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Beigi, Khashayar

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Hospitality at Thresholds

By

Khashayar Beigi

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Stefania Pandolfo, Chair

Professor Alexi Yurchak

Professor Lawrence Cohen

Professor Hamid Algar

Professor Vincanne Adams

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Abstract

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If dwelling spaces, for example a house, serve the goal of habitation with the help of exterior walls that is to protect its inhabitants against adverse elements and with a door to instantiate hospitality and discern between enemy and friend, what is the reason for the designation of a special place often called a threshold? In other words, if humanity can be known and recognized in terms of its modes of dwelling such as resident, builder, occupier, host, guest, intruder, refugee, nomad, labor migrant, etc, still what can thresholds add to that anthropological knowledge if at all?

By way of questioning the where, how, why, and when of thresholds, this dissertation attempts to describe those anthropological sites where hospitality (or lack thereof) is turned into a *problem of living space*, where modes of dwelling have been effaced, degraded or replaced by phenomena such as upheavals, flows, dispersals, echoes at distance, refractions, and recurrences born out of concrete socio-historical events.

In the vast territorial events spanning from the cold-war Iran to Stalinist Central Asia and to Post-war Tajikistan, socio-historical quagmires darkened by the double absence of epistemological clarity and spatial orientation, hospitality reveals a different dimensionality of knowledge/life, one less guaranteed in the embodied extensions of *habitus* and more promised in the ensouled *spatium* of threshold. In this sense, thresholds as well as this dissertation celebrate the anthropological possibility of that second dimension, the originary re-beginning, the *being-for* of a living space to come.

Table Of Contents

Introduction	iii
Chapter One: Of -stans and Astans	1
-stan	3
Astan	4
A Threshold Stone or the Proclamation of Human Rights?	8
Tajikistan Between Vertical Profligacy and Horizontal Horror	13
Mazars: Terrestrial Echoes of the Revered	20
<i>Wajh</i> or the Face of God: Reception of Being in the Expenditure of Forms	25
Bukhara between Man's Poverty and God's Self-Sufficiency	30
Chapter Two: Terrains of Shame and Glory: Across the House of Uncle Youssef	33
Inlands: Soviet Habitats of Impassioned Nativism	36
Cold War Troubles: Beginning of a Dark Decade for a Prodigious Party	44
The Soviet Memoirs of Iranian Emigres: Introduction	49
Julfa Itineraries: "An Iron Snake Faster than a Horse"	52
On Becoming <i>bezgrazhdani</i> : Border Crossing and Statelessness in the Memoirs of the Commoners	59
Vicissitudes of Camaraderie: The Greater and the Lesser Satan	61
Labyrinths	79
Ashgabat Four Floors Under	81
Outlands: Hodology of Hunger	84
Chapter Three: Ibra or Pedagogical Passages of Traumatic Exemplarity	88
Geo-Biographies of Terror: Challenges and Limits of Forensic Hermeneutics	89
The Political Cartography of Education between Russia and Central Asia	91
Moving Learners and Religious Pedagogies of Mobility	93
On Becoming a Thug: Re-Cipherings of Going Astray	95
<i>Ibra</i> or Passage of Exemplarity	100
Conclusion	104
Bibiliography	105
Appendix: List of the Published Memoirs of Iranian Soviet Emigres	106

*A thousand images brought by eras and none
Conforming to those mirrored in our imagination*
Aziz-aldin Nasafi, Sufi Theologian of 13th C. Transoxiana



Tehran, 2015, Copyright Khashayar Beigi

Introduction:
Astan/Threshold
Or Falling Descriptions

O Thou the *Sadr* and Me the *Astan* of Your door.
Maulana Rumi, 13th C. Persian Sufi Poet

Of His threshold stones I kept a treasure trove under the head
Thus managed to have my head trampled under His Way
Mirza Abdul Ghani Beig Ghabool, Persian Poet of 17th C. Kashmir

One must pause and descend
At the *Astan* of the door without knockers,
For should you arrive on time the Doorman is awaiting you
And if not He won't answer your knocks.
Ahmad Shamlou, Modernist Iranian poet of 20th C.
Opening of the long poem *Dar Astaneh* (At the Threshold, my translation)

Martyrdom is not a loss; it is a choice, a choice whereby the warrior sacrifices himself at
the *Astan* of the temple of freedom and the altar of love.
Ali Shariat, Influential Ideologue of the Islamic Revolution of Iran

The image is that which extinguishes itself, consumes itself: a
fall. It is a pure intensity, which is defined as such by its height, that is,
by its level above zero, which it describes only by falling.
Gilles Deleuze, *The Exhausted*

What is required is an obscure spiritual tension, a second or third *intensio*, as the
authors of the Middle Ages put it, a silent evocation that is also an invocation and even
a convocation, and a revocation, since it raises the thing or the person to the state of an
indefinite: *a woman*
Gilles Deleuze, *The Exhausted* (original italics)

In a short story by Jorge Luis Borges called “the Man on Threshold” the narrator is on a
search and rescue mission of a colonial administrator of a Muslim region of British India.
The Scotsman tasked to restore order to the unruly subjects of the empire had proved
successful in quelling resistance but only by resorting to violence. However sometime
after bringing back calm the rule of law through bloodbath he goes missing. The
narrator deployed in his search arrives at a local address. There he locates a house
with entangled courtyards where based on appearances and sounds a crowd is holding

a ceremonial function. At the threshold of the house an old man is seen squatting “motionless as an object”. The narrator starts to question him. In response to his inquiry the local informer recounts the story of a foreigner who is murdered by a crowd in a house. As the story ends the narrator steps inside the building, follows its labyrinthine courtyards, and encounters the mutilated body of the administrator put to death by the crowd just moments ago.

Astans or thresholds in Persian literature and Persianate cultures from Iran to Central Asia and the Indian sub-continent bear a paradoxical relation with hospitality. From a Sufi poet of Medieval Khorasan to a Kashmiri poet five centuries later and to a modernist poet of contemporary Iran up to the most influential ideologue of the 1979 Islamic Revolution *astan* expresses a special place or site or encounter. Special in the sense that *astan* as the lows, as a place of wavering or perishing or falling is often contrasted with the heights of hospitality and reception (*sadr*). On the one hand the lows signifying *astan* can be metaphors standing for virtues of humility, etiquette (*adab*) and self-effacement particularly in the theosophical context of the Divine revealed through Its Supreme Hospitality and Mercy. A sacred space and its guaranteed hospitality even (or particularly) to foreigners is also the sense that most travelogue writers from the West reported on their visits to the religious sites of pre-modern Iran, which I will mention briefly in the first chapter.

On the other hand a different sense and context of *astan* rises if the particular Sufi description of a threshold be understood in a more strict and technical way. In this sense and context (though not less theological or sacred necessarily) the lows as a descriptive style provide a way of denoting a singular register of event in which something arises out of the fall, vanishment or perish while paradoxically continues to plunge deeper - not into nothingness but *out of itself*. Here the paradox of Hospitality entails stripping away all the real or imaginable qualities and quantities of a thing that makes it possible or recognizable as a distinct *tendency to be*, a *manner of* consummation, exhaustion or fall - a depth or a dive. In this strictly Sufi context the language of “falling out of existence” and the language of “a tendency to be” hinge on each other, giving rise to asymmetrical or paradoxical (but not oppositional) syntax in pairs such as Love in Sacrifice, Hospitality in Perish, Knowledge in Ignorance, Sufficiency in Poverty, Instances of Eternity, Stray Arrivals, and finally Life and Death.

In philosophy, the distinction between “a tendency to be” (often referred to as Mode or Essence) and Existence comprised a main, if not the most important, subject of sustained commentaries, debates, and expositions for at least five centuries of the Medieval tradition of Scholasticism in the West. Terms such as Formal Distinction (Duns Scotus), Modes (Suarez), and Intensio that were developed out of Scholastic problematization of the nature of Divinity, Trinity and Angelology influenced as far as secular philosophers of the twentieth centuries such as Charles Peirce and Gilles Deleuze (Cf. *Charles Peirce and Scholastic Realism: A Study of Peirce's Relation to John Duns Scotus* by John Boler, 1963, University of Washington Press; and more recently, *From Realism to 'Realicism': The Metaphysics of Charles Sanders Peirce*, by Rosa Mayorga, 2008, Lexington Books). But the Western Scholastic tradition itself was greatly influenced and nourished from the start by parallel debates on the nature of

Universals that had started in the Islamic world with Avicenna's commentary on Porphyry's introduction to Aristotelian logic (or *Isagoge*) to the degree that various camps in the Christian tradition including Scotus and Aquinas cited exactly the same paragraphs - on "horseness in itself" or *Animal Tantum* - by Avicenna up to Gilles Deleuze, a classical metaphysician in training (Cf. *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation* edited, by J. Garcia, 1994, State University of New York Press; Also *Logic of Sense*, by Gilles Deleuze, 1990, P.34 on Avicenna and "*animal tantum*"). The Islamic Scholastic tradition continued along and much longer than its Western-Christian counterpart with the highly technical and polarized debates between the followers of the primacy of Essence and those of Existence, and still today it holds a privileged, canonical place in the curriculum of seminaries in Iran. Unfortunately the Western Scholastic tradition is now totally buried under the Enlightenment hegemony and its desecendent Critical Theory while the Islamic Scholastic tradition has either remained inaccessible outside of formal religious education or limited to scholars of Islamic philosophy (for a rare translation of a classical work representing positions in Islamic metaphysics as well as that of Sufism in relation to the Existence-Essence polemics and the problem of Universals by Abd al-Rahman Jami, a Khorasani Sufi poet of 15th Cf. *The Precious Pearl* by Nicholas Heer, Albany, NY, 1979, as well as his *Treatise on Existence* by the same translator in Parviz Morewedge (ed.), *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, Albany, NY, 1975).

In the simplest terms, this dissertation is an apprenticeship in *falling descriptions*, in the stripping away of forms, qualities and quantities of things, accidents and properties towards revealing, engaging and perhaps even participating in their intensive being: from Avicenna's horse in itself that doesn't resemble any horse to *human tantum*: human beings deprived of their homeland, family, belongings, identity, and even self-recognition. Here *intensive* (another Medieval term) as opposed to extensive points to that space or better spacing of life that goes beyond the dichotomy of death or bare life and instead offers a pause, a passing moment, a silent cry, or a flickering face of a thing before darkness annihilates *everything*. To quote Gilles Deleuze, who attempted to recover the concept of intensity throughout his metaphysics, "it [intensity] raises the thing or the person to the state of an indefinite: a woman" ("The Exhausted" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p.170. 1997, trans. Daniel Smith). In Borges' story too the exchange of colonial violence with a ritualistic death is echoed from a threshold. The narrator, the storyteller and the locals all become participant to a death beyond that of the person of the administrator and the particular temporal-spatial instantiation of his death. In other words, he keeps *having died* in the duration of the story. In this sense death doesn't become the most authentic or transcendental event of one's life as for example postulated in Heideggerian *Dasein*. Rather one's death becomes the unrecognizable *it* in the metaphysical vicinity of things, persons, and events present to it and via each other.

The first chapter is a morphological thread weaved from the concept of Astan in Persianate Cultures in particular in Central Asia as the *spatium* (and not the space) of hospitality through architectural, etymological, historical, geographical, and Quranic exegesis routes. Presence as the event or the singular space of Hospitality, and

Threshold its anthropological sign. The chapter ends with the intensive pair Sufficiency/Poverty in the Sufi figure of Perfect Man.

The second chapter gives an introduction to the memoirs of Soviet Iranian emigres with a focus on the problem of exilic subjectivity: what becomes of Soviet Union as a register of lived territory when there is no leaving in sight but only arriving indefinitely?

The third chapter, as a negative image of Borges' story, deals with the intensive birth of *a man* out of the violence of the civil war of Tajikistan in an exorcism session assisted by clergies, fellow labor migrants, as well as *jinn*s far from home and in Russia.

Despite all the above and the forthcoming, what this accomplishment of *life as tendency to be* has to do with Hospitality and Threshold remains a mystery to me and goes well beyond the present inquiry. Towards the end of his seminar *Of Hospitality* (2000) Derrida stops analyzing various aporias of the philosophical and political rhetoric of friend-enemy, dismissing them as "conjugal, paternal and phallogocentric", to shift rather abruptly to "a second look" but only as the "epigraph or reference" with no interpretation or mediation offered in the end. His second look is yet another parable of Hospitality - and Threshold, my emphasis: the predicament of the prophet Lot, who offers his concubine instead of his holy guests for penetration (biblical "knowing", the story appears in Quran too with some differences) by an angry Sodomite crowd who had gathered outside his residence. The morning after Lot finds the body of his concubine lying unconscious and violated "at the threshold" of the house. He takes a knife and mutilates the body to twelve pieces, each sent to one Israelite tribe with a message: "Has any man seen such a thing from the day the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, until this very day? Ponder on this, discuss it; then give your verdict." *This*, or *a* thing as "envoi of the story" for the Israelites. Derrida's take on Lot and hospitality has been echoed in the Quranic-pedagogical *ibra* of the third chapter before I became aware of his seminar and its Biblical ending.

For me, part of the epigraph or "second look" was sent in a modern time and setting though long before the formation of this dissertation and in a different phase of life. Once working as a volunteer medical interpreter I was called to interpret an oncology consultation for a non-English speaker client at a major HMO hospital in California. The contracting party had requested my interpretation services because supposedly the patient, an immigrant from a Muslim country, only knew my native language Farsi. Upon my arrival at the oncology department, when I introduced myself to a fairly young woman wearing a scarf in the waiting area I realized that due to a strange mix-up, of which I could have a better idea only long after the end of the consultation session, the patient (fictional Ms. Shams) speaks English, French and Arabic but no Farsi! When the department assistant handed me the service forms to sign, I hesitantly said that I might not be needed here. For though I did understand French as well as a little Arabic, I found Ms. Shams' English command as good as mine. Adding to my confusion, the assistant recalled that the same patient had been seen in the same clinic two times during the past month with no need for interpretation. At this moment Ms. Shams approached me in English to ask whether I was Muslim and if I could interpret for her in French. All of a sudden I remembered that in my interpretation resume I had mentioned my educational background in French. With my

smallest hint of a node, she followed the assistant to the consultation room leaving no choice for me other than to concede with her request.

Neither the diagnosis nor the prognosis came as a shock to Ms. Shams. She was suffering from malignant ovarian cancer which ran in the family. Though her mother was spared from the disease, it had already claimed the life of her sister even at an earlier age than hers. Nevertheless, the consulting physician didn't want her to give up hope, "You are still very young", so she assured. The oncologist then offered Ms. Shams a flexible regime comprised of various therapy options, each with a different mechanism of action, assortment of side effects, and survival hope, all quantified in numbers and percentages. Every option was explained to her once by the physician and twice by me (I had a feeling she understood it the very first time). Now it was Ms. Shams' turn to make the next move: she was told that everything depends on her decision and she just needed to make up her mind about the start of treatment and advised, "The sooner will be the better". But Ms. Shams remained silent. The treating physician called her supervisor or a senior colleague to help her in repeating the same ritual. I was no less confused and frustrated than the medical team. About the end of the second round of explaining and interpreting treatment options, Ms. Shams interjected, "I know! I know! My hair will start to fall off and I'll be constantly nauseating and tired...I know it all by watching my sister die of cancer". It was a sublime moment beyond any attempt for translation; neither the doctors pressured her anymore. In response to their final pleas, Ms. Shams promised that she will be back after asking the advice of her family on the preferred course of treatment. On the way out to the parking area, I couldn't resist demanding the impossible answer, "But I did not understand what was it that you could not make a decision about after all the consultation visits?" "I just want to understand better God's Will in submitting my body to cancer", replied to me Ms. Shams. What's the Will of God? Perhaps nothing *more and less* than a cancer, *this* cancer. Idea churning Logos into the veils of Soul: Tonos.

Chapter One
Of -stans and Astans



The door to the Sheikh Musleh Uddin minaret in Khujand, Tajikistan, built in mid-19th Century. Copyright Khashayar Beigi

-Stan

The suffix *-stan* in Persian which is almost an equivalent to *-land* in English has a long etymological history. In the exhaustive article (22 pages) “The Persian Suffix -(E)Stan' 'the Land Of”, Kinga Maciuszak (2008) follows the journey of *-stan* through its three phases of evolution from Old Iranian languages¹ to Middle Persian² to New Persian³. In its earliest phase the suffix *-na* is added to the base root *-sta*⁴ meaning to stand to make toponyms in Old Persian. According to her, a similar construction (and not just the root *-sta*) is traceable in Sanskrit (*sthāna*), Hindi (*sthān*), Ossetian (*styn*), Polish (*stan*), Greek (*ἵσταμαι*), Russian (*стан*), and Germanic languages (*Stand*) including Dutch and Scandinavian in addition to parallel English, Old English and French words deriving from Latin (*stare*). Some of these compounds formed in the Old Iranian can still be recognized and understood easily after more than two millennia: for example *aspōstāna* meaning horse stall (*aspō + stāna*).

To account for the continuity of the same construct later in Middle Persian Maciuszak proposes that

We assume that only due to MP translations of Avestan compounds had its position been established: the second element of old compounds sb. *stāna* 'place' was recognized as a suffix forming names of different places and units of time. P122,.

Middle Persian coincides with the reign of the Sassanids between 3-7 C. AD, who ruled over almost the same territories of the Achaemenids. They inherited the Old Persian eponyms from Avestan and made constructions such as *Arāwa-stān* (later *Arab-istān*) in lieu of *Arabāya* (Arabia), *Asūr-istān* in lieu of *Asūra* (for Assyria).

In the shadow of the long history of *-stan* Maciuszak also adds a passing though significant footnote: By looking at another Old Persian eponym suffix *-gah* (as in *razm-gāh* or battlefield) she notes that in several terms from the Middle Persian period both suffixes can also be used to denote a “time unit” or better a duration; for example *tāb-estān* (literally “the time of warmth or fever”) meaning Summer; or *pe-gāh* meaning on time or at dawn.

Based on its long and varied usage the suffix *-stan* seems not just capable of designating a general place/time externally according to the noun or verb it is added to but also signifying spatio-temporal dimensions as a mood, a shade, a timber or basically an *event* of its subject internally. The internal, spatio-temporal dynamism of the subject

¹ Old Iranian languages are divided into Old Persian and Avestan. Though not

² Middle Persian was the language of the Sassanid Empire, which gained and ruled over almost the same vast areas that the Achaemenids conquered before their overthrow by the Alexander the Great in 4th C. BC.

³ New Persian starts in the 8th C. AD after the Arab conquest.

⁴ The American Heritage Dictionary has an extensive appendix entry on this root in the Indo-European languages:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090124231147/http://bartleby.com:80/61/roots/IE494.htm>

of -stan is even more articulated in another Persian term from the same etymology: Astan.

Astan

At the instance of Your reception of Lovers
Poor those with no place at Your *Astan*
Forgive the stranger not yet dead of Love
Who besides Your nest finds no room for Time
Attar of Neyshabur, Persian Sufi Poet of 12th C. Khorasan

It is important here that the notion of the "outside" is expressed in many European languages by a word that means "at the door" (*fores* in Latin is the door of the house, *thyrathen* in Greek literally means "at the threshold"). The *outside* is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access-in a word, it is its face, its *eidōs*.
Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

Astan: Threshold, passageway (*dargāh*), "the anterior part of the house attached to door" (*Dehkhoda Persian Encyclopedia*). Technically Astan is just one but the most important structural element among a dozen such as doors, knockers, verandas, ponds, overdoors, minarets, and chains that alone or in combination form entry spaces in Persian architectural styles. (*Entry Spaces in the Traditional Architecture of Iran*, Sultanzadeh, 1993).

The word *astan* is often used in the Persianate cultures from Iran to Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in a ritualistic sense: the most revered site/instance of reception or hospitality. Also as a toponym *āstān* can signify a sacred burial site equivalent to *mazār* in Central Asia⁵ (like the original burial site called Astana in Kazakhstan after which the new capital is named), perimeters of a religious institution (like the Holy Astan of Razavi in the city of Mashhad in Iran which includes the Shi'i shrine of Imam Reza in addition to administrative and educational buildings), or a synonym of *dargāh* (doorway, a more general Persian term for threshold) such as in the name of Sufi shrines throughout South Asia, and finally to *gōngbēi* (from Persian *gonbad* meaning dome) for Muslim Sufi shrines in Northwestern China.

⁵ Still today in some villages of the Pamir mountains in Tajikistan in anticipation of the New Year (or Nowruz) a feast of *astan* is held by women during which *astan* or the sacred places often located outside residential areas are cleaned and brought offerings to. Hence the name *astan-barāī* or going and attending to *astans* (For a short but informative take, Cf. the article "astani pamira" by Kalandarov, T. ethnographicheskii etiodi, Spring 2002).

Besides the Persianate world, thresholds as architectural elements have been found across the world as early as in the megalithic tombs in the shape of a flat rock located under the passageway or entrance and sometimes they are built in unusual shapes such as a stone boat (Rueben Grima, Dissertation, 2005). Architectural thresholds can also come in simple and inconspicuous shapes such as a wooden or stone block located at the bottom of door frames. Regardless of their shapes and positions, thresholds are a metaphysical marker of buildings:

To build means first of all to create, define and limit a portion of land distinct from the rest of the universe and to assign a particular value or role to it. *The limit* creates the interior and the exterior. Each durable place is marked by limits: the bed-room, town hall, market square and sometimes even the whole town. We refer to limits in order to know that we are inside and “at home” in this world. *Elements of Architecture: From Form to Place*, by Pierre von Meiss, p.148



The door cill of a Spanish Colonial era house from 1780s, Nine Mile Point, Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. Wikipedia Creative Commons License

In the same vein, home is identified not by its inside or by its opposition to outside, rather by what demarcates its in-between space: the limit. In fact the Latin word for threshold is “limes” with the same root of limit. Von Meiss continues with reflecting on three roles for thresholds: the first is *the utilitarian role* of thresholds and doorways in providing free passage for physical elements like light, air and living beings. Striking in their simplicity, thresholds from such a purely functional point of view are devoid of depth and complexity - “a horrifying poverty of expression”. The second role is *the protective role* as doors provide controlled passage and means to inhibit intrusions to

the inner safe space of a building. While every internal space needs to be safeguarded from the onslaught of outside, von Meiss opens the protective role to some cultural nuances particularly between the West and Islamic societies. But the third, *the semantic role* grants the most transcendental as well as universal character to thresholds by articulating the distance between outside and inside. Here by drawing on Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, van Meiss goes beyond architecture to engage with the ritualistic power of thresholds and doors:

A similar ritual function falls to the threshold of the human habitation, and it is for this reason that the threshold is an object of great importance. Numerous rites accompany passing the domestic threshold—a bow, a prostration, a pious touch of the hand, and so on. The threshold has its guardians—gods and spirits who forbid entrance both to human enemies and to demons and the powers of pestilence. It is on the threshold that sacrifices to the guardian divinities are offered. Here too certain palaeo-oriental cultures (Babylon, Egypt, Israel) situated the judgment place. The threshold, the door *show* the solution of continuity in space immediately and concretely; hence their great religious importance, for they are symbols and at the same time vehicles of Passage from the one space to the other. Ibid, p. 149

One of the earliest accounts of rituals associated with doors and thresholds is provided by Ibn Fadlan, the 9th Century emissary of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, to the land of *Rus*, where slavish self-governing tribes originated from the vikings. In the ritual reported by Ibn Fadlan, when a chieftain dies one of his maidens is sacrificed via a violent death. Before being subjected to involuntary sexual intercourse followed by being stabbed to death, she is held upon a “door frame” (*malban al-bāb* in the original Arabic) so that she could see the other world and her master:

On Friday in the afternoon they brought the maiden to a structure, which they had erected like a door frame. She put both her feet on the palms of the men, and was lifted up onto this door frame, and said her piece. Then they let her down again Thereupon they put her up a second time. She repeated what she had done the first time, and then they let her down, and let her go up a third time. Again she did as she had done on the first two occasions. Then they gave her a hen. She cut off its head and cast it away. They took the hen and laid it in the boat. Thereupon I asked the interpreter what her actions meant. He said: "When they raised her up the first time, she said: 'Behold, I see my father and mother'; the second time she said: 'There I see all my deceased relatives sitting'; the third time she said: 'There I behold my lord sitting in paradise, and paradise is fair and green, and around him are men and servants. He calls me; bring me to him.'"

From *Ibn Fadlan and the land of darkness: Arab travellers in the far North* (2012) translated into English by P. Lunde and C. Stone, London. pp. 68-69

A founder of American Sunday Schools, Henry Clay Trumbull in *The Threshold Covenant or the Beginning of Religious Rites* (1896) collected more than seven hundred pieces of folklore stories, proverbial vignettes and anecdotal accounts from around the world including the Middle East on thresholds, some based on his “conversation with the intelligent people of Syria and Egypt”. Relying on his encyclopedic knowledge of the rites of threshold in the Ancient semitic cultures Trumbull suggested that the Passover

should be re-interpreted according to the Exodus as meaning the “crossover” of God over the Israelite houses and not a passing by.

In the Persianate world Henrie Massé compiled a special section under “threshold rites” mostly using previous travelogues but also drawing on his own observations in the first comprehensive work of Iranian folklore by a Western scholar. (*Croyances et coutumes persanes*, Paris, Librairie orientale et américaine, 1938). There among the “august edifices” he mentions the rites associated with the Sufi Shrine of Sheikh Safi-ad-din Ardabili as well as the palace of Āli-Qāpū (literally the Sublime Doorway in Turkish) and observed by ordinary people as well as the kings. In particular for Massé thresholds cultivated reverence and tolerance architecturally. For to the surprise of him and his fellow travelers not only they as non-Muslims were allowed free passage at these sacred sites but acquired an aura of reverence:

At the beginning of the fifteenth century Clavijo (p.110) visited the sanctuary of Imam Reza in Meshed without official pomp though also without any attempt at dissimulation. Later on in other places when the natives learned that he had entered the sanctuary they kissed his clothing.

Five centuries later and as a heir to his sources, Massé travels to Iran, visits the same shrine, and receives the same sense of reverence, “In 1931 in Teheran a (Shiite) servant girl learned that I had come from Meshed and she kissed my hand, weeping with emotion”, he wrote in the same section on Thresholds rites.

In addition to attracting historians, folklorists, and travellers, thresholds have inspired philosophers such as Gaston Bachelard (*The Poetics of Space*, 1958), Jacques Derrida (*On Hospitality*, 2000) and Giorgio Agamben (*The Coming Community*, 1993). For the start of this study perhaps the most simple and intuitive philosophical commentary is provided by the British architect and author Simon Unwin in the Threshold chapter of his book *Doorway* (2012, also translated in Persian). There inspired by the cinematic definition of a good movie cut as a natural moment of blinking for spectators, Unwin offers a similar architectural function for thresholds:

Approaching a simple doorway we prepare to enter the inside or outside to which it gives access. Then, as we go through, we mentally blink, ready for the new scene – the new and different set. It is as if the transition itself, that passing instant, is empty, without meaning and therefore discounted, disregarded, passed through without a thought. P.26

Unwin’s phenomenological observation far from antinomies fashionable in certain Critical Theory debates on enemy/friend, outside/inside, or tolerance/hostility, presents thresholds as benignly overlooked or empty points of passage and not a privileged site for contemplation, recognition, or care. An opposite view, one of ascribing historical meaning and cultural symbolism to threshold is exemplified in the debates over the Cyrus Threshold Stone.

A Threshold Stone or the Proclamation of Human Rights?

Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the loins of kings; to open the doors before him, and that the gates may not be shut. I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the doors of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron; And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I am the Lord, who call thee by thy name, even the God of Israel.

- Isaiah 45:1-3



Los Angeles, California, USA - March 21, 2015 - Cyrus Cylinder parade float at the Norooz Festival and Persian Parade new year celebration More recently a 20,000 pound \$2.2 million replica was installed and inaugurated on the 4th of July of 2017 at Century Park East in Los Angeles and titled "Cyrus Cylinder, The Freedom Sculpture" by the Iranian-American Community (Picture purchased from Dreamstime stock photos).

There are two conflicting views over the most celebrated threshold stone of the world. The barrel-shaped clay object smaller than an American football known as the Cyrus Cylinder was excavated in 1879 in ancient Mesopotamia (today's Iraq) as part of lengthy archaeological projects conducted on behalf of the British Museum by the

Assyrian diplomat-archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam. Since its discovery this source of fascination for almost every Iranian has been on exhibit continuously either in its acquired home or borrowed by various countries around the world. In addition to its over-the-dirt adventures in America and Europe, the object has made two trips to Iran so far: once during the 2500th dynastic anniversary ceremonies organized by the last Shah in 1971 and the second time in 2010 during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Its second trip to Iran became possible after several years of delay and through lengthy negotiations and increased assurances from the Iranian party for the voluntary return of this precious artifact. For despite the seemingly stark ideological contrast between the previous monarchy and the contemporary Islamic Republic, in both occasions the cylinder was glorified unanimously by the Iranian officials and the national media outlets as the most outstanding contributions of the Persian civilization to the history of mankind and thus originally belonging to the people of Iran.

The significance of the Cyrus Cylinder according to the devotees of the cult of Great Persia lies in its cuneiform inscriptions which supposedly qualifies it as the first declaration of universal human rights as early as the sixth century BC. In the Akkadian text, Cyrus the Great, the founder of the first global empire of the time, contrasted his compassionate and peaceful conduct in the course of the conquest of Babylonian territories to the cruel rule of the Mesopotamian kings he had just defeated. There Cyrus applauds himself not only for recognizing the right to freedom of worship for various populations coming under his rule but also with attempts to undo the oppression of previous kings by repatriating the exiled followers of each temple and sect to their homelands. To corroborate their interpretation of the text and their celebratory view on Cyrus as the first crusader of human rights the enthusiasts of the Great Ancient Persia point to historical evidence found in the Hebrew Bible. The Book of Ezra credits the first return of Israelite exiles to Zion and the end of their captivity in Babylonia to Cyrus the Great. Although, the biblical account is curiously absent from the cylinder's text.

In contrast, the skeptics draw on a tradition in ancient Mesopotamia to contextualize the object and its message in historical terms. According to this empirically-supported view, which is rarely represented in Iran or even in the exhibits around the world, the significance of this archaeological artifact should be sought in relation to an architectural ritual practiced by Assyrians and Babylonians for thousands of years in Mesopotamia where many other similar archeological objects have been excavated in addition to the Cyrus Cylinder. In this tradition the Mesopotamian rulers would have various clay objects with inscriptions placed under the foundation of important buildings such as temples, palaces or fortresses to laud themselves and seek divine protection. Miles Lewis in *The Elements of Architectural Style* (2008, p.88) clarifies this ancient usage of threshold stones:

In many ancient and medieval buildings it was customary to place human or animal sacrifices in the foundation to ensure the building success. Later it became common to commemorate the patron and designer by incorporating a foundation stone. Contrary to common belief this was not an inscribed stone visible from the outside, but an anonymous stone in the footings under which might be an inscribed tablet and other objects. The fashion for an inscribed stone on the outside of the building dates from the nineteenth century.

