

**THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT OF BUKHARA IN THE WORKS OF
HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ORIENTALISTS (19TH–20TH CENTURIES)**

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Abstract: This article analyzes the historiography and Orientalist studies of the Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara in the 19th and 20th centuries. It shows how the image of Bukhara evolved in the works of European and Russian authors, from an exoticized and colonial perception to a scholarly interpretation within the framework of academic Oriental studies. Particular attention is given to the works of V.V. Bartold, V.V. Radlov, and A.A. Semenov, as well as the transformation of approaches in Soviet historiography, where the Islamic environment was viewed primarily as a "relic of the past." The need for a contemporary rethinking of the Orientalist legacy and an appeal to the Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara as a holistic system for the formation of personality and spiritual culture is substantiated.

Key words: Bukhara, Islamic cultural environment, historiography, orientalism, oriental studies, V. V. Bartold, A. A. Semenov, V. V. Radlov, Bukhara Emirate, madrasah, ulema, Soviet historiography, colonial discourse, spiritual culture, personality formation.

Аннотация: Статья посвящена анализу историографии и ориенталистских исследований исламской культурной среды Бухары в XIX–XX вв. Показано, как в трудах европейских и русских авторов формировался образ Бухары — от экзотизированного и колониального восприятия к научной интерпретации в рамках академического востоковедения. Особое внимание уделяется работам В. В. Бартольда, В. В. Радлова, А. А. Семёнова и трансформации подходов в советской историографии, где исламская среда рассматривалась преимущественно как «пережиток прошлого». Обосновывается необходимость современного переосмысления ориенталистского наследия и обращения к исламской культурной среде Бухары как к целостной системе формирования личности и духовной культуры.

Ключевые слова: Бухара, исламская культурная среда, историография, ориентализм, востоковедение, В. В. Бартольд, А. А. Семёнов, В. В. Радлов, Бухарский эмират, мадраса, улемы, советская историография, колониальный дискурс, духовная культура, формирование личности.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara was the focus of attention for travelers, diplomats, military personnel, missionaries, and orientalists. It was during this period that Bukhara was finally established in the European and Russian scholarly consciousness as the "classical" center of Central Asian Muslim scholarship, the "city of the ulema," and the "stronghold of traditional Islam." However, this image was not a neutral reflection of reality. It was formed within the framework of specific intellectual traditions, ideological attitudes, and scholarly paradigms that determined the ways of describing, interpreting, and evaluating the Islamic cultural environment.

The historiography of this issue developed at the intersection of Orientalist knowledge, colonial discourse, and academic scholarship. In the works of Western European and Russian authors of the 19th century, Islamic Bukhara is presented as an exotic, closed, and archaic world, contrasted with "civilized" Europe. At the same time, already in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scholarly Orientalism emerged, seeking a systematic study of the language, religion,

law, education, and social institutions of Muslim society. During the Soviet period, a radical transformation of interpretations occurred: the Islamic environment of Bukhara was viewed primarily through the prism of class struggle and the ideology of "fighting vestiges," while its spiritual and cultural functions were reduced.

The current era is characterized by a desire to rethink the Orientalist legacy, to move beyond colonial and ideological frameworks. The Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara is increasingly understood as a holistic system for the formation of personality, moral norms, social practices, and forms of collective identity.

The purpose of this article is to trace how the scholarly image of the Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara was formed in the historiography and works of Orientalists of the 19th and 20th centuries, to identify the main stages and paradigms of its interpretation, and to demonstrate the limitations and heuristic potential of the Orientalist legacy for modern historical research. The first systematic descriptions of Bukhara in the European and Russian traditions of the 19th century were written not so much by scholars as by travelers, diplomats, and military agents. Their texts emerged in the context of the geopolitical rivalry between the great powers in Central Asia and were therefore closely linked to the tasks of intelligence, navigation in "foreign" space, and the cultural identification of the "Eastern world."

The works of English authors Alexander Burns and Ármin Vambéry significantly influenced the formation of the image of Bukhara. In his travel notes, Burns describes Bukhara as a closed theocratic state, ruled by a religious elite, where Islam permeates all aspects of life. His observations document the abundance of madrasas, the role of ulema, and the strictness of morals, but his interpretation of these facts is subject to the logic of the opposition between "progress" and "backwardness." Islamic culture is presented as a force holding back development, and religious education as a mechanism for the reproduction of archaism. A. Vambéry, who visited Bukhara disguised as a dervish, left a more detailed and vivid description of the city's inner world. He conveys the atmosphere of the streets, mosques, Sufi circles, and educational institutions. At the same time, his narrative is permeated with exoticizing motifs: Bukhara is presented as a "museum of the Middle Ages," a "frozen East," where religion has absorbed the individual. In his interpretation, the Islamic cultural environment is a space where individuality and critical thinking are suppressed.

