The sentence presents us with a closed circuit: the oppressive environment leads us through a simile to the oppressed slave and then
back through a dependent clause to the oppressive environment, which is now defined and framed by Zarrin-Tadzh’s point of view.

Gradually, we gain access not only to Zarrin-Tadzh’s direct perception of different spaces, but also to her memories of them. Her original encounter with the lone bird and the plane tree, quoted at length above, evidently becomes refracted in the following manner when she is sick:

But time passed, as the wind rustles over the sands and carries spring birds into green, humid climes. It seemed to the Persian woman in her hot, sick mind that a single tree was growing somewhere, and that on its branch a small, insignificant little bird was sitting and haughtily slowly singing its song. Caravans of camels were going past this little bird, riders were galloping into the distance, and the train to Turan was whistling. But the little bird was singing ever more wisely and silently, almost to itself: it was still not clear whose force would be victorious in life—that of the little bird or the caravans or the whistling trains. Zarrin-Tadzh awoke and decided to live like this bird that had disappeared with the dream. She got better.

This passage seems to follow the logic of a fever dream. The birds flying to “green humid climes” are first invoked to conjure Zarrin-Tadzh’s conception of time in terms of her attachment to greener, more verdant spaces than those of Turkmenistan. The birds escape the confines of their original simile, however, and fly out into several more contexts, as Zarrin-Tadzh’s “hot, sick mind” seems to fixate on the image of one little bird singing its song. Thus the word “bird” (ptitsa) is repeated twice in different grammatical forms, while the word’s diminutive form,
“little bird” (ptichka) is repeated three times, to represent the single bird with which Zarrin-Tadzh identifies.

Upon first spying the plane tree, Zarrin-Tadzh made sense of her environment in personal terms, drawing strength from it and providing the reader with their first personalized landscape of Turkmen space. Here again, Zarrin-Tadzh constructs a personalized landscape that bolsters her will to live and encourages the reader to consider Turkmenia outside of a purely developmentalist narrative. The “single tree” that Zarrin-Tadzh conjures here may not, in fact, be the plane tree she saw while being transported out of Persia, though it is surrounded by the same kind of caravans and trains she witnessed then. Indeed, the figure might have more resonance with other “single trees” depicted in Platonov’s work. Whether the two trees Zarrin-Tadzh perceives are, in fact, identical, they are connected within the world of the story by the function they serve. For Zarrin-Tadzh, the trees give her a will to live and a sense of orientation. For the reader, they draw attention to the psychological dimension that space carries in the narrative and to the relationship between landscape and vision, including the “vision of dreams” (snovidenie) mentioned at the end of the passage above.

If seeing multiple areas of Turkmenistan from Zarrin-Tadzh’s perspective allows the reader to perceive Turkmenistan as more than one monolithic landscape divided into reformed and unreformed spaces according to the logic of Soviet development, seeing the same space from other points of view enables the reader to recognize the extent to which each vision of the republic is shaped by the spectator’s experience and biography. By the fourth section of the

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388 As M. A. Dmitrovskai’a’s work has demonstrated (though she does not discuss the trees in “Takyr”), these trees—along with comparable vertical symbols such as towers and wells—can be read as the organizing centers of the world in Platonov’s works. (Dmitrovskai’a, Kategoriiia prostranstva, 15.) Konstantin Barsht has taken issue with Dmitrovskai’a’s reading, arguing that the structure of Platonov’s space is not Newtonian, but Eisensteinian, and thus there can be no “center.” (Konstantin Barsht, Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova [St. Petersburg: Filologicheskii fakultet Sankt-Peterburgskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2000], 168.) I find it reductive to read Platonov’s works in terms of binary oppositions and thus am inclined to take a view closer to Barsht’s. Still, it is striking that Platonov gives weight to a “single tree” in “Takyr,” given his tendency to do so elsewhere.
story, the narrator is aligned—through free indirect discourse—with the perspective of Zarrin-Tadzh’s daughter Dzhumal, as well as with Zarrin-Tadzh herself. Immediately, the takyr takes on new shadings as Dzhumal’s vision of the space comes into view along with her mother’s:

Джумаль […] не тосковала о реках и листьях; она росла здесь, между барханами, и с высоты песков, насыпанных ветром, видела, что земля повсюду одинакова и пуста. Мать же плакала иногда и прижимала к себе девочку—она теперь была для нее дальней рекою, забытыми горами, цветами деревьев и тенью на такыре. (51)

Dzhumal […] did not yearn for rivers and leaves; she grew up here, among the sand dunes, and from the heights of the sands, gathered by the winds, she saw that the earth was everywhere the same and empty. Her mother cried sometimes and pressed her daughter to her—she was now the far-off river for her, the forgotten mountains, the tree flowers, and the shade on the takyr.

The flat plains of Turkmenistan here begin to bear the traces of the native-born Dzhumal, as well as the foreignness projected onto them by her mother. At the same time, Dzhumal herself takes on her mother’s associations with her lost homeland. While Zarrin-Tadzh gathered strength by identifying herself with the images of trees and birds, she now creates landscapes out of the body of her daughter: Dzhumal becomes the “forgotten mountains” («забытыми горами») left behind in Iran and the Firyuza Valley. The juxtaposition of their two perspectives encourages the reader to attend to the relationship between sight and the perception of space, as do the lines Dzhumal speaks to her mother as she is dying. Encouraging Zarrin-Tadzh to shut her eyes, so that the two can die more quickly together, Dzhumal says: “Why look in vain—for there is nothing, we’ve already seen everything…” («Чего зря глядеть! Ведь нечего, мы все уже видели…», 55).

Sight is frequently foregrounded in Platonov’s work. Living with fully open eyes, outside of a dream state, is generally unsustainable, and for this reason, it seems, his characters
frequently shield themselves from the world by hampering their own vision.\textsuperscript{389} In \textit{Chevengur}, for instance, Dvanov closes his eyes “in order to separate himself from every kind of sight and thoughtlessly live through the road” («чтобы отмежеваться от всякого зрелища и бессмысленно пережить дорогу»).\textsuperscript{390} Still, \textit{vision}, with all its ordering power, is valued, and death is a threat to it: thus, again in \textit{Chevengur}, a dying soldier asks Dvanov to close his “vision” (\textit{zrenie}), not his “eyes” (\textit{glaza}), as he nears the end of his life.\textsuperscript{391} In “\textit{Takyr},” the Turkmen who capture Zarrin-Tadzh “each closed one of their eyes, in order to half-dream and half-see” («закрывали по одному глазу, чтобы дремать и видеть наполовину», 47). Zarrin-Tadzh and her fellow slaves, meanwhile, walk as though asleep, without consciousness (and, we could surmise, sight): “The spirit of the walking people had become so exhausted that they stopped feeling their own existence and walked as though without breath” («Душа пеших людей настолько утомилась, что они перестали чувствовать свое существование и шли как без дыхания», 47).

Although Dzhumal is raised among these people who exist in a state of half-consciousness (like so many of Platonov’s characters), and though she claims that she and her mother have “already seen everything,” the young girl does not renounce her own vision when her mother dies. Indeed, Dzhumal’s determination to \textit{continue seeing} and to remake her life is what gives the tale its—at least superficially—socialist realist bent and suggests that Platonov was trying to keep pace with the endorsed aesthetics of the Soviet state when he composed “\textit{Takyr}.” As she continues to take in the world, Platonov continues rendering Turkmenistan in


\textsuperscript{391} Platonov, \textit{Chevengur}, 76. See also Seifrid, “Platonov’s Blindness,” 289.
personalized landscapes through her eyes. After Zarrin-Tadzh’s death, the *takyr* becomes connected primarily to Dzhumal’s perspective, rather than her mother’s, as is evident from the simile in the following sentence about her life with Katigrob, an Austrian soldier who has been stranded in Turkmenia since the end of the first World War: “They lived together for six years, and the *takyr* in front of the mud tower lay as before without sound, without life, empty, like the fate of Dzhumal” (“Они пробыли вместе шесть лет, и такыр перед глиняной башней лежал по-прежнему без звука, без жизни, пустой, как судьба Джумали», 57, emphasis mine).

During this portion of the story, however, a counterpoint to Dzhumal’s point of view does still exist. In place of her mother’s perspective, we gain access to Katigrob’s:

Katigrob examined [Dzhumal] as a mineral, and his heart immediately got tired, while his reason turned to hardness. He himself began to cry and turned away… His homeland was somewhere out there, a war was underway. He had fled from everywhere and hid himself for a long time, maybe forever, in this emaciated desert, which had long ago scattered its bones into dust and had dispersed the dust in the wind. A Viennese optician, he now sees only mirages, the disappearing ephemera of light and life.

It is unclear from this passage whether Katigrob’s vision is impaired or whether his seeing “only mirages” («один миражи») is proof that he is endowed with a pure, spiritual vision—the kind that Platonov’s characters accrue, Kornienko has argued, when they begin to live outside of the external world.\(^\text{392}\) Although an optician, Katigrob is evidently unable to correct his own tendency to see only ephemera, and he likewise seems unable to see Dzhumal in any other way than “as

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a mineral,” presumably because he “observes” the world scientifically, rather than seeing it as others might. Whether Katigrob’s vision is in fact weaker or stronger than that of those who do not see mirages, the references to his vision in “Takyr” emphasize that his view of the desert as “emaciated” is as critical to Platonov’s construction of Turkmenistan as are Dzhumal and Zarrin-Tadzh’s perceptions. Platonov’s attention to the multiplicity of perspectives available to those living on the takyr destabilizes the notion that there is one constant “insider” view of the landscape as a part of the Soviet ideological system.

Even after Dzhumal escapes from the takyr with the help of the Red Army, receives an agricultural education in Ashgabat and Tashkent, and returns in 1933 to conduct research in her homeland, the takyr retains meaning outside the bounds of official Soviet discourse. As Dzhumal approaches the tower where she lived with the Austrian, she does not see the space through the eyes of a trained scientist recolonizing her native land, despite the fact she has a (positivistic) map of the desert in her possession and is returning to establish a horticultural center and a “preserve of plants, disappearing from the earth” («заповедник растений, исчезающих с земли», 59).393 Instead, her vision realigns with the way she saw the world in her youth:

Копыта лошади зазвенели по плотным плитам глины, как по мерзлоте; все так же было печально кругом, как будто время не миновало и сама Джумаль осталась юной и угрюмой, не видев городов и рек, не зная в мире ничего, кроме ветра, поющего над пустым сердцем. (58, emphasis mine)

The hooves of the horse rang out along the dense slabs of mud, as though on frozen ground; everything around was as melancholy as if no time had passed and Dzhumal herself was still young and gloomy, as though she had never seen cities and rivers, as though she knew nothing in the world except the wind, singing over an empty heart.

393 Dzhumal’s “place for experimental horticulture in the depth of the Kara-Kum” («место для опытного садоводства в глубине Кара-Кумов», 58) may be based on the Repetek preserve in the eastern Kara-Kum, approximately 70 kilometers from Chardjou, which was established in 1928. (Kornienko, “Kommentarii,” Zapisnye knizhki, 372.) Platonov visited Repetek while in Turkmenistan on the writers’ brigade and mentions it in “Goriachaia Arktika.”
Despite the fact that Dzhumal has become “Sovietized” and thus “doubly assimilated” as a Persian national and a Soviet citizen, she sees the *takyr* not in new, “enlightened” terms, but in the way she saw it before she had caught sight of “cities and rivers.” We as readers, in turn, are led to see the *takyr* in personal terms, as an embodiment of her sorrow. The space becomes further grounded in her experience as she finds the bones of Katigrob and visits the grave of her mother, remembering words her mother once spoke to her: “Why am I so luckless? The one who left will never return” («И что это за горе мое, тот кто ушел, назад никогда не вернется», 59). Together, these sites—and Zarrin-Tadzh’s words about the importance of returning—mortalize time and signify that the space of the *takyr* functions as a practiced *place*, one envisioned by its residents in contrasting, personalized, landscapes.