The Cyrus Cylinder too was discovered buried in the ruined foundations of a Babylonian temple in vicinity of which many similar clay documents were excavated a few years later. Equally customary were statements inscribed on such foundation objects in which rulers would exalt themselves on their benevolent deeds towards their subjects. Similar archeological findings belonging to the same era and location such as Cylinders of Nabonidus and Ashurbanipal (also excavated and held by the British Museum) reveal that even the most fearsome kings of Assyria and Babylonia contributed to this tradition and left clay artifacts with self-laudatory texts virtually identical to the Cyrus Cylinder and its “universal” message. In addition to the archeological findings, the skeptics invoke the inscribed text of the cylinder in which Cyrus himself pledges allegiance to this tradition clearly and expressly. In the last, truncated ten lines of the Akkadian inscriptions, which is often absent in exhibit banners and media excerpts, Cyrus describes his construction and fortification activities in Babylonia as continuation and completion of what previous Assyrian kings had started:

The population of Babylon call blessings on my kingship, and I have enabled all the lands to live in peace. Every day I copiously supplied [... ge]ese, two ducks and ten pigeons more than the geese, ducks and pigeons [...]. I sought out to strengthen the guard on the wall Imgur-Enlil, the great wall of Babylon, and [...] the quay of baked brick on the bank of the moat which an earlier king had bu[ilt but not com]pleted, [I ...] its work. [... which did not surround the city] outside, which no earlier king had built, his troops, the levee from his land, in/to Shuanna. [...] with bitumen and baked brick I built anew, and completed its work. [...] great [doors of cedarwood] with copper cladding. I installed all their doors, threshold slabs and door fittings with copper parts. [...] I saw within it an inscription of Ashurbanipal, a king who preceded me, [...] ... [...] ... [...] for] ever. New translation by Irving Finkel, Curator of Cuneiform Collections at the British Museum⁶.

In turn and systematically the Assyrian king cited by Cyrus the Great in the above had beseeched the future ruler who would succeed him and discover his cylinder to credit him in order for his supplication to be “heard” by the Gods. Here is the last lines of the inscription from the Warka Cylinder of Ashurbanipal created a few decades before the Cyrus Cylinder:

For the future it shall be as follows: A later prince, during whose time of reign this work has decayed, shall restore from its ruined condition. He shall write my name with his name, look at my written document and anoint it with oil. A sacrifice he may offer up (and) place it beside his written document. Ishtar of Erech will hear his prayers. (But) whoever does not write my name with his name, destroys my written document and removes it from its place and places it not with his written document, may Ishtar of Erech, the great lady, look upon him in anger, and destroy his name (and) his see in the countries, and may no mercy be his. Lutz, Henry, *The Warka Cylinder of Ashurbanipal*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1931, p.387

⁶http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=327188&partId=1

No matter how humanistic, iconoclastic, or philanthropic Cyrus' deeds might seem today, the comparison between the two texts confirms the second interpretation that he hailed himself as an appointee of Babylonian Gods (and not even of Zoroastrian Mazda) with a divine mission to re-instantiate socio-political order in continuity with previous traditions of the time. According to this view Cyrus could at best be praised as a restorer of lost order or authority, but certainly not a founder or a pioneer of a new civil rights paradigm.

As much as I find the second view palpable to ward off presentist interpretations inline with pan-Iranian prejudices, there is enough evidence for a different possibility h not similar but parallel to the first view: What if such purported humanism was a battlefield tactic in the service of imperial desires and military campaigns of the Achaemenids to expand their territorial reach as far as possible?



Threshold stones (*Sang-e-Astans* in Persian) from Mesopotamia. Pergamon Museum, Berlin. Copyright Khashayar Beigi.

In the text Cyrus calls himself “king of the four corners of the world” in narrating his victories, a title that he would literally pursue and achieve later in the course of two decades of military and diplomatic forays to the East and West of Asia far from Mesopotamia. The historical accounts on these campaigns also show that Cyrus was less concerned about ruling his subjects than to conquer more territories so much that by the end of his life this first global empire of the ancient world spanned from Asia Minor and North Africa from the West to India and Central Asia from the East. His death too came about in the same pursuit: according to Herodotus, Cyrus was defeated and killed in a battle against an alliance of Central Asian tribes after his strategic offer of

marriage was rejected by their queen Tomyris. On the other hand, historical accounts of military campaigns by the less successful successors of Cyrus in particular Xerxes show that once the Achaemenid empire reached the external limit of its power it started to treat not only populations but even *territories* as enemies to be leveled by brute force such as by putting Athens on fire or even more absurdly by having the sea (the Hellespont strait) whipped during the Greco-Persian wars.⁷

Meanwhile and despite external limits, internally the Achaemenids did accomplish and left recognizable remnants of an unprecedented political order: they imagined, institutionalized, and enforced an articulation of political power in terms of a symbolic pact with the populations of their conquered territories. The reliefs of Apadana Palace as well as the ruins of the Gates of All Nations located in Persepolis, the *ceremonial* capital of Achaemenids⁸, provides a visual rendition of the same political pact declared in the Cylinder's statements: the reliefs depict a courtly scene of reception⁹ with representatives of various territories from the "four corners" of the empire bringing tributes accompanied by the king to the main state of the palace. To renew the pact the forced gift ceremony would be staged once a year on Persian New Year or *Nowruz* (a custom still practiced in Iran and Central Asia on Spring equinox) so that the specter of power could be held symbolically without consummation. Thus the Cyrus threshold stone, regardless of its misuse as a human rights document, could be a memorial monument to a political pact between the conqueror of territories and the subjugated inhabitants.

Tajikistan Between Vertical Profligacy and Horizontal Horror

Well-rounded you fancied the World?

It shall not abide for its name being the World.

Rudaki, 9th C. Tajik poet and founder of Persian literature

⁷ Daryae (2016) points to a passage in the Zoroastrian holy book of *Avesta* in which Yima the mythical ruler of the world saves Paradise from overpopulation in a magical gesture of "passing/lashing" it three times. By comparing Yima's to Xerxes' actions he finds the latter's strange style of punishing the sea "a cultural trick" and not merely an exercise of brute force in futility. I find the same passage in *Avesta* potentially more productive in terms of harboring notions of territoriality, passage and distribution from a divine standpoint and at the same time in support of my hypothesis about the primacy of territory over population from a mythical point of view. That the Persian kings were unjustly portrayed as oriental despots by the Greek historians of the time is less my concern here.

⁸ Contrary to the popular view Persepolis (also known as *Takht-e Jamshid* in Persian) had no administrative importance as the capital city of the Achaemenid kings: "Of the four residences of the Achaemenids named by Herodotus — Ecbatana, Pasargadae or Persepolis, Susa and Babylon — the last [situated in Iraq] was maintained as their most important capital, the fixed winter quarters, the central office of bureaucracy, exchanged only in the heat of summer for some cool spot in the highlands." Yarshater, Ehsan (1993). *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3. Cambridge University Press. p. 482.

⁹ In Afghanistan Persian language is called Dari, literally meaning courtly.

How to make a Stan like Tajikistan matter? Mountainous, landlocked, with its infrastructure ravaged by civil war and its labor force languishing in Russia, Tajikistan ranks first in the world for reliance on foreign migrant remittances as well as the worst in poverty scales among the former Soviet satellite republics (with half its population living on less than \$2 a day). Added to the above an unstable Russian economy under US sanctions, a bustling drug hub at its southern borders with Afghanistan, ISIS recruiting from its disaffected youth while scores of abandoned wives pleading to orphanages to feed their children, this small country of Central Asia is bearing an unproportionally large share of troubles from around the globe in addition to its own.

Nevertheless Tajikistan on the eve of its twenty-fifth anniversary of independence from the former Soviet Union is scoring a different set of regional, world, and Guinness records: in 2011 Tajikistan sported the tallest flagpole in the world constructed by a Californian contractor of Iraq war for the cost of \$3.5 million dollars as part of the \$210 million package spent on the Independence Day ceremonies that year. In the words of President Rahmon on the same occasion: "This flag is tasked to consolidate the achievements of our independence -- peace, unity and national harmony". The 165 meter beam is installed in front of the Palace of Nations in the center of Dushanbe and as of now is ranking second after Saudi Arabia raised its own in Jeddah in 2014 only five meters higher than Tajikistan's. Piercing the sky a few meters below Tajikistan's stand Azerbaijan's and then North Korea's flagpoles as the third and the fourth tallest in followed by Turkmenistan's. As for the flag itself (the last to be redesigned among the newly-independent republics), the original seven hundred kilogram banner had been waving auspiciously from its high pole till it was torn to pieces by unusually strong gusts on April 23rd 2013.



Residential towers under construction in downtown Dushanbe, Photo Khashayar Beigi
As of 2012 Tajikistan was boasting of a 45 thousand sq. m. complex serving as the largest library in Central Asia. With its stacks waiting to be filled with a few million donated books, for now the conspicuous structure can be used only to host

conferences, exhibitions, and events. The nine-story two-winged library is designed like a gigantic book opening to the statute of Abu Rayhan Biruni, the Khwarazmian geographer, anthropologist, and mathematician, located in a park by the same name a few hundred yards away. Among the obstacles for acquisition of new books for the new library is the question of language and the scarcity of books printed in the official language of Tajikistan. For Tajikistan is the only country in the world that uses a diacritized Cyrillic alphabet to read and write a variant of Persian in contrast to Iran and Afghanistan where the modified Arabic script has been in use for more than a thousand years. Ironically the script as well as the literary tradition that have nurtured Persianate cultures from Iran to China and India were first propagated by famous figures of Samanid-era Tajikistan such as Rudaki and Daqiqi during the 9th and 10th Century. Even more paradoxically, while contemporary Tajik intellectuals lament the change of script first to Latin in 1928 and then to Cyrillic in 1938 under the Soviet rule, they harbor no faith to return to the standard Persian script or what they call - tongue in cheek- “the ancestral script” (*khati niokon*) [my interview with Akbar Torsan]. As a result of this linguistic parochialism, the application of Tajiki as the official language of administration, communication, and documentation has been limited mostly to a colloquial level of literacy that in practice comes closer to a *lahjavi* language (a dialect) than a written tradition. Meanwhile in this southernmost former member of the Soviet Union with little historical ties to the Slavic world, the Russian language continues to serve as the lingua franca of education and business mixed with Tajiki/Persian. In addition to Russian, there is a growing interest among the middle class parents to have children learn English and Chinese. According to a proverb in Tajiki: *Zabon Doni, Jahon Doni*: if you know languages you can know the world.

Also in the same year Tajikistan inaugurated the most luxurious *chaikhana* (tea house) in the world at the cost of \$60 million dollars located between the (Soviet) Komsomol Lake and the American Hyatt Hotel in Dushanbe. Serving hot tea is the first and the least gesture of hospitality a Tajik host would rush to after opening the door to guests.

When the next record-breaking structure opens in this secular Muslim country of eight million population one hundred and fifteen thousand prayers will be able to attend the mega-mosque, the largest in Central Asia, currently under preliminary design and construction on a \$100 million dollars fund provided by Qatar. Meanwhile in a bid to combat religious extremism the government is cracking down on thousands of “unregistered mosques”, closing some, moving homeless families to others, or using them as teahouse or community centers, reminiscent of Soviet ban on re-branding mosque structures.

In brief, in the absence of external geopolitical power or internal socio-economic growth, architectural edifices seems to be providing Tajikistan or at least the Tajik government with the missing coordinates to locate itself on the post-Soviet new world order of Central Asia and the larger Eurasian sphere.

The latest addition to the impressive list of Tajikistan’s new buildings has been a modern airport terminal with the capacity of a million and a half passengers per year financed through a low-interest loan from the French government. Before this curved and colorful modern extension was added to Dushanbe International Airport in 2014 the modest airport building constructed by Tajikistan’s Soviet administration in the sixties was connected to the aircraft parking area through a small one-story hall. A decorative

inscription in Tajiki Cyrillic alphabet is still visible on the outside wall of the old hall opening to arriving or departing planes:

May the veranda of my eyes be thy nest Show grace and descend that the house is yours

The verse by the most famous figure of Persian lyrical poetry, Hafiz of Shiraz, is supposed to hail newcomers with the legendary hospitality of Tajiks echoed in the Persianate high literary tradition that was cultivated for centuries throughout the Greater Khorasan spanning from North East of Iran to Western China and India. Tajiks distinguish themselves from other Central Asian people by two inter-related anthropological criteria: their close cultural and linguistic ties to Persian civilization despite having no geographical borders with Iran as well as their oasis-settler way of life in contrast to the nomadic lifestyle of the turkic-speaking, steppe tribes surrounding them.

Despite all the historical or imagined distinctions Tajiks bring from their affinity with the Persian literary heritage as well as Central Asian traditions of hospitality, the old airport arrival hall seldom stands as a particularly hospitable site to first-time tourists and less even for regular foreign workers. Many in my circle of Western-educated acquaintances and friends working with international organization in Tajikistan, some even natives of Tajikistan, shared an uneasy sense of anticipation swarming in and around that small inconspicuous hall particularly at the wee hours of arrival from the Western hemisphere: "As if your heart wanted to sink each time", once described in Persian the Berkeley-educated, Iranian head of a major UN organization in Tajikistan the familiar moment of her catching the site of the hall from airport shuttles on the tarmac. The long lines of passport control to the small kiosks where sleepy officers clad in badly-tailored Soviet-style military uniforms are shouting a mix of Tajik and Russian among themselves and sometimes at the passengers can hardly be taken as a welcoming scene or gesture to the arriving foreigners. But there is also more in Tajikistan to feel uneasy about on the question of hospitality both in relation to newly-arrived strangers and worse in relation to old-time neighbors.

Anyone with interest in the contemporary history of Tajikistan can't ignore nor explain an important incident not totally unrelated to the problem of hospitable arrivals - or there lack of. The civil war of Tajikistan that broke out in 1992 and grappled the hopeful, newly-independent country for several years to come has been a national tragedy beyond the scholarly purchase of Anderson's *Imagined Communities* or the more recent debates on the fate of Sykes-Picot agreement in the context of American wars in the Middle East. Tajikistan's *Jangi Shahrivandi* - or as a Tajik academician put it sarcastically *Jangi Sharmandegi* i.e. the war of embarrassment - counts so far as the bloodiest fallout of the collapse of USSR by taking at least fifty thousand lives and hundreds of thousands of wounded and displaced victims during a five year period between 1992-1997. Political scientists are still analyzing the complicated causes and dynamics of this *baradarkoshi* (fratricide) whose violent aftershocks twenty years later are still shaping the current political atmosphere of Tajikistan by exposing the long-lasting fault lines of the initial peace agreement between the two warring parties. Though initially I was hoping to use my experience and research on the Iran-Iraq war as a heuristic guide to conduct ethnographic research on memories of the civil war in Tajikistan I gradually realized that such a project was neither practically feasible nor

theoretically intriguing to me. Meanwhile in continuing to learn about the civil war of Tajikistan I came across a strange chapter that to observers at the time as well as to future analysts seemed as a prefiguration of worst fears to come just less than two years before the breakout of the *Jangi Shahrivandi*.

The 1990 Dushanbe riots or as called “The Bloody February”, the most violent civil unrest under the authority of the communist government in the entire history of Soviet Tajikistan since the Basmachi revolt in 1920s, paradoxically originated thousands of miles away from Tajikistan or even Moscow. During the early stages of Armenian nationalist movements in 1998 Armenian minorities in Soviet Azerbaijan joined the cause of unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with the mainland Armenia by holding demonstrations in the Caspian city of Sumgayit near the capital Baku. On February 22nd and 23rd their enthusiastic expression of support for Armenia was retaliated against with anti-Armenian mobs that led to the death of tens and beating of hundreds from both sides. Not surprisingly the inter-ethnic rioting came as an earthquake blow to the Soviet Union officials and their internationalist ideal of “friendship of people” or *druzhyby narodov*. But even more unexpected was its aftershocks far in an unsuspecting Central Asian country.

Following the 1988 riots in Azerbaijan 39 Armenian refugees from Sumgayit were relocated and resettled in Dushanbe. In the February of 1990 two years past the arrival of those Armenian refugees rumors about an alleged “Armenian influx” and the preferential housing they received from the government swarmed throughout the capital and other cities. The rallies started with an authorized gathering of a couple of hundreds of protestors who demanded to meet with Qahhor Mahkamov, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan. In the face of an acute shortage of housing in Dushanbe and the underserved priority granted by the government to foreigners, first Russians and now Armenians, Mahkamov was unable to disperse the rumors by just offering a refutation statement. A joint committee composed of the protesters, the Communist party and officials as well as the head clergy of the country or Mufti (at that time Mirzo Turajonzoda) had to be established to conduct an inquiry into the housing arrangement of Armenian refugees and to provide an official report. However the rallies soon gained more momentum and the government officials including Mahkamov were advised by the KGB and security forces not to appear among thousands of protestors contrary to what the public had been promised and expected a day before. As a result the small protests turned into city-wide demonstrations and demands for radical reform at the highest political levels. This time demonstrators were countered by the police firing on them in Dushanbe which in turn led to widespread riots during which shops and buildings were looted and non-Central Asian minorities in particular Armenians and Russians were attacked in addition to Tajik women dressed in European style. Finally the state of emergency was announced and Soviet troops had to be called in to bring calm by military force. In a matter of two days 26 people were reported dead and more than five hundred wounded - almost as many if not more as the original tally in the Sumgayit incident. In reality by the time of Dushanbe riots the 39 Armenian refugees had already left Tajikistan to live with their relatives in Armenia. Whether due to the chronic housing shortage, public frustration with the lingering status quo after the collapse of the Soviet Union, or mere collective paranoia, the housing riots and the political pressures led to the resignation of the entire Communist government of Tajikistan including Mahkamov.

From those few days to five years (1992-1997) of chaos, confusion and bloodbath of *Jangi Shahrivandi* (the Civil War) did not take long or much. A significant number of victims of Tajikistan's civil war were those innocent civilians captured or targeted on trips to neighboring towns, among them many families. At least in one documented case traveling families were intercepted on the road by armed men and asked to get off the bus and say the word potato in Russian. The difference in pronunciation of *kartoshka* determined from which regions they were, and by extension their life or death at the hands of their captors (Whitlock, 2003). I was told by a young scholar that as a teenager during the civil war she witnessed houses being attacked and demolished by "non-local people with strange faces and accents". Another young woman remembered that once traveling with her parents in order to deliver food to trapped relatives in surrounded neighborhoods their car was stopped by fighters who interrogated her father at gunpoint to verify the local allegiance of the moving family.

The civil war, for whatever reason - interethnic strifes, economic grievances or political stagnation - exploded in this bastion of hospitality with an accompanying affect that looked eerily similar to that of Dushanbe riots: influx of alien people singled out and targeted among and against members of the same *Jamaat* (community) or even *Mahalla* (neighborhood) who the legends say had cohabited peacefully for time immemorial. As imaginary influxes were being fought off by the warring sides, hundreds of thousands fled the now independent Tajikistan (including all Russians) and never moved back. Since then it has been up to record-breaking vertical structures to perform hospitality, to provide shelter of harmony and peace - for an absent people¹⁰.

¹⁰ The above picture of Tajikistan as odd as it may seem is to a large degree shared by its neighbors: In the most "democratic" nation of Central Asia with tulip revolutions and where its strategic airports are leased internationally to Russians, Americans and the Chinese, violence against Uzbek communities in the south led to a major riot in 2010 resulting in hundreds of deaths during the clashes and the displacement of at least one hundred thousands members of ethnic Uzbeks inside and outside the country. Five years earlier in 2005 in the most "independent" state of Central Asia, Uzbekistan, the protest in Andijan against the arrest and trial of popular businessmen accused by the government of religious extremism had led to the massacre of several hundred demonstrators by security forces and the violent suppression of anti-government protests. And finally the wealthiest member of the club, Kazakhstan, with its futuristic capital and its vast energy resources, is continuously quelling public protests of workers in the oil sector as well as fighting internal terror attacks allegedly by native ISIS sympathizers.



Infantry vehicles closing the path of demonstrators on Prospect Lenin in Dushanbe Tajikistan on Feb 14 1990 . Copyright RIA Novosti archive, image #699865 / Vladimir Fedorenko / CC-BY-SA 3.0 from Wikipedia.

Mazars: Terrestrial Echoes of the Revered

It occurred to me to go and visit those revered *mazars*.

Nasser Khosrow

11th C. Ismaili Theologian, Traveler and Poet

Mazar (name of place, from the Arabic root to visit, synonym of *ziarat-gah* in Persian): place of visitation and pilgrimage. Also sacred burial site. Tomb. Graveyard:

It's told at the end of the twentieth of the past century three women inhabitants of the village Sayyod of Romit wanted to visit their brothers in Hissar and while approaching the locality they were surrounded by the troops against the Red Army from the east and the Red Army from the West. The three sisters found themselves in encirclement. In order not to be captured by them they ask God to seize their souls. All three of them were buried here. Afterwards supposedly three trees grow from the soul of the *mazar*: the trees of sada, tut, and chinar, each of which were the expression of these women's chastity., *Sacred Places of Tajikistan*, p.45, original English text (2007).

Mazars connects Tajikistan to the spiritual geography of a greater Central Asia spanning from China and India from the east and Iran from the West. Mazars are located next to various natural and manmade sites such as cemetery (*qabristan*), religious school (*madrasa*), demarcated trees, designated water springs, lakes, fountains and more. Not only these sacred sites have survived decades of Soviet atheistic propaganda that demolished and decommissioned mosques everywhere but these simple structures withstood pre-Soviet regional waves of secularization propagated by the *jadids*¹¹. However in recent times mazars similar to other Islamic as well as non-Islamic structures such as shrines, statues and mausoleums have come under unprecedented threat of destruction with many heritage sites demolished around the Islamic world from Mali to Syria and Afghanistan.

According to Wahhabism (a Takfiri sect born and bred in Saudi Arabia and exported to extremist groups around the world) visitation of mausoleums particularly for the purpose of intercession is tantamount to holding a partner for God (known as *shirk* in Arabic) - a major sin in Islam as grave as idolatry. The subject of this dissertation is not Islamic extremism so in lieu of a plethora of textual and historical evidence against such a literalist reading of Islam I suffice to mention the case of Taliban mazars to show the non-reciprocity and all-inclusiveness of mazars among local populations in the very context of rise of Wahhabi ideology and the so-called wars of democracy. In the Eastern Province of Khost in Afghanistan the burial sites of Wahhabi Arabs or as they are called in the Western discourse the “foreign fighters” killed alongside Taliban guerillas are functioning as revered and well-frequented mazars. Decorated with colorful rags wrapped over small pieces of stone as typical of most Central Asian mazars, these graves that are marked only by ethnicity (like *Shahid-e-Arab* or the Arab Martyr) continue to receive daily visitors in need of intercession as far as Pakistan regardless of the antithetical position of the buried intercessors.¹² This is all the while that old burial sites in Afghanistan particularly mausoleums with decorative tombstones deemed “antique” are being broken into and sold in the international markets for the archeological objects stolen from the Middle East.¹³

¹¹ 19th C. reformist intellectuals of Central Asia and Tatarstan with a universalist vision of replacing local knowledges and vernacular languages (in particular Arabic and Persian) with modern scientific education.

¹² http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2016/07/160702_zs_arab_graveyards_khost

¹³ http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2016/08/160830_k05_herat_historic_tombstones



A mazar in Langar, the Wakhan Corridor, Afghanistan/Tajikistan border. Mazars in this mountainous and isolated region of Central Asia are decorated with horns of Marco Polo sheeps. (Picture Purchased). Theodore Kaye / Alamy Stock Photo

Perhaps the secret to the survival of mazars throughout the previous and the present political and religious upheavals is their topological embeddedness in the living fabric of their surroundings in contrast to the eye-catching rise of modern monuments such as those mushrooming in the post-war Dushanbe. The morphological inconspicuousness of the mazar of Shahid, where the three witnesses of the colonial war in Central Asia are said to be buried, provides a typical case for such a contrast:

The Mazar of Shahid is located 200m to the north of the sanatorium of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan in the village of Qipchod. The Mazar is surrounded by a round cement wall. There are three tombs which do not differ from the level of the earth and may be determined only by grave stone. The entrance of the mazar is from the northern part. There is an old tree of sada the branches of which are tied by rag stobes. Also

there are three trees (sada, tut, chinar) which seem to be younger than the first. Outside of the mazar circumference to the eastern side there is a huge old tree of chinar. (ibid) Often traced through their immediate surroundings (“200 meters”) and distinguished by simple features such as walls, stones, or a set of trees (some even named after trees), mazars are not only geographically scattered throughout greater Central Asia but whether elevated, roofed, or in open space these sacred sites often morph with their local surroundings inconspicuously. The indistinct geographical and morphological features of mazars has resulted in compensatory, if not compulsory, practices of locating, identifying, cataloging, and describing their geographic, historical and anthropological features so much that recently there have been attempts to measure and record the three dimensional GPS coordinates of each mazar (*Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang*, 2013).

But lack of terrestrial distinction is not the only mystery of mazars. Mazars to scholars of Islam in Central Asia comprise a category of their own: they are often visited on Wednesdays (a pre-Islamic pagan day of festivity still celebrated in the new year’s ceremonies in Iran) and mostly by groups of *travelling women* in contrast to regular mosques attended on prayer times either daily or only on Fridays by local men (depending on the government’s zoning of religious activities permitted in each mosque)¹⁴. The distinction holds also for those mazars that are inside or adjacent to mosques or cemeteries for example the popular mazar of Yaqub Charkhi, the 14th Century Naqshbandi Sufi, which is located in a suburb of Dushanbe adjacent to a functioning mosque.

Furthermore, many stories associated with mazars invoke identifiable Muslim or Quranic personalities or alternatively anonymous heroes of known local histories. In the case of the Mazar of Shahid and through the story of the three/tree women the real history of clashes between communist forces and anti-colonial guerillas is locally memorialized. The fortress of *Hissar* next to an eponymous medieval town (which literally means fortress) had indeed served as a Basmachi guerrilla stronghold since 1924 till it was totally destroyed by the Red Army. Before that the town was a winter residence of the Khanate of Bukhara. Most recently the ruins of the historic fortress of Hissar has been reconstructed over its archeological foundations and its purportedly 3000th birthday was celebrated during the Independence Day festivities of 2015.

¹⁴ According to the the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Between 2004 and 2014, the Council of Ulema banned women from attending mosques. In 2014, it said it would allow women to attend mosques and female students at religious schools to become imam-khatibs (imams’ assistants) to work with females at mosques with women-only sections”. The full report can be read at http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_AR_2016_Tier1_2_Tajik.pdf



Hissar or fortress located in the suburb of Dushanbe under re-construction in 2011.
Copyright Khashayar Beigi

But emphasizing mazars as local repositories of factual histories - Islamic, colonial or Soviet- opposite to the empty monuments of the newly-born nation-state can shed light only on some aspects of these sacred spaces while bringing forth some difficult questions. Many mazars are associated with distinct Islamic personalities and Quranic stories without necessarily bearing any real political, historical, geographical or hagiographical relevance to Central Asia or Tajikistan. These include sacred sites claiming to preserve body parts of the Prophet Muhammad such as his *Muyi-Mubarak* (sacred hair), burial sites of his immediate family members such as Hazrate Ali Shah Mardan (the Prophet's son-in-law) in the south of Ferghana valley, burial sites attributed to Sahaba (the Prophet's Companions), Tabi'uns (the Followers of the Prophet's Companions) as well as to commanders of Muslim armies such as the Mazar of Qutayba in the Andijan Province of Uzbekistan. The same question is posed in relation to many mazars attributed to Sufi masters such as those named after Khwaja Abdullah Ansari or Bayazid Bastami in Central Asia (the former is buried in Herat in Afghanistan and the latter in Bastam in Iran), or still to mythical figures of Quranic stories such as Prophet Solomon, whose throne is located purportedly on an elevated rock formation called Takhti Soleiman and is revered by the visiting public in Kyrgyzstan for centuries. Adding to the above mysteries, there is a significant number of Shi'i imams or their

descendants purportedly buried in Central Asian mazars despite Sunni Islam being the predominant tradition throughout the history and geography of the area. Bringing to full-circle the mysteries of sacred places in Central Asia are those mazars that are by name and definition such *ghadamgahs*, *paijays* (stepping place), imply a place of passage and not burial (Zarcone, 2013). And finally, comparative studies with Soviet ethnographic records show mazar legends do change through time with oral stories harboring more detailed information about them than centuries-old historical documents left at the sites (Yayoi, 2013, p.57).

Bypassing interpretive dilemmas associated with sacred sites in general and particularly with Central Asian mazars, a different perspective, one often advocated by anthropologists, emphasizes the ritual-functional effectiveness of such sites over their geo-historical factuality or their folkloric birth certificate. From this equally empirical point of view, mazars and other sacred sites are simply where people travel to in order to seek intercession from the patron saint or any figure of religious authority on a wide range of everyday life problems, wishes, and afflictions such as skin diseases, infertility, marital feuds, and other chronic or serious conditions. The rituals performed at these sacred sites range from recitations of special prayers such as *Moshkelgosh*a (literally in Persian: problem-solver) to holding dolls (*lukhtak* or *qorchaq*) over the ill person and leaving it at the sacred site for cure or protection from evil eye, or alternatively to obtain and take home amulets or talismans from the scribing mulla present at the site. But if mazars can be defined merely in functional terms by whatever the visitors think of them regardless of their spatial situatedness then why are they discernible in *this* site rather than somewhere else or anywhere at all in light of their spatial fluidity? Or why one has to “go and visit a revered mazar” as put by Naser Khosrow instead of asking a patron of mazar or a saint for intercession from home like a regular prayer or supplication? Why are they somewhere “outside” instead of being fully transcendental beyond worldly places as for example Takfiri-Wahabi extremists want? In a geo-philosophical sense mazars present the old problem of nominalism, one that anthropological scholarship in particular have long been engaged with in various historical and social contexts. Can a theological articulation engage the same problematic beyond but also informed by local belief systems, folk rituals or geo-historical memories?

***Wajh* or the Face of God: Reception of Being in the Expenditure of Forms**

All things perishing save His/Its Face.

To him belongs the judgement, and to him you shall be returned.

Quran, Chapter *al-qisas* (the Stories), verse 88.

I died as a mineral and became a plant,

I died as plant and rose to animal,

I died as animal and I was Man.

Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?

Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar

With angels bless'd; but even from angelhood

I must pass on: *All things perishing save His Face.*

When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
I shall become what no mind e'er conceived.
Oh, let me not exist! for Nonexistence
Proclaims in the tunes of Organon,
To Him we shall all return.
Maulana Rumi, 13th C. Persian Sufi Poet
(Translation by Mahmudul Hasan Hemal, slightly modified).

Mazhar: (name of place, from the Arabic root of *zuhur*, to appear, to manifest): In Sufi terminology Mazhar is translated as the Locus of Manifestation and is used to explain the nature of Created in relation to the Creator in the paradigm of the Unicity of Being (*wahdat-al wujud*). Ibn Arabi claims to have coined the term for the first time.



