

Bukharan Jews in the 20th Century History, Experience and Narration

edited by Ingeborg Baldauf, Moshe Gammer and Thomas Loy
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The Jews of Central Asia, commonly known as “Bukharan Jews”, have a long, eventful and fascinating history. Still, until recently this group has attracted very little attention from scholars of either Central Asian or Jewish communities. Only now, that almost no Bukharan Jews are left in Central Asia has their study started seriously. This volume is part of a joint GIF project (“Bukharan Jews: Making meaning of Memories and Identity, 2004-2007) by teams from Humboldt and Tel Aviv universities and is the first in a series of related publications. Its twelve studies, written by leading authorities, deal with various aspects in the history, language, anthropology, demography and identity of this diaspora group in what proved to be a most important century in their history – a century that radically changed their world and by its end witnessed their mass exodus from Central Asia.

¹ Pictures by courtesy of Lydia Bachaeva and Yochai Primak.

The approaches towards Bukharan Jews presented in this volume take into account the political and historical changes connected to the establishment and dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Bukharan Jewish responses to it. Rather than to concentrate on depictions of a homogeneous, coherent and stable group we put our emphasis on individual agency, variability, mobility and change. While anti-essentialist understandings of social boundaries and cultural forms have gained widespread acceptance, for the Bukharan Jews, however, this academic assessment has so far been largely irrelevant.

The five parts of the volume are grouped in two separate methodological approaches. The first three parts of the volume, presenting innovative studies based on new archival and other sources and are largely written in accordance with the traditional historical approach.

The three articles in **Part 1** deals with the burst of optimism and action in the early Soviet Period. Yefim Yakubov's article describes the temporary government's abolition of the Tsarist persecution of and limitations on the Bukharan Jews. Zeev Levin presents a historical survey of the favourable Soviet policies towards Bukharan Jews in the 1920s and early 1930s and the Bukharan Jewish response to them. Lutz Rzehak describes the efforts to create a literary language for Bukharan Jews and shows how

political intentions and transformations affected the language and the linguistic behaviour of Bukharan Jews in Central Asia.

The two articles in **Part 2** discuss the disillusioned post-Stalin era. Based on Soviet archives and many personal interviews Yaakov Ro'i describes the efforts by the Bukharan Jews to maintain their religious life in the late Soviet Period. Mark Tolts' paper is the first attempt to explore the demography of the Bukharan Jews in that period.

Part 3 moves outside the Soviet Union. Sara Koplik's chapter, which is based on an array of Western and Jewish archives, details the fate of those Bukharan Jews who fled Soviet Central Asia in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Albert Kaganovitch gives a short survey of Bukharan Jewish communities on three continents at the turn of the 21st century.

The last two parts of the volume are based on an interview-centred approach common to both oral history and anthropology.

The two chapters in **Part 4** combine the analysis of oral narration and written memoirs for an investigation into historical memory and interpretation from below. Ingeborg Baldauf focuses on the gulag memoirs by the Uzbek poet Shukrullo Yusupov, which she understands as an effort to counterbalance state policies on historiography, social

memory and the silencing of alternative voices. Thomas Loy's chapter on Mordekhay Bachayev's literary memoirs *Dar Juvoli Sangin* is an attempt to portray this famous Bukharan Jewish writer and his major work in prose.

Thomas Loy and Yochai Primak's chapters in **Part 5** are analyses of two major autobiographical narrations recorded during the joint Oral History project on Bukharan Jews. The first deals with a descendent of the Mashhadi Jewish community from Samarkand, the latter focuses on the memories of a female Rabbi in Tel Aviv. Alanna Cooper's final chapter on courtship and marriage deals with the dynamics of stability and changes in traditions and memories within the Bukharan Jewish community.