It has been argued that the *takyr*, as “an empty landscape of the East” («пустой пейзаж Востока»), serves as an extrapolation of Platonov’s characterization of the southern Russian steppe to Central Asia and thus helps collapse the distinction between East and West. While I would agree that Platonov’s “Takyr” does not depend on a binary opposition between East and

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394 A very similar line appears in Platonov’s notebooks: see Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 131.

395 Harrison has argued that it is “impossible to understand the institution of places on the earth independently of the institution of burial,” since the “grave marks a site in the landscape where time cannot merely pass through, or over.” He continues: “It is this mortalization of time that gives places its articulated boundaries, distinguishing it from the infinity of homogenous space.” (Harrison, “Hic Jacet,” 353.) On the significance of the grave within Platonov’s approach to space, see “Simvolika groba,” in Barsht, *Poetika Prozy Andreia Platonova*, 173–178; Karasev, “Dvizhenie po sklonu.”

396 Lokher, “Rasskaz Platonova ‘Takyr’ i tema Vostoka,” 295. The borderlands between steppe and desert were one of Platonov’s privileged spaces even before he wrote the Turkmenia cycle. On this see Oksana Filenko, “Step’ i sad (Printsiy organizatsii khudozhestvennogo prostranstva i vremen i tvorchestva A. Chekhova i A. Platonova,” in ‘Strana Filosofov Andreia Platonova: problemy tvorchestva, vypusk 6, compiled and edited by N. V. Kornienko and E. A. Rozhentseva (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2005): 90–97; Geller, *Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast’ia*. In general, Platonov often depicts a struggle to build a better world in a physical space where man is not only metaphorically, but also literally, exposed to harsh conditions and where shelter is hard to find. As Seifrid has noted, the image of a sheltering abode is central to Platonov’s ontological myth, from his early poetry onwards (Seifrid, *Uncertainties*, 155).
West and that there is much in common between the desert setting of the story and the setting of other works by Platonov, I would argue that Platonov’s takyr is not, in fact, an “empty landscape.” First, the story’s central characters make the spaces of the takyr their own, even if they remain alienated from it, observing the environment and one another in it. Second, the takyr is not reducible to one landscape. Presented in relationship to several individuals’ fields of vision and related to their personal experiences, the takyr is, if anything, a set of individually constructed landscapes: it is at once “emaciated” in Katigrob’s estimation, “tedious, like a child’s death” in Zarrin-Tadzh’s, and “melancholy,” in Dzhumal’s.

Although Platonov’s story was deemed publishable and appeared in the almanac Aiding-Giumler, the story does not fully conform to the conventions of insider iconography that were being established when the national commission sent its representatives to Turkmenistan in 1934. In it Platonov does not define the republic as a landscape in Soviet developmentalist terms through the eyes of a single male “insider,” as several of the other fiction writers on the brigade in 1934 did. Instead, Platonov chooses a female protagonist who sees the landscape through the prism of her personal experience and contrasts her vision with that of her (foreign) mother and a (foreign) companion. Each of their perspectives encourages the reader to dwell on the problem of alienation and the challenges of human existence in a harsh environment, rather than to look forward to a glorious Soviet future. Platonov by all accounts was eager to do take part in the writers’ brigade to Turkmenistan in 1934 (even if he grew frustrated with the other writers and the collective endeavor), for it opened up opportunities for him within the Soviet publishing world. The work he produced in conjunction with the official excursion to the TSSR, however, refracts its accepted poetics, rather than fully embracing them.
II. “Goriachaia Arktika” and Place

That the landscape of Turkmenistan that Platonov created in “Takyr” did not match the prevailing trends in Soviet discourse is reflected in the official response that the story received upon its publication in Aiding-Giumler and Krasnaia nov’. The first influential reaction was a withering review in Pravda entitled “Zametki chitatelia. Dremat’ i videt’ napolovinu” (“A Reader’s Notes: To Half-Dream and Half-See”), which reproduced fragments from the story, pointed out the peculiar style of the writer (including his characters’ tendency to “half-see” the world), and suggested that the story read like an unrefined, literal translation from Persian or Turkish.\footnote{N. Nikitin, “Zametkia chitatelia. Dremat’ i videt’ napolovinu,” Pravda, January 18, 1935.} Next came a speech by Aleksandr Shcherbakov, Chairman of the Writers’ Union from 1934-1936, at the Writers’ Union plenum on March 5, 1935. In it, Shcherbakov condemned “Takyr” for propagating a “philosophy of the impending doom of people and culture” («философия обреченности людей и культуры») and “the idea of the miserliness of nature, its animosity toward people” («идея скупости природы, ее враждебности к людям»).\footnote{Vtoroi plenum pravleniia Soiuza Sovetskikh Pisatelei SSSR. Mart 1935. Stenograficheskii otchet (Moscow: GIKhL, 1935), 321.} After delivering the speech, Shcherbakov reiterated his warning, according to NKVD documents, by telephoning Platonov in March and telling him that he “should immediately write a completely clear political thing” («должен сейчас же написать совершенно ясную политическую вещь»).\footnote{V. Goncharova and V. Nekhotina, “Andrei Platonov v dokumentakh OGPU—NKVD—NKGB,” in “Strana filosofov” Andreia Platonova: Problemy tvorchestva, vypusk 4, edited by N. V. Kornienko (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2000), 857.}

Platonov was later told, according to another NKVD report from October 1935, that other members of the Writers’ Union had praised “Takyr” and believed that Shcherbakov had
overreached with his criticism, though they had stayed silent during Shcherbakov’s speech.\textsuperscript{400} In the immediate aftermath of the reproach, however, it seems that Platonov took Shcherbakov’s warning to heart and wrote the sketch “Goriachaia Arktika.”\textsuperscript{401} Whether or not “Goriachaia Arktika” was created directly in response to Shcherbakov—there is some scholarly debate over whether it was written in late 1934 or early 1935—the sketch promotes the richness of Turkmenistan’s nature in a way that “Takyr,” according to Shcherbakov, did not. In place of the “miserliness” of the takyr—or the “wasteful spending” that Platonov had observed in Turkmenia’s landscapes\textsuperscript{402}—Platonov here paints a portrait of unlimited possibility. Moreover, Platonov explicitly identifies Soviet development as the best means for opening up land within Turkmenistan, writing that “our task consists in the full industrial and agricultural mastery of the Kara-Kum and in the construction of a great Turkmenian oasis on one of the saddest places on our planet” («наша задача заключается в полном промышленном и сельскохозяйственном освоении Кара-Кумов, в создании великого туркменистанского оазиса на одном из самых печальных мест нашей планеты»).\textsuperscript{403} This is not an idle or unrealistic undertaking, Platonov argues, for another Soviet Republic, the RSFSR, had turned its attention to a “desert no less empty and cruel” («не менее пустой и тяжкой пустыне», 645), conquering the cold expanses to the Soviet north. To seal the analogy, and to emphasize the connection between the TSSR and the rest of the Soviet Union (something largely ignored in “Takyr”), Platonov then emphasizes the comparative importance of the project, noting that: “the Kara-Kum for Turkmenistan is even

\textsuperscript{400} Ibid., 859.

\textsuperscript{401} See Kornienko, “Razmyshleniia,” 737.

\textsuperscript{402} See the epigraph to this chapter.

\textsuperscript{403} Platonov, “Goriachaia Arktika,” in \textit{Sobranie, vol. 8: Fabrika literatury} (Moscow: Vremia, 2011), 645, emphasis mine. Further citations will appear parenthetically within the body of the text.
bigger than the Arctic for the Soviet Union. The future of the multiplied Turkmen people lies in
the Kara-Kum. It will become a site of socialism and of further historical development” («Кара-
Кумы для Туркмении—это даже больше, чем Арктика для Советского Союза. В Кара-
Кумах лежит будущее туркменского размноженного народа, —они станут местом
социализма и дальнейшего исторического развития», 645).

In a traditionally Stalinist vein, the sketch then continues to glorify construction and
outline a number of projects and inventions that will help reclaim the desert for cultivation.
Specifically, Platonov advocates the use of the inexpensive portable desalinization pumps that
had recently been invented by K. G. Trofimov of Tashkent and the methods developed by M. P.
Petrov and his colleagues with cotton-growers in the Repetek Desert Station. Platonov personally
attests to the effectiveness of the project, writing in reference to the 1934 writers’ brigade: “We
had a chance to walk in the saxaul groves of the Repetek on light sand dunes, where the desert
already cannot be felt at all” («Нам приходилось ходить в саксауловых рощах Репетека на
сыпучих барханах, где пустыни уже не чувствуется вовсе», 647). The promise of such
undertakings affirms that the Kara-Kum can change, while the presence of oil, gas, sulfur, coal,
and minerals—which can help “to cover the dead space of the Kara-Kum with live industry”
(«покрыть мертвое пространство Кара-Кумов живой промышленностью», 647)—promises
a bright future. This development, Platonov suggests, will allow the boundless and metaphysical
“space” of the republic to transform into physically limited and habitable “places” as a cultural
revolution occurs.404 Those who were nomads and horsemen will become the cultural avant-
garde of humanity, he asserts, and socialism will flourish.

404 I build here on Dmitrovksaia’s argument that while the word “prostranstvo” (“space”) in Platonov’s works often
gravitates toward infinitude and emptiness, “mesto” (“place”) is always concrete and bounded. (Dmitrovksaia,
Kategoriiia prostranstva, 77.)
As the summary just provided makes clear, in this essay Platonov creates a developmental, Sovietized landscape of Turkmenistan centered on the notion that the republic is a desert with great potential. Aligning himself with many of the writers published in Aiding-Giunler, Platonov equates the Kara-Kum with a “great Turkmenian oasis.” In drawing attention to the possibility for the desert’s transformation, Platonov echoes his own writings from the 1920s. Indeed, there is a striking similarity between this argumentative essay and others that Platonov had penned earlier, including “O likvidatsii katastrof sel’skogo khoziaistva” (“On the Elimination of Agricultural Catastrophes,” 1923), “Bor’ba s pustynei” (“The Battle with the Desert,” 1924), “Chelovek i pustynia” (“Man and the Desert,” 1924), “Meliorativnaia voina protiv zasukhi” (“The Reclamation War Against Drought,” 1925), “Kak edinstvenno vozmozhno likvidirovat’ zasukhu” (“The Only Way to Eliminate Drought,” 1925), and “Organizatsia pobedy nad zasukhoi” (“The Organization of Victory Over Drought,” 1925).

There is direct resonance, for instance, between “Goriachaia Arktika” and “Chelovek i pustynia,” one of the few essays Platonov wrote while working as a land reclamation engineer for the Voronezh Regional Land Administration (Gubzemuprav) in 1924 and 1925. In that essay, Platonov had argued that, though many people believe climate change has nothing to do with mankind, in fact it does. After explaining that every environment has a delicate and sensitive water system, Platonov declared: “Herein lies the cause of deserts. Man attempts to acquire more and more from the land faster and faster, not caring whether grass will ever again grow there. And really, after man’s tinkering, grass does not even grow where it grew before he arrived” («Вот в чем причина пустынь. Человек задается целью нажить от земли побольше и поскорее, а там хоть не расти трава. И действительно, после хозяйствований человека не
In so defining the relationship between man and space, Platonov explicitly refuted Spengler’s thesis from *The Decline of the West*, that, in Platonov’s words, “peoples and cultures perish because their soul becomes exhausted, subsides, and withers, and after that they have nothing to do in life” («народы и культуры гибнут потому, что исчерпывается, стихает и блекнет их душа и дальше им делать нечего в жизни», 542–3). To Platonov, there was nothing inevitable about the course of history, even if man generally is “a predator and destroyer of nature” («хищник и разрушитель природы»), 543). If Soviet citizens on the path toward communism wanted to control their environment, Platonov concluded, it was within their power to do so: they could take special care to preserve their land from the consequences of their use, thinking ahead “in ages, in years, rather than in days” («на века, на годы, а не на дни», 543).

