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Connecting the two Easts: Central Asian cultural diplomats and Soviet Internationalism of the late Stalinist era, 1947–1950

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Central Asia's interactions with regions outside the Soviet borders during the Cold War have been largely ignored, despite evidence of the vital role it played in Soviet engagement with decolonising nations in Asia, as a model for a developed, decolonized, socialist nation. Central Asia was essential to Soviet cultural diplomacy, as Moscow sought to establish an anti-imperialist alliance with decolonizing countries in Asia and Africa. This paper begins its discussion with the Soviet participation in the 1947 Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi, which marked the first post-WWII occasion in which the socialist republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus represented the Soviet Union abroad. The paper explores the implications of this encounter on the Soviet interpretation of post-WWII Asia and the role of Central Asia in promoting anti-imperialist solidarity domestically and internationally. It also focuses on travel accounts of Tursun-zade and Oybek (Musa Toshmuhammad o'g'li), two prominent Central Asian writers who visited India and Pakistan as a part of the Soviet cultural delegates abroad. The writers utilized historical, cultural, and religious symbolism that resonated with the Central Asian population to foster connections between Moscow and Asia, localizing Soviet internationalism and creating a unique identity for Central Asia as the mediator between the Soviet centre (Moscow) and (South) Asia beyond the Soviet borders. By examining how Asia beyond the borders were depicted and how post-WWII Soviet internationalism discourse were integrated into the late-Stalinist republican literature, this paper offers a deeper understanding of the roles Central Asian cultural and intellectual figures played in shaping post-war cultural and international relations.

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Introduction

Until recently, much scholarship on the Cold War-era Soviet history has primarily focused on Moscow's foreign policy and its engagement with the West, while little research has been done on the agency of the non-Russian socialist republics, especially those in the 'Soviet East.' With a 'global turn' in the Cold War studies, scholars have begun to pay closer attention to the region came to be known as the Third World and its connection with socialist countries, shedding light on how interactions between the Second World and the Third World not only influenced Moscow's perception of the post-war international relations but also shaped the Cold War era global order (Young 2016; Babiracki and Jersild 2016; Kirasirova 2018; Djagalov 2020; Mark, Kalinovsky and Marung 2020; Mark and Betts 2022; Muratbekova 2023). As a result, the scope of the Second World has expanded; it is no longer synonymous to Russia or more narrowly Moscow, but encompasses a widely diverse regions of Eastern European satellite states, Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia, and socialist East Asian nations. Recent studies on the interactions among these regions within the Second World have also presented a more complex and nuanced picture of Cold-War era globalism. Building on this shift in perspective, scholars have recently begun to explore Central Asia's interactions with regions outside the Soviet borders which have been largely overlooked despite substantial evidence highlighting its crucial role in Soviet engagement with the outside world, as a model for a developed, decolonised, socialist nation (Khalid 2007; Kirasirova 2011; Kalinovsky 2018, Djagalov 2020; Cucciolla 2020). Central Asia was integral to Soviet cultural diplomacy as Moscow sought to establish its anti-imperialist credentials and demonstrate its commitment to fostering national development in decolonising countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Consequently, the Soviet state mobilised Central Asian writers, intellectuals, and scientists to serve as informal 'cultural diplomats' to represent the Soviet Union abroad. Soviet internationalism, founded on the anti-imperialist movements of the 1920s and merged with the notion of 'friendship of the peoples' during and following the war years, enabled Central Asian intellectuals and cultural figures to negotiate their political and cultural leverage with Moscow. Their reinterpretations of Soviet internationalism were shaped by, and in turn shaped, their encounters with the "outside East" and Soviet visions of trans-Eurasian or East-East solidarity.

Contrary to the conventional reading of the late Stalinist period as marked by continued isolation, this paper reveals that the Soviet attempt to forge an East-East solidarity began during the post-war Stalinist period. Central Asian delegates began travelling across Asia as early as 1947, starting with the Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi, as the cases of these writers demonstrate.¹ This paper begins with an examination of Soviet participation in the Asian Relations Conference, a seminal event that marked the first international assembly of Asian nations after World War II, with the goal of cultivating political and cultural relationships among Asian countries. Addressing the Asian delegates to the Conference, Mahatma Gandhi described the Conference as a "great event for us all who belong to Asia" (Work for One-World Ideal with Determination: Gandiji Addresses Asian Relations Conference 3 April, 1947). This conference also marked the first international gathering organised outside the Soviet Union where delegates from Central Asia and Caucasus socialist republics represented the Soviet Union since World War II. A Soviet newspaper article reporting on the Soviet delegation's visit to Delhi, praised the Conference for playing "a conspicuous, progressive role in the life of the Asian countries" and expressed the delegation's hope that the Conference would strengthen Asian solidarity against Western imperialism (quoted in McVey 2009

p.40). For the first time since the war and on the cusp of another global conflict, Soviet Central Asia encountered the people of Asia under European or Western colonial or semi-colonial dominance. This paper delves into the implications of this encounter on the Soviet interpretation of post-war Asia and the role of Central Asia in promoting anti-imperialist solidarity domestically and internationally. In the aftermath of World War II, the international landscape experienced rapid transformations with the emergence of new global powers and alliances. In September 1947, a months after the Delhi Asian Relations Conference, Andrei Zhdanov, the Second Secretary of the Communist Party, described the emerging new international order as a tension between two opposing camps: Western imperialists and capitalists on the one side, and anti-imperialists and proponents of people's democracies on the other. Between 1948 and 1953, Soviet foreign policy rhetoric was heavily influenced by Zhdanov's ideas, which, in turn shaped its involvement in Asia. Simultaneously, Soviet internationalism was redefined in response to the shifting geopolitical context.