In the Russian tradition, a similar role was played by the texts of N. Vitkevich and P.I. Lerch, as well as the reports of military and diplomatic missions. These materials combined empirical observation with the practical objectives of colonial development of the region. Bukhara was described as an "alien world" requiring deciphering: the authors recorded in detail the everyday life, religious rituals, educational structure, and the social role of the clergy. However, the Islamic environment was viewed primarily as an object of control and transformation.

These works are characterized by several consistent features:

1. The external perspective of the observer. The Islamic culture of Bukhara is described "from the outside," without attempting to reconstruct its internal meanings.
2. Exoticization and archaization. Religious practices are presented as strange, irrational, and "medieval."
3. A colonial interpretive framework. The Islamic environment is conceived as an obstacle to modernization, and therefore as an object of potential transformation.

At the same time, these texts laid the foundation for subsequent scholarly study. They were the first to introduce information about the structure of madrasas, the number of students, the role of ishans and ulema, and everyday religiosity. Despite the limited perspective, 19th-century Orientalists captured the true diversity of forms of Islamic life in Bukhara.

Thus, early Orientalism created a dual image: on the one hand, exotic and stereotypical, on the other, rich in factual material. It was on this basis that academic scholarship arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A distinctive Orientalist tradition, associated with the names of V. V. Bartold, V. V. Radlov, A. A. Semenov, and other scholars, sought to elevate the study of Bukhara beyond travelogues and colonial descriptions into the realm of scholarly analysis.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a qualitative shift in the study of Bukhara and the Islamic cultural environment of Central Asia. Travelogues and exploratory and descriptive literature gave way to academic Oriental studies, focused on the systematic analysis of sources, languages, legal norms, and institutions of Muslim society. It was during this period that the scholarly tradition associated with the names of V. V. Bartold, V. V. Radlov, A. A. Semenov, N. I. Veselovsky, and several other researchers took shape.

Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold occupies a special place in the historiography of Bukhara. His works laid the foundation for a scholarly approach to the history of the Muslim East in Russia. Unlike his predecessors, Barthold sought to view Islamic culture as an internally coherent historical system, not as a set of exotic practices. He consistently insisted on the need to study the East "from within," through language, written sources, and the Muslim world's own intellectual traditions.

Although Barthold did not devote specialized monographs to the cultural environment of 19th-century Bukhara, his works on Turkestan, Muslim education, and the role of the ulema and madrassas created a methodological framework for further research. He demonstrated that Islamic institutions were not relics of the past, but complex social organisms that performed the functions of knowledge transmission, moral education, and social regulation. In doing so, Barthold challenged the simplified colonial image of Muslim society as static and "ahistorical." A similar role was played by the works of V.V. Radlov, focusing on the languages, folklore, and spiritual culture of the Turkic peoples. Radlov viewed the Islamic environment not only as a religious space but also as a cultural system shaping thought, norms of behavior, and identity. His approach allowed him to see in the traditional environment of Bukhara not a "frozen East," but a dynamic form of civilizational development.

Of particular importance for the study of Bukhara was the work of A.A. Semenov, who combined archival work, source studies, and a deep knowledge of local tradition. His research on the history of the Bukhara Emirate, its administrative system, and religious institutions was distinguished by a desire to reconstruct the internal logic of society. Semenov documented the complex structure of spiritual life: the multi-tiered educational system, the hierarchy of ulema, the role of ishans, and the interaction of Sharia and customary norms.

It is important to emphasize that academic Orientalism was not entirely free of colonial preconditions. Even leading scholars retained the idea of the Muslim East's "lag" behind Europe and the need to reform traditional institutions. However, the fundamental difference of this stage was the shift from value judgments to analytical description. The Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara began to be viewed as a historically established system, rather than an anomaly.

A characteristic feature of scholarly works of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was an interest in:

- the structure of madrasas and educational programs;
- the social status of the ulema;
- the role of Sufi brotherhoods;
- the functioning of Sharia courts;
- the mechanisms for the reproduction of the religious elite.

Thus, Bukhara transformed from a "closed city of the East" into an object of scientific analysis. The Islamic environment was understood not only as a religious phenomenon, but also as a cultural mechanism for the formation of personality, norms of behavior, and social hierarchy.