“Goriachaia Arktika’s” optimism about the possibilities for controlling the desert also echoed Platonov’s 1926 story “Peschanaia uchiteľnitsa” (“Teacher of the Sands,” adapted into a screenplay in 1927), which likewise suggested that the battle for sustainable life in the Central Asian desert could be won.406 The text follows a twenty-year-old schoolteacher named Maria Nikiforovna to the village Khoshutovo, on the border “with the dead Central Asian desert” («c

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405 Andrei Platonov, “Chelovek i pustynia,” in Platonov, *Gosudarstvenyi zhitel’,* comp. M. A. Platonova, ed. V. A. Chalmaev (Moscow: Sowetski pisatel’, 1988), 543. In drawing this conclusion, Platonov literalizes the idiom «хоть не расти трава», which can be translated as “who cares whether or not the grass grows” and suggests that the subject “couldn’t care less,” but usually has nothing to do with grass specifically. Platonov’s realization of the idiom underlines the connection between man and his environment by reminding us of how nature is even embedded in our language.

There, the teacher makes the central subject in her school “training in the fight with the sands, training in the art of converting the desert into living land” («обучение борьбе с песками, обучение искусству превращать пустыню в живую землю», 85), working with both students and adults. Her concerted effort pays off: “After just a year, Khoshutovo was unrecognizable” («И уже через год Хошутова было не узнать», 86).

Maria Nikiforovna proves so effective, in fact, that at the end of the story her superior asks her to move to a new village, Safuta, and work with the people who are struggling to survive there. She has a moment of indecision, wondering whether she should really spend her youth and be buried “in the sandy desert among wild nomads” («в песчаной пустыне среди диких кочевников», 88–89). In the end, however, she accepts the assignment, earning the story’s title as “Peschanaia uchitel’nitsa,” and the story closes with a praise-filled speech from her superior, who calls the desert the “world of the future” («будущий мир», 89).

As I have suggested, Platonov endorses the transformation of the Kara-Kum in “Goriachaia Arktika” and echoes his own earlier works “Chelovek i pustynia” and “Peschanaia uchitel’nitsa” in his assessment that deserts can be transformed with thoughtful management. Even as he does so, however, he complicates his own rendering of the desert as a “dead space” and landscape of future Soviet development in “Goriachaia Arktika” by concentrating on the Kara-Kum’s particular physical and cultural history. In so doing, Platonov effectively challenges the very metaphor on which the essay is built, destabilizing the idea that the Kara-Kum can truly be defined as a “hot Arctic” and casting doubt on the emerging iconography of Turkmenistan as

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407 Platonov, “Peschanaia uchitel’nitsa,” in *Usomnivshiisia Makar*, 83. Further citations will appear parenthetically within the body of the text. Neither Turkmenistan nor the Kara-Kum is mentioned in the original story, though the Kara-Kum is explicitly named in the screenplay. (Platonov, “Peschanaia uchitel’nitsa,” in *Doraki na periferii*, 445.) Nevertheless, the Kara-Kum may have been the setting for the original story as well, and his descriptions of the desert in that story may have been based on first-hand experience, since letters Platonov sent to his wife in the mid-1920s suggest he may have traveled there for meliorization work. (Kornienko, “Primechaniia,” in *Zapisnye knizhki*, 368.)
a socialist “oasis.” In the opening lines of the essay, Platonov sets the tone for his dualistic approach to Turkmenistan. On the one hand, he presents it much as he had presented deserts in the 1920s, through the eyes of a land reclamation engineer, with all the precision, as Skakov has suggested, of a “colonist-geographer.” On the other hand, Platonov gazes upon the space through the lens of the republic’s pre-Soviet history, attending to the associations the desert carries outside the strict confines of Soviet discourse:

Туркменский народ далеко еще не овладел своей родиной: он живет лишь по «берагам» песчаного океана. Южный берег—это прикаптедагская полоса ахалтекинского оазиса, Тедженский оазис, Мервский культурный район и Чарджуй. Затем культурная линия земель спускается вниз по Аму-Дарье, в направлении Ташауз и Куня-Ургенча: это восточный «берег» пустыни.

Таким образом, лишь южный и восточный «берега» Туркмении заняты людьми. На остальном пространстве великой страны, за редкими исключениями, лежит взволнованное ветром море безлюдных песков. Блуждающие русла рек Памира, Парапамиза и Копет-Дага, их беспокойные дельты, оставившие перемытые минеральные остатки от некогда девственных плодоносных земель, плюс смертельное влияние походов Тимура и Александра Македонского, — все это помогло образоваться Каракумам, и потоки воды надолго умолкли на параллели Копет-Дага, Теджена, Мерва, Чарджуя, в узкой долине Аму-Дарьи, предоставив сухое пространство ветрам и векам.

Искусственные холмы Тимура, древнеазиатские и греческие городища все еще покрывают обитаемые места Туркмении. Поэтому нынешняя Туркмения представляет собою кладбище дотуркменских народов. (644)

The Turkmen people is still far from mastering its homeland: it lives just along the “shores” of an ocean of sand. The southern shore is the Akhal-Teke oasis zone in front of the Kopet-Dag, the Tedzhen oasis, the Merv cultural region, and Chardjou. Then the cultural line of the lands descends below along the Amu-Darya, in the direction of Tashauz and Kunya-Urgench: this is the eastern “shore” of the desert.

Thus only the south and eastern “shores” of Turkmenia are occupied by people. In the remaining space of this great country, with few exceptions, is a sea of people-less sands roiled by the wind. The wandering riverbeds of the Pamir, the Paraparmiz, and the Kopet-Dag [mountains], their volatile deltas that have left washed-out mineral remnants from once virgin, fructiferous lands, plus the the

deadly influence of the campaigns of Timur and Alexander the Great,—this all helped form the Kara-Kum, and the sources of water permanently dried up on the latitudes of the Kopet-Dag, Tedzhen, Merv, Chardjou, the narrow valley of the Amur-Darya, furnishing a dry space to the winds and the ages. The artificial hills of Timur, the ancient Asian and Greek settlements still cover the inhabited places of Turkmenistan. This is why contemporary Turkmenistan amounts to a cemetery of the pre-Turkmen peoples.

This description—which may allude again to the work of Fedorov—is not unusual for Platonov, who as early as 1922 had characterized space as “past frozen time” (прошлое замерзшее время) and “that, which was” (то, что было). The writer had often referred, before this, to layers of history and matter in his artistic works. What is striking about Platonov’s attention to the Kara-Kum’s geographical specificities and its formation is that it is in tension with his metaphorical rendering of the Kara-Kum. By directing his reader to engage with its specific historical memories and meanings for local populations, Platonov undermines his own claim that Turkmenistan is equivalent to an “ocean of sand” or a “Hot Arctic” ripe for change. In “Goriachaia Arktika,” Platonov at one point asserts that the goal of socialist Turkmen culture lies “not in respect for the muddy ruins of the ancient, powerful world and not in the

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409 On September 8, 1899, while visiting Turkestan, Fedorov described it as a vanquished civilization in a letter to his student Vladimir Aleksandrovich Kozhevnikov. The image of Turkestan that emerges closely resembles the one in Vasiliy Vereshchagin’s 1871 painting Apotheosis voiny (The Apotheosis of War): “After all I have seen, read and heard about Turkestan, I visualize it in the shape of a high pyramid, constructed of skulls and placed beneath a cloudless sky in the middle of a waterless, sandy desert. This symbolic representation of death, destruction and lifeless desert could even serve as Turkestan’s coat-of-arms. A coat-of-arms like this would express the whole history and geography of Turan, pointing not to its past but also to its future, to what should be.” (N. F. Fedorov, What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task, trans. and eds. Elisabeth Koutaissoff and Marilyn Minto [Lausanne: Honeyglen/l’Age d’Homme, 1990], 206–7.)

410 Andrei Platonov, “Simfoniiia soznaniia. Etiudy o dukhovnoi kul’ture sovremennoi zapadnoi Evropy,” in Fabrika literatury, 40. The article was written in 1922 for Voronezhskiaia kommuna, but was not published until 1992, when it appeared in Russian Literature. (Kornienko, “Kommentarii,” in Fabrika literatury, 671–2.)

411 The eponymous spatial image of the 1931 novella Iuvenil’noe more (The Juvenile Sea), for instance, was a manifestation of the concept that space is “frozen time”: the ancient sea, located below ground, is portrayed in the novella as a physical remnant of a past era. For an analysis of that novella’s approach to space, see Ketrin Kholt [Katharine Holt], “Prostranstvennyi obraz ‘tkan’ v ‘Iuvenil’nom more’ A. Platonova,” trans. S. Levchin and K. Holt, in Na puti k ’Iuvenil’noum moriu’. Poetika Andreia Platonova, ed. Evgenii Iablokov (Belgrade: Filologicheskii fakul’tet Belgradskogo universiteta, 2013), 82–102.
study of them” («не в уважении к глиняным развалинам древнего мощного мира и не в изучении их», 644–5), but his assertion betrays his clear interest in the “pre-Turkmen peoples” and their legacies. Far from being a blank slate, Turkmenistan, in Platonov’s depiction, is a “cemetery,” which is to say a specific place in which time is mortalized and which history has uniquely shaped. Platonov is far less willing than, say, Sannikov in “Khorezmskii oazis” (discussed in Chapter Three) to relegate the republic’s past to the dustbins of history.

Indeed, all of the analogies Platonov employs in “Goriachaia Arktika” to demonstrate the Kara-Kum’s significance for the Soviet Union ring a bit false, perhaps because they seem to contradict one another. The desert, he writes, “is not only a geographical space, it is a gigantic field for the enthusiasm of young Turkmenistan, it is an anthology of themes for Turkmen literature and art” («это не только географическое пространство, это гигантское поприще для энтузиазма молодого Туркменистана, это сборник тем для туркменской литературы и искусства», 646, emphasis mine). For this reason, he suggests, “We want all of socialist Turkmenistan today to understand ‘Black sands’ [the literal meaning of “Kara-Kum”] as the future country of their children and for this understanding to penetrate into its will and heart” («Мы желаем, чтобы сегодня весь социалистический Туркменистан понял “Черные пески” как будущую страну своих детей и чтобы это сознание проникло в его волю и сердце», 648, emphasis mine). By defining the Kara-Kum not only as an “oasis,” but also as a “gigantic field,” an “anthology of themes,” and a synonym for the “future country” of the Turkmen in his analogies, Platonov undermines the effectiveness of his comparisons. The sheer frequency of his analogies suggests that his assertions about the possibilities for the Kara-Kum’s transformation are grounded in propaganda, rather than scientific research or reality.
Despite the fact that “Goriachaia Arktika” was evidently written to ward off rebuke about Platonov’s approach to Turkmenistan, and that—as Geller and Seifrid have noted—the sketch included the kind of Sovietisms he had only recently parodied while writing Kotlovan (The Foundation Pit, 1930), “Goriachaia Arktika” was rejected for publication in 1935. The central Soviet literary organizations, it seems, sensed that Platonov was not wholeheartedly embracing the dominant practices of landscape production vis-à-vis Soviet Central Asia. We might surmise that his attention to Turkmenistan’s history and contested meanings as a place, along with his overzealous attempt to grant the “Kara-Kum” a range of different metaphorical significances, betrayed that his approach to the TSSR was not as standard as desired.

IV. Dzhan and Hybridity

I have argued that in “Takyr” and “Goriachaia Arktika” Platonov attempts to conform to contemporary conventions of insider iconography, but ultimately departs from them, primarily by focusing on the subjectivity of landscape production and problematizing the reduction of Turkmen space to metaphor. In Dzhan, in my reading, Platonov pursues both of these strategies and also collapses the borders between “inside” and “outside,” “native” and “guest,” “Turkmen” and “Russian.” In “Takyr,” none of the main, well-developed characters are native-born Turkmen, but their views are primarily those of insiders: we see the republic through their eyes as they make their lives there and, in the case of Dzhumal in the story’s closing, as she returns to the land of her birth to begin a new chapter. In Dzhan, which Platonov wrote while on his second trip to Turkmenistan, in early 1935, Platonov offers a new, and more complete, inversion of the

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412 Geller, Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast’ia, 341; Seifrid, Uncertainties, 183.