This paper investigates the travel accounts of two Central Asian writer-intellectuals Mirzo Tursun-zade (1911–1977) from the Tajik SSR and Oybek (Musa Toshmuhammad o'g'li, 1905–1968) from the Uzbek SSR, to explore Central Asian interpretations of post-war Soviet internationalism. Both writers were celebrated authors, each emblematic of the national literature of their respective republics. Tursun-zade not only chaired the Tajik Writers Union from 1946 until his death, but also served as the head of the Tajik Ministry of Arts. The Tajik writer was appointed as the Chairman of the Soviet Committee for Asian and African Solidarity in 1956. Oybek, on the other hand, led the Uzbek Writers Union between 1945 and 1949, and was elected as People's Deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from 1946 to 1965. While he never held a formal diplomatic title, Oybek undertook many international missions across Europe and Asia. The two writers were among the first Central Asian writer-bureaucrats who also served as 'cultural diplomats' representing the Soviet Union in Pakistan and India in the late Stalinist period (1945–1953). This paper focuses on Mirzo Tursun-zade's poems from his collection titled *Poems about India (Stikhi o Indii)* which was inspired by the poet's visit to South Asia and Oybek's *Impressions from Pakistan (Pokiston Taassurotlari)* which recount the writer's journey to Pakistan. In both texts, Mirzo Tursun-zade and Oybek utilised Central Asian historical, cultural, and religious symbolism to foster connections between the Soviet Union and Asia, thereby localising Soviet internationalism and creating a unique identity for Central Asia as the mediator between the Soviet centre and Asia beyond the Soviet borders. By examining the evolving Soviet internationalism discourse and its integration into the late-Stalinist republican literature, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the roles Central Asian cultural and intellectual figures played in shaping the post-war cultural and international relations between the Soviet Union and Asia.

Soviet 'Asiatic' Republics at the 1947 Asian Relations Conference

The Asian Relations Conference, also known as the Inter-Asian Relations or New Delhi Conference, was convened at Purana Qila in Delhi, India, from March 23 to April 2, 1947. In total, 193 delegates and 51 observers from 34 countries (counting Soviet republics separately) attended the conference. Non-Asian countries including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union also sent their observers. This conference constituted a watershed moment, as it was the first major international gathering of Asian countries since the end of World War II. At the heart of the discussions lay the fundamental questions of how to achieve political autonomy, cultural and economic

modernisation, and how to restructure Asia's relationship with the Western world in the context of the changing post-war international order. While the conference was not an official, binding meeting of government officials, it carried a powerful symbolic significance. The conference marked a "psychological revolution" in the way Asia envisioned itself (Thakur 2019, p. 677). According to Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the organisers of the conference, the gathering of Asian countries to address the post-war challenges and envision a shared future signalled the emergence of a nascent sense of Asiatic solidarity (Asian Relations Organization 1948, p. 21). He repeatedly emphasised that the time had arrived to restore the historical connections between Asian countries that had been disrupted by European imperial dominance.

While the desire for Asiatic solidarity was widely shared among conference participants, the precise nature of this solidarity was a matter of considerable debate. The conference was criticized by observers from outside Asia for attempting to create an exclusive Asian bloc, to which Nehru responded by assuring that the conference would not "be opposed in any way to America or the Soviet Union or any other power or group of powers" (quoted in Edwards 1961 p.192). Nehru's vision of Asiatic solidarity was universalist and aimed to create a foundation for a broader world federation (Thakur p. 677). However, this vision was not widely embraced by the conference participants who emphasised that the shared experience of European colonization and the struggle for national independence was the unifying factor that brought Asia together (Abraham 2008; Stolte (2014)). Therefore, they called for anti-colonial, rather than universal, solidarity of Asian countries. Others advocated for more tangible political measures against imperialist powers, proposing the creation of a "neutrality bloc" to resist possible European military advances (Asian Relations Organization, pp.85–86). Some delegates addressed the problem of economic dependency of former colonies on empires and suggested the formation of an Asian economic bloc to break the chain of economic exploitation (Ibid, pp.109–114).

The Asian Relations Conference marked the first post-WWII international conference, held outside the Soviet Union, in which the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus represented the Soviet Union. The Soviet authorities sent a total of 16 delegates to the Asian Relations Conference. Among them, 14 delegates were from the "Asiatic republics of the Soviet Union"—five Central Asian republics and three Caucasus republics (Nehru, p. 565).² Most of the republican delegates were intellectuals affiliated with their respective republican Academies of Sciences or universities, representing a diverse array of fields of expertise including philosophy, history, mathematics, literature, and linguistics. In addition to the Central Asian and Caucasus intellectuals, Russian Orientalists E. M. Zhukov and I. P. Plyshevskii also attended the conference as Soviet observers. The two Orientalists were affiliated to the Soviet Academy of Sciences' Pacific Institute and played a pivotal role in shaping the Soviet Union's foreign policy towards South and Southeast Asia. The Soviet delegates presented papers on the current state of economic and social development in Central Asia and the Caucasus. They also travelled to other parts of the Indian subcontinent including Bengal, Sindh, and Hyderabad after the conclusion of the Conference in Delhi.

