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The Formation of the System for the Protection and Restoration of Bukhara's Historical and Cultural Heritage in the Early 1920s

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Abstract: This article examines the formation of the system for the protection and restoration of Bukhara's historical and cultural heritage in the early 1920s. Particular attention is given to the socio-political conditions that necessitated the establishment of specialized institutions responsible for preserving monuments, manuscripts, and archival materials. The study analyzes the activities of early scientific expeditions, their role in documenting architectural monuments, collecting written sources, and identifying sites requiring urgent restoration. Special emphasis is placed on the contribution of organizations such as Suardel, Turkkomstaris, and other administrative bodies, as well as on the participation of local intellectuals and scholarly societies in safeguarding Bukhara's cultural legacy. The article demonstrates that during this period monument preservation in Bukhara evolved from isolated initiatives into a legally and organizationally structured institutional system. It is concluded that the early 1920s represented a crucial stage in the emergence of coordinated state administration, scholarly expertise, local participation, and practical restoration measures in the field of heritage protection.

Keywords: Bukhara, cultural heritage, historical monuments, monument protection, restoration, Turkkomstaris, Suardel, archaeological expeditions, manuscripts, archival documents, institutional development, early 1920s.

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Introduction

The socio-economic and political situation that emerged in the 1920s made it necessary to establish an authorized institution responsible for the protection of cultural monuments. The process of transition from one socio-economic and political system to an entirely new order was naturally reflected in attitudes toward ancient monuments as well. An analysis of the history of this period shows that this process was shaped through many years of research conducted by scholars and specialists, as well as through the consistent efforts of local historians and regional researchers[1].

It is known that after Soviet power was established in Turkestan, the responsibility for organizing the protection of historical monuments was initially assigned to the Republic Central Archive Administration — Suardel (TsUArDel). For this purpose, on January 30, 1920, the Central Executive Committee of the Turkestan ASSR adopted the decree “On Transferring the Protection of Science, Art, and Historical Monuments under the Authority of Suardel.” Under this decision, the duties previously carried out by the inactive Turkestan Circle of Archaeology Enthusiasts and the Turkestan branch of the Russian Geographical Society were also transferred to this organization. As a result, all activities related to archaeological research and the protection of monuments in the region came under the authority of Suardel. The registration of historical monuments, their protection, restoration, and scientific study were defined as the main areas of the

organization's activity.

A study of the correspondence conducted by the head of the organization, D.I. Nechkin, with local authorities and central officials clearly demonstrates both his contribution to the restoration of Bukhara's architectural monuments and his responsible approach to this issue[2].

In September 1920, a special expedition was organized with the aim of registering the architectural monuments of Bukhara, identifying manuscript sources, and collecting them in one place. This initiative was prompted by the difficult situation that had emerged in the city at that time. During the establishment of Soviet rule, many historical structures in Bukhara had been damaged, while some architectural monuments had suffered severe destruction and fallen into ruin. Therefore, the urgent identification, documentation, and preservation of the existing cultural heritage became a pressing matter.

Prominent scholars and specialists of the period were involved in this expedition. Among them were D.I. Nechkin, Academician Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold, Y.K. Betger, archaeologist V.L. Vyatkin, P.E. Kuznetsov, and Professor A.E. Schmidt. This gave the expedition a strong scholarly character and created opportunities for organizing its activities in a more systematic manner[3].

On September 30, 1920, under the leadership of D.I. Nechkin, a meeting was held in Bukhara devoted to the preservation of antiquities, works of art, books, and manuscripts. During this meeting, a number of practical measures related to safeguarding cultural treasures were discussed. In particular, the necessity of establishing a library on the basis of the available manuscripts, classifying them according to their content, and cataloguing them in an orderly manner was emphasized. In addition, issues such as establishing a separate committee responsible for collecting and preserving waqf documents, initiating restoration and repair works on damaged historical and architectural monuments, gathering existing archival materials, and examining privately owned collections containing objects of museum significance for the establishment of the Bukhara State Museum were also considered[4].

Methodology

The materials and reports of the commission indicate that during the expedition nearly three hundred and eighty manuscripts and various documents were identified and registered. This became one of the important steps toward preserving the written heritage of Bukhara.

At the same time, in cooperation with the Bukhara Revolutionary Committee, architectural monuments in need of repair and those under threat of collapse were identified, and practical proposals for their preservation were developed[5].

As a result of the expedition's activities, it was also determined that Registan Square needed to be cleared of the remains of destroyed constructions. In addition, a list of monuments requiring urgent restoration was prepared. This list included such important historical sites as Kalyan Minaret, Ark Fortress, and Modari Khan Madrasa. The amount of funding necessary to carry out the initial repair works on these structures was also calculated in advance.

The issue of protecting and restoring the historical and cultural heritage of Bukhara became, in the early 1920s, not only a practical concern but also an urgent scientific and organizational problem. During this period, the transfer of political power, radical changes in the system of governance, and the collapse of old administrative and social institutions made it necessary to resolve, in a centralized manner, matters related to the preservation, registration, documentation, restoration, and scholarly study of historical monuments. In particular, the large number of architectural monuments, ancient buildings, manuscripts, archival materials, and other cultural valuables in Bukhara were either being kept in disorderly conditions or were under threat of disappearance, which required the adoption of special organizational measures. From this perspective, the activities of the first expeditions, the results they achieved, their relations with local authorities, as well as the later formation and work of specialized authorized bodies such as Turkkomstaris, are of particular importance for understanding

the earliest institutional stage in the system of historical monument protection[6].