A fabricated mazar with dolls and offerings in Tajikistan. Part of the Quranic inscriptions on the left stone grave reads: “All souls perishing save His Face.” Copyright: Khashayar Beigi

If mazars as held by scholars of Central Asia provide testimonies to the local and historical life and traditions of the communities affected by events far and close in time and geography then how to classify and make sense of “fabricated mazars”? These maquette or make-shift mazars grow in places with no apparent identity- no oral hagiographies, colonial memories, or local geographies - and their only distinct feature is the *staging* of a burial site. Once back from visiting a reconstructed historical mosque in a residential area of a town in Northern Tajikistan I walked by one such mazar. Upon

my inquiry I was provided with the common narrative: this is a place where women come to pray and seek solution for their problems such as their children's health, infertility, skin conditions and so on. The presence of dolls and offerings indicated that such a patently fake or fabricated site was nonetheless functioning similar to those authentic mazars attracting pilgrims and visitors.

At first sight the only authentic elements of this fake mazar is its Quranic inscriptions (regardless of grammatical inaccuracies), which is among the frequently-cited verses on death and the Judgement Day. The citations start with *shahada* or declaration of allegiance to God and His Messenger Muhammad and continue each with a small verse. The verse inscribed at the right (fake) gravestone conveys a straightforward Eschatological warning: "Every soul will taste death and will return to God" (Chapter *al-ankabout* or The Spider, verse 57). The verse on the left gravestone however is written with a major mistake, which could simply be attributed to the lack of knowledge of the inscriber were it not among the most controversial verses of Quran. The original verse is from the chapter the Stories (*al-qisas*: 88) and literally is often translated: "All things perishing save His Face". The inscription on the gravestone uses "souls" (*nafs*) instead of "things" (*sha'i*) originally cited in Quran. Regardless of the mistake or modification, an important one though, the rest of the verse carries an ambiguity that has been the subject of centuries-long debate, conflict and commentary. The verse in its superficial (or *zahir*) interpretation talks about the finitude of things or the world against the Eternity of God. In the same vein its message could be understood as a theological statement wrapped in an eschatological warning. The first point of contention lies in the word Face (*wajh*) that is used instead of God: Neither Allah nor the transcendent God of monotheistic religions which Islam is also heir to cannot bear any resemblance to the created by carrying a recognizable, objectified Face. But this is not the only verse in Quran where God speaks of His Face. Another famous verse says: "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (Chapter *al-baqara* or the Cow: 115). Quranic commentators perhaps to avoid the problem of anthropomorphism of the divine have resorted to translate Face as Essence (*dhat*) in such verses (Cf. *Sahih al-bukhari* and Ibn-Katheer's interpretations among the widely-used sources of Quranic interpretation)¹⁵. The difficulty of course is not lessened by replacing Face with Essence if only increased: if it is not permissible for the created describe the Creator by His face, how would it be plausible or if at all possible to think of the Essence of God instead? The essence of an entity by definition must be harder to grasp and this should be true even more acutely with the unbound, infinite Essence of God in relation to the limited boundaries of human knowledge and creaturely life. There is unanimous theological prohibitions against even posing questions about the Essence of God. And that's exactly where the Sufi intervention makes the question of Essence palpable though in a radical theological reduction.

Sufi commentators, often enchanted by and extrapolating on the difference between superficial (*zahir*) and hidden (*batin*) interpretations of ambiguous verses of Quran followed a similar path in this case too: they offered two interrelated but divergent

¹⁵ <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura28-aya88.html> فغير بالوجه عن الذات

For a similar interpretation of the same verse according to contemporary Shi'i tafseers, Cf. *Tafseer e Nemooneh* by Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, volume 16, p. 204. The famous Persian Sufi tafseer of Meybodi of 12th C. too resorts to *dhat* in interpreting this verse.

explanations. In the first, more orthodox explanation, the Face refers to God's independent existence and the verse conveys that nothing can exist independently of God. Every existing thing gets its existence (*wujud*) from God before perishing into non-existence and being brought back again by God's constant self-disclosure. This view is (safely) close to the Asharite theology of constant creation with atomistic underpinnings advocated by early philosophical theology (or *kalam*) of Medieval Islam.

The second interpretation offered by Ibn Arabi (Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabi's Cosmology*, 1997, p.93) takes the question of Face in a radical sense beyond the dichotomy of the existent and the non-existent. First Chittick discerns a subtle grammatical point in the syntax of the verse exploited by the Sufi view: the masculine possessive pronoun for the "face" associates the referent with the closest masculine name in the sentence which is "thing". So from the point of grammatical correctness the verse should read, "Everything perishes save *its* face" and not necessarily "His Face" or God's Face. Based on this Continues Chittick, "then the verse can mean that all things in the manifest universe perish, but their faces, which are their realities that is, their fixed entities known to God never perish" (p.93). Ibn-Arabi, as a predecessor to Sufi masters in the Persian tradition such as Maulana Rumi and Abdul Rahman Jami (Algar, 2013) expounds on this second meaning of the verse:

Within the Cloud, God gave existence to all the forms of the cosmos. Concerning them He said that each of them *is perishing*, that is, in respect of its forms, *except its face* [28:88] that is, except in respect of its reality, for that is not perishing. The *its* in "its face" goes back to *thing*. Hence, each thing - that is, all the forms of the cosmos - *is perishing*, but not the things' realities. Hence each thing is not perishing and cannot possibly perish. (p.93 italics in the original translation).

Through this grammatical shift the whole order of creation is reversed: in the more normative interpretation it is God the Creator (also the Peripatetics' Uncaused Necessary or *wajib-al wujud*) who commands and creates things into being out of nothingness and then condemns them to perish in a continued process of production - A view confirmed and in harmony with orthodox philosophical theology or *kalam*. In contrast Face in its second sense signifies that things are not perishing nor can they possibly perish at all. On a philosophical level this radical view on the afterlife of things, their eternal Face or their thingness may resemble an eschatological parallel to the Platonic problem of Form: Things as imperishable Archetypes. However if Ibn-Arabi's argument is followed closely it becomes clear that forms far from being ontologically predicated on a support or model such as Platonic Ideal Type or Archetype, they themselves are continually in perish *by the very virtue* of having been created: Perishing or *halek* in Arabic is a gerund and therefore signifies a continuous agentive process rather than designating the achieved result of an accomplished action. In other words, all things created or determined by God are fully exposed to the divine and acquire a face or as Ibn Arabi's calls it "receive a coming to be" regardless of their ontological status as existents or non-existents. In this sense, Creation corresponds or converges to the Divine Presence beyond the actual (or real) or the potential (or possible) existence of the created. Ibn Arabi calls this correspondence "the locus of manifestation" and thus distinguishes the Sufi view both from creationist theology (such as the Ash'arites) as well as from philosophical hylomorphism (of the Mu'tazilites):

The property of unveiling pertains only to the folk of this path. As for others, they are of two sorts. One group says, "The possible thing has no entity in the state of nonexistence. It has an entity only when the Real brings it into existence." These are the Ash'arites and those who accept their position. Another group says, "They have fixed entities (*'aine-thābeta*), and it is these that come into existence after they were not. As for that whose wujud is not possible, such as the impossible thing, it has no fixed entity." These are the Mu'tazilites (p.52). In contrast to the above two, the third group or "the Realizers" - the Sufis- see thingness of existence (*wujud*) as *mazhar* or "the locus of manifestation" of the divine: The Realizers among the Folk of God affirm fixed entities through the fixity of the things. These entities also have fixed properties through which each of them becomes manifest in *wujud* to the extent that we said, that is, such that it is a locus of manifestation (p.52).

By becoming the locus of manifestation things "receive the coming to be" as commanded by God:

God says to the thing, "Be!" He does not address or command any but that which hears, yet it has no existence It receives coming to be. But our view of its reception of coming to be is not like your view. Its reception of coming to be is only the fact that it becomes a locus of manifestation for the Real. This is the meaning of His words, "[Be!] And it is." This does not mean that the thing "acquires existence" (*istifadat al-wujud*). It only acquires the property of being a locus of manifestation. . . . Hence He is identical to all things in manifestation, but He is not identical to them in their essences. On the contrary, He is He, and the things are the things. (*The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 90)

Furthermore, the passage and perish of forms as the Quranic Face or as the Sufi loci of manifestation makes poverty (or *faqr*) the constitutive feature of all things and by extension the cosmos. For as the cosmos in its coming to be or the reception of the word of God receives Being it doesn't acquire any independent being for itself. Rather, it only obeys His command as Ibn Arabi described. Obeying the creational command constitutes neither existence nor non-existence for things. Rather, it is constituent of their Poverty, their universal *mode of being*:

Existential poverty (*faqr-e wojudi*) is an essential attribute of contingent being and all its aspects, whether of principal essence (*'aine-thābeta*) or of objective being. When contingent being is a principal essence it needs a motivator in order to perpetuate its existence and to provide whatever is necessary to preserve itself in terms of food, medicine and such. Thus, poverty of being is an essential attribute for the existence or non-existence of all things and applies to all created beings. It is universal and all-encompassing. (Kashani, quoted in Nurbakhsh, p.134).

On the other hand to replenish the ontological poverty of the Created, the Divine Essence has to be self-sufficient or wealthy (*ghani*), lacking nothing and depending on no one. The Poverty of the Created and the Self-Sufficiency of the Creator extends an infinite complication, a co-presence, or a hospitality for the passage of forms at the divine threshold. Another chapter of the history of Central Asia reveals this other side of Poverty.

Bukhara between Man's Poverty and God's Self-Sufficiency

O mankind, you are the poor in need of Allah, while Allah is the Self-Sufficient, the Praiseworthy.

Quran, *al-Fatir* (the Originator), 15.

Haggard and poor I arrived at your *Dargah* (threshold),
Show pity for there remains no recourse save Your Sovereignty
Hafez, 14 C. Persian Poet

Beware that when God's Wind of Sufficiency bloweth
A thousand prayers won't be worth a chaff
Hafez, 14th C. Persian Poet

When Poverty in relation to God is complete, then sufficiency in God is complete, for neither of these states are complete without the other.
Ascribed to Abu Bakr Kattani by Shahabuddin Umar Suhrawardi, 12-13 C. Sufi Theologian

Finally out of Poverty we kicked away the world
Some leaned on Pomp and we strayed
Ignominy and Dignity fared the same in this expanse
Yet Sufficiency awakened as we kicked out Greed
Bidel Dehlavi, 16-17 C. Persian Sufi Poet of India

Bukhara (or the Revered Bukhara or *bukhara-ye sharif* in Persian): "The name of a famous city in Transoxiana which is derived from *bukhar* meaning an abundance of knowledge and wisdom. For there have been innumerable scholars and sages from this place" (*Borhan-e Ghat* lexicon). Historically, Bukhara was long the center of theological, cultural and literary learning throughout Central Asia rivaling other Islamic capitals such as Baghdad. Among the historical figures born or lived in Bukhara are Imam Al-Bukhari the compiler of one of the most trusted Hadith sources throughout the Islamic world, Avicenna the famous physician and philosopher, and Baha-ud-Din Naqshband the founder of Naqshbandi Sufi order. Geographically, Bukhara is located in today's Uzbekistan but is culturally claimed by Tajikistan along Samarqand for their paramount significance in the Persianate heritage of Central Asia. Etymologically the name is possibly derived from the Sogdian βuxārak or "Place of Good Fortune" (*Encyclopedia Iranica*).¹⁶

It is the year 1220 A.D., one year into Genghis Khan's Central Asian campaign against the Khorazmshahi Empire in Central Asia that once ruled from the Ural Mountains in the north to the Persian Gulf and the Euphrates in the south. The Mongol army has advanced to the gates of the Revered Bukhara, the religious and civilizational center of

¹⁶ Sogdian is in the family of the Eastern branch of Iranian languages and was prevalent in Central Asia at least since the Achaemenian period based on the remaining texts. Its only surviving descendant is the oral language of Yaghnob villages in Tajikistan.

the then most prosperous region of Transoxiana. Two Muslim historians, Ibn-al-Athir and Ata-Malik Juvaini, will soon be faced with the dilemma of writing the catastrophic passage of Mongols into the heartlands of the Islamic world. Upon hearing horrendous stories of atrocities committed by the “tartars” (the name Mongols were called by Muslims), the former plunges into silence for many years to come. The latter, a master of Persian literary prose recruited by Genghis successors to administer their expanding territories, sets out to record the chronicles of Mongol conquests in his *Tarikh-i Jahangushai* (literally the world opener or conqueror history).¹⁷

According to Juvaini, to avoid bloodshed the noblemen of Bukhara decided to let the invader army conquer the city without resistance. While passing by the citadel with his army shortly after his bloodless conquest, the great Khan notices the central mosque of Bukhara. Realizing the magnificent structure is not the Sultan’s palace but “the house of God”, Genghis Khan enters the mosque and raises to the pulpit. Juvaini describes the imaginary scene with vivid clarity:

Then he too got down from his horse, and mounting two or three steps to the pulpit he exclaimed: “The countryside is empty of fodder; fill our horses’ belly.” Whereupon they opened all the magazines in the town and began carrying off the grain. And they brought the cases in which the Korans were kept out into the courtyard of the mosque, where they cast the Korans right and left and turned the cases into mangers for their horses. After which they circulated cups of wine and sent for the singing-girls of the town to sing and dance for them; while the Mongols raised their voices to the tunes of their own songs. Meanwhile, the imams, shaikhs, sayyids, doctors, and scholars of the age kept watch over their horses in the stable under the supervision of the equerries, and executed their commands. After an hour or two Genghis Khan arose to return to his camp, the leaves of the Koran were trampled in the dirt beneath their own feet and their horses’ hoofs (Boyle, 1997, p. 104).

As if the above descriptions were short of conveying the singularity of the event, Juvaini continues with a theological exchange between two Imams present in the above scene: In that moment, the Emir Imam Jalal-ad-Din Ali Al-hasan Zaidi, who was the chief and leader of the sayyids of Transoxiana and was famous for his piety and asceticism, turned to the learned Imam Rukn-ad-Din Imamzada, who was one of the most excellent savants in the world- may God render pleasant the resting-place of them both- and said: “Maulana, what state is this?”¹⁸ That which I see do I see it in wakefulness or in sleep, O Lord?” Maulana Imamzada answered: “Be silent: it is the wind of God’s sufficiency that bloweth, and beyond our power to put it into words.”

The accounts provided by other historians of the time on the fall of Bukhara and many other cities on the path of the Mongol invaders depict a different story more in line with

¹⁷ Juvaini later accompanies Hulegu's army in the conquest of Baghdad and becomes its governor. During his decades of service to Mongol rulers he visits Central Asia and attends their special assemblies there.

¹⁸ State or *halat* in Sufi terminology denotes an affection of heart or soul accorded to the Sufi by the divine that may not last long but can provide valuable insights and even transformation. Contrasted with *maqam* or stage which is the earned result of perseverance and gradual progress towards the divine.

Ibn-al-Athir's reason for keeping silent. In reality, the prosperous Bukhara was pillaged and its inhabitants were raped and massacred. Among those who fought till the end were Imam Rukn-ad-Din and his son (Browne, 1956, p.439).

Chapter Two
Terrains of Shame and Glory:
Across the House of Uncle Youssef¹⁹

¹⁹ “The House of Uncle Youssef”, codename for Soviet Union among Tudeh party members and writers.

Since a myth is what you are going to be,
Strive for a good one, not evil.
Baba Afzal Kashani, 13th C. Persian Poet
Epitaphs on the tombstones of some of the Soviet-Iranian memoir-writers

Waves of political emigration from Iran to Soviet Union can be divided to three distinct periods: the first begins with the overthrow of the Qajar dynasty by Reza Mirpanj (later Reza Shah) in 1920 and the subsequent arrest and prosecution of the original members of the Communist Party of Iran among whom many later became the founding members and the future leaders of the Tudeh (Masses) Party²⁰. Touraj Atabaki (2004) in “Incommodious hosts, invidious guests: the life and times of Iranian revolutionaries in the Soviet Union, 1921–39” has summarized the the sociopolitical atmosphere in both countries conducive to the revolutionary activism of many Iranian emigres and dissidents in a nascent Soviet Union. This story was cut short however tragically with expulsion, imprisonment or execution of thousands of Iranians of all layers: communists, revolutionaries, migrant laborers and traders. A book co-written by Atabaki and on the same subject under the title of *Victims of Time (Zhertvy vremeni)* has been published recently in Russian with English and Persian translations due. Also the recently identified archives of the Iranian Communist Party pre-Tudeh years (1917-1940) in Moscow (Shahvar & Abramoff, 2015) as well as anecdotal accounts in the Soviet memoirs of Tudeh members about their emigre predecessors could provide further clues about the historical landscape and the geographical journey of these first Soviet Iranians which roughly coincided with the tumultuous revolutionary period in Russia up to the Great Purge and after.²¹

²⁰ Bozorg Alavi’s *Panjah va Seh Nafar (Fifty Three Persons)* (1942) is a famous historical and biographical work of modern Persian literature on the 53 communist members imprisoned by Reza Shah including Alavi himself. It needs to be said that not all from the group of 53 participated in or looked positively on forming a new party for various reasons beyond the scope of this paper.

²¹ Zarbakht (1994) in his memoir mentions an encounter with a larger-than-life member of this group: he describes an Iranian survivor of Siberian labor camps suffering from respiratory illnesses and looking for his wife and daughter in Dushanbe. The old man, originally from Khorasan province of Iran, had joined the Communist Party before the October Revolution, fought along the famous Budyonny regiment in the Civil War and lost an arm, held various appointments at the party bureaus, deployed to Central Asia in 1923 to suppress anti-communist activities and finally caught up in the *Yezhovshchina*

The next wave of emigration, started with thousands of communist forces mainly Tudeh party members (but not limited to them as I show here) leaving Iran in the chaos and confusion of the fall of the Soviet-designed *Ferghe Democrat Azerbaijan* (Democratic Party of Azerbaijan) in 1946 and continued after the CIA-assisted, pro-monarchy coup of 1953. During almost a decade events that started with the geo-political fall-out of the end of the Second World War and the birth of Cold War culminated in the voluntary or forced exodus of thousands of Iranian emigres across the Soviet border and into Stalin's carceral archipelagos. Those who survived the ordeal were released into the civilian life in the "thaw" period and spent most of their lives in the Soviet Union up until its collapse and their subsequent return to Iran or to the Western Bloc.

The third wave took place after the culmination of the 1979 Revolution and instigated with the violent purge of leftist organizations and their ban from participation in the revolutionary government which led to the exile of a group of Sazmane Fedayeen Khalq members into Soviet Central Asia²².

Though among the second wave of Iranian émigrés less than a handful might still be alive, their memoirs, biographical documents, and oral histories provide a wealth of first-hand material which to this date has remained largely untapped both in general archival terms and in particular for the purpose of research into various historical and anthropological aspects of life under the late Stalinist period through its transition to post-Stalin era.

The Tudeh Party is perhaps the most prominent political entity in modern Iran with an overseas history on par or even longer than its native history inside Iran. However most English-language studies on the history of leftist forces and in particular on the Tudeh Party tend to either ignore the overseas life of its members or find it irrelevant to the political and social dynamics shaping the course and the fate of the party in various episodes of its rise and demise. By collecting and analyzing a dozen volumes of memoirs written by Tudeh Party members in exile, mainly in the Soviet Union, I attempt to balance the nativist-historicist focus on the party politics with an exilic-anthropological approach to the everyday life of its members. In doing so I argue that these memoirs, mostly ignored or rejected by the party leaders, launch a trenchant critique on the internationalist and collectivist claims of the Soviet utopia through the life experiences of their authors across the Soviet territories as prisoners, camp laborers, refugees and ultimately stateless citizens (*bez grazhdan*). Furthermore they depict the complex confluences of forces that act locally by driving them into exilic trajectories, forces that are originated from afar on the regional and global stage of the Cold War with Iran and the Soviet Union as two relaying points. On a more personal level the memoirs struggle to keep and project the question of hope and humanity against the most existential

arrests of 1937 before being released and rehabilitated by Khrushchev in 1953. He could also remember encountering another Iranian during the October Revolution.

²² Fathollahzadeh in his memoir *The House of Uncle Yousef* (2002) bridges between the history of the second wave to the third. Himself an emigre of the third wave, Fathollahzadeh marries the daughter of a Tudeh emigre and writes of the indifference towards, oblivion and in some cases spying on these elderly emigres by the leaders of his leftist-revolutionary organization Fadaeian Khalgh. Naturally the book, which merits a separate study on inter-generational party dynamics under the Soviet was dismissed by the Fadaeian leader Farrokh Negahdar.

conditions of life in exile. Between the cold war history and the existential geography of exile something arises as visionary territories which is neither historical nor personal but singular or spiritual.

Inlands: Soviet Habitats of Impassioned Nativism

A few months after the fall of the Soviet-engineered Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan in December 1946 its Iranian leaders who had fled to Baku were invited by Mir Jafar Baghirov, the head of Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic of the time, for a film screening (*We and the Strangers*, Jahanshahloo, Volume two, p.18)²³. *On the Other Side of Aras* (*Po tu storonu Araksa*, 1947) is a compilation of various archival footage on Azerbaijan of Iran some produced during the short life of the Autonomous Republic and some from an earlier time when the Red Army had occupied the northern provinces of Iran during the Second World War. According to Jahanshahloo, some footage was added later in Soviet Azerbaijan where the film was produced. Of the 54 minutes of the compiled documentary screened for Tudeh party leaders in exile only about one minute footage and narration at the end is dedicated to the violent events of the demise of the Autonomous Republics. The rest presents an impassioned cinematic take on the land, language, and culture of a people struggling to fulfil their historical role towards freedom and independence until the “reactionary forces” i.e. the central government of Iran would halt their progress through betrayal and violence.

On the Other Side of Aras was written as well as directed by the Stalin-era Soviet pioneer documentary filmmaker Esfir Shub with a full-length musical score composed by the renowned Azerbaijani musician and conductor Nyazi. Shub’s signature style of “compilation film”, composing visual history through careful selection and creative editing of archival footage, was particularly noteworthy in her time and even today for her use of cinema at the service of collective “permanent history” rather than highly-staged visual artistry as for example in the latter works of Eisenstein. The resulting *On the Other Side of Aras* deploys a sentimental storytelling style accompanied by a romantic Azeri musical score in order to depict and accuse the central government of Iran of oppressing its own Azerbaijani citizens.

Start of the Transcript of *On the Other Side of Aras* (My translation from Azeri voice-over):

The story of the war of the River Aras which is located between Soviet Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijan starts from right here. These old bridges which have survived from the ancestors now divide Azerbaijan into two parts but in the past they served to connect people and were traversed by them. Each people have their own myths and stories engraved on a leaf of history. Aras- this sacred and pained word, it speaks of the stories in the past. Aras has divided the dear Azerbaijan into two parts, and the larger part is in the hands of the strangers.

In reality the river Aras or its bridges never divided the two Azerbaijanians. Rather the division was due to the Russo-Persian War of 1826–28 and the resulting Treaty of Turkmenchay according to which the Iranian party agreed to cede all its territories in the Caucasus to the Russian Empire including the area north of Aras which later constituted a number of Soviet Republics including Soviet Azerbaijan.

²³ The film must have been screened sometime after Nowruz or end of March 1947 according to Jahanshahloo’s memoirs. He calls the film in Persian *Ānvare Aras*.

Ashiks have composed volumes of poetry and songs in tribute to Azerbaijan ("The story of nations turns you into an Ashik and the eyes become afflicted by tears"). And there is a proverbial saying that "Tars and balabans look up to Aras but it's from the eyes that its waters flow". The river banks are so close to each other that whatever happens on one side it is visible from the other side.

Azeri troubadours or *ashiks* are first to retell the impassioned history of Azerbaijan, capable of reading its signs as preserved and expressed by natural and geographical elements of the land from time immemorial. The geographical landscape is itself a history book to be deciphered and recounted. Hence the river, the *ashiks*, and the camera echo each other as fellow storytellers through distant times and places.

The mount Sabalan- the whole past of a nation and the myth of a people and their heroism is attached to the Sabalan mountain. The history of our ancestors who defended Azerbaijan from the Arabs is preserved and alive at this mountain: for example Babak and other heroes. And the famous fortress of Babak lies on the slopes of the Sabalan. Here everything is bequeathed by the ancestors.

Contrary to the above description, the remains known as Babak Fortress (or *ghaleh babak*) is located in the Arasbaran forest and not on the slopes of Sabalan. The story of Babak's uprising against the Abbasid Caliphate in the 9th Century AD could have no import on the 20th Century Azerbaijan other than implying that Iranians are now the foreign party ruling over Azerbaijan as once did the Caliphate in Baghdad.

You can see nomadic Shahsavands who take temporary domicile here each year. They have a basic way of life and live in tents and take their herds to the mountain slopes for pasture and live according to old customs and rites of their ancestors. Many world-conquerors have passed across this land throughout history but the people of Azerbaijan have managed to preserve and engrave their customs, rites and language despite the efforts of the world-conquerors. And heroes have rose and fought against them. Passing caravans take rest in this region and take baths in its warm streams.

The Soviet policy towards ethnic entities was aimed at recognition, construction and elevation of ethnic identities and traditions at the cost of their particularization. As Slezkine notes (1994), "All officially recognised Soviet nationalities were supposed to have their own nationally defined 'Great Traditions' that needed to be protected, perfected and, if need be, invented by specially trained professionals in specially designated institutions." A similar approach is prominent in Shub's emphasis on focusing on the nomadic tribes of Azerbaijan as holding and defending the ethnic essence of Azerbaijan against foreign invaders and historical changes.

On the road between Ardebil, Sarab and Tabriz amidst fertile agricultural fields a contemporary car is seen passing - a very strange thing. Astar is located on fertile agricultural lands developed by the hard labor of its local people. The fruits borne by the laborious life of the farmers are taken by the masters who have enforced harsh rules on their working conditions. The people live in destitute and are poor but the land is rich. This is not limited to the Ardabil region. All over Azerbaijan there is this old and primitive belief that the villagers harvest all the crops in order for the masters to exploit them. Nature has been so generous to the land of Azerbaijan and has provided it with a fertile soil, where in addition to fruits and other agricultural produce tea and tobacco fields have proliferated.

These villagers in addition to toiling on agricultural fields have to go to cities to work and earn a piece of bread. In Azerbaijan there are plenty of grape fields and raisin factories. These raisins have to be left on elevated sites to dry so villagers carry on the back heavy sacks of raisin and via narrow ladders up to these sites: "Hurry up, hurry up, work, otherwise tomorrow you will be hungry". These workers have to be on their feet morning to night and toiling non-stop, and their manpower provides the cheapest resource for these factories as their labor is even cheaper and better than the machines. On a daily basis they even work in such factories as long as 14 hours per day without a break. Look at these small hands, tyrannized and hard-bitten. And they are at work with a tiring rhythm. It is even harder to work in salt mines of the cities of Ardebil, Sarab and Astara.

Loads of salt are being transported to Tabriz.

The modern political scene is inaugurated in Shub's narrative with the people of Azerbaijan being oppressed partly because of their own submissive beliefs and practices and partly at the exploiting hand of their brutal masters.

Tabriz is an ancient city with a prominent role in the history of Azerbaijan. Here those who have and those who have not live next to each other. The city is landscaped by narrow alleys, thatch partitions, tall walls and crowded bazaars. The city of Tabriz is famous for its poets, writers, music masters and architects. Its grandeur and beauty is enshrined in the words of its poets. Tabriz is a city-state which is unique compared to other cities of Azerbaijan in terms of the heroism it has harbored in the course of the history of Iranian Azerbaijan. To those who have always tried to impoverish Tabriz and plunder its riches to Tehran: they will never attain this goal for such a magnificent and glamorous city with no beggars or poverty will be enough to detract them. Hard working hands in such dimly-lit workshops are knitting carpets with a tender sound. Azerbaijan's Tabriz is not famous just for its carpet. In other areas such as arts, poetry, music and manufacturing too Tabriz is famous and in particular for its handmade ornamental structures. The Azarabadgan of Tabriz is a fortress spiraling to the sky, where centuries ago it was used as a temple by those who worshipped fire. Many more remarkable buildings and sites are located in Tabriz.

In the city of Urmia there is a historic mosque which has preserved its original beauty and its elaborate decorations, pointing to a high level of craftsmanship but unfortunately we often don't notice or appreciate the significance of these ornaments and artistic creations. The name of the master craftsman of these ornamental engravings is Karbala Nejati. The Friday Mosque is another of such historical buildings. Its awe-inspiring altar is handcrafted and highly decorated. The creator of these lines are the famous poet of Tabriz: Sharaf Shaer. In the citadel of Ardebil is located the historic mosque of Sheikh Safi. On the dome of this mausoleum lies the swords of Shah Ismail Khatai. These swords are the key to the victorious campaigns of the Khataee Shah. Shah Ismaeel united Iran and Azerbaijan and inaugurated the Safavid era and won battles against the Turks and was crowned as the shah of Iran when only fifteen years old. For the first time he had the state laws written in Turkic. Shah Esmaeil is not just a famous military campaigner but also a renowned orator.

Again artists play a prominent role in showcasing the ethnic elements of a people. Here architects, poets, musicians and craftsmen are all signaling the historical presence of an ethnic entity. Shub laments the lack of attention and appreciation for various artistic productions that *visibly* demarcate the historical and cultural turf corresponding to the territory of Azerbaijan. In the same vein, the 15th Century founder of the Safavid Dynasty, Shah Isma'il is referred to by his relatively obscure penname (Khataee) and praised for his historical role not just as a military campaigner or ruler but more significantly as a reviver of the language and traditions native to Azerbaijan - himself "a great orator and poet".

Old books depict drawings inspired by poems and songs such as those of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh or Nezami's Khosrow and Shirin, which are highly significant. The people of Azerbaijan, who are very industrious, let the poets participate with their skills in the city. The people of Azerbaijan preserve and hold their language, religion, customs and conventions very dear to themselves. If their heroes and wars were engraved in history we could now read them all.

Since the poetry of Shah Isma'il is at best only known to scholars of Safavid history Shub moves quickly to more popular examples of literary ethnocentrism. However both works of poetry quoted by her as cultural achievements of Azerbaijan in reality gained literary reputation in the Persianate world well beyond the local traditions of their time and place and were never recognized as a certain ethnic mode of artistic expression. Shahnameh was composed far from Azerbaijan or Turkic languages or "traditions" and Nezami the 12th C. creator of the well-known *Khosrow and Shirin* despite spending his entire life in Azerbaijan composed mainly in Persian. Again a strict association between "people", "arts" and "territory" is being forged and forced through Shub's civilizational landscaping of Azerbaijan.

The Russian revolution brought events to Iran. The leaders of popular resistance movements such as Sattar Khan and his comrade Baqer Khan and then Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani campaigned for democracy and freedom. The fighters and rebels did push ahead and defended Sattar Khan barracks. People fought for six years before the reactionary forces broke the resistance. Nevertheless they were not able to defeat the people and the flag of Sattar Khan was handed over to other patriots who are still fighting today. Despite all, they resisted and fought against the Fascists alongside freedom-demanding movements so that this flag could be raised again.