The Soviet delegates at the Asian Relations Conference depicted their republics as exemplary postcolonial societies, free from the socio-economic challenges affecting other Asian nations. They credited the October Revolution with liberating Central Asia and the Caucasus from colonial and feudal oppression, transforming these regions into highly advanced, industrialised areas. The delegates expressed gratitude to the Russian people, whom they considered allies in their anti-colonial struggle against the Russian Empire, and celebrated the "friendship of the Soviet peoples" or the fraternal unity which bound Soviet nations together under Moscow's leadership. The socialist republics of

Central Asia and the Caucasus were portrayed as thriving economies with rapidly advancing industrialisation, sophisticated agriculture, full employment, and effective mechanisms for preventing labour disputes (Asian Relations Organization p.129: pp.132–3: p. 165). The most notable achievement of socialism in the region was universal access to education, resulting in significant advance in literacy and cultural development. For example, the delegate from the Kazakh SSR suggested (p. 53):

One of the important things that bears witness to the growth of the cultural level of the population is its literacy. Kazakhstan is entirely literate. Before the Revolution Kazakhstan had not a single institute or university; now the Republic has 23 institutes and hundreds of colleges. Before the great October Revolution Kazakhstan had neither scientific institutions nor scientists. Now it has its own Academy of Sciences with 26 affiliated institutes and 1200 scientists. All this is the result of the free and unhampered development of our Republic. The Kazakh people are sure that in brotherly co-operation with other peoples of the Soviet Union, and with the establishment of friendly co-operation and cultural and economic relations with peace-loving countries—and especially with the neighbouring peoples of Asia—they will be able to achieve even greater prosperity.

The Soviet delegates attributed this success to the Soviet Union's recognition that building a socialist society necessitated an educated and skilled workforce (pp.178–9). They also believed that all individuals, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality, deserved equal rights and access to material and cultural resources (pp. 202–3). Rejecting the racist idea of inherent inferiority among "backward" peoples, the delegates argued that the Soviet Union had introduced the most effective social and educational systems in Central Asia and the Caucasus, facilitating the flourishing of their national republics (p. 102). In support of their claims, the delegates organised film screenings for other Asian representatives, showcasing the unique cultural characteristics and achievements of their home republics.

Upon listening to the reports and comments presented by the Soviet delegates, conference attendees reached a broad consensus that the Asiatic republics of the Soviet Union had accomplished an unprecedented level of advancement, especially in the fields of culture and education, within a relatively short span of time, as a result of Soviet national development policies. K. G. Saiyidain (1947, p. 10), the future Secretary of the Ministry of Education of India, wrote in his report on the Education session of the Conference that "Whatever may be the reactions of people of different schools of political and economic thought to the Soviet experiment in other fields, it is impossible not to admire and be impressed by the magnitude of their work in [the field of education and culture]." Nicholas Mansergh (1947, p. 303), a British observer at the Conference, also noted, "One sensed that the prestige [of the Soviet representatives] was rising, partly because constant repetition suggested that there might after all be something in the story which they told." Nevertheless, the conference attendees deemed the current situation and experience of Soviet Central Asian and Caucasus republics as "unique" or "exceptional," thereby inapplicable to other Asian countries (Asian Relations Organization p.156; p.165; p.182). The lessons offered by the Soviet representatives appeared remote from the realities that other Asian states confronted. For example, a delegate challenged the applicability of the Soviet model of collective land ownership to the rest of Asia, pointing out that landless peasants sought the transfer of land rights to themselves and their heirs, rather than memberships in a state-owned collective farm (p. 138). A Southeast Asian delegate later remarked: "It is hard to

get to know them [Central Asians]. They have come here and seem interested in discussions. But, except for cultural topics, they regularly tell us they have already solved all problems that are facing the rest of us and conversation stops there” (quoted in Talbot). Western observers also discovered the same Soviet aloofness and reluctance to cooperate with other Asian countries except in cultural matters. American observers noted that the delegates from the USSR “assumed no aggressive part in any of the discussions...their complacency precluded any admission of even the existence of such problems as were plaguing other countries of Asia” (Thompson and Adloff 1947, p. 98). Moreover, as Carolien Stolte (2019) argues, the lessons derived from the Soviet planned development, along with other developmental issues, were overshadowed by the conference’s anti-imperialist stance. In addition, even though the delegates from Central Asia and Caucasus emphasised complete political sovereignty of their republics, conference attendees remained unconvinced of the extent of autonomy granted to the republics under the Soviet system. This scepticism was deepened after the Soviet screening of a film showcasing Russian military power, which left unfavourable impression among other the delegates (Significance of the Asian Relations Conference 7 April 1947).

The Soviet observers were also disillusioned by the conference. Zhukov and Plyshevskii submitted a report to the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Party authorities, expressing disappointment that the organisers showed little interest in what the Soviet experience could offer other Asian countries, even though the Soviet delegates received considerable attention and even “friendly applause” from the audience (RGASPI f. 17 op. 128, d. 405, l. 19 (1947)). They felt that the organisers and Nehru himself “only wanted to use the fact of the presence of the Soviet delegation in Delhi to bolster the authority of the National Congress and its leaders” (Ibid). They viewed the host of the Conference as a bourgeois faction of the National Congress that suppressed workers’ movement to sustain an alliance with British imperialists. This faction, according to the observers, perceived the British imperialists “the lesser evil” compared to the more aggressive American capitalists (Ibid, l.24). Furthermore, Nehru’s call of neutrality was criticised by the observers as a façade used to conceal the bourgeois elites’ continuous partnership with their former colonisers. In a published version of the report, Zhukov took this idea further and suggested that “the activity of the Indian working class, its leading role in the struggle against English rule, is pushing the bourgeoisie more and more strongly into the imperialist camp, causing it to take an anti-national position” (quoted in McVey, p.40).

The Soviet observers discovered potential allies not among the conference hosts but instead within the All-India Muslim League. Zhukov and Plyshevskii reported that the representatives of the Muslim League showed warm hospitality towards the Soviet delegation, in contrast to the polite indifference displayed by Nehru’s inner circle. According to the Soviet observers (RGASPI l.23 (1947)):

In the Muslim border regions of India, which are destined to become the main parts of Pakistan, in particular in the North-West, there is a strong anti-English sentiment. The Soviet delegation had the opportunity to witness more than once the heightened interest among Indian Muslims towards the progress of the ethnically related Muslim population in the Soviet Asian republics. Representatives of the Soviet “Muslim republics” were warmly welcomed and received great honour during their visits to Bengal and in Sindh (regions of Pakistan).