413 As Kornienko has noted, there are many entries about guests in Platonov’s notebooks from Turkmenistan. (Kornienko, “Kommentarii,” in Zapisnye knizhki, 373.) Many may relate to Dzhan, but one seems especially relevant to Katigrob in “Takyr”: “The legend about the frightful guest from the dry sands” (“Легенда о страшном госте из сыпучих песков”). (Ibid., 239.)
“insider” paradigm by structuring the novella around an explicitly hybrid character, Nazar Chagataev, and his travels through the TSSR on a mission from the Party-State.

Chagataev is defined in the novel’s opening sentence as a “non-Russian person” («нерусский человек») and soon after as a “[f]oreigner” («[ч]ужеземец») in Moscow. Early on in the novella, however, Platonov destabilizes these classifications, revealing that Chagataev, born and raised in the “Asian desert” («азиатской пустыни», 120) and educated at the Moscow Economics Institute, is not only the son of a Turkmen mother, Giul’chatai, but also of a Russian father, Ivan Chagataev, who passed through Central Asia on an expedition to Khiva, in present-day Uzbekistan. (Platonov invented the surname Chagataev, perhaps to further limit the identification of his main character with a single ethnicity or nationality.) When Nazar Chagataev is assigned to travel to Turkmenistan, then, he does so not only as a “non-Russian” son returning to the land of his birth, but also as a Russian emissary reprising his father’s (colonial) mission and a Soviet functionary touring the periphery from the capital. Charged with finding his people, a small clan known as the dzhan, and helping them improve the circumstances of their lives, Chagataev journeys to Turkmenistan as both a visitor and a

414 In the first variants of the opening paragraph, Chagataev was defined as a “happy” («счастливый») man, rather than a “non-Russian” one. (Kornienko, “Istoriia teksta i biografiia A. P. Platonova,” 231.)


416 Kornienko and Skakov have also commented on this hybridity. See Kornienko, “Istoriia teksta i biografiia,” 231; Skakov, “Prostranstva Dzhana,” 212.

Not unlike Nikolai Murav’ev, whose account of traveling to Khiva in 1819–1820 as a Russian emissary Platonov drew on while writing Dzhan, and the members of the national commission on which Platonov served, Chagataev ventures into Turkmenistan as though traveling from an ecumene to spots in the little known region “beyond.”

Chagataev’s journey takes him throughout Central Asia, and Platonov charts his character’s route carefully, accurately reflecting the topography of Turkmenistan and its neighboring republics, while also recalling the reports that early travelers created as they explored the region. First, Chagataev travels by train from Moscow to a station close to Tashkent. Next, he covers the remaining miles to the Uzbek city by foot, walking for seven days. After receiving his orders from the Central Party Committee in Tashkent, Chagataev relocates (presumably by train, though this leg of the journey is not described) to the Turkmen city of Chardjou, where he then sets off by boat north along the Amu-Darya River to the Khiva oasis. From there, he sets off to his homeland in the Sary-Kamysh depression, near Turkmenistan’s northern border with Uzbekistan, following along the dry Kunya-Darya River. He then journeys toward the Ust-Yurt plateau, which lies to the west of the Sary-Kamysh, and then toward the Amu-Darya delta, where he discovers his mother and the rest of his people barely subsisting in a

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418 The name of Chagataev’s people, the dzhan, is derived from the Persian word for “soul.” In the remainder of this chapter, I will use the lowercased word dzhan to refer to Chagataev’s people and the capitalized word Dzhan to refer to the title of Platonov’s novella.

419 I here adapt Dmitrii Zamiatin’s argument that Platonov’s spatial structure in Chevengur resembles a medieval understanding of geographical space, which, he argues, envisioned the world as a comparatively small ecumene surrounded by unknown and dangerous spaces. (Zamiatin, “Imperiia prostranstva,” in Metageografiia, 231.)

420 Robert Chandler has noted that “Platonov’s one departure from geographical accuracy is that he describes Sary-Kamysh, ‘the land of eternal shadow,’ as receiving only evening sunlight. In reality, it would have received more sun in the morning.” (Robert Chandler, “Platonov in Central Asia,” in Soul, xi.) For accounts of traveling in Turkmenia, see Murav’ev, Puteshestvie v Turkmeniiu i Khivu; Murav’yov, Journey to Khiva; The Country of the Turkomans: An Anthology of Exploration from the Royal Geographical Society (London: Oyuz Press and the Royal Geographical Society, 1977); I. Sevast’ianov, ed., Stranichki proshlogo Turkmenii i sopredel’nykh stran (Ashkhabad: Turkmenskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1929).
modest settlement. Eventually, after several brushes with death, Chagataev manages to lead them back toward the Sary-Kamsysh and the more plentiful Ust-Yurt mountains. There, he establishes a self-sustaining community with the help of the youngest and most active member of the dzhan, a twelve-year-old girl named Aidym.

Figure 4.1 Map of the geography of Dzhan.
Source: Andrey Platonov, Soul, trans. Robert Chandler et al., unpaginated.

After the settlement is established, another episode in Chagataev’s quest begins, at least in the third and final variant of the text.421 While Chagataev looks on, the dzhan wander off in

421 There are two other known variants. In the first, which was published in 1964, the novella ends in the middle of Chapter 16, while the dzhan are dispersing. The second ends with the dispersion of the dzhan and the return of Chagataev and Aidym to Moscow, without the intervening chapters in which Chagataev once again searches for the dzhan and they return of their own volition. There is some critical debate about which is the “real” or best ending of Dzhan, since Platonov seems to have added the longer ending to ward off criticism about his pessimism, but also seems to have been engaged in self-censorship. Since Platonov himself wrote both the endings where the Dzhan disperse and when they recongregate, Marina Koch-Lubouchkine argues that the two endings reflect Platonov’s contradictory desires as a writer. (Marina Koch-Lubouchkine, “The Concept of Emptiness in Platonov’s Fourteen
various directions to follow their own desires: “Some walked toward the Caspian Sea, others
toward Turkmenia and Iran, two, although far away from one other, toward Chardjou and the
Amu-Darya. Those who left through the Ust-Yurt toward the north and east, and those who had
gone too far away in the night were not visible” («Некоторые шли к Каспийскому морю,
dругие к Туркмении и Ирану, двое, но далеко один от другого, к Чарджую и Аму-Дарье.
Не видно было тех, которые ушли через Усть-Урт на север и восток, и тех, кто слишком
удалился ночью», 210). Chagataev sets off on his own sprawling tour to find them again—
traveling once more to Khiva and then with another member of the dzhan through “all the oases
between Chardjou and Ashgabat—they were in Bairam-Ali, Merv, Uch-Adzhi, they passed
through the wells and takyrs into camps and, in the end, shuffled off from Ashgabat to Darvaza”
(«все оазисы от Чарджуя до Ашхабада—были в Байрам-Али, в Мерве, в Уч-Аджи,
удалялись по колодцам и такырам в кочевья и, наконец, от Ашхабада побрели на
Дарвазу», 224). Independent of Chagataev’s tour through the whole country, the rest of his
people return to the settlement he had earlier established with more goods and people to establish
residence for the foreseeable future in the community. When Chagataev returns, he finds the
dzhan settled and discovers he has succeeded in his mission. At that point, he takes Aidym to
Moscow so that she can receive an education and, eventually, use it to improve her people’s lives
further, perhaps repeating Chagataev’s own mission sometime in the future.

I dwell on the geographical movements of Chagataev at such length to stress that the
novella carefully tracks his odyssey through the space of Turkmenistan, rendering it familiar to
the reader as Chagataev travels through it for the first time as an adult and as a returning

Little Red Huts and Dzhan, Essays in Poetics: The Journal of the British Neo-Formalist Circle 26 [August 2001]:
93.)
Attending solely to Chagataev’s movements and the plotline sketched out above, we might be tempted to see *Dzhan* as a socialist realist variant of the colonial travel narrative, since it seems to present, along with its mapping of the republic, “the generic socialist-realist cliché of a ‘tale about a young graduate sent to a remote region to help build socialism.’” But as with all Platonov works, narrative and linguistic subtleties render the text more complicated than a simple encapsulation of its plot might suggest. Seifrid has argued that in *Dzhan* Platonov annuls the socialist realist cliché by using “every opportunity to let us know that instead of enthusiasm the world is suffused with weariness, is out of joint with forward-racing time.” Anninsky, meanwhile, has suggested that the desert is not only a setting, but a “philosophical concept,” where the “image of the intangible, illusory and spectral horizon becomes symbolic.” I find these assessments of *Dzhan*’s temporal and philosophical perspectives convincing, and I likewise concur with Evgenii Iablokov that, while travel in literature generally involves the movement of characters through a sequence of topoi, spatial movement in Platonov’s work is existential. I would argue, however, that Platonov also undermines his own travelogue-socialist realist plot by giving us a “remote region” that has no fixed identity as such, either to his heroes or to his

422 Cf. the discussion of José María Arguedas’s novel *Yawar Fiesta* (*Blood Fiesta*) in Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 231.


424 Ibid.


narrator. Although Platonov maps the spaces of Turkmenistan in “absolute” and “relational” terms, to employ David Harvey’s terms, he does not stress their “relative” relationship to Moscow, Ashgabat, or other regional centers, outside of noting how Chagataev transports himself from one place to the next.427 Rather, Platonov allows the spaces that he maps to be alternately “inside” places or “outside” spaces, “central” or “remote,” depending on the circumstances in which they are viewed. They are as hybrid, in other words, as Chagataev himself, who can be viewed as “Russian” or “non-Russian,” “a native” or a “stranger,” depending on one’s perspective.

In making this claim about the perceptual hybridity of Platonov’s spaces, I to some degree echo Nariman Skakov, who has suggested that in Dzhan Platonov undermines the binary oppositions between center (Moscow, Ust-Yurt) and periphery (Sary-Kamysh, the deserts surrounding Ust-Yurt) as he enters into the world of mythology.428 My analysis of Dzhan departs from Skakov’s, not only because I attend less to the problem of myth, but also because I do not see Platonov as growing more interested, after his visits to Turkmenistan in 1934 and 1935, in the transfiguration (preobrazovanie) and transcendence (transitsendentsiia) of the desert. (Skakov argues that Platonov’s inclination in this direction displaces his previous attraction to the desert’s forcible modification, or vidoizmenie.429) For my part, I find Platonov attending to the limits of transformation and transfiguration in Dzhan, rather than their possibilities, and using the conventions of myth as a device, rather than an endpoint. Where my argument does align with

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427 As I noted in my introduction, Harvey has argued that there are three main ways to view space: in absolute, relative, and relational terms. To Harvey, “absolute space” is the fixed space of Descartes, Newton, and Euclid. The relative approach to space focuses on its relation to other spaces and locations in terms of some variable, whether it is transportation, property relationships, or distance measured by skateboard. The relational concept emphasizes that there is no such “space” or location outside of the processes that define it: personal and collective memories, among other things, come into play. (Harvey, “Space as a Key Word, 270–293.)

428 Skakov, “Prostranstva ‘Dzhan,’” 211–212.

429 Ibid., 216.
Skakov’s is in our shared belief that Platonov destabilizes the binary oppositions between “center” and “periphery,” “colonizer” and “nativizer.”