Shub is now moving into the contemporary stage of political history. As a master editor she stages the 1905 revolution in Russia, the Constitutional Revolution in Iran in the same period, and the events of Ferghe Democrat forty years later in Azerbaijan as sequences following each other on the same territorial stage. The sequencing however is devoid of historical accuracy. The Constitutional Revolution of Iran, which took six years as stated in the film narrative, did have a lot to do with Russia but not in terms of inspiration or instigation; rather in terms of uprising against and suppression by Russian elements. The Constitutional movement in Iran was born in 1905 initially in protest to the tariffs imposed on Iranian merchants to repay the government debts owed to Russia due to the extravagant lifestyle of the Qajar king Mozafaredin Shah. Merchants, reformers and progressive clergies who demanded legislative reforms were suppressed by the mercenary Cossack forces who were employed by the Iranian government but

practically taking orders from Russian officials. At the height of the confrontation in 1908 the building of the parliament in Tehran, the gathering place of pro-parliament public, was shelled by the Russian general Liakhov which ever since is called infamously “the Day of Canon” in Persian (*Yaum al-toop*). Liakhov’s Cossack army also arrested and executed several prominent revolutionaries for which he was rewarded with the position of the military governor of Tehran under the reign of Mohammad Ali Shah. During the Constitutional Revolution Iran was divided into two sections: northern Iran under the influence of the Russians and southern Iran under the influence of the British.

Since the people of Iranian Azerbaijan knew that they had to attain freedom by themselves they formed Fadaee groups in all towns and from across the country. The leaders of the Ferghe Democrat too started to organize and put up resistance for freedom because they too knew that ceaseless struggle is their only weapon. In 1945 the Democratic Ferghe produced a manifesto in which the masses were called to revolt in the name of freedom and patriotism. Many were firebrand orators and freedom-loving citizens who would travel across towns and villages, giving speeches to urban and rural populations. The battle had begun! Their heroes are immortal. Mohammad Agai and Tayarehchi are among those prominent figures who marched on to Tabriz from Tehran to join the movement. People were joining the Fadaees and with the (symbolic?) leadership of Sattar Khan in Tabriz they started the battle. And Gholamali, a Sattar Khan comrade and his brother in arm, was accompanied by the Fadaees who arrived in Tabriz. People of the cities of Urmiah, Ardebil and Mianeh started the rebellion despite not knowing much about such campaigns but they pushed ahead nevertheless. And these heroes served their military service with honor in the barracks of Gholam Ali, whose name would put the enemy in tremor and fear, and they conquered many territories.

On an evening of 1945 about 8:30 pm the martial of Tabriz surrendered and General Derakhshani installed the new People’s Government of the Nation of Azerbaijan and the Persian language that had been used like the native tongue was replaced with Turkic. In 1945 the first national laws were signed in the Turkic language and speaking Turkic became official. Pishvari and other heads of the government were elected. Pishvari is the person who was imprisoned for twelve years in the Shah’s era for his political beliefs. The heads of the government were: the Interior Minister, Dr. Javid²⁴, Agriculture Minister, Dr. Mahtash²⁵, Science and Culture Minister, Poet Biriya²⁶, Energy Minister, Mr. Kaviani, and

²⁴ Salamullah Javid (1900-1986) was the governor of Azerbaijan Province and the Interior Minister of the Autonomous government. At the fall of Ferghe he was in favor of peaceful surrender to the Shah’s army in opposition to Pishvari and others who were inclined towards resistance. He stayed in Tabriz and was detained and sent to Tehran and then pardoned by Shah and reinstated to his previous position .

²⁵ Javid Mahtash was a veterinarian and native of Azerbaijan. Originally a Tudeh member before joining the Autonomous government. Not much is known about his life after his migration to the Soviet.

²⁶ Mohammad Bagherzadeh Nouhi aka Biriya (1913- 1984) was an Azerbaijani Iranian poet who in the last days of the fall of the autonomous republic and after the escape of Pishvari was appointed as the head of Ferghe government. Later during three decades

finally Jahanshahlou, the senior deputy of the prime minister. It is important for those people who have obtained freedom to guard this weapon that they rushed to secure. This weapon that belonged to the reactionary forces is now in the hands of those who are in charge of guarding this land.

Soil: this is a word that expressed the authenticity of generations as well as individuals. The spring has come now and the soil is awaiting humans. The trees are all in bud.

In 1946 representatives gathered from each region. Mr. Pishevari announced in a speech, "Dear brothers by the grace of our leader Sattar Khan and our heroes these lands that are as precious as bowls full of gems (kaseh la'al) and that were in the hands of the enemies of people are now under our control and we are going to divide them and will defend our freedom. To protect this freedom and land is a responsibility that weighs heavily on our shoulder".

By this land and this epic episode all over Iran got inspired and the movements started, long live Azerbaijan! The ministers put out a great fight and Azerbaijan will march on the forefront.

Bless'd be this victory and long live Azerbaijan!

The land (torpaq) is important and I guard it for my own sake. Just being able to say this sentence is such a bliss. Farmers didn't wait to manage land and unfortunately started to divide it by their old method by throwing stones and measuring the distance. And each took their share. Many of these people had sacrificed their lives in the path to prosperity and happiness but these simple villagers who divided the lands by throwing stones didn't know that the internal enemies are watching them closely. They knew the meaning of political signature.

My own land, how dear sounds this term. Many even the elderly work next to the youth enthusiastically. These days are a festive time for everyone. Now it is 22nd of March, coinciding with the Eid, the Eid of Spring. After many generations this is the first time that people celebrate the Eid with a different mood. Let this dawn of Eid be colorful like flowers in the land of poets and artists as they embrace it with poetry. Let Ashik Hossein sing his songs. Today everybody can gather and congratulate one another. The Eid reception is open to all and everybody is its guest and this is a folk tradition. Safdar Khan along with his daughter too are among the guests. The poet Biria reads aloud his poetry: "Those who cast an evil eye on our land they will perish, those who in our name accuse us of lies they will perish, the story of our people will travel from mouth to mouth and it will be preserved for other folks. I declare that Azerbaijan is the land of heroes. The land of the brave, the land of Sattar Khans and Baqer Khans. We are obligated to our ancestors for each centimeter of it."

The alleys of Tabriz are witnessing the harmony of masses and for the first time experience an air of youthfulness. For the first time the wide boulevard of Sattar Khan has been allocated for people's festivity. Pahlavi avenue has been

of exile in the Soviet Union he is subjected to the wrath of the KGB for his repeated attempts to return to Iran and his provoking religious attire and conduct. Broken by long years of prison and isolation in exile he finally returns to Iran a year after the 1979 Revolution to be detained and interrogated by Iranian security and die shortly after.

renamed to Satar Khan avenue. The factories of Tabriz resumed production and to commemorate this moment of national freedom the leaders were presented with medals. The first medals were presented to the national leaders on the occasion of Norouz. The first one was given to Pischevari, who at the cost of his suffering led us to this blessed day and then to the agriculture minister Dr. Mahtash, Fereydoun Mazaheri, Cheshmazar, Jahanshahlou, Shabestari and Javid.

It is customary among the people of Azerbaijan that they call a friend “a thousand friends” and on the other hand throw stones at the back of enemies to ward them off. The people of Azerbaijan received and saw off the leader of Azerbaijan as a very close friend. The regular activities resumed. This Eid days were the fruit of people’s labor. Everybody was doing his or her share. Within the shortest time the roads were paved with asphalt. These roads are the key to success for which everybody worked hard. The ashiks composed songs for the coming of electricity to cities. In Mianeh and many more cities electrical poles were raised and started to work. The factors of Tabriz were out of order and people had to exert a great deal of effort but after a few months of working 8 hours a day the task was accomplished and manufacturing resumed. The patriotic women showed up to work at textile factories. All these changes that happened has a special place in the people’s lives. All that Azerbaijan went through just during 8 months is unbelievable. New hospitals were built and for the first time they admitted ordinary people offering sympathy and help, serving Fadaees. Women for the first time in their lives attended school to learn their mother tongue while in the past it was just a dream for everyone to speak and write the mother tongue. The alphabet A, which is the start of the most beloved words: Freedom (azadi), Mother (ana), and Azerbaijan.

Freedom allowed the mother of these children to get education in their own language. The children were speaking at home the same languages as of their mothers and therefore were happy.

Each day there was something new. The pharmacy of Tabriz was inaugurated and the physicians started to meet with their students and the first university textbooks were printed in Turkic. Azerbaijani poets now had a lot to create poetry about. And all these young boys and girls who are gathering to honor the memory of Sattar Khan. About this most cherished event of freedom many stories will be written.

A traditional sport hall (zoorkhaneh): look at the movement of these arms. Their movement transfers zest and strength to the heroes of Azerbaijan. The great success of Azerbaijan instilled the wish for freedom and will give birth to national movements in other parts of Iran.

In 1946 Kurdish representatives came to Tabriz led by Qazi Mohammad²⁷. He signed a friendship accord with Iran and then went back for bringing democracy

²⁷ Qazi Mohammad (1893-1946) acted as the president of the (Kurdish) Republic of Mahabad, a twin of the People’s Republic of Azerbaijan under Soviet protection. After the Soviet withdrawal and the victory of the central army he was court martialled and hanged on March 31 1947. However his army chief and prominent Kurdish leader, Mustafa Barzani, along his 500 strong *peshmarga* force in a tight chase with the Iranian

to his native country. The name of Qazi Mohammad echoes freedom, independence and free spiritedness, a very popular figure across Kurdistan. This gathering was turned into a magnificent national festivity. In 1946 the government in Tehran was changed and upon the request of the Azerbaijan of Iran they sent their representatives from Tabriz to Tehran for negotiations. The airport of Tabriz was full of the crowd who had come to receive their representatives from Tehran. All the demands of the National Government of Azerbaijan had been accepted by Tehran. In December of 1946 a treaty was signed and was announced by Radio Tabriz. Accordingly, new rules were put in place for land management and for the creation of Azeri councils and for the expenditure of a third forth of the income of Azerbaijan for itself. Also the right to use mother tongue was officially recognized in that treaty. And ultimately it was the right to create councils that fulfilled the wishes of people. From then on the Azerbaijan leader, Dr.Javid, were able to travel to and visit villages frequently to inquire about problems, which was unprecedented till then.

A statue honoring Baqer Khan was erected on Sattarkhan avenue. Pischevari took his role as a leader enthusiastically and impassioned the people of Azerbaijan through his rule as it was sanctioned in the treaty that the Democratic Azerbaijani be ruled by a governor (vaali). The first anniversary of freedom was turned into a magnificent festival and guests arrived in Tabriz from all around and the people were finally able to manifest their power and there was such a level of sincerity expressed in poetry, slogans and songs as if nothing will stop this jubilee and that Sattar Khan's flag will be waving high forever.

But no one could believe that Tehran would betray and disregard the treaty and that there will be bloodbath. The year 1946 was the last Eid in Azerbaijan as the treaty was abandoned, prisons across the country were loaded with prisoners and the heroes who fought for the freedom of Azerbaijan again were arrested and imprisoned or executed like Shabestari and Javid, who were imprisoned or the General and Qazi Mohammad who were executed. They killed the fire-brand speakers and freedom-loving citizens, and treason and insurrection engulfed the country, and everywhere was covered by dead bodies, burned houses and blood. All that happened on the other side of Aras and still goes on....

End of Transcript of *On the Other Side of Aras*

Regardless of its historical inaccuracies and the masterful editing skills of Shub, the film played no role in what transpired before and after the events it depicted so impassionately. The main reasons for its irrelevance was that the Soviet government stopped believing in what it preached even before the film could come out. With the Soviet's cold feet, the Ferghe Democrat and along with it thousands of mobilized Tudeh party supporters were thrown into organizational, political, and territorial limbo many as far as the penal colonies of Central Asia, Siberia, and even the notorious Gulags of the Far East Territories.

army in their pursuit is able to pass the River Aras into Soviet Azerbaijan after an epic march of about 300 kilometers across Zagros Mountains . They will be resettled and living in Uzbekistan before moving to Iraq after the July revolution of 1958.

Cold War Troubles: Beginning of a Dark Decade for a Prodigious Party

Despite its rapid growth and high ambitions, the Tudeh party as the main communist organization in post-war Iran suffered irreversible losses between 1945-1955. The Tudeh Party (*Tudeh* meaning masses in Persian) had been officially born in 1941 less than a month after British and Russian forces invaded Iran in order to counter Reza Shah's affinities with the Nazi Germany and use the country's transportation route for sending vital supplies to Russia. Ironically this period of occupation till the end of the second World War was a relatively prosperous time as the country benefited from financial relief through war-related jobs and provisions. Politically too the period between the removal of the authoritarian father king by the Allied Forces and the consolidation of power by his young inexperienced son was a exceptional era of social activism and political mobilization. Those members of the old Communist Party who had previously been persecuted, jailed or exiled during the uncompromising rule of Reza Shah now didn't waste a chance to regroup with younger generations of college students, factory workers, high school teachers, and other layers of the society, forming the prodigious Tudeh Party of Iran. In a relatively short time the party enlisted a unique array of diverse or even contradictory figures under various levels of its organization including Qajar-era revolutionaries, farm workers, enlightened feudals, patriotic army officers, ethnic and religious minorities, classical poets, founders of modern Persian literature, foreign or domestic-educated writers, engineers, physicians and so on. The list of famous personalities joining the party officially or sympathizing with it at least at a point of modern history of Iran read like a who-is-who list of prominent figures of Iranian intellectuals of the last century. Only three years after its inception, the Tudeh Party enjoyed such a level of popularity that the head of Tehran University in a communiqué with the British Ambassador of the time warned that the majority of the four thousand students of the university were significantly under the party's influence. During this short period the party was responsible for organizing waves of petitions, demonstrations and strikes particularly against the British presence in the country. But the boldest as well as the most miscalculated move of the Tudeh party was its half-hearted support and forced involvement in the ill-designed Soviet project of *Ferghe Democrat Azerbaijan* or the Democratic Branch of Azerbaijan (from now the Ferghe).



Jafar Pishevari in the middle with other leaders of the Ferghe Demokrat, circa 1945. Wikipedia Creative Common License.

Regardless of some attempts to depict the Ferghe as a spontaneous formation based on local and ethnic grievances, the scholarly consensus based on archival evidence points to significant material, armed, and ideological involvement of the Soviet Union in establishing two breakaway republics in 1945, the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad²⁸ under the political leadership of the movement²⁹. Reluctant to leave without securing a sphere of interest similar to that of the British in the south of Iran, the Red Army, some thirty-thousand strong, held on to the northern provinces while Moscow was trying to broker a diplomatic agreement with Iranian representatives to explore and exploit the Caspian shoreline for oil. At a point of time during the negotiation process, which artfully prolonged by the Iranian side, a circle close to Stalin including Beria and Baghirov³⁰ pushed for mobilization and orchestration

²⁸ The two autonomous republics during their short life changed currency, invented their own official seal and even issued school certificates with a new letterhead.

²⁹ Atabaki's *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (2000) remains the most balanced, multi-faceted, and well-researched study published in English on the Azerbaijan crisis. For a historical account, though limited to the role of Qavam (the Iranian prime-minister of the time) and his winning diplomacy during the Ferghe crisis look at J. Mūsavī'zādah's *Tabrīz zīr-i chakmah'hā-yi Artish-i Surkh* (2002).

³⁰ Mir Jafar Baghirov (1896 - 1956) was the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Azerbaijan Communist Party during the Ferghe crisis who after Stalin's death was accused of atrocities and executed .

of various forces and actors inside Iran possibly to seize the momentum and/or as a precursor to demarking that sphere of influence. In September 1945, three months after Stalin's decree on creation of autonomous "oblasts" in northern Iran, *Ferghe Democrat* announced its official birth in the Azerbaijan of Iran. As for the fall of the Ferghe less consensus and more controversy exists on why only a year after in 1946 Moscow couldn't care less about the fate of the two autonomous republics and only sufficed to provide safe passage to the Ferghe militia (or *fadaees*), officials and leaders into the Soviet territories³¹.

³¹ This was first and foremost a problem raised by Tudeh leaders among themselves as well as addressed to the Russian sponsors of the Ferghe. N. Jahanshahloo, originally a member of the Communist Party and a founder of Tudeh and the first deputy to the head of the Ferghe Jafar Pischevari (or *bash vezir* in Azeri), describes a conversation between Pischevari and Gholiev the consulate general of Russia in Tabriz on the eve of the fall of the Azerbaijan Autonomous Republic. According to him, Pischevari protests to Gholiev angrily, "You pushed us into the middle of maidan and then abandoned us cowardly going after your own interests. Now it is too late for us but what about these ordinary people who followed us, who mobilized and sacrificed themselves? Their life is all in danger. I want to know who is responsible by this mayhem?" Gholiev, mumbling out of anger, replied in Azeri, "Whoever brought you is now telling you to go!"



The map of two autonomous republics created in December 1945 with Astará and Julfa as the two main points of crossing the border after the fall of Ferghe in December 1946. Wikipedia Creative Commons License.

Whatever the reasons, the unforeseeable collapse of Ferghe and the considerable involvement of the Tudeh party in filling its ranks posed unprecedented ideological confusion in addition to dire security problems for the majority of party members. From now on the name Tudehi (meaning affiliated with Tudeh) bore a hefty accusation as traitor to the territorial integrity of Iran regardless of the actual position of the party vis a vis the Ferghe affair. In the decree autographed by Stalin, communist forces in northern Iran had been instructed to dissolve and to re-integrate into the newly-formed ranks of the Ferghe. But the Tudeh Party of Iran (the name of the country has always been kept in the title), despite identification with Soviet Leninism and internationalist communism, had inherited a wide range of nationalistic sentiments dating back to the Constitutional Revolution era in the Qajar period and on. Thus as several memoir-writers and historians point out, Stalin's orders for rebranding the party in territorial terms was met by confusion, disagreement and debate despite the call of leaders to keep ranks and cohesion in public. The fall of the seat of the Ferghe, Tabriz, to loyalist guerillas even

before the arrival of army units and the overnight escape of its leaders to Soviet Azerbaijan fermented further disaffection, deflection and branching among the party cadres³².

Thus the first territorial exodus of Tudeh party members from Iran took place in the seismic fault created by the Ferghe affair and continued two years later in 1948 after a failed assassination of the king that was blamed on the Tudeh Party, resulting in its official ban throughout the country. Five years later the CIA-assisted coup against the nationalist government of Mosaddeq was followed by mass identification and prosecution of the military branch of Tudeh party and further intensified the waves of emigration into the Soviet Union. Historically it is possible to divide the post and pre 1953 coup waves of Tudeh emigres into two separate groups but as Fathollahzadeh (2008) in the collected memoirs of his colleagues shows both groups were tried by the Soviet penal system on similar grounds of illegal border crossing and received similar sentences. This point also builds into my argument on border crossing as a preferred lens for dealing with chronological raw data rather than to impose on it a pre-formed socio-political periodization. Such a lens can shed light on the continuity of certain institutional practices from the late Stalinism period well into the Khrushchev's era.

³² A major organizational fall-out of the Ferghe affair started with the public deflection of Khalil Maleki, an influential and founding member of Tudeh who reported on the ineptitude and passivity of the party leaders during the Azerbaijan crisis. The reverberations of the crisis continued also across the borders far and long after: Zarbakht (1994) divides the community of Iranian émigrés in Dushanbe into three circles: the majority who were in favor of *Ferghe Democrat* and allegedly had ties with Baku, those ordinary Tudeh party members with no affiliation with the *Ferghe* often harassed by the first, and a third group of non-members who had disguised themselves among the two. Fathollahzaeh also discusses the tragic fate of many Ferghe sympathizers isolated in Kazakhstan.



Pishevari holding a Ferghe flag grabbed by the fist of an army soldier in Azerbaijan. From *Erade Azerbaijan* (Azerbaijan's Will) newspaper published in the 40s. Wikipedia Creative Commons License.

The Soviet Memoirs of Iranian Emigres: Introduction

Since the Soviet memoirs of Tudeh émigrés are introduced for the first time in the English language scholarly world, a few points on archival sources needs to be mentioned along the historical and the topographical engagement . First, about half of these memoirs are published outside of Iran for two reasons: the authors continued to live in exile and/or they could not foresee passing through the censorship in Iran³³. And since they are all written, compiled and edited in Persian the publishing houses abroad that could accept, print, and distribute them have been small, diasporic printing shops scattered around Europe and the United State, most of them defunct now. Therefore in theory it is impossible for me to provide an exact or absolute count of all the Tudeh Party Soviet memoirs ever published. However drawing on the in-text and bibliographic references I can assuredly claim that more than twenty five volumes of the memoirs (more than two thousand pages) I've been able to identify and study so far constitute the majority of this genre³⁴.

³³ There are also a couple of memoirs that are first published abroad and then re-printed in Iran.

³⁴ Listed in the appendix at the end of the dissertation. Adding to the existing publications by and on Tudeh party émigrés, Dr. Hamid Ahmadi at the Research Association for Iranian Oral History has produced hundreds of hours of interviews in a span of two decades as part of an ongoing project to record the living history of the

Second, all of the studied memoirs were published within the last three decades from 1980s to 2010. I've not researched nor included those memoirs published before the Iranian revolution during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Not more than a couple, they were to target a specific audience (e.g. army cadets) in the government bid to counter communist propaganda of the time. There is a high possibility that their repenting authors were tasked, at least to some degree, to mix repentance and confessions with memoirs, a hybrid style of memorialization that requires a different analytics than the one I develop here.

Thematically most of the Tudeh party Soviet memoirs open with a socio-political landscape of Iran implicating the author's personal and political stakes and continue through various phases of emigration to, through and finally outside the Soviet territories. For example the opening chapter of Pishvapur's memoir *The Struggle of Life, From the Military Branch of Tudeh Party to Siberian Camps* is entitled A Brief View on My Youth and the Reason for My Affinity with Leftist Movements. Similarly, an introductory chapter of Mohammad Torbati's *From Tehran to Stalinabad* deals with the circumstances of his membership in the Tudeh Party and continues for several chapters on his activism against the Shah and his imprisonment in Iran till his escape to Soviet Union and the start of a new phase of his life as a Marxist intellectual and later economist first in Stalinabad (the old Soviet name of Dushanbe) and then in Prague. Historically the periods covered by the memoirs *within* the Soviet territories span from 25 to 50 years: Leaving Iran sometime during the eventful decade of 1945-1955 the memoirs navigate through various Soviet administrations till mid 90s when the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the break-out of Tajikistan civil war leads to the final exit of many Tudeh emigres including the memoir writers and their subsequent resettlement in the West or Iran.

Geographically, the memoirs follow a roughly common route from various provinces in Iran towards the border zones of the either side of the Caspian Sea and mostly then to detention centers and labor camps in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan - for some even to the Gulags of Magadan or to exile towns of Kazakhstan - then settling in the diasporic communities of Dushanbe and Moscow before exiting via the Communist Bloc in the end. In between abandoning Iran and staying in the Soviet Union a couple of memoir-writers were able to make brief visits to Iran, to Eastern Europe and even to the neighboring countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan. Several of the memoirs are entitled as geo- biographies such as *The Other Side of Astana*, *From Anzali to Dushanbe*, *From Tehran to Stalin Abad*, *On a Dirt Road Through Dust*, *No Aging in Magadan*, and *Passage through Barzakh*. The Soviet sections of the memoirs, which often comprises a major part of the authors' biographies, is ordered and entitled in a with overwhelmingly geographical references on the same level of importance as pivotal events such as marriage. For example in *From Anzali to Dushanbe* Mohammad Rouzgar divides a quarter of century of his life under the Soviet into the following chapters: "The First Step

Iranian left. Naturally the history of Tudeh Party both inside and outside Iran comprises a significant subject of such a unique and valuable archive of Iranian communist and socialist forces and organizations. Some of these oral histories include unique narratives on Soviet life in territories such as Eastern Germany (the site of the party headquarters in late Soviet period), Bulgaria, Afghanistan, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere.

into the Soviet territory”, “Two Months in Ashgabat”, “Two Years in Tashauz, Marriage, Twenty Two years in Tajikistan”, “A Time for Eating Stew”, “The Tudehis of Dushanbe”, “The Tudehis of Moscow”.

As the first part of my argument here on territory and subjectivity I distinguish, describe and compare three ideal types in the Soviet memoirs of Tudeh party émigrés: *The elite* or those Tudeh party members with direct access, recognition and ties to the leadership of the party in Iran as well as officials in Russia which enabled them to cross the Soviet Azerbaijan borders in designated and protected corridors. They were subsequently granted as legal and political protection as full-fledged Soviet citizens and were allowed to resettle in Moscow and live a relatively privileged life. The memoirs of Najmi Alavai and Ghasem Jahanshahloo are among this first fortunate type. In contrast, the second group or *the commoners*, representing the majority of the memoirs, exited Iranian territories on their own and forcefully without guarantee of recognition. This group of emigres because of having no official permission to cross Soviet borders and no means to establish their connection to the party had to endure several (from three to six) years of forced labor, the legal punishment for trespassing, and then resettled and lived for decades mostly in Tajikistan under the auspices of Soviet Red Cross as non-citizens or stateless (*bez grazhdan*).

The third group or *the damned* also exited Iran on their own similar to the second group but during the detention phase they were randomly singled out, accused and interrogated as spies and received decade-long sentences in the Gulags before being rehabilitated by the Khrushchev’s administration³⁵. Also in the memoirs of all the three groups lurk subaltern figures of local guides, rebels, shepherds and servants who were caught, trapped or carried across the Soviet borders haphazardly or against their will.

This introductory classification of the memoirs is to show that Soviet borders with Iran were not penetrable for all Tudeh members equally, and that many events and forces that would later shape the individual trajectories and lifelong journeys of these memoir-writers across the labyrinthine Soviet Territories were prefigured in advance by the administrative-penal-logistical mechanisms operating in relation and adjacent to the border zones. I show this point by highlighting and comparing the memorialization of border-crossing in episodes from the three types of the memoirs.

³⁵ Though only a couple of memoirs are written by this group, in their extraordinary accounts they also point to the ordeals of numerous less-fortunate peers perished due to prolonged incarceration and forced labor.

Julfa Itineraries: “An Iron Snake Faster than a Horse”



The 15th Century bridge, *pole dokhtar*, connecting Zanjan to Mianeh, was exploded by the Ferghe militia, *fadaees*, fleeing the army units deployed to Azerbaijan on Dec 16th 1946. Picture from Wikipedia, Creative Commons Licence

In the memoirs of the most senior leaders of the Tudeh party, such as Nouredin Kianouri or Ehsan Tabari, who were shuttling back and forth between Moscow and Tehran whether legally or illegally (and sometimes via a third or fourth country route), hardly any mention of border-crossing can be found. Conversely, there are brief, sarcastic references in the memoirs of the ordinary Tudeh emigres on the facile movements of the party leaders in “brand new, dark-colored Zils and Volgas” (Safavi, 2003). But among what I call the elite, or those on the higher echelon of party organization but lower than the leaders or the central committee members, Najmi Alavi’s memoir under the title of *We Too Have a Right in This House* (2004) provides a short, atypical account of border crossing to be contrasted with dramatic events experienced by other memoirs writers.

Najmi Alavi came from a prominent family of intellectuals and activists. Her brother Bozorg was a towering figure of modern Persian fiction and also among the founding members of the Communist Party in the 40s and a member of the group of 53 imprisoned by Reza Shah. Najmi’s other brother, Morteza, fleeing from persecution during the same period migrated to Russia but soon fell from Moscow’s grace and perished in Tajikistan³⁶. Najmi herself had important roles in leading the women’s right movements in Iran such as being on the editorial board of the feminist journal *Our Awakening* published in 1944-47 in addition to her membership in the Tudeh party after her marriage to an officer member of Tudeh. Her brief involvement in the Ferghe affairs through her husband led to the emigration of her family to USSR for 34 years. Apart

³⁶ Najmi in her memoirs explains her ceaseless efforts during decades of stay in Russia to excavate information on the fate of her brother and finally obtains his death certificate that stated he died of malaria in a prison in Tajikistan in 1941.

from a brief return to Iran after the 1979 revolution, she stayed the rest of her life in exile and eventually settled in London with her daughters.



Cover of the journal *Our Awakening* with the motto “We too have a right in this house”.
Wikipedia Creative Common License.

Around the time of the rise of the Ferghe in 1945, Najmi’s husband, Morad Razmara, an army officer and a member of the military branch of Tudeh party, was in hiding in Baku in Soviet Azerbaijan³⁷. Having returned to Azerbaijan of Iran and served in the Ferghe leadership cadre for several months, he invites Najmi and their three-year-old daughter to Tabriz. On the eve of the fall of Tabriz to the loyalists in December 1946 Najmi’s family flee to the Soviet Azerbaijan along with thousands of paramilitary guerillas, tribal groups, and Tudeh supporters of the Ferghe. While it is generally known that the Soviet administration provided safe passage to Ferghe refugees through designated corridors and for a limited time, Najmi’s laconic reference in her memoir provides almost no details on the concrete circumstances, place, or time of such passage: “After passing over Iranian borders in December 1946 we entered Zhdanov Camp”.

³⁷ The officers of the military branch of Tudeh party in sensitive times such as the rise of the Ferghe were tasked to conduct special, secret operations. If exposed and arrested by security forces, their swift prosecution and execution was almost certain. Hence their elite and trusted status with the party and in some cases even on par or above its civilian leaders. For a single study on the military branch of Tudeh in the period 1943-1954 look at M. Khosropanah’s *Sazeman Afsaran Hezeb Toudeh Iran* (2008).

Upon crossing into Azerbaijan's borders in a coordinated manner, families of the military branch of Tudeh party including Najmi's are immediately lodged in a camp that was used to hold German POWs. Based on Najmi's account, neither she, nor her husband or others in their family or friend circles were treated as detainees, criminals or spies and shortly after their encampment inside the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan they enjoyed relative freedom of moving around the camp area. Also, though she laments the general conditions of their camp, they are provided with regular military portions and later even an improved "dry ration including pasta and ham". After four months Najmi's and hundreds of accompanying families of Tudeh and Ferghe officers and officials are moved to a large garden-compound in a suburb of Baku called the Garden of Mardakan. Later she would learn Azeri and work for Radio Baku before moving to Moscow to attend university. The saddest event in Najmi's memoir during the first year of her almost eventless border crossing into Soviet Azerbaijan is the illness and death of their family servant. Najmi decides to donate the body of their servant, Zarafshan, who had accompanied them from Tehran to Tabriz and eventually to Baku, "for the purpose of scientific research". Najmi Alavi's memoir is not necessarily sparse, laconic or complicit in narrating the events of her emigration to Soviet Union. Conversely, in many instances she excavates, reveals and condemns the tragic fate and sufferings of Iranian emigres including her own brother. However, as the brief episode on the first chapter of her life in USSR shows, neither her border-crossing nor her subsequent movements could not be the focal point of her exilic journey or its mode of memorialization. Between contrasting Najmi's mute passage to a dramatic account by a young bride on the violent push of locals across the border town of Astara to a border town in Soviet Azerbaijan by the same name, there is a brief section on border crossing in the memoirs of Jahanshahloo, the second highest-ranking official in the Ferghe Government and the deputy of its prime minister Pishevari. Long before the rise of Ferghe, Jahanshahloo was a prominent and founding member of the Tudeh party, persecuted and imprisoned as a member of the group of 53 and released after the overthrow of Reza Shah by the invading Allied Forces. He studied medicine and at the same time led the Youth Organization of the Tudeh Party. In the Ferghe government he was responsible for negotiating with the central government in Tehran. At the collapse of the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan he and other high ranking officials of the Ferghe were transported to a designated garden close to Baku, most probably the same that housed Najmi's family and other Ferghe officers³⁸. However he provides a relatively more vivid as well as introspective account of his passage from the same designated Jolfa corridor that Najmi and other officers used:

We arrived at the [Jolfa] border at dawn. It was very cold, the formalities took a while. At the border crossing they did not inspect us at all. All officers handed over their weapons except for the generals. No one asked the leaders and members of the central committee of the Ferghe Azerbaijan for their weapons but I gave my revolver and automatic weapon to the border officer except for my hunting rifle and another revolver that I kept. Then we rode to Nakhijevan and

³⁸ Jahanshahlou does in fact mention and comment a few times on Najmi's husband but in a suspicious and disparaging tone in particular in relation to his close association with various foreign governments and his shadowy activities and travels.

there general Atakishiyev³⁹ the minister of interior, Hasan Hasanov the third secretary of the Bolshevik Party of Azerbaijan, and Mirza Ibrahimov⁴⁰ the minister of culture came to receive us as envoys of Mir Jafar Baghirov.