It was at this stage that the possibility of moving from external description to interpretation emerged. Oriental studies began to address questions about how the Muslim personality is formed, what values are reproduced in the traditional environment, and what role religion plays in social integration. These questions would become central to modern historiography, but their origins lie in the academic tradition of the early 20th century.

However, the fate of this line of development was interrupted by the Revolution and the subsequent shift in ideological paradigm. Soviet historiography inherited the rich empirical material and methodological apparatus of Oriental studies, but radically altered its interpretive framework. The Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara began to be viewed primarily as a "relic of the feudal past" subject to dismantling.

The Revolution of 1917 and the establishment of Soviet power in Central Asia radically altered not only the socio-political reality but also the very paradigm of scientific knowledge. Oriental studies found themselves integrated into the system of Marxist-Leninist methodology, where religion was viewed primarily as a form of "false consciousness," and spiritual institutions as the support of the "feudal-lord" classes. In Soviet historiography, the Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara lost its status as an independent cultural phenomenon and became an object of criticism.

While the scholarly apparatus—source studies, archeography, textual criticism—appears to be retained, the very logic of interpretation changes. If in the pre-revolutionary academic tradition, the Islamic environment was viewed as a historically established system, now it is described in terms of "remnants," "reactionary," and "an impediment to progress." Madrasas, ulema, and ishans are interpreted primarily as elements of class domination and ideological control.

In works from the 1920s and 1930s devoted to the Bukhara Emirate and its social structure, religious institutions figure as the support of a "feudal-theocratic regime." Islamic culture is reduced to a function serving exploitation. Even when authors draw on rich empirical material borrowed from pre-revolutionary research, they are forced to fit it into a rigid schema:

emir—clergy—people, where ulema and ishans act as intermediaries of oppression. As a result, a methodological shift occurs:

- religious education ceases to be viewed as a form of intellectual tradition;
- spiritual education is interpreted as a mechanism of ideological subordination;
- Islamic morality as a system that hinders the formation of a "new man."

Even researchers who maintained scholarly integrity and a deep knowledge of the sources were limited by the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Describing madrasas, they emphasized their "backwardness"; analyzing the activities of the ulema, they emphasized their "reactionary role"; turning to Sufi practices, they presented them as a form of "mystical escape from reality."

A characteristic example is the Soviet interpretation of pre-revolutionary Bukhara as a "stronghold of the Middle Ages," an "anti-center of progress," where Islam supposedly paralyzed social development. In this image, the very idea of a culturally integrated environment disappears. Bukhara ceases to be a space for the formation of personality; it becomes a backdrop for class struggle. It is particularly telling that Soviet works practically ignore the internal logic of Islamic culture. They do not explore:

- how religious identity was formed;
- how the madrasa influenced worldview;
- what were the moral ideals of the Muslim individual;

- what role the ishans played in spiritual socialization.

The Islamic environment is conceived exclusively as an object of destruction and overcoming. Even when authors are forced to acknowledge the high level of literacy of the ulema, the richness of the literary tradition, or the authority of spiritual leaders, these facts are interpreted as a "paradox of feudal culture" rather than as the manifestation of an independent civilizational model.

At the same time, it was precisely during the Soviet period that colossal work was done to introduce archival materials, court documents, waqf acts, and chronicles into scholarly circulation. Historians documented the structure of madrasas, the number of students, the economic foundations of spiritual institutions, and the biographies of religious figures. This empirical corpus is of immense value today. The paradox of Soviet historiography is that it:

- enriched the source base;
 - systematized data on the social structure of Bukhara;
 - created chronological and institutional frameworks;
- but simultaneously:
- deprived the Islamic cultural environment of subjectivity;
 - reduced it to the function of an "ideological apparatus of feudalism";
 - excluded the personal dimension of religious culture.

Thus, the line outlined by Bartol'd and Semenov—the line of understanding Islam as a complex cultural system—was interrupted. The image of Islamic Bukhara in Soviet scholarship was rigidly integrated into the project of modernization and secularization, where the past was not to be understood, but to be overcome.

Only at the end of the 20th century, with the collapse of the USSR and a reassessment of the methodological foundations of historical scholarship, did the opportunity arise to return to the Islamic cultural environment of Bukhara as an independent subject of research. A post-Soviet historiography is emerging, striving to free itself from ideological clichés and restore the integrity of the spiritual world of traditional society.

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