The basic characteristics of the spaces through which Chagataev travels in *Dzhan* are well defined. Outside of the more urban settings of Khiva and Tashkent, they are generally empty, desert places of the type so frequently described in Platonov’s fiction. Here it is difficult, though not impossible, to find sustenance, since boiled marsh grasses, soup from clean-picked camel and donkey bones, feral sheep, and eagle vultures are occasionally available. But these characteristics prompt different reactions in different observers; they are not defined solely by their relationship to the larger Soviet network or to republican borders. As a result of this flexibility, possible meanings for the deserts of *Dzhan* are in tension with one another within the text. Depending on who is operating in the space, the desert takes on different significance as a place. In essence, it functions as an “open text”—to draw on the formulation of Umberto Eco—for the space provides no “definitive, concluded message” about its meaning.

The first extended description of the desert spaces of Turkmenistan appears in an embedded memory, within the opening section of the novella that takes place in Moscow, right after Nazar learns that he has been assigned to travel to his homeland. He left the place by chance, it seems, for “he disappeared from there as a boy, fifteen years before” (он пропал оттуда мальчиком, пятнадцать лет тому назад, 123), when his mother decided she was too weak to feed and love him anymore. As Chagataev remembers it, the space seems to have been inhospitable because it was motherless:

Проснулся Назар в пустом месте. Мать ушла, с пустыни шел ничтожный чужой ветер — без всякого запаха и без живого звука. Перед ним была земля, где он родился и захотел жить. Та детская страна находилась в

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черной тени, где кончается пустыня; там пустыня опускает свою землю в глубокую впадину, будто готовя себе погребение, и плоские горы, изглоданные сухим ветром, загораживают то низкое место от небесного света, покрывая родину Чагатаева тьмою и тишиной. Лишь поздний свет доходит туда и освещает грустным сумраком редкие травы на бледной засоленной земле, будто на ней высохли слезы, но горе ее не прошло. (121)

Nazar awoke in an empty place. His mother had gone and an insignificant, alien wind was coming from the desert—without any smell and without any living sound. Before him was the land where he had been born and first felt the desire to live. This childhood country lay in the dark shadow where the desert ends; there the desert lowers its earth into a deep hollow, as if preparing a burial place for itself, and flat hills, gnawed by an arid wind, shut out this low place from the light of the sky, covering Chagataev’s homeland with darkness and silence. Only a late light reaches there and casts a sad twilight on the sparse grass of a land that is pale and salty, as if tears have dried up on it but its grief has not run its course.

Without his mother, the space that had given and promised further life to Chagataev becomes alien and silent, a weakened incarnation of its old self. This judgment is rendered explicit with the first of the passage’s two similes, which also animate the desert, suggesting that it too seeks shelter and emphasizing Chagataev’s identification with it as a place: “there the desert lowers its earth into a deep hollow, as if preparing a burial place for itself” («там пустыня опускает свою землю в глубокую впадину, будто готовя себе погребение»), emphasis mine). The space is then more directly tied to Chagataev in the passage’s second simile, which compares the desert’s saltiness to the saltiness of tears and draws our attention back to the grief of Chagataev and those like him. From this first description, the “childhood country” («детская страна») of the desert seems to be available for psychological projections and self-identification.

This reading of the desert is strengthened when Chagataev draws closer to Turkmenistan itself. Here, the similes again lead back to his predicament, suggesting that the desert still carries meanings from his childhood:

Поезд давно покинул Москву; прошло уже несколько суток езды. Чагатаев стоял у окна, он узнавал те места, где он ходил в детстве, или они были другие, но похожие в точности. Такая же земля, пустынная и старческая, дует тот же детский ветер, шевеля скулящие былинки, и пространство
просторно и скучно, как унылая чужая душа; Чагатаеву хотелось иногда выйти из поезда и пойти пешком, подобно оставленному всеми ребенку.
(128, emphasis mine)

The train had long ago left Moscow; several days had already passed in transit. Chagataev stood by the window. He recognized those places where he had walked in childhood, or they were others, but exactly similar. It was the same land, deserted and aged; the same childhood wind was blowing, stirring whining blades of grass, and space was spacious and tedious, like a despondent and alien soul. Sometimes Chagataev wanted to get off the train and go on foot, like a child abandoned by everyone.

As Chagataev encounters the land of his birth for the first time in years, he sees it not through the eyes of a colonizer framing a foreign landscape from the confines of a train window. Rather, he sees it from the perspective of a native son, in the mindset in which he left it, much as Dzhumal saw the desert when returning to “Takyr.” The first simile, which compares the “spacious space” to a “despondent and alien soul,” recalls the “alien” wind that came from the desert when his mother left him in the passage above, evoking once again the estrangement he seems to have felt when his familial ties were cut off. This set of associations is then underlined with the second simile, which compares Chagataev’s behavior on the train to that of an abandoned child, what he has been previously in this space. Together, the four similes in these passages suggest that the Central Asian desert serves as both a mirror for Chagataev and a reminder of the moment when he passed through Lacan’s mirror stage, for it reflects back the moment when Chagataev’s world began to be defined by loss, absence, and a symbolic order without a stable relationship with signified objects. As he encounters the desert, we see it as a reflection of the primal scene of his abandonment.

If Chagataev always experienced the desert as a reminder of his own alienation, then the meaning of the desert would be consistent for his vision, much as the meaning of the takyr

remained essentially unchanging for Dzhumal and Zarrin-Tadzh in “Takyr.” But he does not.

Once he finds the dzhan and discovers that his mother is still alive, he goes wandering through the marshland where they are living and, in the process, sees it as a place that can sustain life. As he stands alone in the night, he sees that “a small young reed was stirring at the feet of the older plants, like sleeping children” («мелкий молодой камыш шевелился у подножия старых растений, как дети во сне», 149). Immediately afterward, Chagataev thinks to himself:

“Humanity thinks that there is nothing in the desert […] But in fact here, too, by the Amu-Darya, and also in Sary-Kamysh, there was an entire difficult world, busy with its own destiny”

(«Человечество думает, что в пустыне ничего нет […] А на самом деле и здесь, на Амударье, и в Сары-Камыше тоже был целый трудный мир, занятый своей судьбой», 149). And after he has led the dzhan back to the Sary-Kamysh, fed them properly, and watched them disperse, seeking their own destinies, Chagataev realizes that “[e]ven here, in the poor natural world of the Ust-Yurt, in the ancient hollow of Sary-Kamysh, there was serious work for an entire human life” («[и] здесь, в бедной природе Усть-Урта, на ветхом дне Сары-Камыша - есть важное дело для целой человеческой жизни», 212). Depending on how energized Chagataev is, he sees the space as fractured and “alien” («чужой»), or “as an entire difficult world” («целый трудный мир») nurturing “for an entire life” («для целой человеческой жизни»).

Moreover, it is evident that a given experience in the desert of Dzhan can prompt different reactions in different people. Gazing at it from the ground, where he is lying wounded and, like Prometheus, waiting for birds to feed upon his body, Chagataev thinks to himself, “Maybe an airplane will appear in the sky! No, they are unlikely to ever be here; there are no treasures on earth here yet, nothing worth wasting a precious machine on” («Может быть,
покажется аэроплан на небе! Нет, здесь едва ли они бывают, здесь нет пока сокровищ на земле, чтобы тратить дорогую машину», 187). In contrast, as the young girl Aidym looks at the same circumstances, she sees plenty in the space:

Она знала, что не может быть, чтобы на земле ничего теперь не было. [...] Старшие люди говорили ей, что в пустыне столько же добра, сколько на любой далекой земле, но в ней мало людей, и поэтому кажется, что и остального нет ничего. (191)

She knew it was impossible for there to be nothing on the earth at that moment. [...] Older people had told her that there are as many good things in the desert as in any distant land, but that there are very few people and so it can appear as if there is nothing else in the desert at all.

From one perspective, the space is uniquely blighted; from another, the space is the same as that “in any distant land” («на любой далекой земле»).

The ambiguity in the “meaning” of the spaces through which Chagataev travels is further underlined by frequent references in the text to the space’s history as the “hell of the world.”

Early on in the text, when Chagataev is receiving his orders in Tashkent, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Party tells Chagataev to build socialism for the dzhan, saying: “Your people was already in hell. Now let it live in paradise for a while—and we’ll help it with all our strength” («В аду твой народ уже был, пусть поживет в раю, а мы ему поможем всей нашей силой», 131). When Chagataev finds the first of the dzhan, this mention of “hell” takes on a less abstract meaning, as Chagataev notes that, “[h]ere, according to the Persians, was the hell for the whole earth” («Здесь, персы говорили, был ад для всей земли», 137). He then recalls the whole of the Zoroastrian myth that defines Turan against Iran. Later, as Chagataev watches the different members of the dzhan disperse, he recognizes that, “out of his one, small heart, out of the tight space of his mind and his enthusiasm, he had wanted to be the first to create true life here—on the edge of Sary-Kamysh, the deepest hell of the ancient world” («он ведь хотел из
своего одного небольшого сердца, из тесного ума и воодушевления создать здесь впервые истинную жизнь, на краю Сары-Камыша, адова дна древнего мира», 210). At first, the emphasis within the text on the desert’s hellish associations suggests that this is a space ripe for progress. A world long thought uninhabitable can, the Soviets imagine, be transformed into a socialist paradise. As the narrative progresses, however, the definition of this space as a “hell” is thrown into doubt, as Chagataev and Aidym experience the desert, and do not merely gaze upon it from afar as do the Soviet planners. We see that the desert is only “hellish” when it is perceived as such. In itself, the desert is not alien or, for that matter, destined to be a future paradise. It is merely a contested set of places, not so unlike any other space in the world. In deconstructing this conception of hell, Platonov thus challenges the paradisal Soviet narratives that define Turkmenistan as a future oasis of socialism.

Up to this point, I have maintained that the subjective descriptions of Turkmenistan’s deserts in Dzhan suggest that Central Asia is more than a “remote region” of socialist development: it is chartable in absolute terms outside of its relationship to the center, and its meaning is made by individuals who experience the spaces over time. Similes elsewhere in Dzhan seem to bolster the point by emphasizing that meaning is not dependent on projected futures and comparisons to that which is “beyond” the horizon or currently manifest. Introduced into a text dense with comparisons and personifications, the analogies, which usually compare objects that have already been related to one another before, encourage the reader to see the space of Turkmenistan as an environment being experienced, rather than a space that can be defined in relative terms to the Soviet project. An example of this type of comparison comes early in the novella, when Nazar encounters a camel:

Дойдя до сухой реки Куня-Дарьи, Назар Чагатаев увидел верблюда, который сидел, подобно человеку, опершись передними ногами, в
As he came to the dried-up bed of the Kunya-Darya, Nazar Chagataev saw a camel sitting *like a human being*, propped up on his front legs in a drift of sand. The camel was thin, his humps had sagged, and he was looking timidly out of black eyes, *like a sad and intelligent human being*. When Chagataev walked up to him, the camel paid no attention to this man who had come up to him. He was watching the motion of some dead stems of grass being blown about by a current of wind: would they come close or would they pass by out of reach? One blade moved along the sand right up to his mouth; then the camel chewed the grass with his lips and swallowed it. In the distance a ball of tumbleweed was dragging along the ground; the camel watched this large, living plant with eyes made kind by hope, but the tumbleweed passed by to one side. The camel then closed his eyes, because he did not know how he was meant to cry.

In this passage, which appears after Chagataev has already ascribed human emotions to objects in his dormitory and creatures in the grass, the camel is explicitly compared to a man through the two similes highlighted above and implicitly compared to a human being several more times through anthropomorphization: the camel “was looking timidly,” “paid no attention to this man coming up to him,” and looked “with eyes made kind by hope.” Platonov’s texts are often full of anthropomorphization, of course, and the lines between human, animal, and object are usually blurred.  

I would like to suggest, however, that the blurring of these lines in passages such as

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this one is connected with something particular to Dzhan: the creation of a closed desert circuit at
the level of analogy that challenges a “relative” interpretation of Turkmen space.