From *We and the Strangers*, 1982, end of first book, no page number.

Jahanshahlou also adds reminiscences on his last steps on Iranian soil to the concrete circumstances of his passage:

I could have no knowledge of what was going on in the minds of others but I for Myself could not take eyes from the farthest points of horizon in my homeland. In that brief moment my childhood, my teens and my youth all and all was passing in front of my eyes like a movie screen. The sweet or bitter moments of life in my homeland they all tasted equally so sweet at that moment. My appearance was calm and quiet but inside I was so disturbed.

From *We and the Strangers*, 1982, Second Book, page 7. My translation

Let's now compare the border crossing accounts of the above two high-ranking members of the Ferghe to Razia's descriptions of the events leading to her family's forceful removal from their border town of Astara and their crossing to the Soviet side of Azerbaijan about the same time as the other two above-mentioned memoir writers. Razia's memoir in the chapter *The Other Side of Astara* is cited in lieu of her late husband Esrafil who had just passed and is part of a volume of collected memoirs of Iranian Soviet emigres entitled *The Cold Stove of Neighbor* (2008). Razia's memoir is short but sharp on memorialization of the circumstances of the exodus of her extended family to the Soviet side of the border town of Astara. On the same day that Najmi Alavi crossed the borders through protected corridors, pro-Ferghe guerillas or *Fadaees* appeared at the door of Razia's family and forced whoever present to follow them across the border to Soviet Azerbaijan. When resisted and asked for a reason, Razia's in-laws were told horrifying stories of rape and execution by the loyalist militia and that it would be a temporary exit "for a couple of days at most". The exit turned into forty eight years of harsh life in Soviet territories for the sixteen-year-old, newly-wed Razia. Women, children and the elderly, whether convinced or forced, gathered into groups and hurled into the other side of the border without even being able to inform their male relatives who were working at the sea during the day. Upon entering the Soviet side of Astara rebels put fire to the wooden bridge separating the two sections and beat anyone getting cold feet. After a few hours of wandering in the city, families are loaded onto trucks and carried to train wagons at a station: Razia describes her impressions of her first train ride in Soviet Astara as "an iron snake faster than a horse meandering across towns and hills". All this time they still thought they were on their way back to Iran. A while into the journey children start to cry out of hunger while adults find using barrels as designated public toilets on train wagons a most unpleasant first experience. After two train rides across Jolfa they get off at a village with fields of cabbage nearby.

³⁹ Agasalim Atakishiyev (born 1900 - died 1970) was an Azerbaijani politician. He was Interior Minister of Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic between 1934 - 1953 according to the online archive of the Azerbaijan Government:

<http://www.mia.gov.az/?/az/content/131/>

⁴⁰ Mirza Ibrahimov (1911-1993), Azerbaijani writer, playwright, state and public figure, who successfully advocated for the recognition of Azeri language as the second official language of the Soviet Azerbaijan.

Having had no food all the day, Razia and her family start to dig for cabbage roots. Finally each member of the family including her mother-in-law is allowed to work full day in exchange for 400 grams of black bread. Razia's entire family are housed in a tiny hut. During several years of forced labor in rural Azerbaijan, where "guards and head workers did not care about hygienic problems of female workers" Razia witnesses the perish of her extended family in the absence of her husband: her mother and brother-in-law as well as her own uncle are dead by the time Esrafil is able to locate them from far away Tajikistan where he had been exiled to and living for several years. Shortly after their forced departure, Esrafil had crossed the border to look for them. But he was detained, served a three years prison sentence for trespassing before settling in Dushanbe. Even after finding his wife Esrafil had to travel to Azerbaijan to get the permission to take her back to Tajikistan - for Azerbaijan would not readily agree to release her due to her being counted "a local workforce"; a story far different than Najmi's smooth path to and out of Azerbaijan. Here is Razia's saga of entering Soviet Azerbaijan from her border town of Astara and from there being transported to Jolfa, the main arriving hub for Ferghe refugees from across Azerbaijan of Iran.

Let me now tell you what befell us:

It was the December of 1946. Me and my mother in law and two younger brothers of Esrafil were at home. All of a sudden someone knocked the door violently. My father in law, Imamali, who was also my uncle, was at sea fishing. My mother in law and me opened the door anxiously. Two armed fadaees⁴¹ were standing at the door. My mother in law said, "Qārdāsh [brother in Azeri], what are you breaking the door for?!" One of them ordered us harshly, "Quick! Get out the house". My mother in law replied, "But to where? What for?" They answered, "We are here from the Ferghe committee want to warn you that the Shah's army along with the police force are advancing towards Astara. They will violate women, create a bloodbath, make a massacre, put houses on fire, so you and all the residents of this area have to move to the Soviet Union". My mother in law cried, "My husband is at sea and my son is not in Astara now, where can I go with my young bride and these two sons?" A fadaee pointing to me and my mother-in-law said, "Just because of the dignity of your family you should go to the Russian Astara and there a place is prepared for you. You will return after two days again". The neighborhood and then my aunts gathered to figure out a solution. So we reached the conclusion to go to the Russian Astara for two days. One reasoned against sacrificing ourselves for nothing and the other feared women being violated and....Then we have to go, there is no choice. The army and its infamous police force will arrive...My mother in law locked the house door and hang the key at a nail on terrace. Our neighborhood, which was called Hakim Nezami, was located in the vicinity of Astara and close to the Soviet border. In such circumstances all the residents of our neighborhood moved to the Soviet side except for Aunt Pari and Mir Taqi. But things in Astara proper was different: more than half of Astara population, particularly women and

⁴¹ Guerrilla groups formed and mobilized in alliance with the Ferghe Government, mostly comprised of displaced villagers.

girls, took refuge in mosques fearful of being raped. But when I was reunited with my husband after eight years I learned that when the Shah's army and its police force arrived there happened no violation of women, the property of those not affiliated with the Ferghe was not attacked, and no houses was put on fire. For example our houses and lands and those of my aunts were not confiscated by the government but by our own relatives. Here I don't intend to justify the Pahlavi regime or its brutal police force but I want to show the fake propaganda, the oppression and our forced displacement under deceitful conditions that held our body and soul for forty seven years hostage to the Soviet government and took the lives of my relatives and wasted the lives of me and thousands of other Iranians.

Anyways the neighborhood set off. Our family too (Me and my mother in law and two of my husband's younger brothers) along with the family of my two aunts and those of neighbors (Sara and Rakhshande) were in the same party. We all believed that for two days we are fleeing from the Shah's army and police to the Soviet Astara and then after the return of calm we come back to our own Astara. At that time I was a sixteen year old bride and relied on my mother-in-law's decision and thought she would have a better judgement than me. When walking I noticed that a significant number of people had been threatened explicitly and against their will. Upon arriving at Soviet Astara I realized that one third of the population of Astara were moved there under some sort of deceit or coercion or out of despair. The fadaees under the leadership of Sadegh Khan pillaged the shops and put the famous wooden bridge of Astara on fire. Half way when my cousin wanted to go back, he was told by Sadegh Khan that the bridge was on fire and he couldn't go back. When he insisted they beat him almost to death. The two days we spent in the Soviet Astara we were just sitting on benches tired and hungry and wondering what to do in such circumstances and to whom address our problems. Upset about our situation the third day we started to walk back towards the border bridge and our homes in Iran. As we approached the bridge, armed soldiers ordered us to stop and held us on a spot all together, old, young, women, children. All of a sudden several cargo trucks arrived and the soldiers loaded us. People said, "where to on trucks? For the border is close and we can just walk to our own Astara". The head of the soldiers, a deceitful and wicked man, replied in Azeri, " No, no, why on foot. It'd be a disgrace for the Soviet regime to let you go back to Iran on foot. Besides, clashes are going on at the border and you may get wounded or killed so we have to send you back to Iran from a safer place.

The cargo trucks hit the road and we didn't know this new area or where we are being taken to. The trucks continued their journey for two hours till we arrived at a train station, where a train was awaiting us. The children were all hungry and crying and the poor mothers didn't know what the hell to do. The soldiers loaded us into cargo wagons like animals and we sensed that it was not their intent to send us back to Iran. Then men started to raise questions in a protesting manner, "But where are you taking us?" Women got suspicious by their protest and they too started to scream and beat themselves, which in turn scared the children who were watching the cry of mothers and threw them into tantrum.

Some men disobeyed and threw themselves out of the wagons. Then suddenly the soldiers started to fire into air and their dogs upon the order of soldiers started to bark, making a frightening scene. As things calmed down a bit, the soldiers threatened to shoot at those disobeying. The protesting crowd became subdued and we were all placed in the wagons, the doors closed and the inside space got dark and the train started to run.

Again hunger overwhelmed us. Children were crying for food and the poor mothers didn't know what to do. We couldn't understand this cruel behavior coming from Soviet soldiers nor guess their intention. Until that day we had not rode a train. This was strange to us how a long piece of metal could crawl like a snake and run with a strange noise through valleys and mountains faster than a horse. Let's pass. The train continued its journey and we were imprisoned inside the wagons. Some needed toilet and soiled themselves. After about two hours the train stopped. We saw the Soviet soldiers loaded some people and then again it stopped to load more people that looked like us. This stopping and loading happened three times till Jolfa. Then we realized that these poor ones were like us: they had been wandering in the border strip for two three days while they like us had hoped that they would go back to Iran after this time. In fact our train was stopping to collect all Ferghe members and their families who retreated into the Soviet territories in various border points and to take them to Jolfa. After the train stopped an old woman from Astara complained to an officer, "You didn't think how we can go to toilet inside the wagons?" The officer answered, "Weren't there toilet barrels (barsh) there? You could have done it in the barrels". The old woman replied angrily, "We didn't know what these barrels are for, and besides, there were man and women in the wagons, how could it be possible to do it?" The officer replied, "Well mother when someone is busy others can avoid watching". She suddenly got aggravated and said, "You too have swallowed your shame and disgrace and have placed your dignity in your ass! Also I'm not your mother and don't want to have a son like you. You brought us here at bayonet point by deceit and supposedly only for two days, now you dare to call me your mother?"

The Soviet officer said, "Don't talk too much, this is our regulations". The old woman damned, "Then the hell with such regulations!" The officer this time pretended not hearing the old woman's harsh words and showed no reaction. We came to learn later that the people of Soviet Azerbaijan because of sharing the same religion and language would help us as much they could and would sometimes tolerate our rightful though aggressive protests. Likewise the protest of this brave women was always on our minds. After years I learned that even the security police of the Stalin era could not stop the words of such women.

They would always curse the Soviet regime and its officials with no fear. When the train arrived at Jolfa a large number of people got off. The day after they loaded us again and took us to a village three hours away. There was a lot of cabbage fields in this village but we had no clothes or no roof over us. Also the hunger had disabled us. I should say it was for the first time in Soviet territory that we Iranians felt absolute hunger from close. All we had was our clothes and shoes and chadors (a full body robe worn by Muslim women). We had no

provisions. At the same time we heard that the family of Sadegh Khan are selling the goods they looted from Astara in the bazar of Kakhor. We had no bread or food. To satisfy hunger we had to dig out the fields for cabbage roots and eat them. When the weather got cold and the ground froze our job became much harder and digging out cabbage became a huge pain.

From the chapter The Other Side of Astara by Razia Bayramzadeh in *The Cold Stove of Neighbor*, pp. 178-184.

Eventually Razia finds a temporary solution to the problem of hunger: selling her wedding chador and buying some flour to make bread with - the bread smelled intensely because the cheap flour was soiled with petroleum.

After eight years of forced labor in agricultural fields her husband, Esrafil, locates her and travels to Azerbaijan to take her to Tajikistan, where he has been exiled to for trespassing the Soviet borders searching for them:

Eventually Esrafil after eight years of efforts and correspondence with Moscow was able to find where we lived. I was supposed to be transferred from Azerbaijan to Tajikistan but the local officials resisted to my transfer because I was counted part of the labor force of this area and didn't have permission to leave. Just imagine we were not even entitled of the legal or conventional rights the Iranian peasants enjoyed. True that peasants were oppressed in Iran but at least they had the right to leave their village for any reasons.

After a few months Esrafil notified us that he is coming himself to take me with him. I became moody and my cousins started to tease me. They too were having a very hard time but tried to lift my spirit. Yes eight disgusting years passed and I knew that my husband too must have been suffering all along.

At the moment of our meeting we both burst into tears. He just learned that his father died of sorrows, his mother of food poisoning, and his brother of hunger and tuberculosis. He was struck by the horrid appearance of us and his relatives. He and I went to a private spot while he was still shedding tears. Honestly my heart was overcome with grievances all this time and was just looking for someone to take it against him. I told my husband that what's the use of you appearing now? You should have come when your father's and mother's eyes were staring at the door to see you. Now you can go back the same way that you came. He answered truthfully in cries, "But it was not up to me when to come after you. You made a mistake to come to the Soviet." After some quarreling we decided to make peace and open our hearts. We both knew that it was neither's fault and as the saying goes, the soil is tough enough to plow. We were opening our hearts to each other on the hardships of these past eight years. He was telling me of his hard time in labor camps and hunger and I of the agony and abuse the family went through.

Ibid, pp.200-201, my translation.

On Becoming *bezgrazhdani*: Border Crossing and Statelessness in the Memoirs of the Commoners

Razia's entrapment in territorial policies of Soviet administration is typical (if one can use the term for such ordeals) of those commoners who entered Soviet territories from the Western side of the Caspian Sea immediately following the fall of Ferghe. In the ensuing organizational and ideological chaos after the fall of Ferghe the main body of

the party became isolated and disintegrated rapidly. The majority of Tudeh party members comprised of young students and workers from poor families in the provinces had no significant role in the Azerbaijan affairs nor could they communicate with the already-in-hiding leadership about their present predicament and future misgivings about the fate of the party and communism in general. Many such young members due to the fear of security crackdowns left their hometowns and scattered all over the country isolated, perplexed and lost in the post-Ferghe confusion and chaos. Mirmirani's border crossing episode in his *On a Dirt Road Through Dust* tells of the start of his fugue-like escape from Tehran to the border zone north of Bandar Turkmen before entering Soviet Turkmenistan, "I wasn't feeling well, I would take a walk then stop and gaze and then walk on again. I could not understand who I am and could not find a place to sit at the train station. I was overcome with restlessness and sadness...." Many of these perplexed Tudeh members similar to Mirmirani and in contrast to those involved voluntarily or involuntarily in the Azerbaijan affair crossed the north eastern border to Soviet Turkmenistan via Khorasan province of Iran. To navigate Khorasan's elevated terrains to Soviet Turkmenistan away from Iranian border posts these commoners often used rebel bands as local guides. Two separate chapters in Fathollahzade's collection *The Cold Stove of Neighbor* and a chapter of Mahmoud Pazuki's *The Refugee Without Refuge* (2008) include vivid and valuable recollections on the encounter with these rebels both on the way to the border and afterwards in prison camps⁴².

Upon crossing the border into Soviet Turkmenistan and being spotted by border posts this group of Tudeh members to their shock and disbelief would immediately get detained and subjected to various practices of interrogation, sometimes even torture, and mostly convicted of trespassing and sentenced to three years of forced labor (except for a third group or *the damned* that I will explain in the next section). Not all the commoners would survive the three year sentence. Many died or committed suicide during initial interrogations, still others perished in labor camps due to hunger and disease or work-related accidents. Small numbers too were forgiven and released early.

⁴² Mahmoud Dowlatabadi the prominent contemporary Iranian fiction writer has immortalized a legendary band of these Khorasani-Kurdish rebels in his celebrated novel *Kelidar*. However less is known and researched about their role in the border crossings of Tudeh emigres as well as their own ordeal inside Russia. According to some of the memoirs, by the time the wave of Tudeh border crossings started these veteran rebels were already in a shaky position because of years of guerilla warfare and living in the wild in northern Khorasan. During years of traffic and contact across the borders the rebels had become aware of the official punishment for trespassing into USSR territory. Several memoir-writers mention that they were warned by the rebels of the three-year prison sentence awaiting them if unable to produce official permission once within Soviet territory. But these young men, mostly desperate and perplexed, carried no official permission and could only lie to the rebel commander, Abbas Pahlevan, about party assurances. Ironically a little later Abbas Pahlevan and his guards get trapped by Soviet border guards and are transferred to the same prison camp holding familiar Tudeh faces who had talked assuredly about their border crossing!

But what ties together the diverse fate of this large group of commoners in addition to their mode of crossing the border or their punishment was the existential condition they would find themselves in *after* being released into the Soviet civilian life. In contrast to the elite that were granted political asylum and full Soviet citizenship the commoners only received the right to live in USSR as non-citizens. The non-citizen (*bezgrazhdanstva*) status for these emigres meant constant obstacles in changing locations and jobs, and in particular severe limits on travelling abroad or back to Iran which comprises the main object of hope, wish, and struggle of almost all the memoir writers in their decades-long exilic journeys as civilians. Here I briefly describe the civilian life of a memoir-writer of this group.

Mahmoud Pazuki, an engineer member of Tudeh who had fled Iran after the failed assassination of Shah in 1948 by crossing into the Soviet Turkmenistan border, was among a fortunate group of Iranian emigres granted early release from forced labor. His recollections on the sudden turn of events which led to his direct transfer on a train from a labor camp in Charju of Turkmenistan to Khawja Abe Garm sanatorium and resort outside of Dushanbe as a “foreign guest” is perhaps the most ironic and happy chapter of his entire memoir. Pazuki’s early release and facile re-settlement in Tajikistan however did not translate into total freedom of movement in and out of Soviet territories, and conversely the rest of his autobiography is riddled with his relentless efforts in order to obtain the right to leave USSR, a stubborn pursuit deemed ruinous equally in the eyes of KGB as well as the Tudeh party officials in Russia. In fact the more Pazuki submitted petitions, complaints or transgressed official limits imposed on his internal and external movements the more he found himself entangled in a punishing territorial machine and *re-moved* farther and farther away from Iran or even Moscow. His last bid to travel to Moscow illegally to obtain Iranian passport from the embassy lands him in a remote steppe town of Kazakhstan called Lisakovsk among a closely-monitored population of political exiles. The saga of his several years of encampment and construction work in Lisakovsk and the painful bodily ransome awaiting him before his final departure to Germany brings his several years of struggling for a reverse journey out to an anticlimactic end. Adding to Pazuki’s case I will briefly analyze another memoir similar to his in terms of mobility and entrapment as the institutional-territorial aspect of life under the Soviet administration.

Vicissitudes of Camaraderie: The Greater and the Lesser Satan

Fereydoon Pishvapur enjoyed a notorious reputation among the Iranian Tudeh diaspora of Dushanbe. He was known to work as an informant for KGB in addition to himself having become an attractive target of KGB plots later - a mixture of opportunism, weakness of character and reversal of fortune. But his story is too complex to be explained merely as a moral exemplar of fall. In fact, his fall was bound to his efforts to remove himself from Soviet Territory similar to many of his peers, which in turn only had him thrown deeper into the territorial vortex of Soviet surveillance and punishment. Pishvapur, according to his autobiographical memoir, was the only emigre from the military branch of the Tudeh party residing in Dushanbe. He and hundreds of officers were hunted after the entire database of the military branch of the party was discovered and decoded by the intelligence department of the Iranian army shortly after the pro-monarchy coup of 1953. This episode, which narrowly missed Pishvapur, put an end to

the military branch ⁴³ and delivered a new blow to the entire party just when it was putting behind the Ferghe crisis losses. Pishvapur as a recognized member of the branch upon leaving his military post and crossing the north-east borders was granted political asylum in Ashgabat and re-settled in Tashauz (today Daşoguz) in Turkmenistan fairly straightforwardly . Having been implicated and tested by the local KGB in various covert scenarios, he is recruited as a civilian agent. Pishvapur feels compelled to accept the offer just before relocating to Dushanbe to join the Iranian diaspora and start university there. Upon arrival in Tajikistan Pishvapur hesitantly would report on fellow Iranian emigres (including Safavi) and also is sent to short trips to watch on Iranian officials traveling Soviet Central Asia. Gradually he starts to exercise full citizen rights to travel inside and outside of the Soviet Union on his own. His travel plans to East Germany to visit his brother in 1965 are approved by the KGB provided he meets and reports on certain Tudeh leaders residing there. A few years later he invites his brother to Dushanbe. He seems shocked by comparing the standard of life in East Germany with the life of his brother in Dushanbe. On seeing him off through Moscow, Pishvapur decides to leave the Soviet territories and immigrate to East Germany with his family. From then on he starts to dodge KGB requests to perform tasks during his travels, “a costly mistake” in his own words. In his second, longer trip to Germany with his family, Pishvapur’s immigration request is rejected by the East German authorities at the advice of Tudeh leaders who were wary of his surveillance mission over themselves during his first trip, so his family is sent back from Moscow to Tajikistan. After his third attempt to obtain permission to travel abroad gets denied this time immediately by the officials in Dushanbe, Pishvapur travels to Moscow to seek a solution for his exit. Again KGB tasks him with eavesdropping on the conversation between a close friend (Zarbakht, also a memoirist and a popular Tudeh emigre in Dushanbe) and his mother who had just arrived in Moscow for a visit from Iran. Rejecting the KGB request for a second time lands him in a jail in Moscow for three months due to a bogus robbery charge. Upon return to Dushanbe he persists through petitions and complaints to exit the Soviet territories against the advice of his German wife to leave the matter silent at least for the time being similar to the fate of millions of other Soviet foreign ethnicities in internal exile. In 1971 again he finds himself framed in a similar plot of robbery in Dushanbe. This time Pishvapur doesn’t appeal to law and endeavors an epic escape across Soviet republics and towards Iranian borders. Equipped with a water container and a metal cutter, he runs away all the way from Dushanbe to Turkmenistan, determined to traverse the same Iran-Turkmenistan border region that he had crossed fifteen years ago in the opposite direction towards the Soviet territories. He makes it to Turkmenistan and approaches the demarcated border crossing region vigilantly under the night’s cover. However guards intercept him in between barbed wires just a few meters short of Iranian soil. From there he is sent to a KGB detention center in Ashgabat, then transferred to Dushanbe KGB prison where tried and convicted of illegal border crossing and sentenced to three years of forced labor. He is promised to be sent

⁴³ Earlier in 1946 Khalil Maleki at the height of the disarray among Tudeh leaders had issued an executive order to disband the military branch, finding it against the party by-laws. However, only three months later, the defunct branch metamorphosed to an independent party of former Tudeh officers which later in 1950 entered into a coalition with the leadership of the main party.

to a detention center in Dushanbe close to his family but a few days later is put on a plane to Moscow and then on train to a labor camp in Mordovia where he would spend time longer than his official sentence. For his appeal request is responded with a six-month extra time. To make things even worse and his utter disbelief Pishvapur upon release and return to his family in Tajikistan finds out that his refugee status is revoked and he cannot move even out of Dushanbe without prior permission. Still obsessing to exit Soviet Union, this time he travels illegally to Baku to reach out to the Iranian consulate. The Iranian consul after knowing about his burning desire to live in Iran and hearing the story of his conflictual relationship with KGB gives him a piece of paradoxical advice that at first sounds as if he did not take Pishvapur's request seriously. The consul, who had received a recommendation on him through a family friend in Iran, advises Pishvapur to go back to work with KGB! Pishvapur protests in surprise but the consul explains calmly that the only way to get out of the Soviet Union and enter Iran safely is to regain the trust of KGB to work for them in Iran. Such an advice, though possibly too late and not practical for someone with the security baggage of Pishvapur, reveals a profound understanding of how the Soviet borders were continually relocated and recalibrated in a dynamic map of forces beyond the physical barriers or internationally-recognized territories. From this view borders of the Soviet Union were themselves a vector of mobility, a trajectory of power with its own paths, directions, inflections, swirls, lines of entrapment as well as line of flights- a vortex. Eventually and against all the odds Pishvapur would volunteer again for KGB and this time he would take the first opportunity to leave the Soviet Bloc - successfully and permanently with his entire family.

On the day of my arrival out of prison, the kids were so happy they did not want to go to school. In spite of that, I managed to convince them to attend their school. They were grown remarkably for the past two and a half years. My family was in a dire economic situation. My wife's earning was not enough the three of them. And part of our savings had been used to cover the attorney costs. There were also a number of fellow resident Iranians in Dushanbe who, in my absence, had collected some financial aids and left the sum with my wife. Upon my return, some of the Iranians came forward and expressed their sympathy. Roozegar, too, came over but I had no desire to continue friendship with him, because he proved to be such a hypocrite. It was after reading his eighteen-page report in my dossier that I was sure of my hatred towards him; a feeling that I never expressed to him nor shared with anyone else. Later on, Roozegar resorted to our mutual friends in Dushanbe to mediate to save our longstanding friendship, or at least to find out on his behalf why this partnership went awry! Unlike my ongoing friendship with other Iranians as it used to, Roozegar was the only fellow I decided not to carry on with following my return from the Labor Camp. As long as I was residing in the USSR even my wife could never know why. After resting for a couple of days I went to the police station to recover my ID card. This time, the ID I was provided with did not give me the right to travel out of Dushanbe city. Whereas in the past I used to carry a political-refugee ID card posing no special restrictions on my job or travel category. But this time and now I was deprived of such privileges, and obviously this added to my troubles, whatsoever. Despite all this, I needed to regain the authority to work and travel all over the USSR so that

I could plan a legal departure both for my family and me. First and foremost, I had to find a job, somewhere no matter what, to put in order this economic shatter of my family. Luckily and thanks to some friendly connections with my Russian and Tajik former colleagues, I easily obtained a decent position at the level of my expertise. Afterward, I set a appointment date with Mr. Akbar Shandermeni, one of the Party officials also in charge of political refugees in Dushanbe to investigate further the reasons for my dismissal from the Political Refugees Agency.

Mr. Akbar Shandermeni told me that I had attempted to leave the country, which was a good enough reason for them. So I told him "Comrade Shandermeni, you are in charge of the Iranian political refugees in this town. If it is so, in your view point, why did you never come to me myself, even for once and shortly, to inquire on my case?" All the resident Iranians in Dushanbe along with the Russians and Tajiks were present at the court, while you, in the position of the party official who is in charge of political refugees in Dushanbe did not bother to attend my trial.

Mr. Shandermeni answered that he had sent Roozegar to attend the court session on his behalf. I told him that he knew very well that Roozegar was not an impartial or independent person at all, and as an opportunist would always swim along with the current. His bad reputation is spread everywhere. What was the need for a representative while you yourself were residing in this same town? You could ask for my resignation from the party membership but neither you nor any other authority is able to deny my status as a political refugee. The reason which explains my presence in this country as well as yours is not merely our membership to the communist party but the socio-political situation back in our home country -a status which has remained unchanged.

There was no use continuing the conversation. It was evident that Shandermeni would do nothing positive in my favor. Now I had only one objective on mind which was leaving the USSR with my wife and kids altogether. I sent letters to my sister in Iran and my brother in East Germany. Attached to his letter, I also dispatched a second letter to Abram so that my brother could send it to his address in West Germany. Besides, I paid visits to the interior ministry of Tajikistan and the International Red Cross in Russia, requesting permission for my departure from the USSR both verbally and in writing. On the surface, every political refugee could depart the USSR any time desired; yet this was a law which never applied in practice. At the Russian interior ministry I was told I had to have either the invitation letter or the visa to my destination country for immigration at hand. They were quite aware of the fact that getting hold onto such a letter or visa application for an Iranian refugee from Iran was out of question or a similar document from other countries. I also maintained my letter correspondence with my Afghan refugees mates at the labor camp and tried to deliver food, clothing and other stuff via post service to the camp location. Some months passed before I got the first reply letter from my sister in Tehran. She had recommended me to contact the Iranian embassy in Baku at earliest time possible and meet with the ambassador, Mr. Afrasiab Nava'ee, since his mission in Baku city would be soon over. I was being recommended to him through an acquaintance there. Located one thousand kilometers away from

Dushanbe, Baki was not an easy destination to travel openly. My Dushanbe restricted ID card could get me caught at any police at any police checkpoint and if not causing much more trouble.