During their visit, the Soviet delegation emphasised the principle of non-interference in India’s domestic affairs, but the report they produced revealed a strategic bias towards the Muslim

League. The report presented the Muslim League’s struggle for separation as a national resistance against the Hindu bourgeois-imperialist coalition, referring to young Muslim League representatives as the progressive (and socialist) elements. Notably, the Soviets came to realize that the ethnic commonality and religious legacies Soviet Central Asia and Caucasus shared with neighbouring Asia could potentially be leveraged for advancing Soviet foreign policy interests in Asia.

Even though the Asian Relations Conference was the first diplomatic instance where the Central Asian and Caucasus republics represented the Soviet Union in Asia, the Conference received minimal official publicity in the Soviet Union. The central and republic newspapers devoted only a few lines about the conference in the international news section. This lack of publicity reflected the Soviet Union’s foreign policy priorities at the time. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the Soviet state was focused on security issues in Eastern Europe and its relationships with the Western Allies who had now become its rivals. This period between 1946 and 1947 was a transitional phase when the Soviet Union abstained from direct involvement in Asia’s decolonisation movements. Instead, the Soviet Union opted to offer moral and diplomatic support for local communist insurgencies. Then on September 22, 1947, the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau) was established to counter the growing influence of the United States in Europe and Asia. On the same day, Andrei Zhdanov delivered a seminal speech that became famously known as the ‘two-camps speech.’ This marked a significant turning point in Soviet foreign policy discourse.

Evolving Post-war Soviet Internationalism between 1947 and 1950

In his speech delivered in 1947 on the post-World War II international situation, Andrei Zhdanov identified two competing camps that had a significant impact on the shaping of the post-war international order. These camps were characterised as “the imperialist and anti-democratic camp” and “the anti-imperialist and democratic camp” (Zhdanov 1947, p.8). According to Zhdanov, the imperialist and anti-democratic camp, led by the United States, aimed at strengthening global imperialism, fomenting a new imperialist war, and combating against socialism and democracy. To achieve these objectives the imperialists were willing to form alliances with anti-democratic and fascist forces. On the contrary, the anti-imperialist, democratic camp, led by the Soviet Union, was “a staunch champion of liberty and independence of all nations, and a foe of national and racial oppression and colonial exploitation in any shape or form” (Ibid). Zhdanov’s speech marked a pivotal moment in the post-war era as it signalled the Soviet Union’s abandonment of the “United Front” policy, which involved forming temporary alliances with nationalist-bourgeois forces to strengthen anti-imperialist movements. Additionally, the speech marked the end of the Allied system that had emerged during the war, and set the stage for the beginning of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Zhdanov’s ‘two-camps’ theory and the slogan of ‘struggle for peace in all the world’ were essential components of post-war Soviet foreign policy rhetoric between 1948 and 1953 (Liberman 2000; Johnston 2008; Dobrenko 2016). The Soviet Union co-organised the First World Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Peace in 1948, to appeal to cultural and intellectual figures worldwide to defend world peace against the warmongering imperialist camp. The Congress resulted in the adoption of a resolution that distinguished the defenders and enemies of world peace. Then, during the third Cominform meeting in 1949, Mikhail Suslov (1950, p.19), the Soviet representative, delivered a

speech that celebrated the formation of the Cominform as a “peace front” whose goal was “to save mankind from a new world war” by isolating “the clique of the instigators of a new war and securing peaceful cooperation between peoples.” Suslov characterised the current state of international affairs as being trapped in “the policy of disrupting international cooperation led to the notorious ‘cold war,’ an “artificial tension” fabricated by Anglo-American imperialist-capitalists seeking to profit from wars (p. 12). To counter this imperialist agenda, Suslov called for the mobilisation of “all forces of the people for active defence of peace and for the struggle against the warmongers” (p.27). As a result of this meeting, the Committee of Partisans for Peace, later replaced by the World Peace Council, was established as a new socialist anti-imperialist platform. In addition, the Soviet Union established the Soviet Committee for Protection of Peace with Nikolai Tikhonov, a prominent Russian poet, as its chairman, to coordinate peace movement within the Union.

Meanwhile, the geopolitical landscape in Asia was undergoing rapid changes. Only a few months following the Asian Relations Conference, the Indian subcontinent gained independence from British rule, followed by a violent partition of the region into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. In 1949, Mao’s communist party emerged victorious in the Chinese Civil War, creating the People’s Democratic Republic of China, which became important ally of the Soviet Union. Indonesia gained independence in that same year, with Sukarno inaugurated as the republic’s first president. In other parts of Asia, local Marxist revolutionaries continued to seek moral and material support from the Soviet Union. Then, in 1950, the Korean War erupted on the eastern edge of the Eurasian continent. In his 1949 publication, “Sharpening Crisis of Colonial System after the Second World War,” Soviet Orientalist E. M. Zhukov (1949) analysed the ongoing political changes in Asia in the context of Zhdanov’s ‘two camps’ theory. Zhukov argued that the struggle between the two camps that shaped the international order was also unfolding domestically in colonial and semi-colonial countries. According to him, the experience of fighting against fascism during World War II motivated the colonial proletariat class to lead the struggle for national independence, as the colonial national bourgeois elites had chosen to collude with colonizers to safeguard their privileges, thus abandoning their aspiration for national liberation. Therefore, complete national independence for a colony or semi-colony could only be guaranteed when the working-class people achieved a people’s democracy against the native bourgeois elites. Moreover, Zhukov pointed out that the construction of people’s democracy in Asia aimed not only to “eradicate the cultural and economic backwardness, artificially imposed by imperialism” but also to lay the groundwork for socialism (pp. 23–24). The success of a people’s democracy in safeguarding national independence and progress towards socialism depended on “its reliance on the Soviet Union, support from the mighty democratic and socialist camp, and the general balance of forces between democracy and imperialism on a world scale” (Ibid).

