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Runner up entry for 2023

Beatrice Voorhees
Connecticut College

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Name

Beatrice Voorhees

Title of Paper

A Soviet Scholar's 1952 Vision of Qaraqalpaqstan's Future

Class Year

Senior

Date Research Undertaken

Fall 2022

Citation Style Used

Chicago

Affiliated Course

Islam in Asia (HIS 263)

Faculty Name

Dean Accardi

Student Major

Slavic Studies and History double major, Computer Science minor

Narrative Questions

- 1. Describe how you came to choose your topic, specifically noting any pre-research that you did. What sources did you use in this pre-research? To what extent did you consult with librarians, faculty, or others? How did this pre-research lead you to your topic?**

The assignment for this paper was to analyze a source about a particular Muslim ethnic group or religious sect in depth, and in doing so interrogate Western myths and ideas of Islamic practice. As a Slavic Studies and History double major, I wanted to incorporate my interest in Soviet and post-Soviet studies with the themes surrounding Islam we had learned about in class, which is something I talked about with Professor Accardi. Focusing on a Central Asian group would allow me to combine these topics. Initially, I had wanted to write about the Kyrgyz or Uzbek peoples, but through exploration on OneSearch, JSTOR, and simple Google searches I found the amount of information on the cultural and political histories of these peoples and their countries to be overwhelmingly vast, exceeding the scope of this project. However, when reading an article about Uzbekistan, I noted a brief mention of the autonomous district of Qaraqalpaqstan, a name which I hadn't previously encountered. This grabbed my interest, especially after learning that Qaraqalpaqstan encompassed the former Aral Sea region, an ecological disaster that has interested me for some time. I did some quick pre-research by reading through the Encyclopaedia Britannica articles on both the region and the Qaraqalpaq people, as well as looking through current news articles on CNN, BBC, and the New York Times that mentioned the word "Qaraqalpaq"/"Karakalpak". Searches through current news led me to find out about the summer 2022 Nukus protests over the autonomy of the region, as well as a 2018 New York Times article about a contemporary interpretation of the ancient story "Forty Girls". Hearing that it was a shortened interpretation, I was curious to find a recording or written version of the full story. Some digging online led me to Svetlana Somova's 1952 translation, which I was able to find online as a PDF. After skimming through Klimovich's introduction to the translation, I was drawn to some of its peculiar claims, which is why I chose it as my source to analyze.

- 2. Describe your process of finding information for your project. Note specifically the tools you used to undertake your research, as well as the specific search strategies you used within these tools. (Note: “Ebsco,” being an umbrella vendor, is not a specific enough response when identifying tools; listing the “library database” is also an unacceptably vague answer. Specific tools include JSTOR, America: History & Life, Web of Science, etc., along with OneSearch, the new library system.)**

The process of pre-search led me to many of the sources I would later use to write my paper. However, when I was writing a paragraph about background information on the Qaraqalpaq region, I needed to find some specific sources about ancient civilizations; for this I used OneSearch and JSTOR to find several articles providing background information. The article “The nature of fluctuating lakes in the southern Amu-dar’ya delta” was helpful in understanding the ecological history behind the Aral Sea and the rivers that feed it, as well as the Khwarazmian civilization. Another article on JSTOR, “Une approche esthétique de la performance chez les bardes karakalpaks d’Asie centrale” provided helpful information about the history of Qaraqalpaq bardic and oral traditions. Through ResearchGate, I found “Central Asia’s Maritime Dimension?” which was also immensely helpful in providing information about the impact of the Aral Sea diminishment on the surrounding environment. Additionally, I took out Qaraqalpaqs of the Aral Delta through interlibrary loan by David and Sue Richardson, which contained valuable information about the history and identity of the Qaraqalpaq people. To accommodate for spelling and translation differences, I searched “qaraqalpaq OR karakalpak” and “forty girls OR forty maidens”. I also used many different search terms; “qaraqalpaq”, “aral sea”, “central asia”, “forty girls”, “epic poem”, etc.

3. Describe your process of evaluating the resources you found. How did you make decisions about which resources you would use, and which you wouldn't? What kinds of questions did you ask yourself about resources in order to determine whether they were worthy of inclusion?

One problem I encountered was the overlap in name between the Qaraqalpaq epic Forty Girls and the Persian fairytale "Forty Maidens". They are unrelated to each other in content, but search terms like "forty girls", "forty girls epic poem", or even "qaraqalpaq forty girls" can bring up results for the Persian tale. This meant I had to read my sources carefully and evaluate their relevance to the project. To make the matter more complicated, the Qaraqalpaq epic is sometimes translated as Forty Maidens and the Persian fairytale as Forty Girls. Another issue, and one that I run into frequently when working with more niche Soviet-oriented topics, is that there are many fewer English sources than there are Russian ones. As well, some sources on these slightly more obscure topics are slightly duplicitous in appearance. David and Sue Richardson's website qaraqalpaq.com, for example, looks rather untrustworthy - it is not very well designed compared to sites run by larger companies. A little research, however, reveals the Richardsons as the preeminent English scholars of Qaraqalpaq history and culture, who have lived in Qaraqalpaqstan for years and published Qaraqalpaqs of the Aral Delta. Questions I asked myself to evaluate sources include: who is the author of this? What are their credentials? What kind of organization is this source affiliated with or published by? Additionally, part of the research process is knowing what to cut out. I was able to find many English-language articles about ancient Khwarazm, Turkic migrations, and the thousands of years of Central Asian history undergirding present-day Qaraqalpaq-Uzbek relations. However, not all of it was helpful to include, as the goal of this essay was not a textbook on Central Asian history, but rather an investigation of a particular source. I ended up with a long second body paragraph spanning a page and a half about the political history of the Amu Darya region, but I ended up cutting it in half so that the main argument and analysis of the paper are able to breathe.