Flying to Baku was not a possibility either. Because, to buy the air ticket or even getting onboard passengers had to display their ID's. On the contrary, there was no need to show identification papers if you were to take the train. I talked it over with my wife. She told me if I were to go to the Iranian embassy in Baku she would come along with me. I had been employed at my new job just for a few months and I could not request a leave. Eventually I made up my mind and decided to travel to Baku covertly with my wife. Since it was my very first time there, I did not know the address to the embassy in Baku. Out of experience I knew well that even the cab drivers would not take us to any embassy or consulate office unless the passengers could provide them with the street name or house number. I had already encountered the same problem back in Moscow. That's why I obtained the address of the Iranian embassy from those Iranians in Dushanbe who used to live in Baku. Then I went to visit Dr. Ata Safavi and asked him for a sick leave paper so that I could justify my absence from work for a few days. Dr. Attar suggested that I had better visit Dr. Nasiri instead, simply for the reason that he was from the same side of the city I lived in. By the way, Dr. Nasiri was also trying hard to receive the permission to depart for Iran as well. He issued a sick-leave permit for six days and also asked me to discuss his case with the embassy in Baku and bring him an application form too. I was well aware of the fact that I was committing something illegal, and if got caught, Dr. Nasiri would also get into a huge trouble for the sick-leave paper he had provided me with. Therefore, it was much wiser to leave the sick-leave permit with Dr. Nasiri himself so that, just in case of anything unexpected came up, he and his kind act of helping me would stay out of trouble; and in case all went well, I would come back and take the sick paper from him for my work place once returned safely. Besides my wife, three more people knew about my travel and intention - the being Mr. Nasser Zarbakht. He gave me the address of Mr. Yousef Hamzeh'lou in Baku where I could spend the night. For it was impossible to find accommodation anywhere in Baku Dushanbe-restricted identification paper. Leaving the kids with our friends, we pretended as if we were going to spend a few days in vacation , camping and mountain climbing. Traveling by train was cheaper but took much longer. We first took a train from Dushanbe to Ashgabat, and from there by another train to a port city called Krasnovodsk. Krasnovodsk is located on the south west of the Caspian Sea, right opposite to where Baku is. We spent the night in the roofed dock of the port and got onboard in the next morning. Not far from the passengers' dock you could see some battleships and motor-rafts which belonged to the marine border police. We were given a tiny room with two narrow beds, just like those in a train car. The room was very damp. Having not slept for awhile, we first took a few hours nap on the beds and then went to the deck of the ship. It was partly cloudy and the sea was calm. The ship was cruising along the coastlines of Mazandaran and Gilan provinces only about 35 kilometers away from Iran. In the evening of the same day we arrived at the passenger harbor in Baku. After leaving the dock station,

we secretly wandered in town for a short while and stopped to buy some food and beverages from stores. From there we were able to get to Mr. Hamzeh'lou's place by taxi easily. Hamzeh'lou and his wife lived in a flat including a small living room and a much smaller kitchen. They both welcomed us warmly. We had dinner all together, after which they offered us their only bed and slept on the kitchen floor instead themselves. The Next morning after having breakfast my wife and I went downtown. The Iranian consulate office in Baku was located at the building No. 4 Sardarov street. At one end of this street there was a tiny round square with a water fountain in the middle and a few benches surrounding it. We agreed that my wife would wait for me sitting on one of those benches at the square. It was not so long a street. I started walking the sidewalk opposite the embassy's side. I was wearing sunglasses and holding a light raincoat. There was a control kiosk upfront the embassy's entrance. There were also two police guards at the control kiosk holding a close watch over passersby. Under such circumstances my entry to the embassy was no where close to possible. Because, in case I was going be asked to show my ID upon entry, all my dreams would evaporate in an instance. There was a news stand nearby. Without drawing anybody's attention, I went to the front news window and pretended that I was reading the paper headlines. From there, I could watch over the activities of those two policemen at the gate, waiting for a suitable moment. Right under the three-colored flag of Iran hanging from the top of the building, with a set of staircase below, the front gates of the embassy were standing closed. I suddenly noticed that one of the police guards left the front door for a short time and returned afterwards. Then, the second police guard did the same and returned to his post. Following that, they both entered the police kiosk and shut the door behind them. It was exactly when the front entrance to the embassy was left unprotected. It was the right time. The two guards were talking inside the kiosk. I started walking to the gate while having an eye on them. Reaching the entrance, I turned my back almost ninety degrees and walking up the stairs I rushed to the door handle to pull it open. Startled by my unexpected move, the police guards ran out of the kiosk shouting "stop! stop!" The door failed to open however. I felt a guard's hand on my shoulder. With all the force left in me this time I pushed the door forcefully towards inside and the door opened. I swiftly jumped in the hallway and surprisingly found myself inside the huge entrance hall of the embassy. All the office doors inside the main hall were closed. I took a look back and there was no sign of the policeguards. I was relieved knowing that they did not have the right to follow me inside the embassy premises. I took a convenient breath and tucked up my clothes. There was a small sign at the door of every room so I looked for the Iranian consulate room, which was the one next to the entrance. I knocked gently and a voice from inside replied. I entered and greeted politely. After introducing myself, Mr. Afrasiab Nava'ee asked me to take a chair. None of the embassy's staff had noticed my entering to the embassy building yet. There, I explained my issues and concerns, asking for assistance and help to depart the Russian soil. Mr. Nava'ee then enquired about my work profile, family and education backgrounds. After that he provided me with an application form which

I filled in in his presence, attached my letter of impunity and handed the documents over to him. Mr. Nava'ee asked what my basic problem was. And why I had to leave Russia with my family. I then let him know that the Russian intelligence had pressured me into espionage, and once I opposed doing that they started to abuse me. To escape that unfair pressure, I intended to escape the Russian border to Iran. Most unfortunately, I was arrested at the border line and sent to the labor camp sentenced for three years and a half. I told him that it was just a few months that I was walking free again. Nava'ee giggled and replied jokingly why I had rejected working for the Russian intelligence. Right then, he pushed the bell on his desk and a young smiling woman entered his office. Nava'ee also ordered for some sweets and tea.

I explained to Nava'ee that I was never a spy and my conscience was very distressed with what they had forced me to do, but they would not let me go free. Mr. Nava'ee again told me that I was wrong and I should have continued cooperating with them! Hearing this from an Iranian high-ranking authority was quite a shock. At first, I thought he might be kidding but he did mean it seriously. Seeing my wonder, he argued that I had better tell them that I would continue my cooperation pending a few conditions and terms. You should tell them your assistance would go on with the condition that you were permitted to leave the Russian soil and offer your services from outside. I told him that it was not me or my type and I was never ever willing to involve or commit myself this far. Nava'ee, who was patiently listening to me, asked if I was really oppressed in Russia or treated with cruelty. I said yes. He said that I should treat them the same way. Once you could earn their trust and confirmation for your service from foreign countries other than those of social communism, upon the chance to leave Russia and Russian-dominated countries, forget all about your promises to spy or deals and set your moral conscience free as well.

Sipping the second embassy tea, I thought it over and realized that he was right. I told him that by then I had already lost the chance to do so, though. I had always been honest and straightforward in deed and creed, a simplicity which caused me a lot of trouble. Leaving his room I requested for a few more copies of the application forms for those who had asked for them. I did not take notice of the passage of time at his office. Mr. Nava'ee saw me off by the consulate entrance gate and I left the building while he was standing at the gate. All of a sudden I was assaulted by some policemen. A minibus and a jeep truck had parked on the street side next to the embassy. A few more policemen popped out of the minibus too. One from my front and two at my back tied my arms and cuffed me from behind. I was yelling in protest. Turning my head away, I saw that Mr. Nava'ee was still standing on the stairs and watching this event. When our eyes met, he waved goodbye to me. The police guards dragged and threw me inside the minibus and jumped after me into the vehicle. No sooner than the rear doors had been closed the minibus took off. In that messy situation all my attention was with my wife, who, unknowingly, was awaiting me at the square bench. After a short while, the car stopped.

Quite roughly, they pushed me up the stairs into a large building. Going through a long hall, I was moved into a room in which there were some officers dressed

in KGB uniforms. They put me on one of the chairs at the desk. There was an officer sitting there already. With his command, another officer took out all my belongings from my pocket and put them on the desk. Then he took a pen and paper to interrogate me further. I told them that I would not go to take their questions unless they loosened my hands. I was thinking that this time I was going to spend my sentence in Baku jails. I was not at all afraid of getting imprisoned again, was only worried about my wife, who had not a single penny on her as all the cash was with me. Hence I was feeling quite embarrassed why I had not left all or at least part of the money with her. After all, I had not anticipated such an awful situation. There was no need to introduce myself as the investigating officers knew all about me from my ID. They removed the handcuffs. I told them that as they could see, I was from Iran and intended to visit the embassy in order to travel to Iran. Visiting the embassy is not forbidden, so why am I taken here? The interrogating officer then questioned me why I forced my way into the embassy without permission. I replied that I was Iranian national by birth and required no prior permission to meet with the consul. The office then argued that I should have asked for permission from those two police guards before entry. He told me that I was a terrorist that's why they had two police guards at the gates to protect the ambassador and his staff. I, then, told him that now you can see that I am neither a terrorist nor did I hurt any of the staff there at the consulate office. Moreover, you yourself noticed that the consul himself came to the door to accompany me in person. This is a shame your officers are treating every visitor to the consulate of a neighboring country with such a brutality. This savage act of yours is witnessed by Mr. Nava'ee himself and will be surely reported accordingly. You had better give him a call right away so that he can assure you that this is a mistake. Otherwise I am not at all afraid of being arrested as I have not committed anything wrong! My dear wife is waiting for me at a bench down in Sardarov square, please, fetch her all the cash I have available so that she could travel back home. She had nothing to do with this and never entered the consulate premises. The interrogating officer then asked for my wife's specifications exchanging some gestures with the other officer present in the room. Then he asked me when and how I was able to enter the city of Baku. I had to tell them nothing but the truth as I was anxious in case they questioned my wife her explanation would contradict mine, and make our case just more complicated.

I even provided them with the postal address to Mr. Hamze'lou's place where we had spent the night before and insisted that they had nothing to do with and knew nothing of my plan to visit the embassy today. I then said if meeting with the Iranian ambassador is a crime for Iranian nationals, why then the embassy is there in Baku the first place. The interrogator asked me what type of conversation I had with the consul. I said that I disclosed him nothing in particular, I just requested to travel to Iran and he provided me with two copies of the application papers so that I could carefully fill them out at home and mail them back to the consulate address: "As you see I have not yet replied to those questions in the application form". Then he continued that I had entered the consulate at 11:15 am and left the premises at 1:30 pm. He wanted to know

what I was doing for about two hours and fifteen minutes, and that receiving an application form would not take any longer than a few minutes. I replied that time was of no importance to me then. Besides, the consul kindly received me with tea and sweets, and followed the conversation with different questions. That's why the meeting took longer than expected. The interrogator was greedily getting ready to jot down, asking me to repeat every question and answer I had provided to the consul. I said all right; the Iran consul questioned me about my career background, and if I had someone or relatives in Iran to whom I wanted to go back to, and whether I intended to return to Iran alone or with my family. I suddenly noticed that he had stopped taking notes. Such topics did not interest him much. He was looking for some intelligence or political issues or questions on the basis of which to build a strong case against me. Eventually and after having not even the least reasonable cause to include in the minutes of the interrogation, he accused me of struggling with the police guards and physically beating them! He told me that such action is insulting the uniform and the police forces. I chuckled and said: "I am above 45 years of age. If you still believe I can defeat two young and strong police forces why would you assign them to guard the consulate gates? You had better dismiss them and ask me to take over. This is nothing but sheer lie, as I have traveled to Baku to meet with the consul only and not to fight or get involved with the police guards. They were sitting inside the kiosk talking together. I did not want to interrupt them. So I entered the consulate on my own". Then the interrogator ordered to invite one of the young police guards, perhaps standing the next door to be called if needed. He sat down right in front of me, pale and frightened. The interrogator asked him in Turkish if this man had beaten him. I know some Turkish, so I asked the young officer in Turkish, "ada-man-sana-vordum" meaning hey man did I hit you? The young police replied in Turkish: "No, he did not hit me, he hit my friend". Then I told the interrogator that if you invite his fellow friend he would tell you the same story. Visibly upset the interrogating officer put the pen and papers away and ordered me to leave Baku in 24 hours. Pointing to the table he then asked me to collect my cash money, the ID papers, the wrist watch and other stuff they got out of my pocket. Excited, I said, "I am ready to leave Baku in minutes, but regrettably, I know there is a long queue at the ticket window in every train station or airport now. Maybe the tickets are even already reserved for the next coming days. Now that you ordered my immediate departure from the town you are at least expected to arrange for it too". The interrogating officer took a look at the wall calendar. He called upon one of his staff and ordered him to get me an air ticket from Baku Airline Company at his own expense, out of the queue the next morning at nine o'clock and send me off to Dushanbe. I told him, "My wife is also with me, so we need two air tickets". Then he ordered one of the guards to see me off the building. When I left the Baku KGB building I did not know where I was or how far it was from the square where my wife was waiting. It was past 6 in the afternoon. I requested the guard who led me outside to provide directions to the square. He told me that it was just a few stations from there to Sardarov square. I ran to the bus station but there was no bus. To double check I verified the direction with a few passersby and kept running till I

got to Sardarov street. I went to our rendez-vous square. It was growing dark already. The street lights on as well as at the square, which was almost clear; only my wife sitting there all alone by herself. Seeing me she broke into tears and sobbingly questioned me why my meeting at the consulate took so long. She had got scared and worried that I got into trouble: "I was sitting here thirsty and hungry, worst of all I needed to go to bathroom". I pacified her a bit. We went inside the first restaurant we saw on the way to use the bathroom.

I was both hungry and thirsty, but did not feel like eating or drinking out of excitement. We sat at one of the tables in the restaurant. The waiter got us the menu. I apologized to my wife and told her she had all the rights to be mad at me as I was to blame. I failed to predict the altercation. I had, once, visited the embassy in Moscow but never encountered such accidents. I knew it was difficult to enter the consulate but the exit was not supposed to cause any difficulties, whatsoever. Then I explained the problem in details to my wife. She, then, told me perhaps that was why there was an anonymous man sitting on the bench opposite to her and kept watching her. She thought he might be of those men who were after homeless or street-working women. However, he left after a quarter of an hour. My wife and I ordered meat broth. But before we started to enjoy ourselves, my wife suddenly started a nose-bleed; maybe, her blood pressure had increased because of all the anxiety and tension. We used all the paper napkins on the table to stop her bleeding but it continued. So we stood up and hurriedly reached for the bathroom. My wife tried to control the bleeding by holding her face and nose under the cold tap water but all her efforts seemed useless. Right then one of the restaurant staff rushed to our aid. He suggested to call for a physician. He placed a chair next to the bathroom basin, sat my wife on it, after that he soaked a towel wet in cold water and asked my wife to hold her head upwards. Next, he placed the wet towel on my wife's nose and forehead. This plan worked out and her nosebleed gradually came to a stop. Paying for the meals we had not touched, we thanked the restaurant staff and left.

After taking a walk in the cool weather, we bought some food and beverages from stores and spent the second night at the Hamzelou's. That night, too, Mr. Hamzelou and his wife received and treated us with utmost hospitality. I explained my troubles to them. I remember it quite well that Mr. Hamzelou continued saying: it is a long time that I am planning to move from Baku to Moscow. Now with your accident it is very probable that the local authorities relate your incident with that of mine and cause me problems. I apologized to him once more and told him that what happened is over now and I could not predict it. At KGB, I told the officer that my dear host in Baku had no idea about my visit plan to the Iranian consulate, and that they have welcomed me at their place just as ordinary fellow countryman.

At 9 am next morning, at a Baku air travel agency and with their we were given two air tickets out of the queue and for free. Since it was not a direct flight to Dushanbe, we had to fly to Tashkent first and get to Dushanbe by another flight. That's how our journey ended after a couple of days. After arriving at Dushanbe, I discussed with no one of my conversation with Mr. Nava'ee at his office. Even my wife was totally unaware of our discussion. Because I knew it pretty well from

experience and knowledge that the KGB agents would pursue this case with further curiosity and in disguise as friends or colleagues to make and send detailed reports to KGB. I handed the blank application forms to Dr. Nasiri and also gave my sick-leave paper to the administrative lady in charge of personnel attendance in the factory where I worked. She told me that she had not marked my few days of absence, nor anybody noticed it other herself. It was better to disregard and forget all about the leave permission. Besides and as soon as possible, I attended the police station in person and informed them of my short visit to Baku city for a couple of days. Apparently, they knew about this trip since they made no particular objection or comment against it. However, they asked me to notify them before I planned to travel again. Of course, if my trip did not end up with my visit with the consul, I sure would get financially fined or imprisoned. But it was done, and it did not look all right with the authorities to fine an Iranian national for entry to an Iranian consulate and visit with the consul. I was expecting a lot from this meeting while there was no news or feedback neither from the consulate in Baku nor from the Iranian embassy in Moscow. I even tried to phone the Iranian embassy in Moscow for a few times and talked to someone named Mr. Mahmood Izadi there. He told me he had nothing on me yet and if they receive something from Tehran they would let me know. I received a letter from Herat city in Afghanistan. It was from Mr. Haji Qolam Heidar Qolam Nei. He has been spending his sentence at the same labor camp, and now was a free man again and returned to his home country. In case I desired to migrate to Afghanistan he asked me to send him more detailed information about myself and my family as well as my postal address so that he could proceed and deliver us an invitation letter from his side. I received also another letter from Mr. Abram Kopelovich in West Berlin. He asked about the same in his message. I replied positively to both letters.

More than a year had passed and yet I could not sense the least indication or the remotest sign of a possible departure. By the end of 1975, the West and East European countries held an assembly in Helsinki the capital city of Finland. Ratifying a convention on human rights and coexistence of all nations and the right to immigrate freely, they concluded by a statement according to which the German and Jewish minorities could get repatriated and reunited. Amongst all, the USSR had endorsed the petition as well.

The content of this agreement was published in Pravda and Izvestia newspapers. This European convention brought a lot of hope to the German and Jewish residents of Russia. Every week in Dushanbe, a great number of German and Jewish citizens of the USSR received application forms to immigrate outside and reunite with their families. There were always very long queues of German and Jewish nationals held in front of the visa office. Only once every week, the visa office would open from 9 to 12 to handle the political refugees issues. Every staff there knew me very well as I was the only Iranian political refugee who would go there time and time again. My situation was different from those of the Germans or the Jews. They were officially counted as Russian citizens, while I was just a political refugee and was entitled to have the permission to leave the USSR legally. Whereas and in practice, everyone was treated in the same manner

there. Every and each applicant had to provide an invitation letter from his or her immediate family member in order to receive an application form. On the days allocated to the Germans and the Jews, a large crowd of people would gather at the front door of the visa office competing for the chance to be among the first who could enter the building at 9 am. For only a few applicants could be processed each time during the three working hours and the remaining people had to come over the next week or the weeks later. To keep order, these refugees had a roll call list in which the applicants names were registered. Before the Helsinki convention in 1975 almost none of the German and the Jewish refugees visited the visa office in Dushanbe. On the contrary now, they would come with strong desire and will to immigrate. They would over to the visa office in Dushanbe from far and wide in Tajikistan. Some even would spend the whole night there at the visa office front door to have their name placed first on the roll call for the next morning.

I kept going my correspondence with Abram. In his letters he always raised some hope by telling me that he would make every possible efforts to finally provide my family with a legitimate invitation letter. Every time in his messages he was advising me against hasty moves.

It was in early April 1976 when Abram informed me in a letter that he was able to retrieve my wife's and her mother's residence records back in Berlin and Hamburg. This success was worth a lot in preparing and delivering invitation and visa for my family to West Germany. For your information, sometime in the middle of the World War II, my wife, who was a little kid then, along with her mother, had emigrated from Ukraine to Germany. After the end of the war and the defeat of the German army by the Russian occupant forces, they were exiled to Tajikistan. Eventually and in April 1976 the visa was delivered to me from Abraham by post. With a world of happiness I showed that yellow document to my wife and a couple of close Iranian fellas, a paper machine-typed both in German and Russian languages, also endorsed and stamped by the West German police authorities. I could not believe that I managed to receive a visa to West Germany. That German visa had been signed by Mr. Riplinger, my wife's aunt's husband -a resident of Brownfletz in West Germany. My wife's in-law, Mr. Riplinger, in his youth used to live in Russia in the suburbs of Odessa by the Black Sea. After the start of the World War II and the occupation of Ukraine by German forces, he was called to enlist in the German army and for the same reason when the war was over he did not dare to return to Ukraine, to his wife and kids. Therefore he had decided to remain in American-occupied area in the West Germany. We found out his address through his wife and children who had been deported from Ukraine to Russian Kyrgyzstan. I had provided Abram with his address in my letters. In the invitation letter Abram declared my wife's in-law as her uncle, so did my wife too by telling everyone that her uncle was a resident of the West Germany and that he sent us an invitation letter from there. This scheme was very important for it showed there were documents available to the Russian interior authorities indicating that my wife, her kids and husband could immigrate to West Germany to get reunited with her relatives.

As soon as possible we went over to the visa office asked for application forms to

immigrate to West Germany. After examining our formal invitation paper, the secretary lady at the visa office recorded our names in her register book and gave us some of the application forms. Then she explained that we were supposed to return the application forms with written answers together with some attached documents like some photos, a notice from our workplace, plus one hundred twenty rubles for processing charges. I went to the visa office to submit the documents once we had the required information and documents. I asked when to check for the result. She informed us that there was four to six weeks waiting period to process the applications on their side so no need to stop by. And that they would mail us the result themselves.

To our frustration she commented that we would better not waste the one hundred rubles fee and cancel our application instead of hoping for a positive reply. Because in the case of a negative reply neither the total sum or a single penny was not to be reimbursed no matter what. I opposed her by saying: "no, I am hundred percent hopeful since your boss, just like other interior authorities, have repeatedly mentioned that having an official invitation in hand is mandatory for any temporary or permanent immigration. After all that I have been through and now that I could provide you with an official and original invitation letter what other issue could be left that you dare anticipate a negative outcome?"

To be able to afford the costs involved for reception of the exit passports from Russia we had to recalibrate our daily expenditure more frugally. In case of a receiving a positive reply we, then, had to pay up to twelve hundred rubles to the interior ministry for processing four people, an amount which would equal the income of both of us for six months. But came six weeks later and we yet had no reply. So we went over to the police station and the visa office. They told us that there was no reply yet and we had to wait for another six weeks. After the second six-week period, which amounted to three months in total, we went to the same office. There we were informed that they had replied negatively to our application request. It was as if the whole world collapsed all over me. All my hope suddenly turned into despair. I questioned the reason for the negative reply to see what was wrong. They said: "we do not know". After showing a lot of persistence, I succeeded to meet with the visa office manager. He told me that he was not the sole decider in cases of those applicants who intend to depart Russia with their families: a committee comprised of deputy to the interior minister, a number of the secretaries and other officials. "Regarding your family there are two issues. Firstly, it is your son who is seventeen years of age and would be soon eighteen and thus eligible to get recruited in the Russian army. Secondly, your wife's uncle is not counted as your immediate family. One's immediate family means your own parents, wife and children". To calm me down he told me that I could reapply after six months or so in writing. I asked, "What particular difference it would make to my status after six months since you said that my son was supposed to enlist for the army after the next six months, or my wife's uncle could never become my father to be counted as immediate family. You used to claim that for immigration procedure out of Russia one just needs a formal invitation letter, whereas, now that such a problem is over, you promise us the next six-month period. You are never true and honest with your statements, and will certainly

deny my application for the same issues today again after six months. I am not holding Russian citizenship. The USSR and its huge population do not need my son. You are achieving nothing other than stranding people and their families, and are acting against the convention signed by all the party leaders and Russian authorities in Helsinki. If you fail to provide me with satisfying answers I will certainly write and report the details of our today's conversation to the authorities in Moscow. By the way and in there, I asked to have a meeting with the interior minister of Tajikistan”.

The visa office manager told me that I had to request the visit from the interior ministry myself. Feeling quite upset, I left the visa office irritated. The day after, I registered for meeting with Tajikistan interior minister who was a Tajik man. Because of having the same religion and language, I was hoping that he would understand me better and order to revise a follow up on my case. After two weeks of trying, one of the secretaries of the interior minister who was a young Russian lady and had showed me some sympathy advised me secretly and told me that the interior minister was not in a position to do much. He was holding the post just formally. The real person who was running the interior ministry was his first deputy. The vice president or the first deputy to the interior minister was a Russian colonel whose name I do not recall. To meet with the colonel another two weeks were gone down the drain. The secretary of the minister deputy jotted down my name in a book and asked for the purpose of the visit. Then, from her calendar, she wrote the date and time of my visit on a small piece of paper and gave it to me. I showed up for the visit on the appointed day. The young Russian girl who was sitting at the counter table of the deputy minister's office took my ID and entered the deputy minister's room. After a short while, she opened the office doors and invited me to the deputy minister's room. The deputy's room was inside a furnished hall. There was a heavy desk with lots of stationery and so many telephone sets on it. At the table was sitting a muscular man with blue eyes and blond hair . There were other people sitting in his room among whom I could recognize the visa office manager. A great number of chairs had been arranged orderly by the wall, a red carpet decorated the floor, and a picture of Lenin was hanging on the wall. I greeted right after entering the room. The Russian colonel by his hand gesture asked me to sit on one of the chairs placed next to the door by his hand gesture. I moved the chair next to his desk and sat on it.

The attendants were sitting all in silence. The colonel asked me what my request was. I told him that his negative response to my immigration application was not acceptable: “You are a high ranking authority and I demand a reasonable explanation”. He told me, “I do not see any reason why to explain the decisions made by the government committee to anyone”.

I replied, “This is my fate that you have decided for and that is not a government secret, so if you give me a satisfactory justification I have no more words to say. The reasons provided by the visa office manager are by no means acceptable to me. I am almost sure that your committee has rejected my application with no reason”. In addition and just for the sake of lip service, I continued by saying that the USSR policy is founded on practicing humanity and human rights, a fact that Russia and other European countries emphasized on in Helsinki last year.

Running out of patience for my nonstop chatter, the colonel told me, "You would see Iran if I could see the back of your head because of your long babble. I said, " Colonel, you did not even review my written application carefully enough. My request has nothing to do with immigration to Iran at all, but to travel to West Germany together with my German wife and children. I did not expect to hear such a reply from you with your distinguished rank. If this is all you have got to say then I know what to do. I will travel to Moscow tomorrow and repeat your exact words there. You are not the whole government. There are other high ranking authorities over you. Today, you are in this position as the deputy to the interior minister, tomorrow you may not be". The colonel blushed with rage at my words. Calling me some obscenities, he shouted at me to get out of there. I stood up. I was in an aggressive mode and did not get scared or threatened by the colonel's yelling and left his room calmly.

His rejecting me was of no significance to me because I had nothing to lose. I had the experience of labor camps and different KGB prisons. I was by no means afraid of such yelling, which was of no substance other than a bluff. I returned to the young lady at the counter of the deputy minister room to collect my papers. She was busy on the phone. Once her conversation was over, she hanged up and told me: your ID is with the deputy minister. You had better return tomorrow to pick it up.

Empty-handed I left the interior ministry building. The same day I produced letters from the contradicting explanations given by Tajikistan interior ministry and posted multiple copies via express delivery to the interior ministry in Moscow, to the USSR Communist Party, to the USSR High Council and the Red Crescent organization. Beforehand, I knew they would not take any of these letters seriously. Despite all this, sending these letters soothed me because and at least I had said what I had to, and if I found the chance to travel to Moscow, I had communicated every and each of my viewpoints to the authorities already. I returned to the secretary of the interior ministry to collect my ID papers. That young lady made promises again for the following days. Later on I found out they had confiscated my ID in order to prohibit me from traveling to Moscow. They took it for two weeks. At last, I was not able to take it anymore and told her if she did not hand over my ID papers, I would travel to Moscow without any ID. Therefore she should be held responsible for the upcoming consequences. She sat me down in the waiting room. After a few minutes my ID was in my hand. Of course, my travel to Moscow was no more than a bluff. I had visited the authorities in Moscow and received no due response ever. Every time they after listening to my complaints they had sked me to return home as they would send the answer to my requests to the authorities in Dushanbe. Therefore, there could come nothing out of this as my complaints would again reach those against whom I had complained. All the same, I always shared the content of my letters of complaints with my close Iranian friends. But they were not in a position to help me. Once more, my escape plan via the borders occurred to my mind. This time I was well experienced and had a one hundred percent hope for success. Yet, I'd still be facing the problem of my wife and kids. First time and with my wife's prior information I conspired an escape while this time my children had

grown up and would hold me accountable. I had enough time to look for more appropriate and legal methods like a travel plan to Moscow. Of course, not to the Russian authorities but I intended to take refuge at foreign embassies. Finally I concluded that I had better contact KGB intelligence office directly once and as the last resort.

I had never entered the intelligence building premises before and in the past an arranged place would be used for my secretive meetings with the KGB. At the time of my problems with the KGB, they had taken me inside the KGB yard within a roofed car.

I walked up the front door stairs of the KGB building in Dushanbe. By arriving at the front door two armed guards stopped me and asked of the purpose for my presence there. I told them that I have an issue and would like to discuss it only with the KGB administrator. They led me into a room and asked me if I knew the head of that office. I said no but maybe the manager and some of the staff here could recognize me. They had a phone conversation and mentioned my name and contact in it. After some minutes Mr. Nazarov, the officer who knew me came to me, greeted me and told me that this was not a suitable place to talk. He then asked me to go to Dynamo football court if I had something important to say. We would meet there in half an hour time.

Dynamo football court was almost empty. Only a few youth were playing and shooting at a goal gate. Officer Nazarov showed up at the appointed time in civilian dress. We both sat at the clear side of the court on a bench. I told him that I did not know why and for what reason the local authorities of Tajikistan interior ministry had rejected my own and my family's immigration application to Germany without providing any reasonable justifications. Consequently, I meant to travel to Moscow in the following days and communicate my complaints to the higher ranking authorities.

"I just meant to inform you of my decision before this travel". Officer Nazarov told me, "It is your own fault that the local authorities oppose your immigration. Your travel to Moscow will not resolve the struggle. Surprised I asked what my blame is. What wrong have I committed that they refuse my emigration from Russia?". Officer Nazarov told me, "You do not want to cooperate with us, and that will never lead to your success". At that moment the advice of Mr. Nava'ee, the Iranian Consul in Baku, passed before my eyes in a flash. It was a suitable opportunity and I had to make most of it and tie up this broken rope. I replied, "I have never refrained from cooperating with you and now, too, I am quite willing to offer my services; however, you have enough personnel and information for your petty tasks in Dushanbe. By all means I can be your very beneficial agent outside Russia and perhaps I will be able to gather and provide more valuable information. But continuing my assistance here is not so worthy for you". Officer Nazarov told me, "If you are sincere and diligent in your statement the problem with your family's immigration will soon be over".

Officer Nazarov then advised me by saying, "Travelling to Moscow is nothing but a waste of time and money if you intend to immigrate. You should economize your expenditures because immigration to West Germany will cost a fortune for a family of four. You had better change your mind and decision from travelling to

Moscow". Then he set another date for a visit with me in the same place some days later. In my second meeting with Officer Nazarov he told me, "I have discussed your case with the authorities". Then he promised that during the next two weeks there would be noticeable changes in the processing of my application so that there was no need for a new letter or six more months. I was not so optimistic toward Officer Nazarov's words or promises, but I had no other options. The two-week period was not too long. I accepted his proposal and set a date to meet up for the following week. During that short period, some of the Iranian and non-Iranian acquaintances whom I knew remotely and with whom I did not have any close relation came closer to me and wanted to make friends and showed some compassion and friendship. I had learnt my lessons very well. I guessed these people were sent by KGB. Perhaps they put a test or trap on my way. I thought that I should revise my relation with them and act cautiously. One of them was a Kurdish man from Iran named Ali. He talked little and was a man of no action, whose private life I knew nothing about. We did not know his family name because everybody called him Ali Kurd. Ali Kurd had never come over to my place. Once and on my way home, I ran to him suddenly. I was getting back from work and this incident could be quite innocent and accidental. Ali Kurd invited me to have a beer nearby. While drinking beer he drew me to a corner, insulting some of the Iranians and the local authorities he told me: "I am deciding to depart the Russian soil illegally and reach Iran. I trust you and that's why I tell you all my secrets. If you agree let's plan for escape together and benefit from shared experience in this regard. I know the border pathways very well". From Ali's blunt and unprepared suggestion it was pretty obvious that he happened on my way with a special purpose otherwise nobody would share his never-told secrets with a total stranger just met. I told Ali, "I appreciate your offer, but regrettably I cannot support you in your decision since I have legally requested and applied for the immigration of me and my family".