In this world, camels not only behave like men: wild bushes stand “like little old men”
(«[к]ак маленькие старики», 134); the old man Sufyan has a face “like the empty skin of a
dried-up, dead snake” («похоже на пустую кожу высохшей умершей змеи», 136); and a
camel walks like Chagataev himself, since it ambles “fearing loneliness as a loving man who
lives far from his own people fears it” («боюсь одиночества, как боится его любящий
человек, живущий в разлуке со своими», 138). The stars, meanwhile, are compared to the
light of human thoughts, while a clump of grass is compared to a rasping, walking creature: “In
the sky the stars burned like the light of conscience; the camel outside breathed heavily; and
enfeebled grass, uprooted by the day’s wind, was rasping cautiously against the sand, as if trying
to walk independently on the little blades that were its legs” («Как свет совести, горели звезды
на небе, верблюд сопел снаружи, и по песку осторожно скреблась сорванная дневным
ветром обессиленная трава, точно стремясь идти самостоятельно на своих ножках-
былинках», 138). Cumulatively, these similes, which have been extracted from just five
pages of the text, compare wild bushes, an old man’s face, stars, grass, and a walking camel to old men,
a snake, man’s conscience, a rasping animal, and a lonely, walking man. The register of the first
set of images, in other words, is almost identical to the register of the second set of images. The
similes provide no break and no new field of vision in which we can imagine Chagataev’s world;
rather, they leave us wrestling with the same world with which we began.

There are moments when the novella reaches beyond the closed circuit of the desert for
comparison. These are relatively few and far between, however, and marked by the text as
unsustainable. The best example of such a moment comes when Chagataev looks at the young girl Aidym and, it seems, begins to compare her to his wife Vera and stepdaughter Ksenia:

Chagataev вспоминал, где он видел такие же глаза, как у Айдым, но более живые, веселые, любящие, — нет, не здесь, и та женщина была не туркменка, не киргизка, она давно забыла его, он тоже не помнит ее имени, и она не может представить себе, где сейчас находится Чагатаев и чем занимается: далеко Москва, он здесь почти один, кругом камыш, водяные разливы, слабые жилища из мертвых трав. Ему скучно стало по Москве, по многим товарищам, по Вере и Ксее, и он захотел поехать вечером в трамвае куда-нибудь в гости к друзьям. Но Чагатаев быстро понял себя. «Нет, здесь тоже Москва!» — вслух сказал он и улыбнулся, глядя в глаза Айдым. Она оробела и перестала смотреть на него. (148–149)

Chagataev was trying to recollect where it was he had seen eyes like Aidym’s, but more alive, joyous, and loving. No, it was not here, and the woman had not been Turkmen or Kyrgyz. She had forgotten him long ago; he couldn’t remember her name either. And she could not imagine where Chagataev was and what he was doing now: Moscow was far away and out here he was almost alone, amid reeds, watery floods, and feeble dwellings made from dead grass. He began to long for Moscow, for his many comrades, for Vera and Ksenia, and he started wanting to take an evening tram somewhere to visit some friends. But Chagataev quickly understood himself. “No, Moscow’s here too!” he said out loud, and he smiled, looking into Aidym’s eyes. She felt shy and stopped looking at him.

As soon as Chagataev begins to compare Aidym’s eyes to eyes from outside of the place in which he is currently located, “amid reeds, watery floods, and feeble dwellings,” he begins to lose himself in his memories of the Soviet capital. Chagataev quickly redirects his thoughts, however, and returns to the present. The scene has been interpreted as a rejection of the opposition between Moscow and the open spaces of the Amu-Darya delta and the Sary-Kamysh, as well as an expression of the doubleness that governs the poetics of the novella. In my reading, however, this sequence points to a larger proposition that Platonov makes in the novel: that a relative understanding of space—in which a given stretch of land is compared to other, potentially more transcendent ones—is a flawed one, even if reaching “beyond the horizon” to a better land is a universal human desire.

Looking outside of a given space is equated, I would suggest, with the concept of *mirage*, rather than striving toward transcendence and transformation. Elsewhere in *Dzhan*, Chagataev indulges in the practice of conjuring visions. Upon reaching his mother and his people’s settlement, he looks upon his homeland thus:

Здесь было все, — мать и родина, детство и будущее. [...] Оглядевшись здесь, Чагатаев улыбнулся всем призрачным, скучным стихиям, не зная, что ему делать. Над поверхностью камышовых дебрей, на серебряном горизонте, виднелся какой-то замерший мираж — море или озеро с плывущими кораблями и белая сияющая колоннада дальнего города на берегу. Мать молча стояла около сына, склонившись тулowiцем книзу. (147)

Everything was here—mother and homeland, childhood and future. [...] After looking around here, Chagataev smiled at these phantasmal, boring elements, not knowing what he should do. Above the surface of the reed thickets, on the silvery horizon, hung some kind of frozen mirage—a sea or lake, with floating ships and the white gleaming colonnade of a distant city on the shore. A mother stood silently beside her son, her torso bent downward.

Surrounded by the impoverished and exhausted “here” that is defined as “mother and homeland, childhood and future,” Chagataev momentarily escapes into the “sea or lake” and the “distant city on the shore.” The circumstances do not allow him to disappear into this world, however, and the mirage dissolves before it is even fully described. Chagataev returns to reality, where his mother stands next to him, bent toward the ground, and Chagataev’s homeland remains defined in the “here and now,” rather than in terms of possible future changes.

The clearest example of reaching “beyond” a given space in *Dzhan*, however, does not involve Chagataev himself, but a two-paneled painting that he observes in the Moscow apartment of his new acquaintance Vera, whom he marries soon after. That diptych, which appears early in the novella, is the key to all of Platonov’s later descriptions of space in the work. The first panel appears to be an adaptation of Camille Flammarion’s engraving from the book *L’atmosphère: météorologie populaire*, which illustrates the legend of Saint Macarius the
Roman, as told by Charles Labitte. In Labitte’s original version, three oriental monks search for paradise on earth in Persia, India, and Ethiopia before finally discovering it at the cave of Saint Macarius. The engraving features a single medieval “missionary”—he is defined as a “missionnaire” on the original engraving’s caption—whose head and shoulders have broken into the heavens, but whose torso and legs have been left in the ordinary world below.

Figure 4.2. An engraving from Camille Flammarion’s book *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire*. The caption under the picture reads: “A missionary from the Middle Ages declares that he has found the point where heaven and earth meet.”

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In the second panel of the painting, which depicts the same scene at a later time, and seems to have been completely imagined by Platonov, the man’s whole body has shriveled up and died, his torso in the ordinary world and his head in the heavens. Platonov describes the diptych thus:

This diptych has repeatedly been interpreted as an example of Platonov’s interest in man’s ability to transcend the flat, imperfect earth and reach eternity, immortality, boundlessness, and volume.

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**Note:** Although I will not focus on this line of exploration in the present chapter, the diptych could also be read fruitfully against Platonov’s other depictions of fragmented bodies, including his portrayal of the heroine’s amputation in *Shchastlivia Moskva* (*Happy Moscow*) and the scene in which Polikarpov loses his arm in the war story “Odukhovorennye liudi” (“Inspired People”). For a Lacanian reading of these scenes of fragmented bodies, see Susuma Nanuka, “Vzgliad i golos: eshche odin opyt psikhoanaliticheskogo prochteniia proizvedenii A. Platonova,” *Acta Slavic Iaponica* 29 (2011): 92–94.
Konstantin Barsht, for instance, has read the sequence as one of several in Platonov’s work that treat the matter of crossing the “boundary above” (he specifically connects it to the story “Erik,” in which a hole in the sky is made to see whether God is there or not) and as an ideological parallel of the *Kotlovan* narrative, in that both the diptych and *Kotlovan* suggest that man can only transcend into the cosmic world by forgetting his body and allowing his physical being to perish.436 Skakov suggests that the diptych parallels Chagataev’s “lifting up” of his people to the plateau of Ust-Yurt (Sary-Kamysh is topographically lower than Ust-Yurt) and the theme of bodily sacrifice in the novella.437

When it is read against the novella as a whole, however, I would argue that the diptych does not foretell Chagataev’s future experience with the space of Turkmenistan and with his people. In the novella, Platonov destabilizes Chagataev’s position as a “missionary” traversing the world on behalf of Russia and the Soviet state by also defining him as a native son of Turkmenistan returning to his homeland. At the same time, Platonov destabilizes Turkmenistan’s position as a “remote region” and a Soviet periphery, casting it as a set of absolutely chartable places being experienced by individual beings. Given all this, it seems, we cannot read Chagataev’s odyssey in Turkmenistan as an escape from the “poor, flat space that is the earth” that is in the diptych, but rather as a journey *through* it, without a greater mythological, epic, or socialist realist significance. As much as the Party-State might want Chagataev to serve as a missionary and take his people “beyond the horizon” to a better place—and as much as Chagataev himself might want this—the two panels suggest that such missionary work is untenable. The second panel in particular, casts doubt on the very project, for it shows that the

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436 Barsht, *Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova*, 169. Other critics, too, have argued that Platonov’s characters generally seek movement upwards and out into the distance. Cf., for example, Zholkovskii, “Fro Piat chtenii,” 45.

437 Skakov, “Prostranstva Dzhana,” 220.
section of the man’s body that has escaped into the heavens suffers as much as the portion that remains on the earth. Cut off, the head in the heavens dries up and rolls about as though on an ordinary tin bowl and, it seems, continues to seek eternity.

In *Dzhan*, Platonov acknowledges the desire to see Soviet Central Asia in terms of *landscapes* defined in relationship to future development and transcendence. The very desire for such transcendence is expressed in the first panel of the diptych. Platonov challenges the contemporary tendency to map Soviet Central Asia in iconographic terms as a future “oasis of socialism” through “insider” narratives, however, by emphasizing repeatedly that space is defined not by the dreams insiders or outsiders attach to it, but by the way places are practiced on earth. Both Chagataev and the reader are left like the man in the diptych, desiring an escape into the utopian and “the ideal,” but convinced ultimately that there is no escape from the “real,” which is to say, from “the poor flat place” that is Turkmenistan.

**IV. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that Platonov’s depictions of Central Asian deserts in his “Turkmenia cycle” of 1934–1935 diverge sharply from those of his contemporary Soviet writers and specifically from two main elements of their work: their tendency to create iconographic Soviet landscapes out of Turkmenistan and to create “insider” narratives supporting the definition of Turkmenistan in these terms. What distinguishes Platonov’s work from the Soviet iconography about Central Asia is his insistence that the *takyrd* and deserts of Turkmenistan are more than just sites for development, transformation, and the demonstration of Soviet writers’ commitment to the Party-State’s cause. “Takyr,” “Goriachaia Arktika,” and *Dzhan* superficially conform to the idea that Turkmenistan should be remade by Soviet projects, which is fitting.

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438 Here my argument to some extent aligns with that of Per-Arne Bodin, who has argued that “Goriachaia Arktika” can be read as an expression of the “positive” panel of the diptych, while *Dzhan* (in its first variant) can be read as the negative one. (Budin, “Bibleiskoe, mificheskoe, utopicheskoe,” 154.)
given that—from all accounts—Platonov was ardently seeking to accommodate the new rules of cultural production and to find a place for himself as a Soviet writer when he created this cycle. Ultimately, however, Platonov destabilizes his own socialist realist “message” in each of these works, resisting, in various ways, the conflation between “Turkmenistan” and its metaphorical rendering as an “oasis of socialism.” In the end, Platonov’s Turkmenistan appears to be less a site of potential transformation and more like the “real” world depicted in a diptych described early on in Dzhan, which is reflected in the fact that only “Takyr” was published in full in his lifetime, and that Dzhan could only be accepted when excerpted and repackaged with the less metaphysical title “Vozvraschenie na rodinu” (“Return to the Motherland”). The cycle as a whole pushed the limits of the emerging form of representation of Soviet Turkmenistan, which Soviet critics recognized. While Vertov’s “cine-eye” could be trusted in Tri pesni o Lenine to create landscapes of the new Turkestan, Platonov’s in the Turkmenia cycle could not.
Conclusion

Visions of Turkmenistan Revisited

In the preceding pages, I have analyzed a diverse set of texts about Transcaspia, Turkestan, and the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic that were created in the 1920s and 1930s. Along the way I have made a number of interrelated arguments. Chief among these are: 1) that Turkmenia gained new prominence in Russian-language cultural products between 1921 and 1935 when its abstract spaces were depicted in Russian-language film and literature as places and iconographic landscapes; 2) that the paradigm for representing Turkmenia in officially sanctioned Soviet texts changed between 1926 and 1934, as writers and filmmakers were increasingly incorporated into the cultural inscription of the national republics; and 3) that Platonov’s “Turkmenia cycle” can be read as both an accommodation of the representational paradigm that he encountered in 1934 and 1935 and a nuanced critique of it. I have touched on the circumstances in which my chosen texts were produced, arguing that the rise of high Stalinism affected the production of texts about the region, but my main object of analysis has been the discourse about Central Asian space that emerged in Russian-language film and literature in the 1920s and 1930s.