As the Soviet Union expanded its foreign policy interest in Asia, its citizens became increasingly informed about international affairs in Asia through various official news outlets. For example, *Pravda* reported daily updates from the war-torn Korean peninsula until the end of the war, expressing moral indignation regarding what the Soviets perceived as America’s unjust intervention in Korea (Johnston p.263). Soviet citizens also learned about the harsh realities of colonies in Asia and Africa, where people lived in poverty without basic rights. Even after gaining independence, Asian and African countries were under constant threat of wars from the belligerent Anglo-American imperialists, as demonstrated by the Korea War. Against this backdrop, the ideology of Soviet internationalism was redefined

to align with the shifting Eurasian geopolitical landscape and Soviet peace-campaign against the imperialist-capitalist camp.

Soviet internationalism of the late Stalinist period was synonymous to socialist patriotism that had gained significant momentum during the Great Patriotic War. According to Zhdanov, “Stalin made it clear that between internationalism properly understood and proletarian patriotism, there can be no contradictions. Rootless cosmopolitanism that denies national feelings and the notion of a homeland has nothing in common with proletarian internationalism” (quoted in Sygkelos 2011, p.131). The Soviet Committee for Protection of Peace arranged frequent lecture sessions and conversation groups in factories, collective farms, schools, universities, and other professional and educational institutes to educate the public about Soviet internationalism and foreign policy. The Soviet authorities also invoked wartime slogans to rally Soviet citizens in support of Soviet foreign and domestic policies. Soviet citizens once again found themselves mobilised to defend their homeland and the world peace.³ Soviet industrial workers and collective farmers were motivated by the slogan “the more you produce, the greater your contribution to peace” (Sovetskie ljudi golosuut za mir 30 July 1950). The Soviet news media repeatedly emphasised the message that “the people of the globe know that every new factory built in the Soviet Union, every ton of coal and metal mined, every center of wheat produced, and every new scientific discovery, work of art, and literary creation made with the labour of the Soviet people serves to strengthen peace; therefore, the stronger Soviet Union became, stronger the hope for peace” (Vdokhnovliauishchii primer sovetskogo naroda 17 September 1951). Millions of workers transformed into “stakhanovite(shock-worker)-like guards of peace, increasing labour efficiency and exceeding production targets” Ibid. They were called to devout “selfless labour for the good of the motherland” (Ibid). The militarisation of labour was reflected in the words of a shock-worker who declared, “We, yesterday’s war veterans know how to win in battlefields. Today, we can win no smaller glorious victory with peaceful labour on machines” (Delo mira nepobedimo 1 July 1950).

The Soviet state promoted the idea of ‘struggle for world peace against the imperialist camp’ as a core tenet of Soviet internationalism. It positioned the Soviet Union as the global leader in the struggle for peace, upon which all peace-loving nations relied. Within the Soviet Union, Soviet internationalism was expressed through the slogan of “the friendship of the Soviet peoples,” which highlighted the sense of camaraderie that bound together the socialist republics under Moscow’s leadership. As seen in the previous section, Russian people were celebrated as the vanguard of the Revolution that liberated Central Asia and the Caucasus from the colonial rule of the Tsarist Empire. In the spirit of the friendship of the Soviet peoples, as the rhetoric went, the Russian people helped Central Asia and the Caucasus lift themselves out of backwardness and poverty, and transform into modern socialist nations. Furthermore, Central Asia, serving as a temporary refuge for millions of evacuated Soviet citizens, especially thousands of children, during World War II, came to be seen as a warm and generous host, embodying the spirit of friendship during times of crisis (Manley 2009; Kaganovitch 2022). The participation of Central Asian soldiers in the Red Army’s efforts to liberate Europe from the clutches of Fascism not only bolstered the Soviet internationalist narrative but also instilled a sense of newfound pride among Central Asians (Shin 2015). This unity, symbolized by the friendship of the soviet peoples, was celebrated as a powerful counterforce to the racist and imperialist ideologies of Fascism. The post-war Soviet internationalist friendship, now combined with the peace campaign, came to symbolise “a flaming torch that lights the path towards a brilliant future for the

brothers and sisters abroad who are under the yoke of imperialists" (*Izvestiia*, 30 July 1950). With the expansion of the Soviet friendship beyond its borders, Soviet Central Asia could no longer remain a passive bystander. It was required to play a more active role in Asia's decolonisation struggle and anti-imperialist movement as the Asiatic representative of the Soviet friendship. In this context Central Asian cultural and intellectual figures were mobilised as informal diplomats to represent the Soviet Union in Asia. These figures also played an important role in informing the Soviet public—both Russian and Central Asian—about Central Asia's new international(ist) role.