The second guy was engineer Ma'soumian. He was a friend since college time. We spent a period of four weeks together at a sanitarium in the suburbs of Moscow, named Asandjeh Gorsk (?). He had spent some years in Afghanistan as a technical expert deployed by Russian. Everybody knows that no one is entitled to such a mission without close cooperation with KGB. My friendship with Mr. Ma'soumian was quite ordinary. We did not have home or family visits at all and our friendship was limited to the casual encounters on the street and brief greetings.

My doorbell rang. When I got it I saw Mr. Ma'soumian at the door. He had come all alone. I invited him inside and treated him with tea and fruits. We spoke about here and there and then he stated, "I have heard you are making efforts to travel to West Germany". Then I told him, "it's been quite a long time that I've been trying it with no results yet and apparently I foresee no results for the future".

The third person was one of my college mates who had graduated at the same time as I. His name was Cholmadinov. I had no particular connection with this one since graduation which was thirteen years ago. One day he came to visit and told me, "I have heard you are migrating to West Germany. Good for you! I have a letter; please deliver it to the Jewish organizations or assemblies in West

Germany". Astonished, I asked him how he came to know such exact information while I had not yet succeeded to obtain the permission.

He replied, "One of my acquaintances has seen you visiting the visa office for a couple of times and have even spoken to you there". I asked, "Why don't you post your letter?" "My problem is that I do not possess the postal address to such organizations but I know that they are active in the West Germany". I said, "I do not understand your intention. Why do you send letters to the Jewish organizations outside Russia and what is the content of your message for them?" He said, "My mother was a Jew and my father a Russian. She passed away some time ago. According to Jewish religion kids are adopted by moms only. It means that mothers continue the lineage. I am looking for a way to depart Russia. Because in this wide country there is no way to grow and develop other than climbing the ladder of the Communist Party through hypocrisy and charlatanism. I want to stand independent and try my chances for progress on my own feet. I have no other friends or relatives outside the USSR and this is my only opportunity if only I could connect with the Jewish organizations in Europe". I asked him, "If you do not have any acquaintance outside Russia what are your chances that somebody would send you a formal invitation or visa from outside?" Cholmadinov answered, "I have heard it on radio so many times that people like me could ask for assistance from such organizations. I am still young and hope to be able to move my family out of Russia. Therefore I am after individuals, tourists or anyone travelling outside by whose help I could communicate with these organizations".

Cholmadinov and his statements were in line with truth. There were plenty of similar cases like his among the Jewish population. Some managed to immigrate to Israel. Some other had immigrated to Western European countries. But he had come to visit me in the wrong circumstance or time. I did want to assist him but not at the cost of my family or my own chance. There was this probability that he was meeting me according to a premeditated plan by KGB in which case all my efforts, predictions and preparations would vanish into thin air. Thus I told him, "My dear friend, currently my request for application and immigration to West Germany is declined and I have a lot of trouble beforehand. Now I can receive the new application forms at the earliest after six months. Until then I hope you can find other applicants traveling to West Europe and take your letter for you to your desired organization".

The next week I met with Officer Nazarov in Dynamo football court, this time he greeted me with a welcoming smile. He shook my hand warmly and told me, "Your case is under process back again and you may get the results by next week". Then he asked me, "Do you have any update news?" I explained my visit with Ali Kurd in full details and whatever went on between us two. But I did not share anything about my meeting with the engineer Ma'soumian or Cholmadinov. Officer Nazarov set a date for our next visit in the next coming week and then we separated.

After some days the postman brought us an express letter to the door. The sender address was the interior ministry of Tajikistan, the visa office. By that letter, my wife and I were invited to visit the visa office 9 o'clock next morning

bringing the ID papers of our own and our kids. I did not sleep the whole night speculating various scenarios. We arrived at the visa office on the appointed morning a few minutes earlier. A large number of Germans and Jews were there waiting in a long queue at the office door. Somebody had a register book and put the names of the new comers there to keep order. So did he with our names. A few minutes after nine the doors opened and a woman in police uniform appeared on the stairs. She announced that first those who are invited via the letter communication can enter with their ID papers at hand. My wife and I left the queue and reached to the stairs. Another family also followed us up the stairs. The woman in uniform studied our invitation letters carefully and let us in the waiting room. Then the door of visa office supervisor opened and the very person who had confronted me so harshly now welcomed us warmly and this time with a smile asking us to make ourselves comfortable on the chairs. He took our all ID papers and opened a small file case and read us an approval letter from Tajikistan interior ministry committee and the result of its second review over our request. The approval letter concluded that a temporary permit to travel to West Germany was issued in our favor. My wife thanked him so many times out of excitement, and I took a sigh out of relief.

The same administrator shook our hands firmly as if he were not the one who rejected our applications with unreasonable arguments a month ago. My wife was unaware of the real cause of these changes happening within the past month. I did not tell my wife anything regarding this and pretended that my communications and complaint to Moscow had turned luck for us. But deep in my mind I adored the Satanic power of KGB and regarded myself as a little Satan who has to live his life with a double face, keeping ties with the big Satan in disguise.

Pp.346-367, Fereydoun Pishvapour,, *The Struggle of Life*, 1997, my translation.

Labyrinths

The colonel said, "You are going to fly to Magadan today, go get ready and be in the airport at 12!" I rushed to the dormitory and with the money I'd earned after eight months of laboring as a coal loader and blacksmith I purchased a suit, a coat, a winter hat with ear flaps and a watch. I put them on and went to the airport. On the way the prison uniform and my identification number was on my mind. I could not believe that after such a long time I was wearing a new suit and am on my way to the airport. Just couldn't believe it. Upon entering the airport hall I noticed that one of the same three officials was waiting for me. He nodded towards the smaller hall of the airport. We passed through that hall and then I saw a small airplane with its engine running. He took me to the pilot. There was no passenger in that small plane other than me. The plane took off and arrived after a few hours. There was a car next to the airplane with a driver waiting for me. I got in and we drove to the city till we stopped at a building. The driver asked me to wait in the building. After a few minutes he guided me to a large room where eight to ten military and civilian personnel were sitting. They greeted me and like the previous time asked about my biography, asked who I knew among the Tudeh leaders, how Iranians had viewed the presence of the Red Army in Mazandaran, what were the personality traits of Dr. Mosaddeq, about my

connections in the Aelgen Ugel camp as well as on the plot to strangle me there. At the end of questions and answers one of them said, "We will conduct an investigation about you and then decide how to proceed [with hiring you for the KGB]. Meanwhile we are asking you to forget the past". I said to myself, "To your grandma's soul!". The gentlemen then fed me a good lunch in the same building and drove me to the airport. I was put on the same small plane this time with several passengers back to Seymchan labor camp and from there to my dorm. Ata Safavi, *No Aging in Magadan*, pp. 208-209, my translation

Two long memoirs, one two hundred eighty pages and titled *On a Dirt Road Through Dust* by Alaeddin Mirmirani (1998) and the other three hundred fifty pages and titled *No Aging in Magadan* by Ataallah Safavi (2003) produce the most detailed recollections on territory in addition to standing out from the rest at least for one specific reason: Mirmirani and Safavi were among a group of nine young Tudeh members, all from Mazandaran and Gilan provinces, who followed each other into Soviet Turkmenistan within a few days in October of 1948. Though carrying documents such as newspapers and letters in attestation to their pro-communist activities and party membership, all the nine were subjected to extremely harsh interrogations and detained for several months and eventually were convicted not only of border crossing but of espionage for "imperial powers". The aggravated charge of border crossing for the purpose of collecting and communicating information to foreign countries carried ten to twenty-five years of forced labor in notorious camps such as that of Kolyma located in the Gulags of the Far East Territories. The naive and hopeful nine young men of provincial Iran by no way could foresee such a fate. In fact Safavi and three of his friends were first tried and given two-year sentences for trespassing. Then a member of the group breaks down under prolonged and repeated torture sessions and admits to the charge of spying not only for himself but also for the entire group. According to the only other survivor and memoir writer of the same group, Ata Safavi, the person who sealed the fate of the other eight by confessing under duress was Alaeddin Mirmirani, the only other memoir writer of this group ⁴⁴.

Long chapters in both memoirs describe the saga of journeys of several thousand miles from Ashgabat to Magadan on various types of wagons and aboard livestock transport ships. Their will to survival surpasses the inhumane conditions of life and work in Seymchan labor camps until first Mirmirani and then Safavi are rehabilitated by Khrushchev and follow each other to Tajikistan to settle among the community of Tudeh emigres.

But as significant as the historical and geographical expanse is the narrative of territory that provides a unique perspective into the mode of memorialization of Soviet life by these authors beyond any descriptive voice or exploratory accounts. Episodes of

⁴⁴ Mirmirani, perhaps understandably, shows no expression of responsibility or admission of guilt or moral remorse despite treating in great details the circumstances of his detention starting from his border crossing to his forced confessions and then his rebuttal. However, his equally elaborate descriptions of bodily and psychological harm he suffered during interrogation sessions in Turkmenistan or due to harsh labor conditions in the Gulag of Kolyma, or much later in Tajikistan could well betray his silence and point to signs and sites of unconscious moral struggle in his memoir.

approaching and crossing the Soviet borders followed by multiple entrapments, incarcerations, escapes, rehabilitations, resettlements, exiles, isolations, release, and exits, stitches together vast and disparate Soviet territories such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Magadan, Tajikistan, Moscow and elsewhere along a lived or subjective *continuum* of hope, despair, struggle, doubt, confusion, regret and resolution depicting the process of subjectivity as a practice of tracing a territorial field of forces in movement or what I call a trajectory.

In such a biographical ordering of Soviet life in territorial terms, labyrinthine passages replaces the *neutrality* of mobility (such as in travelogues) to describe movement, speeds and inertia experienced by a *trajectorial subject*- a subject herself faced and traversed by a plethora of historical and sociopolitical forces in various directions and magnitudes. Trajectory etymologically is derived from Latin *traject-* 'thrown across,' from the verb *traicere*, from *trans-* 'across' + *jacere* 'to throw.' A trajectorial subject in movement in contrast to a normative subject in movement for example the modern subject of tourism, colonial, or scientific expeditions is thrown across a field of dynamic forces in a continual manner without the movement itself signifying a change of status for better or worse: a labyrinth.

Ashgabat Four Floors Under

Another event shared in Mirmiran's and Safavi's memoirs in addition to a chapter in Fathollahzadeh's collection *The Cold Stove of The Neighbor* by an emigre called Rahim is that their writers were being detained for several weeks in a massive labor/prison depot in Ashgabat awaiting their final verdict from Moscow when the city is hit by a catastrophe in historic dimensions. All the three authors held in detention as spying suspects under KGB interrogation provide vivid depictions of their incarceration in Ashgabat as their first long-term internment in the Soviet carceral system. But their interrogation ordeal soon shifts to a different scene: The extremely powerful 7.3 magnitude earthquake in Ashgabat is estimated to have killed ten percent of the entire population of the Turkmenistan Socialist Soviet Republic in the wee hours of October 6th 1948 (including the family of the future president Saparmurat Niyazov). According to Russian sources the real extent of casualties and destruction was kept secret even from the Soviet public. The capital city of Turkmenistan was so overwhelmingly devastated that the first speculations tended towards a possible nuclear attack by the Americans at the height of the cold war. The first Baha'i temple of the world was among the few Ashgabat landmarks that survived the initial shock but was damaged irreparably and was tore down for safety concerns in 1963. In less than a week tons of medical provisions and hundreds of personnel arrived on planes from Moscow to operate field hospitals on the catastrophe site. Most of the casualties were women and children as the majority of the adult male population of Turkmenistan had been deployed and perished in the battlefield of the Second World War.



Ashgabat in the aftermath of the October 6th 1948 Earthquake. Wikipedia Creative Commons License

Recollections on this event paint an apocalyptic image of prison walls cracking and cells opening into each other while the whole structure crumbling gradually. The inmates, hanging between life and death inside the dark cells, were reaching out through various means (“by banging with the cap of their urinal containers”) and in multiple languages and cries while armed guards shouting and keeping watch on them until rescuers arrive three days later and evacuate the survivors. After being rescued, the prisoners are told by the guards to remember 1948 as their new birth year!

From Ata Safavi’s *No Aging in Magadan*, the chapter Buried Alive, pp. 82-83:

At 12:30 am October 6th 1948 they took me to Mirzayan (the Armenian interrogator of many Tudeh prisoners who sealed their fates one way or the other. He also shows up in other memoirs). The interpreter said that tomorrow I would be put to trial by a special military court. If I admit to my charges my sentencing would be alleviated otherwise it would turn bad for me. Dear reader notice the play of fate. They took me back to my cell. My heart was overcast by sorrow and pain. Again I was overwhelmed by such thoughts that why on earth we fell into this vortex. What will happen to us eventually? What did my friend confess to in the interrogations? Felt a lump in my throat and at reminiscing about my dear homeland, parents and peers my tears started.

My cell at the KGB prison was on the fourth floor underground. At one thirty past midnight the historic earthquake of Ashgabat with magnitude 8 hit the city. The huge building was tumbling under my feet to right and left and up and down. In the same prison that you could not hear even a fly now there were loud cries: Ya Allah, Ya Imam, Ya Hazrat Abbas, last names, first names in Azeri, Turkmen, Russian, and Persian were filling the air. The prisoners’ cries were high enough to reach the sky. How sweet is life for mankind! Till half an hour earlier these

prisoners were wishing for their own death and now were pleading one another for help and rescue. It was an apocalypse far beyond description. Prisoners, family and friends who had not heard the voice of their loved ones for months or years now were communicating by wails and cries: Where are you? What has happened to you? How are your children? Are they alive? How many years you got? The L-shape prison building cracked at the very first moment and even the fourth floor underground was dislocated but the building itself did not collapse for its internal structure was like a cage. The walls and cells due to dislocation of the building moved closer to one another. So prisoners could shake hands and exchange sagas. I was buried three days and night in my solitary confines listening to constant shootings and movements of tractors and bulldozers outside. pp.82-83.

Mirmirani's observations from the window of his cell pp.102-103:

The days were passing by and I was waiting for my trial court to be formed. At 2 am on October 6th of 1948 equal to 1327 of our solar calendar an earthquake hit. I couldn't know what time it was. I was thrown from my bed to the cell floor by an invisible force. Confused and in shock I got up from the ground. Strange noises I could hear. Awaken I saw the big building was shaking left and right and at the same time up and down under my feet. I looked out from my window. The air was full of haze and dust. The outside was bright as if it was not night time. It was just at that moment that I realized it's an earthquake. And with what magnitude and long duration....

Like me another Iranian was spending that night under interrogation. He said his interrogator was trapped under a wall when the earthquake hit. This was the same Mr. Naotichi who was in charge of my interrogation too. But at that moment he was pleading to his suspect to for his life. That Iranian young man helps him and pulls him out from the rubbles. No sooner than the interrogator was saved and could walk away he grabbed the arms of his suspect firmly and took him back to his cell. I heard a prison mate lamented, "Why didn't you hit the interrogator at head by the stool lying there instead?" Note what he replied, "He was a human after all".

Rahim the third memoir-writer and witness of the Ashgabat earthquake, was at time a young son of a *mohajer* family whose father had also went missing in Soviet territories a decade ago before Rahim, two older brother, two sisters, their children and Rahim's mother set foot across Khorasan into Turkmenistan border in the hope of making a new life and finding the father. The title of Fathollahzadeh's collection of short memoirs *The Cold Stone of the Neighbor* is borrowed from a phrase expressed by Rahim's mother, who had already got a taste of the Great Terror and the brutality of early Stalinism and thus was opposed to her sons' attempt to risk going back to Soviet territories. Exactly as she had predicted upon crossing the border in Khorasan the entire family is immediately detained and kept in a stable. After a few days they are relocated to the Ashgabat prison where children are taken away from their mothers - their fate another section of this tragic memoir- and women and men are stripped naked, given prison clothes, separated and moved to individual cells. A few days later in the middle of Rahim's interrogation phase the earthquake brings back some family members closer:

Finally they started to interrogate me. So far I had two sessions but the serious phase of interrogation was to begin later. The interrogator would ask me, “ Who sent you here?” And I’d explain time and time again all in vain that I was a member of the Tudeh Party Youth Organization, and that Radio Moscow had introduced me twice as a party activist. He would answer that all spies say the same and you should tell us the truth on your real intention for coming here.

The other day, 6th of October, an immense earthquake shook Ashgabat. It was so powerful that my cellmate and I were thrown to the air and thought a new war had begun. The KGB building and the ground under our feet was trembling. After a moment the power of the building went off. The aftershocks of this earthquake continued for six months though with less intensity. The morning after when another quake hit the prisoners started to scream and call out each other. The guards would open the window hole of each cell and intimidate us not to shout. But the prisoners were past the point of intimidation. The same day the entire cadre of KGB officers left the prison building and had its perimeters secured by barbed wire. Soldiers were sent to guard us with the help of automatic weapons and trained dogs. We could see them through the cell windows. The first time that I heard the voices of other prisoners I recognized my brother Ghaffar. I replied that I’m alive. A little later I heard the voice of my mother, and my sisters Masoumeh and Kolsoum. The women were praying to God to protect their children. I shouted loudly “Naneh! Me and Ghaffar are alive, we are here, we are not dead, don’t worry”. My beloved mother after the earthquake was constantly asking the guards about me and Ghaffar. Though it was forbidden to talk but with whatever means she was able to convey to the guards that her two sons too are imprisoned here. My poor mother would dry up her two hundred grams bread ration and would plead to her guard to send this bread across the prison to his sons, herself eating nothing. Even this could get both the guard and my mother in serious trouble. But the guard in order to sooth my mother would take the bread without delivering it to us. When my mother insisted to continue the guard threatened to shoot her. Finally we were able to notify each other of our well-being. I also realized that in this prison are kept three groups of Iranians: The Mazandarani, the Azerbaijani (those of Ferghe members who weren’t detained in Iran) and Tudehis (who were mainly from Khorasan and northern provinces). From *The Cold Stove of the Neighbor*, pp. 30-31. My translation.

Rahim will be sentenced and detained in a labor camp in Turkmenistan for three years. There his father will be awaiting his arrival though he can hardly recognize the old man from his childhood memories. And the family members will perish one by one some in the company of one another and some alone in a different labor camp or detention center as far as Siberia.

Outlands: Hodology of Hunger

“I want to recount an event (*vaghe’e*) about hunger”, that is how the last section of Mirmirani’s memoir, *On a Dirt Road through Dust*, begins, a section disjointed from the narrative order of his Soviet emigre life. The episode immediately preceding the hunger section provides a Hollywood ending to Mirmirani’s ordeals of exile by way of the redemptive value of family prosperity and future generations: After nightmarish years spent in labor camps of Siberia and going through daily struggles of exile in Soviet

Tajikistan Mirmirani almost ends his life story by savoring and rejoicing in a rare moment of sweet reminiscences about his family: By the end of the story he has managed to raise three children each on the path of becoming exemplary citizens and physicians. His youngest daughter though declining the father's desire to become the fourth doctor in the family still opts for medical school and becomes a surgical assistant, conducting an "honorable" life like the rest of the family. That's where the autobiography could have come to a narrative or logical end tucked into the redemptive warmth of family life. But instead he ends the memoirs a world farther by little than four more, infernal pages:

Now I want to recount an event about hunger. It was a Sunday when we got off at prison. At ten o'clock a guard came to our dorm and shouted, "Prisoner Mirmirani let's go!". I obeyed and immediately dressed and went out. I didn't know where he is taking me or what is going to happen. Then the soldier who supervised labor tasks of the prisoners came to us and the guard told me, "Go with this soldier to their camp and do their work". I obeyed. We arrived at the soldiers camp.

A cook soldier ordered me, "Wash the kitchen, the dining hall and the dishwashing room clean". I obeyed and asked, "Do you have a pair of mules for me to put on instead of my felt boots?" He gave me a pair and I started to work. I cleaned well the kitchen and the dining hall first and mopped it twice with hot water. Then I went to the dishwashing room and cleaned there too. The lunch was being served and on each table minced pieces of bread were being left. Soldiers would first eat the soup and then the porridge. When done they would leave their plates in an opening between the dining hall and the dishwashing room. But these plates were the opposite of the prisoners' plates. For the prisoners' plates didn't need washing, they were cleaned by prisoners' fingers and tongues. Here there was lots of leftover food on the soldiers' plates. The assistant cook came to me and pointed to a bucket that I had washed and put at a corner, "Throw all the leftover food and bread into that bucket". I said alright. It was about the end of lunch time that I could not cope with my hunger anymore and ravenously ate all the contents of the bucket with hand save the broth. At the end of lunch the cook called me and gave me a plate of borscht and a plate of porridge with enough bread and told me, "Go eat at the dishwashing room". Though my stomach was full of all the leftover food, I was still hungry. So I took the two plates of food and the bread back to the dishwashing room. I threw the broth of borscht into the bucket and put it aside to eat after finishing the job. Ah! Hunger can be such a cureless maladie driving you far away from humanity. After eating lunch, I washed and cleaned the kitchen, the dining hall and dishwashing room once more. Also took the leftover bucket, which now contained only broth, and threw its content out on the snow. Then washed it and put it at a corner. After some time a man in civilian clothes came and asked, "What did you do with the leftover bucket? Why is it empty?" I answered, "I threw them out and washed the bucket and put it back there". He said, "Who told you to throw out the leftover food?" I answered, "No one, I did it myself, what is it now? who would need it?" The man uttered some insults and left. A moment later the same man came back accompanied by the cook this time. The cook asked, "Who

told you to throw out the leftovers?” I replied, “No one, these left overs were of no use”. He said that the leftovers would feed the pig. Attacking me with profanities, they took the bucket and threw my two plates of food and bread in it and went out. At this moment I felt as if my head was banging against a solid rock. I sat down on a stool, buried in thoughts. My head was in terrible pain and my entire body was shaking and it became difficult to breath. At this point I heard a familiar voice approaching and saying, “Ala, you are upset because you ate the pig’s food”.

This went just beyond my limit and a shrieking sound came out of my mouth involuntarily. I could not bear to be humiliated for eating the pig’s food. A few soldiers turned at me with surprise. The soldier who had brought me from the prison asked, “Ha, what’s going on?” I said, “Nothing, I apologize”. He then asked, “Have you had your meal?” I said, “Yes, yes, thank you”. He asked, “Can you go back to your dorm alone?” I replied, “Yes, I can”. “Alright then you can go now, your job here is finished”, ordered he. I thanked him and put back their mules in the dishwashing room and put on my felt boots and headed towards the prison (my dorm). Next to the soldiers camp there was a store where officers and soldiers shopped grocery and other products. Also between the camp and our prison there was a wooden building in which the prison directors and their families resided. On my way out of the camp I noticed a lady who was carrying large shopping sacks full of products. The sacks looked very heavy and she was struggling to walk with them on the frozen snowy road in her felt boots. I increased my pace to reach her and asked, “Let me help you to your door”. Willingly she handed me her two heavy sacks. On the road there was no one except me and her. We arrived at her house. I gave her back the two shopping sacks. She said, “Just wait here for a moment, I’ll be back” and went inside. Soon she came out and gave me a piece of black bread heavier than six hundred grams. I accepted it. Not hidden from God, at that time though I was very hungry I could not touch the bread. Anyways I wrapped the bread in my cotton blanket and returned to the prison. The guard asked, “You returned alone?” “All alone”, replied I. The small door opened and I entered. (My translation)

From a psychological point of view, the hunger episode far from being a unique event could be another traumatic melt-down or decomposition of ego defenses under extreme psychosocial circumstances. This was not the only time that Mirmirani would be overcome by a strange reaction bordering a panic attack with dissociative marks. In the same final episode he remembers similar fits of fainting in Kolyma labor camp. In fact the first of such altered states occurs even before reaching the Soviet Territories. In the early stage of Mirmirani’s journey and on board a northbound train from Tehran he describes a fugue-like episode: he hears an imaginary voice admonishing against leaving his native country while he is staring at people hugging each other and saying farewell. He writes, “Not knowing where I was heading to, I crossed the wagons like a mad man” (p.6).

Drawing on such psychological dynamics in Mirmirani’s memoir, I ask what does the act of memoir writing amount to for the subject when subjectivity remains stuck in the same vertiginous position from the start to the end? Should we ground Mirmirani memories as reactions to psychosocial conditions of life such as to the economic and political

pressures in the post-world war Iran and subsequently to the long periods of displacement throughout various Soviet penal institution and carceral territories? Or his memoir aspires to something different if not more? Also what does it mean to have no appetite despite being hungry? And why this episode opens as an “event of hunger” and placed at the end irrespective of the temporal, geographical, and autobiographical order of the rest of his exilic journey?

Outlands as mined territories opposed to congeniality of inlands lack nothing but horizon: at their beyond lies transparent nothingness while in their crevices the world falls into a hazy atmosphere where there can only be blurred vision. Things, people, and places come forward and disappear in and out of the haze of outlands as flashing points, as riders of a hidden roller-coaster on an elliptical course - territorial fate. To write becomes a question of how to extend fate onto space following directions of movement and rest rather than securing narrative anchor points or landscapes in focus - not a biography nor a historiography but a topography. Despite haziness outlands are the possibility of light given to open space, *visionary extensions*. The paths that the Iranian memoir writers chart as episodes of their exilic journeys into Soviet outlands are not qualities or states of affair, nor geopolitical landscapes, they are events of territory. They are authorial accomplishments in that the memoirs are tasked to extract visions out of territories: visions that don't respond to the tribunal of historical facts nor hide behind the oasis of personal memory. Rather, they lay the historical as well as the personal exposed to events or entities, to the dust and haze of outlands. Hence the memoirs aspire as machines of territorial sacrifice: to make outlands they throw territories to the altar of Vision, making offerings to an earthly Beast. Shall the offerings be worthy, entities arise or rather descend to gnaw on the memoir-writers: shame, glory, happiness, hunger, pain, and confusion sweep and devour territories. But no particular outland can be existentially or morally superior to others in the bestial eyes of the entities. The authorial task lies in the practical labor of charting a flesh out of territories to make them worthy of their devouring entities: dramatization. The badge of success: a sore eye, a buzzing ear, a gesticulating soul.

Chapter Three
Ibra or
Pedagogical Passages of Traumatic Exemplarity

Take lessons from the world and don't pass through it.

Attributed to Prophet Mohammad
Ikhwan-al-safa, Rasa'il

...[T]he desperate eagerness of a haggard knowledge which knows nothing, which no one knows, and which ignorance always discovers behind itself as its own shadow changed into a gaze...

Maurice Blanchot, *Literature and the Right to Death*

While Russia has historically and geographically close ties with Islam, the second most-practiced religion in its vast territories, the collapse of the USSR changed the terms of this relationship in significant ways. One key shift is the emergence of new immigration patterns between Russia and former Soviet states. Traversing distant lands from the peripheries of the Caucasus and Central Asia to mainland Russia in search of work, migrants have come to recognize each other as fellow Muslims dispersed in a theological geography on the ruins of the universal comradeship dreamed by the Soviet utopia. I propose to study the Islamic pedagogical practice of *ibra* in the context of socio-historical dynamics of education and migration between Russia and Central Asia to further locate and analyze this shift in relation to current debates on post-Soviet subjectivity. By discussing the case of a spirit possession of a Tajik national performed in Russia, I argue that the collective participation in the session pedagogically invokes, ciphers, and extends the post-Soviet terrains of history as *ibra*, or exemplary passage of worldly events. To do so, I first locate the Quranic concept of *ibra* as a pedagogical paradigm in Islamic traditions as well as an ethnographic lens in the context of educational campaigns for the Muslims of Eurasia and then apply the concept to my analysis of the possession session in order to show that in the ritualistic incarnations of ghosts, or *jinns*, the civil war of Tajikistan and its continuing cycle of terror is ciphered into a desire for learning, as well as a focus for approximation of the divine.

Geo-Biographies of Terror: Challenges and Limits of Forensic Hermeneutics

In the immediate aftermath of the tragic marathon bombing in Boston on April 15, 2013, federal authorities as well as the public media engaged in a profiling campaign of the two young suspects with a focus on their geographical and cultural origins. It was hoped that a forensic geography could sift through and connect the hometowns, travel routes, and meeting places of the two men into a decipherable narrative, hinting at their nefarious inclinations and prior intentions. In this forensic experiment, the uncovered territorial coordinates became objects for public imagination and expert speculations on the "meaning" of the two men's act of violence. Their birthplaces, training camp, holiday visits to the Caucasus, socialization sites, even their visits to sporting arenas, were all understood to provide potential clues. However, the early experimental efforts to construct a geo-biographical assemblage soon lost the potential for producing further questions and instead fell back on what could be immediately verified and known: the young Muslim immigrants from Russia could only be meaningfully tied to all those places they were officially and administratively known to have come from. One was born in the North Caucasus, the other in Kyrgyzstan. Their family had lived on both sides of the Eurasian continent in Kyrgyzstan and Dagestan before emigrating to the United

States as refugees in 2002. After further investigation into their backgrounds, the security community and the public came to a relative consensus that the brothers only identified themselves as Chechens (with the implication that they were not really Chechens), and that they had no real ties to known terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda (apparently they learned how to make explosive devices on the Internet).

Thus, in facing the tragic force of the event, the early forensic search for an articulation of biography with geography or a geo-biographical hermeneutics was soon aborted and replaced with psychopathological theories that could find ready-made answers in the internalized world of a traumatized psyche. In this way, the relocations of the family between the Caucasus and Central Asia, their immigration to the US and their subsequent travels back to real or imaginary hometowns all lost significance beyond reaffirming the unsuccessful assimilation of the immigrant Muslim family into the American society, which led to the brothers' resentment towards the world, enacted later in their targeting of the Boston Marathon.

My discussion of the possession case in the following, in contrast with the aborted forensic trajectory of the Boston bombing case, is directed towards an exploration of alternative articulations of subjectivity with geography and space. In doing so I am particularly inspired by the theoretical underpinnings of the *Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel DeCerteau (2011) and *The Experience of Freedom* by Jean-Luc Nancy (1993). DeCerteau develops a poetics of space in which space is produced concretely by impersonal practice (such as making uncharted paths by walking) rather than by representation of movement along mappable itineraries. Even more radically, for Nancy, space in its genetic function or "spacing" is a metaphysical reduction to minimum form in contrast to a three-dimensional projection of emptiness into space. He explains: Spacing is the general form-which precisely has no form, but gives room for forms and formations, and which is not general but which gives room for singularities-of existence: the spacing, exposure, retrenchment and cutting (decision) of singularity, the areality (which is, as we have indicated elsewhere, the character of air) of singularity in its difference which relates it to its limit, to others, and to itself" (p.145, original italics). For Nancy, "spacing" gives room to non-reality or "areality", which is not the negative of reality (in the sense of a fictional story or fake memories of an event such as those shaped around the Boston Marathon bombing); rather "spacing" refers to the act of a leveling or reducing of reality for the procurement of singularities or better for production of singular relations. In a counter-balance to the minimum real form of "spacing", the concept of singularity points to a maximum operation of relationality (or collectivization) towards a world making in which beings come to existence and encounter one another in perpetual relations of attraction, connection, contrast, and repulsion in a metaphysical affirmation of difference.