In these final pages, I would like to revisit the problem of Central Asian space as it relates to vision and visibility. Specifically, I would like to address the position of my chosen authors as they saw Turkestan and Turkmenistan and made the territories seen, for various populations, in their Russian-language works. Sight has been a subtheme of this dissertation, surfacing most obviously in my discussion of Vertov and Turin’s films—works framed by scopic concerns because of their genre—and of Platonov’s “Turkmenia cycle.” By drawing sight into the forefront in these final pages, I hope to clarify as-yet underexplored dimensions of Russian-
language film and literature about Soviet Turkmenia in the period between 1921 and 1935. Moreover, I aim to further elucidate the tension between the “insider” and “outsider” perspectives that I have identified, as well as the relationship between Platonov and the larger Soviet culture in which he operated.

A great deal of post-colonial theory and the scholarship on empires is grounded in an analysis of *sight*. Much of it depends on the integration of Lacan’s psychological analysis of vision into a social and political critique. Indeed, Lacan’s “anti-ocular discourse” has been extremely productive in the last forty years, for, as Martin Jay has noted,

> not only could vision be damned for its role in the construction of an ideological notion of the ego, it could also be deemed complicitous in the complementary apparatuses of surveillance and spectacle so central to the maintenance of disciplinary or repressive power in the modern world.  

While Guy Debord built on Lacan’s work (as well as the work of Marx, Lukács, and others) to interrogate the vision of spectacle, Foucault interrogated surveillance, exploring “the unimpeded empire of the gaze.”440 In Foucault’s wake, surveillance became a key field of scholarly investigation, especially after Edward Said drew on Foucault’s work on power, knowledge, and sight to argue that “Orientalism was ultimately a political *vision* of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’).”441 Indeed, since Said, a wide range of critics have discussed “the problematic of seeing/being seen,” to use Homi Bhabha’s formulation, and its relationship to colonial societies, where dramas of racial/cultural/historical/ethnic difference are regularly

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enacted and where colonial discourse “produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible. Likewise, studies of “imaginative geography” have relied heavily on Foucault and Said’s respective investigations of vision. The very titles of many of these studies—including Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* and Mark Bassin’s *Imperial Visions: Nationalism and Geographical Imagination in the Russian Far East, 1840-1865*—point to the centrality of sight in the analyses of cross-cultural “contact zones” and the manner in which “geographical regions are perceived and signified ideologically.”

It lies far beyond the scope of this conclusion to provide a full investigation of Lacan’s treatment of “the gaze” and its influence on post-colonial theory and studies of imperialism. By pointing to the large number of studies of sight and imaginative geography that have predated my work, I mean rather to emphasize that, when I turn back to my texts to reexamine the problem of vision, I have this body of inquiry in mind. And it is with an awareness of this scholarship that I pose two questions related to seeing in closing: When we reassess the texts analyzed in this dissertation, what position do their authors take in regard to the lands that they are scanning? What kind of relationship among the author, the state, and the territory do these texts build, support, or critique with their visions of Turkmenia?

In answering these two questions separately, I build on Said’s distinction between the methodological devices of *strategic location*, which he has defined as “a way of describing the author’s position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about,” and *strategic formation*, “a way of analyzing the relationships between texts and the way in which groups of

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texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large.” Instead of re-approaching the texts analyzed chronologically, as they are presented in the body of the dissertation, or along the generic axis of documentary film, non-fictional literature, fictional literature, and poetry, I will examine the texts in light of the questions I have just posed.

Visions of Turkmenia and Authorial Position

In respect to the question of what authorial position is taken, the works I have analyzed in this dissertation can be grouped into four main categories: 1) those in which the author views Turkestan and Turkmenistan from a seemingly objective and in certain cases avowedly scientific position; 2) those in which the author observes these spaces as a visitor and obliquely reflects upon his position as an experiential subject; 3) those in which the author observes these spaces as a visitor and directly reflects upon his position as an experiential subject; 4) those in which the author imaginatively presents these spaces as seen through a “native” consciousness (or set of native consciousnesses) and sublimates his own experience as a subject.

The first of these categories, I would argue, includes the essay collections by the Eurasianists, Vertov’s Shestaia chast’ mira, Sannikov’s poems “V pustyne” and “Voda v pustyne,” and Tash-Nazarov’s poema Bairam-Ali. We may see traces of the Eurasianists’ positions as exiles in Iskhod k vostoku and Na putiakh, but their essays view Turkestan from a scholarly remove and their investigation of Transcaspia is presented as a form of scientific observation. Similarly, in Shestaia chast’ mira, Vertov presents Turkestan from the point of view of a surveyor utilizing supposedly neutral—albeit pro-Soviet, pro-Gostorg, and Marxist—tools of analysis. The geographical location from which Vertov’s film gazes at Central Asia seems to

be Moscow: for this reason, apparently, the Soviet capital appears infrequently and the *kino-eye* is trained on the distant periphery. But the exact perspective of the author is uncertain, and Turkmenistan is viewed from afar as part of the larger landmass of the “sixth part of the world.” Finally, the first two works in Sannikov’s “Peski i rozy” present the desert of Turkmenistan as an objectively inhospitable landscape that is becoming improved under Soviet power, while Tash-Nazarov portrays the desert and steppe as oppressive spaces from which his hero must escape. The poets here are as absent from their texts as the Eurasianists and Vertov are from their non-fictional works. In all of these works, Turkestan is observed in relationship to goals and systems of knowledge that are institutionalized outside of the texts, in programs about Eurasianism and the Soviet modernization of Central Asia, rather than in terms of the effect the region has on the individual author-traveler.

In both categories two and three, Turkestan is presented primarily in relation to the speaker-visitor and their mission. In these works, an “I” is present, the element that, as Pratt has argued, “marks the line of complementarity between science and sentiment” in the “deictic anchoring of speech.” In the second category, which in my assessment includes Turin’s *Turksib*, Platonov’s “Goriachaia Arktika,” Sannikov’s “Khorezmskii oazis,” and Tikhonov’s two later poems, the “I” is relatively weak. Turin and Platonov refer to their own status as visitors only indirectly. They take largely impersonal stances toward the place of Turkestan and Turkmenistan in the larger Soviet whole, only occasionally reminding their audiences that *Turksib* and “Goriachaia Arktika” were created by guests in the region. *Turksib* thematically connects the filmmaker to the surveyors paving the way for the railroad, while “Goriachaia Arktika” bolsters its claims about the importance of the space of Turkmenistan with a reference

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Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 75.
to Platonov’s own visit to the Repetek desert research center. Similarly, Sannikov’s “Khorezmskii oazis” and Tikhonov’s poems “Iskateli vody” and “Liudi Shirama” minimize the specificity of their poets’ perspective. The poet in each of these works serves as a mediator and translator. In Sannikov’s case, the poet attests that he himself sees Khoresm in an eruption of dawn, suggesting not only that he is bearing witness to Khoresm’s glory in the Soviet age, but also that he literally has visited Khoresm. In Tikhonov’s poems, the poet glosses Turkmen phrases and attempts to express the experience of local populations in his chosen landscapes, but his vision of Turkmenistan is marked neither by his personal experience as a traveler, nor by the specific experience of one local region. In all five of these texts, we can find signs that the authors are visitors, but they do not draw attention to their statuses as such.

In the third category of works, which I see as including Shklovsky’s Turksib, Ivanov’s Povest’ M. M. Sinitzyna, and Tikhonov’s two earlier poems, the “I” is much stronger. Like Skosyrev in Soviet Turkmenistan, the guidebook I discussed in my introduction, Shklovsky explicitly presents himself as a visitor to Turkestan and a guide capable of bringing knowledge back to Russian-reading audiences outside of the region. He offers specific landscapes for viewing—including both descriptions and photographs of the desert and yurts—as well as descriptions of local customs and the stories that define its places. Still, Shklovsky does not dwell on the specificity of his own vision or present views of Turkestan that are heavily marked by a personal aesthetic. Of this group only Ivanov in Povest’ M. M. Sinitzyna and Tikhonov in “Priglashenie k puteshestviu” and “Polustanok v pustyne Kara-Kum” present themselves as travelers with personal points of view and idiosyncratic proclivities. In his two poems, Tikhonov romanticizes travel and displays his own attraction to lush, verdant landscapes, implicitly comparing Turkmenia to the Caucasus. Ivanov, meanwhile, fictionalizes his experience,
embedding it in tales about a member of a writers’ brigade who visited Turkmenistan, much as he himself did in 1930. Ivanov’s visions of the TSSR are shaped by his stance as a Russian writer sent to the Soviet periphery to bear witness to its socialist construction. His representations of the lands around Krasnovodsk, Kerki, and Bairam-Ali are all inflected with his experience of being temporarily in the republic as a surrogate for the Russian literary center—as well as with his apparent skepticism about the practice of sending emissaries to document progress in the Soviet periphery.

Finally, the last category can be said to include “Biruuzovyi polkovnik,” *Tri pesni o Lenine*, *Oazis*, “Turkmenskii kover,” “Bairam-Ali,” “Takyr,” and *Dzhan*. In the short story “Biruuzovyi polkovnik,” Tikhonov departs from his own perspective as visiting traveler in Turkmenistan to offer the perspective of a long-time Russian resident of the republic. The method in which Tikhonov describes the verdant landscape of the Kopet-Dag, however, alludes to his own proclivities as a traveler in the region and undermines the impression that he is fully inhabiting a separate consciousness. The remaining works in this list offer more complete sublimations of the authorial perspective in “native” personae. The views of Turkestan offered in *Tri pesni o Lenine* are structured around the experiences of a group of female residents: in that film, we see places in Turkestan (and elsewhere in the “East”) through the eyes of local women whose consciousness is affected by Soviet liberation. *Oazis*, “Turkmenskii kover,” “Takyr,” and *Dzhan* likewise disguise the perspective of the individual author, though I would argue for different reasons. Skosyrev and Sannikov, in my analysis, bury their own perspectives to help create officially sanctioned representations of Turkmenistan that feature native voices: Skosyrev portrays Turkmenistan through the eyes of a local Persian *kolkhoz* worker, while Sannikov provides an intimate perspective on a *kibitka* by exploring the world of a Turkmen carpet-weaver.
and her warrior husband in the form of a Turkmen ballad. Platonov, in contrast, seems to choose his authorial perspective for different ends: by presenting Turkmenistan through the “hybrid” eyes of a Persian-Kurdish resident of Turkmenistan and a Turkmen-Russian visitor to Turkmenistan, he is able to both accommodate and defy the conventions of “native” narratives that were emerging in the early 1930s.

I dwell on this reclassification of my chosen texts at such length because it allows us to recognize that, while the works I have chosen to analyze do not fit neatly into either temporal or generic categories with respect to their stances toward Turkestan and Turkmenistan—not all of the documentary films take an avowedly impersonal, detached stance, for instance, and not all of the works from the 1920s betray a personal, idiosyncratic vision—this set of works points to two important historical trends.