Soviet Central Asian Writers in Southeast Asia: Tursun-zade's Poems on India (1948) and Oybek's On the Other Side of the Hindukush (1950)

Even though the Soviet constitutional amendment enacted in 1944 granted Soviet republics the authority to establish their own foreign affairs ministries and engage in diplomatic activities, the republican ministries were understaffed and their responsibilities were reduced to the provision of consular services by 1946. Instead, the Soviet state employed Central Asian intellectuals and cultural figures to represent their republics as well as the Soviet Union in the capacity of informal diplomats, a practice that became more prevalent during Khrushchev's 1950s (Muratbekova 2023). Following the Soviet participation at the 1947 Asian Relations Conference, intellectuals from Soviet Central Asia and Caucasus were invited to similar international events that discussed the future of post-war international relations. The Soviet state dispatched delegations from Central Asia to participate in the World Festival of Democratic Youth (1948, 1950), the World Congress of Peace Partisans (1948), and the Congress of Cultural Freedom (1950). Among the Central Asian delegates to the 1947 Asian Relations Conference, Toshmukhamed Sarymsakov, an Uzbek mathematician and the head of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, represented the Uzbek SSR again at the World Peace Congress. The Tajik writer Tursunzade and the Kazakh writer Muhtar also represented their respective republics at the Second World Peace Congress held in 1950 in Poland. As Soviet cultural diplomats, these Central Asian delegates travelled across Eurasia

The Soviet Central Asian delegates who were sent to Asia were entrusted with the task of propagating communist ideology and promoting the socio-economic and cultural modernization that had been accomplished under the auspices of the Soviet leadership. Their mission was to persuade Asian countries to align with the Soviet-led anti-imperialist, democratic camp. In line with the changing Soviet foreign policy, these delegates assumed a more proactive role than they had in 1947. They also gained more experience representing the Soviet Union by participating in international conferences abroad. Central Asian cultural and intellectual figures who travelled Asia as Soviet cultural diplomats also published accounts of their trips, informing the Soviet public about the living conditions of colonised or semi-colonial peoples of Asia. By doing so, they drew a clear contrast between Soviet Asia and the colonial Asia, emphasising the fraternal benevolence of the Moscow leadership in modernising Central Asia. Moreover, these travelogues highlighted Soviet Central Asia's pivotal role as the Asiatic vanguard of the socialist, anti-imperialist camp, guiding the Asiatic brothers and sisters in their struggle against European imperialism and American capitalism.

The visits of Central Asian cultural and intellectual figures to Asia began to receive widespread publicity beginning in late 1947. For example, Mirzo Tursun-zade's poem, *Indian Ballad (Indiiskaia Ballada)*, inspired by his travels to India and Pakistan, was published both in his native Tajik language and in Russian in September 1947. His collection of poems titled *Poems about India (Stikhi o Indii)* was also translated into Russian and published as

the *Biblioteka Ogonyok* series, a literary supplement to *Ogonyok*, one of the Soviet Union's most popular magazines. This collection stands out as the first published poetic work by a Central Asian writer focused on the theme of the colonised neighbouring Asia since World War II. In recognition of his achievement, and as a signal to the evolving Soviet internationalism discourse and its incorporation into republican literature, Tursun-zade was awarded the Stalin Prize and the Order of Lenin in 1948.

In *Indian Ballad*, Tursun-zade (1951, p. 505) describes India in the following words:

From my homeland, a garden of sixteen lands,
I ventured forth to Hindustan
Amidst green earth and golden borders' grace,
I gazed beyond the grey Himalayas.
Untold riches lay within that realm, so grand,
Yet people dwelt in depths of dire poverty.
In these short verses, I shall not speak
Of Indian magicians' famed sorcery.
Not of black, timid maiden eyes,
Nor marble temples, ancient palaces,
Not of the sweet, tender singers who seek
To spark a flame in hearts through melodies.
Nor shall I speak about dance that sets hearts alight,
The light-footed gazelle on slopes apace,
The bird of dawn that sings the gazelle's plight,
Nor the white elephant, a living mountain's trace.

Despite the author's assertion that he was not extolling India's beauties, the passage is replete with exoticised representations of the region beyond the Himalayas. Similar portrayals of India, emphasising its affluence and attraction, appear in Tursun-zade's other poems as a stark contrast between the region's bountiful natural resources and cultural splendours, and the impoverishment and desolation of its indigenous working-class population. Tursun-zade criticised the deeply entrenched caste and class stratification as the root cause of the native people's suffering, comparing the entirety of India to a leprosarium where millions of "untouchables" endured lifelong hunger, disdain, and despair. Interestingly though, the writer refrained from making explicit criticism against or employing vivid imagery of British colonialism in the region, aside from vague references like "a guest from the West," a "robber without honour or shame," who stretches his greedy paws to the country" but whose influence over the region was also deemed "condemned to death by history" (in *Guest from the West*, pp.506–509).

Furthermore, Tursun-zade emphasised the role of Central Asians as Soviet emissaries, conveying hope and socialist ideals of freedom and equality to colonised Asia (Yountchi 2011, pp.108–122). Interactions with oppressed and exploited locals, who were profoundly inspired by the Soviet delegates' genuine demonstration of camaraderie and accomplishments of Central Asia's socialist modernisation, frequently featured in the poems. In *Rise from Memory (Podnimayutsya v pamyati)*, for example, the Tajik writer recounted his conversation with a local who inquired of the Soviet delegates:

"How long must we yearn?
When shall my homeland join your kin, dear friends?
[...]
Why, from your country of justice
Do we remained estranged, divided by mountains?
From a free country where masters and slaves are none
All stand equal; shelter and protection for everyone.
Masters of your magnificent land, you stand tall.
A beacon alight on the coast, guiding us in distance!
[...]
"Listen! In faith, I declare we shall thrive as you do,
Sweeping oppression and injustice from our land.

From behind clouds that have darkened our sky for so long,
A new sun of happiness shall rise, radiant and strong!
Remember us, let not our faces fade from your memory,
Keep thoughts of those brothers you've left behind."

The passage elucidates the nature of Asiatic or Eastern solidarity that the Soviet delegates envisioned in the wake of the Asian Relations Conference. Through the voice of a fictional Indian 'friend,' the writer suggests that the locals seek not merely territorial liberation from European colonisers but complete emancipation from inequality. Reflecting the Soviet foreign policy discourse prevalent during the time, the passage thus alludes to the local aspiration for a class revolution and integration into the family of socialist Asian nations.