Similarly, but in anthropological terms, I hope to show that in the following possession case, the geo-biographical singularity of a life (with a minimum of subjective form but maximal anthropological collectivization) is effectuated within the confines of a pedagogical practice. By 'anthropological,' I mean a social assemblage created and sustained through interdependent relations among human and non-human elements, in which the terms of these relations can fluctuate without disrupting the consistency and continuity of the collective process. Evans-Pritchard's ethnography among the Azande guides me as the prime example of such a formation in which a society comes to reckon

with excessive or evil forces through a ritual of attuning to a singularity or “a witchcraft” (1976).

Furthermore, my drawing on the relational function of spacing or “singularity” is aligned with and informed by my specific application of the concept of trauma as collectivization of subjectivity (and not the subject) through involuntary processes of subjectivation – here through the specific pedagogical structure of *ibra*. In contrast to the fully formed subject of voluntary recollections, associations, or reflections as mobilized in most modalities of modern psychotherapy, a collectivized subjectivity stays short of assuming a self-standing identity and is in a constant state of incompleteness by merging with other real identities, fictional characters, or professional roles invoked in scenes of subjectivation. Though beyond the scope of the present paper, the modality of subjectivity collectivized and produced in the pedagogical scene of *ibra* can be situated and comparatively analyzed within debates on the hypnotic effectiveness of “trauma therapies” (Leys, 2013) and trans-individual subject formations (Borch-Jacobsen, 1993). Before discussing the anthropological and pedagogical specificities of the possession case, I will sketch the ethnographic environment of the case in the broader context of Islamic education in Russia and the sociopolitical dynamics of migration in Central Asia.

The Political Cartography of Education between Russia and Central Asia

The case of Russia provides a historical lens that could open the “problem” of Muslims living under non-Muslim rule to the question of education as a political strategy. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Muslim populations in the Volga-Ural regions, deemed too costly to convert, came to be recognized by the nascent Christian empire of Russia as an indigenous community carrying a distinct body of religious knowledge and law in relation to their claim to territory (Frank, 1998). Starting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and continuing until the beginning of the Soviet era, *ulama* or religious teachers from the now inland regions of Volga were recruited by the Russian imperial state to implement educational campaigns for the unruly Muslim inhabitants of the steppe and Central Asia, parallel to military and political campaigns spearheaded in the same borderlands (Crews, 2009).

Despite the century-wide historical gap between the pre-Soviet and the post-Soviet era, there is ample reason to find some continuity on the strategic place of religious education tied to political and security interests of the Russian state in relation to Islam. The Russian government and the Muslim leaders of the mainland could well form allies via a mutual enemy: the advance of militant Islamism into Eurasia. Local religious leaders and the Russian government both recognize Islamic radicalism as a security threat to the religious stability of Muslim communities and to the political sovereignty of Russia. In the last three years, suicide bombers allegedly linked to Wahhabi militant groups have repeatedly targeted respected religious leaders in Dagestan and neighboring regions in the Caucasus. Thus, whether spontaneously or under government pressures, many mosques now actively participate in anti-Wahhabi teachings. More recently, on the eve of the Sochi Olympic games, a series of suicide attacks shook the Volga region and prompted a harsh warning by Vladimir Putin to Saudi Arabia. More specifically to the possession case, the Russian-speaking mullah co-conducting the session, who immigrated from the Middle East to Russia during the Soviet era and graduated from a religious school in the Caucasus, in his commentary

on the recorded video specifically mentions among his professional experience in the Council of Ulama (sovet ulemov) those activities related to “enlightenment (prosveschenie) against war and Islamic radicalism”.

Hence I view the possession session as a part of or at least consistent with ongoing educational campaigns in which the interests of the Russian government and those of religious leaders and teachers converge once more. The fact that the session was performed in Russia in the presence of several religious students as well as the fact that it was recorded and distributed online next to links of other educational materials including those condemning radical Wahhabism articulates its place in the larger sociopolitical context of Muslim education in Russia.

But parallel to the strategic convergence of the interests and forces of the state and the ulama over educational campaigns, an ethnographic focus on the specific modes, moments, and terrains of implementation of and participation in these educational campaigns can shed light on the anthropological routes through which such campaigns acquire, maintain, or transform collective shape and consistency in their own terms and in adjacency to the larger fields of sociopolitical forces.

Similarly, the material for the present paper is part of the ethnographic data I have been collecting in Tajikistan and Russia on those educational programs that specifically target Muslim migrants. Despite the different subject matters and intended audience of these educational campaigns they mirror various configurations of often the same field of political forces: for example in HIV/AIDS public health campaigns provided to wives of migrants (many, tragically, widowed or abandoned), a perceived threat to the biopolitical entity of “populations” could be detected (Foucault, 2009). Similarly, Islamic workshops for the imam khatibs (head clergies) of local mosques on how to deliver and what to include in public sermons could be an equally protective measure against the perceived threat of political Islam by the state.

However, to situate and study the ethnographic immediacy of these educational programs in the temporal, spatial, and collective registers of everyday life requires an analytic sensitive to forms of sociality emerging in the implementation of such campaigns. The pedagogical forms I chose to guide my analysis in my research on education of Tajik migrants in Tajikistan and Russia and more specifically here with the possession case enables my engagement with a variety of interconnected actors, objects, desires, alliances, iterations, and vectors of sociality that could heuristically point to an anthropological formation. For example, in the case of education of Tajik migrants on the subject of sexually transmitted diseases, global security forces have enforced such campaigns in the most remote villages of Tajikistan and upon the most unsuspecting populations. But, on the other hand, my observations and collection of ethnographic data often points to religious and eschatological imaginations in the pedagogical implementations of such campaigns, regardless of their factuality or correspondence to the empirical objects of inquiry or the so-called Durkheimian social facts (figure 1). I treat these theological articulations of migration in the form of hazards, tests, temptations, ordeals, rewards, virtues, and other registers of religious subjectivity not as pre-existing or ready-made maps of religious, moral, or cultural sensibility but as parts of anthropological assemblages or formations emerging in response to specific pedagogical roles, demands, tasks, and structures and in tension with broader historical and social forces affecting the flow of every day life.



Figure 1. In this drawing by an unknown artist from the curriculum used in educational workshops by the International Organization for Migration in Tajikistan, a migrant worker is shown pondering two opposing temptations: spending his wages on an affair in Russia (associated with a satanic/animalistic figure of desire) or sending remittances to his wife in Tajikistan (associated with an angelic figure of desire). Permission to use photo by IOM Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Moving Learners and Religious Pedagogies of Mobility

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, as centralized subsidies and demand for local factory products vanished altogether, large portions of the young population of Central Asian countries were forced to migrate and seek menial jobs in the expanding Russian economy. About one million Tajik labor migrants are estimated to be working in various sectors of the Russian economy (Asia Plus, 2013). While the main motive of this epochal wave of migration is often economic, other desires, in particular that of pursuing religious knowledge, play an important role in the lived experience of migrants.

Mobility bears a deep theological and historical significance in Islam. The migration of the Prophet Mohammad from Mecca to Medina inaugurated the epochal advent of Islam as a global religion and established the start date for the Islamic calendar. The spread of Islam from the Arabian peninsula eastward as far as Siberia, China, and Southeast Asia constitutes a small part of a complex global itinerary of Islam through movements of various populations and violent and non-violent exchanges between them for more than a millennium (Ho, 2006). In the case of Eurasia, the paths of Hajj pilgrimage from the Indian subcontinent to Mecca through Central Asia and Turkey gave rise to articulation of many religious practices predicated on aspects of traveling and being on the road in a spiritual journey towards God (Algar, 2012). For example, observations

and recordings of worldly events during travel as a movement under divine knowledge was established into the Islamic genre of travel writing called *rihla* – from the Arabic verb that means ‘to depart’ and also ‘to die’ (Euben, 2008)⁴⁵. Pandolfo (2007) raises the possibility of reconstructing Islamic pedagogy, theological reasoning, and eschatological imagination as migration becomes both the existential conundrum of abject conditions of life and the very site of an engagement with the world transcended by a traumatic subjectivity (2007). In the contemporary context, Lotfalian (2004) suggests that Muslim subjectivities in the West correlate with the concept of *rihla* on the one hand and modern knowledge production on the other hand.

Similar to the above-mentioned authors, my aim here is to apply Islamic pedagogical practices and paradigms to the specific geopolitical landscapes of the post-Soviet and to study and re-chart the flows of migration from Central Asia to Russia in terms of a collectivized geography of the soul (or *jinneography*). In this non-secular geography an encounter among the scattered population of Muslim migrants in Russia in the settings of a spiritual healing session becomes a collective opportunity to learn about God’s absolute knowledge reflected in the fate of the afflicted or the possessed, who carries a ruinous legacy of the post-Soviet along his path of migration as a journey of soul.

⁴⁵ Ibn Batutta’s account of his multiple journeys and observations in the fourteenth century as far as China and South Asia are among the most popular example of *rihla*.

On Becoming a Thug: Re-Cipherings of Going Astray



Figure 2. A shot from a Youtube video of the possession session, showing the possessed encircled by students and two leading mullahs, Youtube License.

The video file of the possession session conducted by two mullahs is posted online under the title of “confession of the jinn by whom they enter” (priznania dzhina k komu oni zaxodjat) on the youtube channel of the Islamic Portal of the Volgograd District⁴⁶. In the following I present a contextualized discussion of the case including a transcript of most of the 14-minute recorded session in addition to separate commentaries provided by the two mullahs conducting the session. To protect the identity and privacy of the session participants, in particular the patient/possessed, I will use the background information on the case only towards my argument here and within what is revealed publicly in the online video. The young patient (in his early twenties) was first brought to the attention of a Tajik mullah in Russia as a migrant worker feeling unwell after having witnessed a series of violent events during his military service in the eastern and northern regions of Tajikistan. In his commentary about the clinical presentation of the possessed/patient before the start of treatment, the Tajik mullah uses the expression “mazash gorikht”, literally, “he lost taste of life”, which can point to a flat, limited, or depressed mood symptomatic of a number of psychological conditions including PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). After an initial session of Quranic recitations, the Tajik mullah diagnoses him with having been “entered” (the exact term used in the title of the video) by spirits or jinns. The healing sessions at the mosque

⁴⁶ The video can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urxY81GaKus>

would continue intermittently for two months before the possessed returned to Tajikistan. Since then he has continued religious treatment in Tajikistan and has been back to Russia doing well the last time the Tajik mullah heard of him. The video was recorded in the middle of the two-month period of treatments in Russia.

The starting scene shows two mullahs sitting at each side of the head of a young man who is lying on the floor with tied ankles and covered eyes; the possessed's body is encircled by several religious students at a close distance to him (Figure 2). The attending mullah on the right side of the possessed holds a rosary near his face, addressing the young man in Russian, "This rosary has touched the sacred hair of the Prophet". In his other hand he holds a book entitled *The Miracles of Quran* (in Arabic *al-ijaz al-Quran*). The mullah touches the young man's face with his rosary, saying, "One single blow of this feels to you like a thousand lashes".

According to the Tajik mullah co-conducting the session, what is performed in this video is a *ruqya*. The Arabic term *ruqya*, meaning incantation in English, has been mentioned as the religious cure for possession in the compendium of medical concepts and practices authorized on the Quran, the hadith and the sunna (sayings and doings attributed to the Prophet), known as Prophetic Medicine since its compilation in its present form in the fourteenth century A.D. An important aspect of Prophetic Medicine distinct from the secular sensibility of modern medicine is that illness is treated as an instantiation and manifestation of the divine will and absolute knowledge. Similarly, any inquiry into the possibility and conditions of healing according to this theological-medical paradigm has to address the revelatory essence of knowledge as delivered to the Prophet by the miracle of Quran parallel to the punishment of the ignorant or the unbeliever as promised in the afterlife.⁴⁷ But before that end of time the practice of *ruqya* has been indicated in many hadiths and still recommended in modern adaptations of Prophetic Medicine for the treatment of spirit possession, evil eye, and mental illnesses, though it can be applied to other physical or spiritual conditions too.

In reaction to his being addressed, the possessed cries in Tajiki, "Do not kill me, I did cooperate (*nakushid maro, man yardam kardam ke*)". The Russian-speaking mullah – the Russian mullah from now on – asks his Tajik-speaking counterpart for an interpretation and then orders the possessed to speak only in Russian or in Arabic. "I'm illiterate (*man bisavadam*)", repeats the possessed, resisting the mullah's requests and at the same time indicating a lack of knowledge, awareness, or responsibility. This brings laughter to the Tajiki-speaking mullah (from now on the Tajik mullah), while the Russian mullah interprets the statement as a deceptive move on the part of the jinn that speaks within (or as) the possessed. The Russian mullah counters the jinn by reciting Quranic verses with increasing ferocity while hitting the possessed man's face with the rosary. After having the possessed swear to God and then say his *shahadatein* in Arabic (the twofold testimony to Allah and the Prophet), the Russian mullah asks the possessed to state his name. Again, the answer comes in Tajiki: "I don't have a name (*man nom nadaram*)". The Russian mullah begins to lose patience, slapping the

⁴⁷ *Ruqya* is also referred to by Quran in eschatological context and in a rhetorical question and warning about its futility and impossibility to remedy the crushing terror and weight of the Resurrection Day upon the human body and soul (the chapter *al-Qiama*, verse 27).

possessed repeatedly with his right hand – this time bare – while prohibiting him from talking to the Tajik mullah, “Why are you deceiving again? Mavlavi [a local term similar to mullah for a religious teacher in some provinces of Tajikistan] is not here!” The possessed continues to mumble in Tajiki, and the Russian mullah responds to his mumbling with more threats, “You don’t want to talk, ha? We will see. I’m going to make you suffer now that you didn’t want things to go peacefully”. Finally, the jinn complies and speaks through the possessed: “I’m listening, me too, I want to become a Muslim”.

“I want to go away and also I want to become a Muslim”, the jinn addresses the Russian mullah this time. “Al-hamdo lelah (Grace to God), you already are a Muslim, why do you say you want to become a Muslim?” The jinn explains to him, “I was not that person, I was his security guard”. “Whose security guard?” the Russian mullah leads the interrogation now. “They took him, the KGB took him”, answers the jinn. “Are you trying to deceive me again?”, replies the Russian mulla, “Then I’m going to make you suffer by reciting the Quran.” The Tajik mulla this time tries to mediate by shouting, “Who is this? How many individuals exist in you?” The jinn continues in Russian, “Only me, no one else, the rest are hiding behind the others, I will go now! Don’t kill me, I’m a good warrior....don’t kill me”. Unaffected, the Russian mullah resumes the Quranic recitations while putting his hand over the nose of the possessed. “I can’t breathe, can’t breathe”, the jinn shouts in Russian, screaming loudly. “What do you want? Mavlavi! Tell me what do you want and I will go”, begs the possessed. “Nothing”, the Tajik mullah mumbles softly. This time the jinn screams angrily in Russian, “Arab people! (Rodine Arab), what do you want?! The great scholars (velikie uchennye), what do you want?”

The seemingly ethnic terms of the address above, “Arab People” and “the Great Scholars,” could ground the scene in a theological geography of human knowledge. In Islamic theological science, each nation (or umma) is a partial carrier of the divine will and knowledge. In particular, the Arab nation holds a distinct position in relation to other nations through its association with the Prophet. Similarly, in classical Islamic contexts such as Ibn-Khaldun’s monumental historiography, al-Muqqaddama, each branch of “positive knowledge” is ascribed to particular ethnicities at various junctions of history (Khaldun, 2004).

– “So if you don’t want to die, then say how many of you are here now?” asks the Russian mullah.

– “I’m the right hand of the commander”.

– “Ah, we asked you how many of you are here?” repeats the Tajik mullah in Russian, taking over the interrogation of the jinn.

– “Only me, no one else, I swear”.

– “To whom you swear?”

– “To all.”

– “To?!”

– “To Allah the Almighty I swear that I’m the only one here!”

– “Under one condition you may go; tell us whom you entered the first time and when?” asks the Russian mullah.

– “Sixteen years ago”.

– “For what reason?”

– “By the order of the queen”.

– “Which queen?”

- “The queen of people, of us all”⁴⁸.
- “Of you all”, the Tajik mullah corrects him. “Why did you choose him [the possessed] in particular?”
- “He committed sin but was a good fighter”.
- “Why did you enter him? What is his name (asking the Tajik clergy)? Why did you enter him?”
- “He was a good teacher”.
- “What did he teach?”
- “He was not our teacher”
- “Did he do his namaz (prayers) or did he not do his prayers?”
- “He was a thug”.
- “Aha you see: he was a thug, that is why he became your teacher, ha? Where did you enter him?”
- “He was fighting”
- “Fighting with whom?”
- “He was fighting with other street thugs”
- “That is why you chose and entered him because your queen would be pleased by him as a thug right?”
- “Right”
- “He did not follow the sharia, right? He left the sharia and did not follow it so you liked him right?”
- “No he loved Allah”
- “If he loved Allah then why did he leave the sharia?”
- “He used to say prayers but then he stopped”
- “He dropped it, that is why you found it easy to enter him?”
- “He got scared and then we could enter him”.

According to a small handbook of ruqya compiled into English from Arabic sources (by translators from the Caucasus, based on their names), “extreme and sudden fear, extreme anger, or extreme sadness or happiness” are the main causes for spirit possession (al-Khudayri, 2012, p.26). Similarly, according to the Tajik mullah in his commentary on the recorded session, “the jinns themselves admit looking for opportunities to enter man in the three states of sorrow (gham), anxiety (tashvish), and excessive laughter (qahqaha)”, which correspond exactly to the three above causes.

- “Where did he get scared?” continues the Tajik mullah.
- “In the middle of a hole”.
- “Where?” interrupts the Tajik mullah.
- “In the war”
- “Which war?”
- “The war of August 2010”
- “Aha, where was it? Say the location?”
- “In Rasht.”

⁴⁸ I’d like to thank the anonymous reviewer who reminded me of the strong parallels between the Quranic (as well as biblical) story of the Queen of Sheba who was in command of the jinns and the possessed referencing of “the Queen of people” and the mullah’s correction “of *you* people”.

The above date and place corroborates the jailbreak of 25 militant “Islamist” commanders from a central prison in Dushanbe and their escape to the mountains of Rasht in the east. Less than a month later, a convoy of replacement soldiers was ambushed in the same area by unknown forces who murdered 23 soldiers and injured 20. The convoy was mostly comprised of new, young cadets with no or little real combat experience. The brazen escape and the subsequent fatal attack was later countered by the army and special forces who sifted through the rugged mountains, killing or capturing a number of the escapees. The official narrative of the state sought to tie the two incidents to a criminal alliance between foreign fighters sympathetic to Islamic fundamentalism and local bandits hiding in the mountains of the Rasht valley. But betraying any truthful narrative of history, and despite the exact references to recent violent events in Rasht, the identity of the possessed keeps alternating in his confessions between a thug, a teacher, and a “good fighter” without an apparent logic. These seemingly haphazard oscillations could be inscriptions in the factual matrix of continuing animosity and violent breakdown of alliances among the former parties of Tajikistan civil war, who later turned “fighter” or “thugs” depending on each side’s point of view.

By far the bloodiest legacy of the collapse of the Soviet Union in Central Asia, Tajikistan’s civil war flared in 1992 and claimed about one hundred thousand lives, displacing more than one million people, before it came to official end five years later by the victory of the forces from the south over the United Tajik Opposition, comprised of forces from Badakhshan and Gharm (the center of Rasht province mentioned by the possessed). The peace treaty signed in 1997 in Moscow guaranteed a thirty percent share of power among government positions for all opposition groups. However, since that time there have been several eruptions of armed struggles that have pitted those former fighters in the opposition camp, who later turned into local commanders of armed forces in the peace process, against the present government (Nourzhanov & Bleuer, 2013). As a result of this continuous score-settling among the former civil war parties in the last two years, various assassinations and violent armed struggles have shaken the relative peace in another mountainous area in Tajikistan, the autonomous region of Badakhshan, which, much like Rasht, was once a stronghold of opposition parties in the civil war, resurrecting not only the recent traumas of war but also echoing memories of earlier histories of violence.

- “That is when you entered him? How many of you?”
- “We waited until he got scared and then we entered him”
- “You had been hunting him right?”

The Russian-speaking mullah interrupts:

- “So he was a thug and did not follow the sharia?”
- “For a total of three years we had been after him”, the jinn answers.
- “So if you don’t enter young children, who do you enter usually?” asks the Russian-speaking mullah. “Can you enter those who follow the sharia or those who love to pray?”
- “It is not possible to enter those who love the sharia, those who say their prayers, and those who beg to Allah.”
- “So listen carefully young men”, the Russian mullah addresses the students attending the session in a way that the possessed can take notice of the pedagogical

moment too and then coming back to the possessed, “those who stop praying and who don’t follow the sharia, it is easy for you to enter them right?”

- “Exactly”, the jinn confirms.
- “So now have you already left this individual or you need to suffer more again by recitations of Quran?”
- “Yes, we are leaving him now”, softly abides the jinn.
- “He said ‘we’, there are several of them”, a student assisting the session says.
- “Yes, it is not just one, they are putting up an act”, the Tajik mullah agrees.
- “Right, again they are acting up, but I can deal with it with enough time”
- “Swear to the Almighty God that it is only me and no one except me has entered his soul”. (End of the recorded session).

Ibra or Passage of Exemplarity

Etymologically from the Arabic verb root a’br, to pass or cross as over a bridge, *ibra* can be translated as “passage”. In about ten Quranic verses various forms of the word *ibra* have been used to denote the pedagogical link between the passage of worldly and human happenings on the one hand and the possibility of approximating divine knowledge on the other—hence my translation of *ibra* as “exemplary passage”. Quranic references to *ibra* mostly narrate and refer to the fate of other nations or deeds of prophets as providing a pedagogical element or a lesson for the Muslim believers and learners. For example, in the chapter Yusuf, mainly dedicated to the story of the Prophet Joseph, the Quran says: “Indeed in their stories, there is *ibra* for men of knowledge” (verse 111). Similarly according to a hadith, when the prophet was asked about the story of the Ten Commandments and the Prophet Moses, he answered, “It is all *ibra*” (cited in Mahdi, 1957, p.72).

But in addition to the narrative story line of prophetic parables (or *qisas al-anbia*), the exemplarity of lessons as the pedagogical goal of *ibra* is predicated on a dramatization of those stories according to eschatological sensibilities and by way of Quranic recitation and admonitory injunctions. Thus the special truth status of *ibra* distinguishes its practice from a (secular) pedagogy predicated on textual or oral lessons. For example, to quote the Muslim mystic al-Shibli, “there is a difference between the general many who busy themselves with the simple recitation of stories and the particular few who are interested in stories for the sake of *itibar* [the pursuit or love of *ibra* or learning]” (cited in Mahdi, 1957, p.72).

On the other hand a moral exemplar solely delivered by admonitory performances (or *wa’z* in Arabic) and recitations of Quranic stories, albeit based on eschatological sensibilities, does not merit the label *ibra* by itself and remains external to it. According to Ibn-Khatib, “admonition is an external tool for turning the soul from its ‘amusement and pleasantry to the atmosphere of sorrow and anxiety’ but once the soul is set on its way to truth, then the cover of forbiddance is folded, unfolding the expanse of *itibar* [the desire for *ibra* or learning] and Love” (cited in Mahdi, 1957, p.72). Therefore, beyond a moralistic lesson grounded in Quranic stories, an emotional-affective course of progress is charted as the teleology of *ibra*, one from an eschatological affection to a positive “love” of learning or *itibar* 49.

⁴⁹ *Ibra* is also used in Islamic medieval histories, most notably by Ibn Khaldun and Beihaqi as well as in theological-philosophical works such as *al-Isharat* by Avicenna (a

Similarly, in the above possession scene, the question of inculcating a desire for learning starts from the very exemplarity of the Quran, which is the miracle that had communicated the divine knowledge to the then illiterate Prophet by the first injunction “read!” (*iqra*), and which authorizes the session by the Russian mullah’s recitation of verses from a booklet entitled *The Miracles of Quran* and asking the possessed if he understands Arabic.

Yet by the end of the session what distinguishes this pedagogical scene from an example delivered in a secular or religious pedagogical setting beyond its anthropological specificity such as its embodied and rhetorical performances is the collectivization of the knowable or the epistemological into the learnable or the pedagogical, or in the words of Ibn al-Khatib, to the love of learning or *itibar*. To elucidate the execution of this pedagogical teleology, I focus on the key last interactions before the end of the filmed session. After the jinn seems overpowered and has disclosed the story of the moral fall of the possessed in exchange for its freedom to “leave”, a student points out that there are multiple possessions taking place for the jinn speaks in the plural.

Until that final moment, the jinn provided a theatrical presentation for the student-spectators to reflect on and know about the pitfalls of a life steering away from the righteous path of religion or sharia and thus overtaken by the jinn. By the end of the session, however the students are turning the knowable into the learnable: they don’t just hear the jinn’s narration, they now listen to its words as echoes of a hidden message; they don’t just see its deceit, they now read into its signature. Drawing on interactions among the possessed, the healers, the teachers, and the students as well as the jinns, this collective enflaming of the desire to learn also betrays the hometown of the possessed as a connecting cave in the underworld of atrocities and his confessions as a stuttering in multiple tongues in lieu of truthful speech. Also, for this pursuit of knowledge under the exemplar passages of the divine to continue there must be “several jinns” in the unfolding spiritual geography of the afflicted soul.

The above pedagogical structure holds two opposing processes of subjectivation interlinked and in tension: on the one hand, the eschatological subjection to the divine removes the sovereignty of the subject necessary for epistemological self-reflection, moral self-evaluation, or ontological self-orientation towards the world. On the other hand, the dethronement of the subject from the hermeneutic center of the self and his loss of control over the world does not amount to anarchy, madness, or nihilism (though *ibra* does carry all these risks for untrained eyes and ears). Rather it produces a kaleidoscope of worldly events in which characters, acts, desires, and even perceptions

native of Tajikistan). In Persian classical literature and poetry, the concept of *ibra* was further developed aesthetically and in association with a rather distrustful outlook on the treacherous nature of worldly affairs so much so that the half Persian half Arabic expression *ibrat-gah*, literally meaning the place of *ibra*, metaphorically means “the world”. In its modern Arabic, Persian and Urdu usage *ibra* is still understood, though less frequently in its religious context, as those happenings that are imbued with potential lessons for learners. My aim here is not to provide a comprehensive study of all contexts and applications of *ibra* throughout Islamic traditions and cultures but to identify and highlight its anthropological enactment in the scene of possession.

of things can regroup and re-enter into perceptions of aleatory, singular relations (for example thug, teacher, student, soldier, migrant, fighter) in a traumatic collectivization of the empty place of the possessed subject.⁵⁰

To recapitulate, in this pedagogical-eschatological world-making, processes of collective subjectivation are shaped and sustained anthropologically towards procurement of an example (or the passage of exemplarity). Could it be that similar to Nancy's "spacing", *ibra* gives room or better captures the singularity of a life through maximal operation of collective learning? Could exemplarity be another name for singularity? Without conflating or reducing the specificities of the two traditions, one philosophical and the other eschatological, by the above I attempt to sketch the mere possibility of an encounter, if not a passage, between a Western metaphysics of singularity based on difference and collectivization of beings and an Islamic pedagogical practice based on collective procurement of exemplarity.

Conclusion

Oushakine (2013), in his study of Khatyn's memorials in Belarus, focuses on the conundrum of postcolonial subjectivity after it was revealed that the perpetrators of the incineration of an entire village during World War II had been mostly comprised of fellow Belarusians in addition to Russians and Ukrainians acting under the German command. More soberly than the Subaltern school of South Asia, he then characterizes the emerging postcolonial nationalism of Belarus in its dealing with a traumatic past as an instantiation of "strategic immoralism" (borrowing the term from the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk), a self-evacuating act of cultural memory when there is no location for a subject position under the structure of domination. This self-evacuation strategy has produced dominant narratives of victimization by consequent colonizers from Hitler to Stalin and on, thus pointing to the futility of any attempt to construct a subaltern history other than "the history of their repeated failures" (p.307).

In Tajikistan, more than a decade after the official end of the civil war, there has been no monument raised nor a memorial public service held for the tens of thousands of the victims, let alone a discursive possibility of memory arising out of such commemorations (Etkind, 2013). The only public ceremony about the war is an official celebration held annually on Unification Day (or Rooze Vahdat). Therefore, in the absence of processes of memorialization and mourning of the civil war a postcolonial nationalism could well loom over the sociocultural horizon of Tajikistan similar to other post-Soviet nation-states such as Belarus and Ukraine.

Here my analysis of the possession ritual in terms of passages of exemplarity or *ibra* could also serve to propose a different modality of self-evacuation foregrounded in the impossibility of discursive or collective memorialization. In agreement with Oushakine and Etkind, I contend that in the post-Soviet withdrawal of mourning processes the educational campaigns targeting migrants could not deliver moral transcendence, chart a path to critical reflection, or promise a genuine mourning. But perhaps in counterpoint with the above post-Soviet scholars, the pedagogical capture of life through passages of

⁵⁰ Here, by 'traumatic,' I don't mean that the subject will dissipate into the abstract abyss of nothingness or madness. Rather he or she could face a strangely familiar world of unending multiplicities that could have as well belonged to others (such as in the experience of dreaming or hypnosis).

exemplarity, short of guaranteeing psychological health of those in need of treatment or reestablishing the possibility of community, can speculate about an allusion to a missing people (borrowing the term from Deleuze), to those souls who could be inhabiting an eschatological isthmus or Barzakh⁵¹ by neighboring the post-Soviet non-place of chaos and war.

Looking from this perspective at the tragic bombing of the Boston Marathon, could the fall of the two brothers be understood as a failed attempt to turn the deserted terrains of their life-worlds in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Dagestan, and finally America into the expanding itineraries of the secret desire of an “other” – or rather, “others” to follow the discovery of multiple jinns by the students in the possession session? Had there been crypto-geographers to read ciphers into banalized memories of displacement and to listen to echoes in the empty hum of everyday life in America, could their “Chechen” stunt have turned differently?

To conclude, I’d like to address those questions with an alarming quote on the social and olitical possibilities of ibra by Mansour Hallaj, a mystic and theologian of medieval Islam: “Ecstatic audition externally is sedition but internally it is ibra. Therefore only he who understands the allusion is allowed to hear the ibra” (quoted in Mahdi, 1957, p.67). Are we already not trapped in the learning chambers of the world one way or the other?

⁵¹ In Islamic eschatology Barzakh refers to the interstice between the physical and spiritual worlds in which the soul awaits after death and before Qiyamah or the Resurrection Day. For an anthropological engagement with Barzakh as an intermediary realm of being look at *The Impasse of the Angels: Scenes from a Moroccan Space of Memory* by Stefania Pandolfo (1998).

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