The first trend that the chosen set of works illuminates—especially when broken up schematically into the categories listed above—is that between 1921 and 1935 Turkmenistan was increasingly described in set terms, iconographically, as a desert being transformed into an oasis by Soviet reforms. In the 1920s, Turkmenia was rarely visible as a delimited territory in Russian-language literature and film, even after the TSSR was delimited in 1924. When the region did appear, both its deserts and its lusher territories (such as those around Kopet-Dag) came into focus. By the mid-1930s, however, a number of works—including the almanacs *Turkmenistan vesnoi* and *Aiding-Giunler*—focused on the republic itself, and specifically on its central geographical feature, the desert, and its dominant metaphor, the oasis of socialism. The republic, and not just the general region of Turkestan, was increasingly made visible, in Russian-language texts, as a discrete landscape.

The trend just described is unsurprising, given the hardening of signs in the Soviet
imaginary that took place in the early 1930s and the scholarship that already exists about the depiction of the Soviet periphery in that period. The second trend that I see is more startling and deserves more attention, since its identification represents a new contribution to both the study of Soviet “Orientalism” and the study of the “cultural swerve” that took place between the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union. This trend is the increasing integration and often simulation of native and non-Russian perspectives on Turkestan.

In the 1920s the space of Turkestan was transformed into landscapes and places by a number of works of Russian-language film and literature, including those texts analyzed in the present dissertation. But in that period the space was generally mastered with fantasies about Turkestan’s role in the larger wholes of Eurasia, the Soviet Union, and the “East,” and there was little anxiety about looking in on the region from outside, or from the point of view of a guest in the region. During the First Five-Year Plan, outsiders’ perspectives were still considered valuable and neo-Romantic travelogues remained common and acceptable to the Party-State, so long as they were reframed within the ideology of socialist rebuilding. By the mid-1930s, however, the center of attention for Turkestan in Russian-language film and literature had shifted to the native populations of its constitutive republics. The space was still depicted as though it had been mastered, but in this case the masters were generally shown to be local populations empowered by the Soviet project. The role of visitors was to locate native voices, to provide amplification for their testimony, and to let the land speak for itself, rather than to proclaim mastery over the territory on behalf of themselves or an existing organization (such as Gostorg). Visiting authors thus increasingly disguised their presence in their texts, though not the fact of their authorship—indeed, the “author function” remained critical throughout this period, despite the experimentations with collective authorship—by encoding their own observations in the
This second trend is connected to the larger process of korenizatsiia, or nativization, that was taking place in the central Soviet cultural world in the mid-1930s. After August 1933, when the Writers’ Union established the national commissions discussed in Chapter Three, “native” perspectives on Turkmenistan became increasingly prevalent, as several more anthologies featuring local voices and a series of new translations from Turkmen to Russian were published—including the separate edition of Tash-Nazarov’s Batrak that I mentioned in the introduction. The increased visibility of literature from and about Turkmenistan was not a unique phenomenon; it occurred with all the national republics in the mid-1930s, as the central Soviet cultural institutions made a point of celebrating the diversity of the federation. Non-Russian presenters were heavily featured at the First All-Union Congress of Writers in August 1934 and, from 1935 onwards, non-Russians appeared regularly both in Moscow and in the pages of the central cultural organs Literaturnaia gazeta, Pravda, and Izvestiia, often as embodiments of their national identities. And, as I noted earlier, when Russian-language

perspectives of “native” characters.

Cf. Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998), 211. For all the interest in brigades and collaborative creation in the early 1930s, the Soviet literary and filmic discourses were still endowed with an “author function,” and an author’s name on a text carried considerable cultural weight, making him or her eligible for valorization and significant rewards from the state on the one hand, and severe critique and penalization on the other.

Policies of korenizatsiia had been in place in the Central Asian republics since 1923, but as of the early 1930s, eastern nationalities were still under-represented (in comparison to the western nationalities) in the central elite, including in RAPP and the other central literary organizations that were dissolved in 1932. For a discussion of “eastern” nationalities in the central elite (albeit not in the literary organizations), see Martin, The Affirmative Action Empire, 180–1.

In addition to Aiding-Giumler, the 1930s saw the publication of Poety sovetskogo Turkmenistana (Moscow: GIKhL, 1934); Turkmenia. Literaturno-khudozhestvennyi al’manakh turkmenskoi komissii Sotva Pisatelei SSSR (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1936); Solnechnyi Turkmenistan. Literaturno-khudozhestvennyi al’manakh (Ashgabat: Turkmengosizdat, 1939); O. Tash-Nazarov, Batrak, trans. G. N. Veselkov (GIKhL, 1934).

Cf. Jeffrey Brooks, “Socialist Realism in Pravda: Read All About It,” Slavic Review 53.4 [1994]: 984. Clark has also noted the “exponential increase” of material “on or by figures from non-Russian nationalities” in the major cultural organs starting around 1935. (Clark, Moscow, The Fourth Rome, 289.) For a further discussion of steps
Soviet literature was reconstructed as a multinational institution, the mantle of representational authority for the national republics was passed, whenever possible, to “native” writers, such as Dzhambul, Lahūtī, and Suleiman Stal’skii (1869–1937), who represented Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Dagestan respectively.

What becomes apparent from the texts analyzed in this dissertation, however, is that the movement toward korenizatsiia extended not only to the kind of authors who were promoted in Moscow and in central literary journals, but also to the approach of visitors to the region. The tendency for them, too, was to cast their depictions of Central Asia as the testimony of locals, as we saw in the film *Tri pesni o Lenine* and the contributions to *Aiding-Giunler* by Skosyrev and Sannikov. The swing toward korenizatsiia at the level of both authorship and narrative consciousness depended, I would suggest, on a form of what has been called the “insider doctrine,” the idea that “as a matter of epistemological principle” particular groups have privileged access, if not monopolistic access, to particular kinds of knowledge. According to this formulation, the ascribed statuses of nationality and ethnicity carried more weight than the acquired statuses of being an author committed to the Soviet cause and demonstrating interest in Soviet Central Asia. These acquired categories were not meaningless: for this reason non-Central Asian authors with a demonstrated interest in Turkmenistan, like Skosyrev, remained relevant from the 1930s to the 1950s. But those individuals with the proper ascribed status—so long as they were also supporters of the Soviet project and able to navigate the waters of culture production during the Stalinist period—were promoted even more vigorously. The goal was to have Central Asians speak for themselves, but when, to paraphrase Marx, they could not

taken to foster literature by the Soviet minorities and its translation into Russian, see N. Naumov, “Ukrepit’ sviaz’ s natsional’nymi literaturami,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, August 10, 1938.

represent themselves, they were represented by visitors donning the masks of Central Asians.451

**Visions of Turkmenia and the State**

If the texts I have analyzed in this study can be divided into different categories based on the position of the author vis-à-vis the land, they can also be divided into different categories based on the position of the author vis-à-vis the Party-State’s project of culturally inscribing Turkmenistan. None of the works I have analyzed, except perhaps the Eurasianists’ collections of essays, diametrically opposed the Soviet project. But as I have tried to demonstrate throughout the dissertation, different authors embraced the role of state agent more enthusiastically than others. Of all the authors analyzed, Skosyrev, Sannikov, Tikhonov, and Tash-Nazarov seem to have most actively embraced the task of representing the Soviet state within Turkmenistan and of proselytizing for the republic in Moscow and Leningrad. More than Vertov, Ivanov, Shklovsky, and Turin, each of whom chafed in some way against the strictures of cultural production in the Stalinist era, even as they operated fairly successfully within them, Skosyrev, Sannikov, and Tikhonov accepted the role of cultural intermediaries between the Soviet center and the Soviet periphery, helping the state both appropriate and integrate the national republics as needed, especially after 1930.452 Indeed, these men even played their roles as functionaries when it was necessary for them to sublimate their own perspectives on Turkmenistan and pen texts from “native” eyes—or, as in the case of Sannikov’s “Turkmenskii kover,” to remove traces of their personality from their existing works. Effectively, all four functioned as imperial agents, for they

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452 Cf. the discussion of the “Great Appropriation” and the Soviet cultural functionaries who dealt with the West in Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*. 
contributed substantially to the maintenance of a specific vision of Turkmenistan within the larger Soviet empire.

The motivations of each of these men was affected, no doubt, by a unique combination of political belief in the Soviet state and unconscious or conscious strategizing about the best way to continue producing work in a changing cultural field. Like the other writers and filmmakers whose work I analyzed, each of these men followed his own “social trajectory,” in Bourdieu’s sense of:

the set of successive movements of an agent in a structured (hierarchized) space, itself subject to displacements and distortions, or, more precisely, in the structure of the distribution of the different kinds of capital which are at stake in the field, economic capital and the specific capital of consecration (in its different kinds).453

Tracking and comparing the trajectories of Tikhonov, Sannikov, Skosyrev, and Tash-Nazarov in a Bourdieuan framework is not something I hope to accomplish now. For the moment, I invoke Bourdieu’s concept of the “social trajectory” simply to acknowledge that these men deployed specific strategies of action based on a logic of practice when they took positions in the literary field as Soviet cultural functionaries operating in Turkmenistan. This is not to suggest that these writers and others like them were necessarily fully conscious of their strategies; I follow Bourdieu in thinking that agents are usually driven by a kind of “feel for the game” that bypasses any calculation, even if in some cases “conscious strategy” and “cynical calculation” are in play.454 I would argue, however, that Sannikov, Tikhonov, Skosyrev, Tash-Nazarov, and all those who acted most overtly as agents of the Soviet state in Turkmenistan pursued a strategy to that end.


I would also argue that Skosyrev, Sannikov, and Tikhonov followed social trajectories that are markedly different from the one taken by Platonov, who remained within the bounds of Soviet literature in the 1930s (he did not opt out of the field, nor was he completely repressed), but did not become a prominent representative of the state or of the Soviet “East.” Rather, Platonov maintained a position as a *quasi-outsider* within official Soviet culture and in relationship to the Party-State’s project of inscribing the Soviet periphery. On the one hand Platonov made concerted efforts to participate in the state’s cultural work. He asked Gorky to help him find a space on a writers’ brigade, for instance, and incorporated a “native” viewpoint into his story “Takyr,” apparently in deference to the prevailing cultural trend. These efforts allowed Platonov to find periodic literary assignments and to publish a number of his creations in the mid-1930s: “Takyr” appeared in *Krasnaia nov’* and *Aiding-Giunler*, “Glinianyi dom v uezdnom sadu” (“The Earthen House in the District Garden”) in *Krasnaia nov’* in 1936 (under the title “Nuzhnaia rodina,” or “The Essential Homeland”), “Tretii syn” (“The Third Son”) in *Krasnaia nov’* in 1936, and so on. On the other hand, Platonov retained a critical distance from the Party-State’s cultural projects. He detached himself from the other writers on the 1934 excursion to Turkmenistan, for instance, and subtly distorted the dominant, pseudo-nativist discourse of his contemporaries in works like *Dzhan*. His palpable resistance to official culture kept many of his works, including “Goriachaia Arktika,” and *Dzhan*, from being published in full in his lifetime, and this resistance may even have had an effect on what was deemed acceptable for the Soviet public by helping Soviet critics to set the limits for the new representational paradigm.

A more nuanced discussion of my chosen producers’ careers and the turning-points in them would fit well into a larger study of the path in the service of “the friendship of nations”
that was available to Soviet cultural producers as the Soviet field of cultural production changed in the early 1930s. This path has largely been ignored in the scholarship about Soviet cultural history and Soviet empire studies, and in future projects I hope to investigate it further. In the conclusion of this study, however, I want only to stress that the Soviet “imperial poetics” that emerged in the mid-1930s was bound up with the promotion of actors willing and able not only to create Soviet landscapes on behalf of the state from the abstract spaces of Central Asia, but also to keep their visions of these landscapes within the developing limits of what I have labeled “insider iconography.”
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