Criticism against European imperialism and colonial rule in Asia became increasingly poignant and assertive in travelogues written during later periods. Among the Central Asian writers who served as Soviet cultural diplomats to Asia was Oybek (Musa Toshmuhammad o'g'li), a prominent Uzbek writer who at the time served as the head of the Uzbek Writers' Union. In 1949, he joined a Soviet delegation of Uzbek, Tajik, and Russian literary figures, to attend the Progressive Writers' Association Conference organised in Lahore, Pakistan. Upon his return to Tashkent, Oybek published a detailed travelogue about his journey titled *Impressions from Pakistan (Pokiston Taasurotlari)* which was also published as a series in the republic's Russian-language Party newspaper. As a scholar of pre-modern Central Asian literature, Oybek celebrated South Asia as the historical source of inspiration and wisdom for Central Asia. He expressed his excitement at the opportunity to visit the land whose beauty had attracted his "legendary ancestors"—the Turkic conquerors of India and Medieval Chagatai poets. He marvelled at the "evergreen gardens and endless expanses of India" that had inspired Central Asian poets of the past to create masterpieces that captured his imagination. Through his celebration of South Asia's historical and cultural greatness, Oybek drew attention to the grave injustice and damage inflicted on the region by local feudalism and British colonisation, thereby dramatising the impact of imperialism on South Asia.

In the travelogue, Oybek painted a bleak picture of the realities and living conditions faced by people in South Asia. He witnessed half-naked, dirty, hungry children begging for "bakhshesh" (religious charity), and elderly men wandering aimlessly, trapped in what he called "the crucible of their nightmarish lives" (Oybek (Aibek) 1978, p. 48: p.50). To highlight the irony of European civilising mission, Oybek juxtaposed the Peshawar-Lahore motorway, a symbol of modernity brought by the British colonisers, with a naked man shamelessly walking along the same motorway. The Uzbek writer wrote: "By God, I would not have believed what I had seen if I had not been destined to travel along this unfortunate road. [...] Look and admire, ladies and gentlemen (*ledi i dzhental'meny*"), upbringing in the style of lofty tradition and virtue" (p. 50). This provocative image highlighted the exploitive nature of colonial modernity that robbed not only the local population's livelihood but also their souls according to the author. Oybek expressed his deep sorrow (Ibid):

The predatory colonial policy of the British reveals a reality so unbearable that my eyes might pop out of their sockets with fright. The first impression of this country, whose splendour had inspired poets, travellers, and storytellers for many centuries, now makes my heart bleed. It became harder and more harrowing to watch my brother, the people of this country. What kind of dark and malignant force cast its curse upon them and dragged them into the abyss of agony?

The author asserted that the absence of a robust domestic industry and rudimentary agricultural practices exemplified the colonial economy that perpetually condemned the people of South Asia to poverty and distress. Furthermore, the British

colonizers devastated the region's once flourishing arts, "erecting the Himalayas between the Indian masses and enlightenment" (p.58). The author lamented that tasteless and low-quality advertisements featured in British and American magazines were now regarded as art. In contrast to South Asia, Soviet Central Asia was portrayed as an independent, modern, and socialist nation that had been liberated from the chains of local feudalism, colonialism, and capitalism. Oybek's account echoed the Soviet delegates' celebration of Soviet achievements in Central Asia at the Asian Relations Conference held two years ago. In the travelogue, he boasted the fact that once backward and oppressed people of Uzbekistan "now have their own palace of culture, theatres, academy [of sciences], and universities; and build tractors and airplanes in their own factories" (p.47).

The overall tone of the travelogue was notably glum. Despite the Uzbek writer's encounters with progressive, left-leaning writers in Pakistan, he remained doubtful that their struggles could liberate the populace from the sufferings imposed by British colonial rule. Moreover, to accentuate the detrimental effects of imperialism and underscore the stark contrast between the Soviet and non-socialist Asia, the author observed the local conditions through the lens of what may be characterised as socialist orientalism. The depiction of Pakistan and India in the Soviet author's travelogue portrayed a land that once boasted a magnificent and exotic civilisation, inspiring countless tales and legends. However, it had found itself mired in a state of stagnation and arrested progress, subjecting its people to a perpetual state of imperialist exploitation. The people, suffering under the imperialist oppression, awaited guidance from their Central Asian socialist brethren. Oybek recounted an encounter with Pakistani writers at the Congress, during which he offered them a cigarette (p. 55):

The old man, with a smile on his grey-bearded lips, took a cigarette from my box, examined it lovingly, and carefully tucked it into the folds of his old turban. "This," he said, "is something from a Soviet country. I will take it back to my village and show it to my countrymen, who will be thrilled to see it." [...] One of the prominent Pakistani poets seated across from me nodded in agreement and added, "In the past, we Muslims held something *khojas* brought back from Mecca as holy. But now, anything from Moscow is sacred for us."

In this passage, Soviet Union emerged as a beacon of hope for the colonised Asia. The author established an analogy between the Soviet capital and the Islamic holy city, attributing a religious undertone to the visiting Central Asian delegates. By employing the analogy that also resonated with Uzbek readers, the passage implied that for the colonised Muslim population of South Asia, the Central Asian delegates were comparable to *khojas* or religious teachers who journeyed from the socialist Mecca to guide them on the path to salvation.

