

Research Proposal by Reinhard Eisener

Working title

"Bukhara in the Whirlpool of the Russian Revolution(s), 1905–1924"

State of things

At present, 503 pages (A4, large type area mirror, font size 12 pt and 10 pt) of a manuscript are completed, the content of which covers analysis and interpretations of developments and events during the years from 1917 to 1919/20 that seem to have been important to the Emirate of Bukhara, to the situation in an of this Russian protectorate at that time. The subject matter of that study is the political, military, and economic history of Bukhara as well as, insofar it seems necessary, that of neighboring Turkestan, Khiva, Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia—the latter in particular with regard to its Orient and Central Asia policies. Hence, the main idea is to write an event history of those years. The reason for doing so lies in findings that emerged from my own research, which I initially was able to carry out in 1988-1993, mainly in the USSR and then CIS, and the results of which suggested a radical rethinking of my scientific approach. The original approach of my research becomes sufficiently visible just by looking at my official research topic during the years mentioned above— "Nation Building in Soviet Central Asia: The Tajik SSR, Its Emergence and National Historiography".

Equipped with this—at that time topical— theme, I unexpectedly plopped into the extraordinary situation of Perestroika and Glasnost' in its late phase, the eventual breakdown of the Soviet Union, and finally, the more or less tumultuous initial phase of its successor states. Thereby, a big advantage in my favor turned out to be that I happened to be among the first scientists (and Orientalists) of Western provenance to penetrate—in some cases even rather deep—into the holdings of relevant libraries and archives. It goes without saying that at this point the 'curiosity' and openness of my Soviet and then post-Soviet academic counterparts and colleagues were of great help...

The mentioned situation during my 'fieldwork' paired with my first findings—in particular in archives—brought about the conclusion that in order to understand, for example, the "nation building of Tajikistan" appropriately one must, simply said, start from the beginning—of course, not from Adam and Eve—, but from its immediate historical background, the revolutions in 1917 and the premature to them. Before one can ask further questions and/or apply more sophisticated scientific approaches, one needs to build, so to speak, in an old-fashioned way a viable event-historical foundation by using for that, as far as possible, primary sources (contemporary documents). In my opinion, this helps at least to develop more valid criteria for an appropriate understanding

of the various existing retrospective narratives related to certain events and their interpretation...

Source basis

My main fund of relevant source materials is based on research in archives and libraries (in Berlin, Munich, London, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Dushanbe, Washington D.C.), in particular during my research visits to the USSR and then CIS in 1989-1993. The already mentioned specific situation of radical change at that time allowed me to collect much more materials than ever foreseeable. For example, archive and library staff gave me tips on what to order; or it happened in the Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki in Moscow that I was provided with files not matching the topic mentioned by me (Tajikistan in the 1920s and the Basmachis) rather than containing very revealing documents concerning the situation of Bukhara in 1920; or in Dushanbe, staff of the Party Archive delivered to me 11 thick volumes containing certified copies of documents from archives all over the USSR concerning early Soviet Tajikistan, which I could picture with my own camera outside of the archive; and the same archive also owned 7 reels (diameter 9.3 cm) of microfilm with relevant materials from the Central Party Archive in Moscow (now RGASPI)—all once provided to the wife of the longtime First Secretary of the KPT, Bobojon Gafurov, whose wife was a Party historian. These microfilms are since 1995 in my possession (for security reasons).

At present, all the source materials mentioned here, and much more, which are relevant for the present proposal, are on hand in a more or less evaluated state, as well as the relevant research literature, including the more recent (since the 1990s) publications (mainly in Russia) of archival documents. Only the later, more recently published materials still needs to be analyzed.

Methodological questions

From working on my doctoral thesis (a source critical study on early Islamic history) I am familiar with 'classical' and 'modern' methods of source criticism. Additionally, I would like to emphasize the importance, for me and my scientific approach as a historian, of two major scholarly works—Hans-Georg Gadamer's study on hermeneutics, "Wahrheit und Methode", and Reinhart Koselleck's study on historical theory, "Vergangene Zukunft".

By following such an approach, I hope to contribute in a productive way to the constant process of revitalizing and rethinking past political, ideological, and public discourses—in the given case with respect to events in an around Bukhara during the first quarter of the last century.

Project goal

My objective is rather simple and practical: I am applying for a unique chance to take a significant step forward in completing my scientific life's work by finishing the manuscript of a study on the history of the Bukharan Emirate from 1917 until its forced end in autumn 1920.

Writing, at least for me, is a creative process in which I do not know in advance what will come out in the end—sometimes I am even surprised by the results myself. As far as possible and to the best of my ability, I try to leave the protagonists of my historiography uncertain about their own future and the one of their actions—they could not know what would happen, rather than at best what they thought what should happen... Seen in this way, the space for historical possibilities may once again open up a bit, and thus, for example, the factor of coincidence as a decisive player in a particular event or situation may become more visible and take its due place beyond all imaginable causalities.

To work in such a way is a more or less time-consuming process, which requires a kind of concentration that is almost exclusive—something that is hard to cope with if at the same time the imponderables of life, if only the creation of sufficient livelihoods, have to be served.