As seen in Oybek's work, "The Other Side of the Hindukush," Central Asian writers who documented their travels to neighbouring Asian countries used Central Asia's historical, cultural, and even religious, symbolism and imagery to foster stronger connections between the Soviet Union and Asia. Tursun-zade also makes references to the Sufi Indo-Persian poets Hafiz and Bedil to emphasise the shared cultural heritage between South Asia and Central Asia. While these symbols and images may have resonated with the Central Asian population, they did not conform to official Soviet cultural doctrines. For instance, Oybek compared his journey beyond the Himalayas to those of Tamerlane, the Turko-Mongol conqueror who established the Timurid Empire, and Babur, Tamerlane's descendent who established the Mughal Empire, despite these historical figures being regarded as controversial. Tamerlane, in particular, had never been acknowledged as a national hero worthy of celebration by the Soviet authorities

(Adams 2010 pp. 39–42; Shaw 2011 p. 54). The fact that such references were published in both the authors' native languages and Russian is significant, as it indicates the state's leniency toward Central Asian travel writings that promoted internationalist solidarity with colonial Asia, a prevalent foreign policy tenet of the time. By invoking such references to shared historical and cultural heritages between Central Asia and its neighbouring Asia, Central Asian cultural diplomats were able to carve out their role as intermediaries between Moscow and Asia beyond the Soviet borders, creating a unique identity for themselves and Central Asia as the Asiatic representatives of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Mirzo Tursun-zade and Oybek were both distinguished Central Asian writers and influential public figures, representing their respective republics within and beyond the Soviet Union. Tursun-zade was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, a People's Deputy to the Supreme Soviets of the USSR (1946–1974), member of the Soviet Committee for the Protection of Peace, and the Chairman of the Soviet Committee for Asian and African Solidarity (1967–1977). In recognition of his contributions to promoting Tajik literature, the Soviet state honoured him with titles such as People's Poet of Tajik SSR and Hero of Socialist Labor. Oybek was also elected as the People's Deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (1946–1967) and joined the Soviet overseas delegations to Pakistan, China, and the United Kingdom until his health began to worsen in the early 1950s. He received the title of People's Writer of Uzbek SSR in 1967, in commemoration of his lifelong dedication to Uzbek literature. The two writers were among the first Central Asians to serve as Soviet informal or cultural diplomats. Central Asian writers, intellectuals, artists, and scientists came to play increasingly significant role in disseminating communist ideology abroad and fostering solidarity between the Soviet Union and decolonising nations, especially under Nikita Khrushchev's leadership. Starting from the mid-1950s, more Central Asian cultural and intellectual figures travelled abroad as Soviet cultural diplomats, and Central Asian cities, notably Tashkent, hosted high-profile international cultural events celebrating the Second-Third World solidarity. Central Asia's involvement in the Soviet efforts to strengthen relationships with Asia and Africa enabled Central Asian intellectuals like Tursun-zade to build political prominence and negotiate the interests of their respective republics with Moscow (Kalinovsky 2018).

Although the period examined in this paper saw limited Central Asian involvement in Soviet cultural diplomacy compared to the Khrushchev period that followed, it remains significant as it laid the groundwork for subsequent developments. While the 1947 Asian Relations Conference did not directly impact Soviet foreign policy, it offered Central Asians an opportunity to reconnect with their Asian neighbours. In addition, a few months after the Soviet Central Asian delegation returned from the conference, a shift in Soviet foreign policy rhetoric prompted them to reconceptualise Soviet internationalism in response to the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape in Asia. They did so by reviving shared historical, cultural, and religious symbolism between Central and South Asia. Central Asian cultural diplomats, including Tursun-zade and Oybek, forged a distinctive identity for themselves and their region as the Asiatic vanguard of the socialist, anti-imperialist movement. These encounters enabled them not only to perceive the external world from a Soviet perspective but also to view the Soviet Union through an Asian lens. This dual perspective ultimately allowed them and other Central Asian cultural diplomats

to reinterpret the global Cold War and their place within the Soviet Union from a uniquely Asian standpoint.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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Notes

- 1 The majority of research on Soviet cultural exchanges abroad, including those studies previously referenced, primarily focuses on the Khrushchev era, when Soviet diplomacy was characterized by a shift towards fostering peaceful coexistence and embracing openness. In contrast, the post-war Stalinist period, which also marks the beginning of the Cold War, is underrepresented in scholarly discourse. Although it is valid to posit that Soviet cultural diplomacy during the late Stalinist era was not as vibrant or pronounced as in later periods, this era witnessed frequent cultural exchanges between the Soviet Union and emerging socialist nations that laid the foundation for socialist cultures in these nations. The Soviets also contributed to the establishment of international platforms such as the World Congress of Intellectuals for Peace (which later transitioned to the World Peace Council). These developments exerted a lasting impact not only on Soviet cultural diplomacy but also on global politics throughout the Cold War era. For research on East-East cultural exchange during the late 1940s, see Gabroussenko 2010; Haga 2016; Imlary 2018, pp. 309–358. For research on the World Congress of Intellectuals for Peace's activities during the Stalinist period, see Krakovsky 2008; Goedde 2019; Matera 2022.
- 2 Due to transportation difficulties, the delegates from the Kyrgyz SSR and the Turkmen SSR arrived a day after the conference had already concluded.
- 3 The memory of fear and loss from the previous war was a potent motivator for Soviet citizens to strive for peace, beyond patriotic and heroic rhetoric. According to Elena Zubkova, the horrors of World War II left a lasting impact on the Soviet people, causing them to view the absence of unhappiness as happiness. She explains: "Here was the origin of the incantation 'but for the war,' and the willingness to forgive the government for all of its unpopular policies if only it fulfilled the people's wish to avoid a new war" (Zubkova 1998, p. 85). Additional insights into how the Soviet state mobilized its population for the peace campaign can be found in works by Yekelchik (2006), Johnston (2011), and Roberts (2014).

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BS: Conceived the research question and objectives, conducted the literature review, designed the methodology, collected and analysed the materials discussed in this paper, and wrote the entire manuscript. The author read and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author. Therefore ethical approval was not required.

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This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author. Therefore ethical approval was not required.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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