Result And Discussion

An analysis of this issue shows that the first efforts aimed at preserving Bukhara's historical and cultural heritage began as individual initiatives and were later gradually systematized within the framework of specific organizations. These early expeditions were not limited to mere inspections; rather, their activities included a wide range of tasks such as registering monuments, collecting material and written sources, preparing scholarly descriptions, and laying the groundwork for future restoration work. In particular, practical measures such as photographing historical monuments, studying the remains of city gates and defensive walls, gathering archival documents and manuscripts, developing mechanisms for their preservation, identifying monuments in need of repair, and appealing to local authorities for their protection demonstrate that cultural heritage preservation was beginning to develop not as a merely declarative approach, but as a practical and scholarly field. At the same time, it can be observed that relations among central authorized bodies, local government institutions, scientific expeditions, and the intellectuals of Bukhara were also gradually taking shape during these processes[7].

This, in turn, demonstrates that the issue of monument protection in Bukhara was not merely a scholarly or cultural matter, but a complex historical process that required organizational, legal, and financial coordination.

According to the source, one of the most important results achieved by the expedition was that, upon the proposal of V.L. Vyatkin, representatives of the Krasny Vostok agitation train photographed nearly all of the historical monuments in the city. This represented one of the earliest and most significant stages of scientific photographic documentation of monuments for that period and created an important source base for subsequent scholarly description and restoration work. At the same time, during the visit, the city gates and the remains of the walls connecting them were also specially examined. Thus, the expedition was not limited only to famous architectural monuments, but also paid attention to the defensive structures that formed part of the city's historical topography[8].

With regard to the collection of archival materials, it is noted that misunderstandings arose between the expedition representatives and the local government. The government of the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic argued that the documents were the property of the republic and therefore could not be transferred, although permission could be granted for their use and copying when necessary. This situation may be evaluated from several perspectives. First, it reflected a certain tension between centralized scientific-expeditionary interests and local state sovereignty and property claims. Second, this approach did not signify indifference toward historical documents; rather, it demonstrated a certain degree of responsible concern aimed at preserving them and retaining control over them. Therefore, the source evaluates this attitude as a positive approach toward cultural heritage.

At the conclusion of the expedition, an appeal was made to the Bukhara Revolutionary Committee calling for concrete practical measures regarding the restoration of monuments. This appeal is particularly significant, as it indicates a transition from merely documenting historical sites to taking real measures for their preservation. In addition, a special proposal was sent to the Academy of Material Culture and to Suardel concerning a comprehensive and in-depth scholarly study of the Ismail Samani Mausoleum. This fact shows that work concerning Bukhara's monuments was carried out not selectively, but on the basis of scholarly priorities. The fact that the mausoleum was considered a separate object of study confirms its high status not only within Bukhara, but also within the broader historical and architectural heritage of the entire region[9].

The source also emphasizes another important aspect: local scholars and regional researchers made a substantial contribution to these scientific and cultural initiatives. This is especially evident in the example of the Tarikhi Anjuman society. Established in 1921 by intellectuals of Bukhara, this scholarly association actively participated in

protecting ancient monuments in the region, collecting and studying archaeological artifacts and manuscripts, and registering monuments. Thus, in the matter of cultural heritage preservation in Bukhara, the local intellectual stratum did not remain passive observers, but emerged as direct practical and scholarly participants. This also indicates that a local foundation already existed for the institutional structures that later developed in this field.

An analysis of the available information makes it possible to assess these processes as the initial organizational stage in the protection of monuments.

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An analysis of the available information make It was precisely as a result of these processes that the groundwork was created for the establishment of special institutions and organizations such as Turkkomstaris, Sredazkomstaris, and later Uzkomstaris. Initially, in Turkestan, the “Commission for Museum Affairs and the Protection of Ancient and Artistic Monuments” was established, and its statute was approved. This commission was entrusted with tasks such as the scholarly study of historical monuments, their registration, protection, and restoration. Later, this commission was transformed into the “Department for Museum Affairs and the Protection of Turkestan’s Antiquities and Artistic Monuments,” with D.I. Nechkin appointed as its head. On April 12, 1921, by decision of the People’s Commissariat of Education, this institution was reorganized into a committee and its statute was approved. Subsequently, in accordance with a decree of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Turkestan ASSR, on May 22, 1921, the “Turkestan Committee for the Preservation of Nature, Art, Antiquities, and Museum Affairs” – Turkkomstaris – was established within the structure of the People’s Commissariat of Education. From that moment onward, the resolutions and directives of this organization became binding for all local authorities, signifying the legal formation of a state administrative system responsible for the protection of historical and cultural monuments[12].

According to the statute, the committee was to include structural divisions devoted to museology, the preservation and restoration of ancient and artistic monuments, archaeology, and the protection of natural monuments. Minutes of meetings and reports preserved in archival collections confirm that such divisions indeed functioned in practice. From the perspective of this research, particular scholarly interest is drawn to the department responsible for the preservation and restoration of ancient and artistic monuments. It was precisely through this department that matters such as the registration of monuments in Bukhara, expert evaluations, the establishment of scholarly monitoring, and the development of practical restoration measures were primarily addressed.

Turkkomstaris emerged as a unified scientific-methodological and practical center carrying out activities on a broad scale. The organization was entrusted with resolving complex issues previously unknown in the region’s administrative practice. Sending representatives on scientific missions, establishing commissions or boards in local areas, and organizing expeditions were practical expressions of these responsibilities. Such measures contributed to the territorial and functional expansion of the committee’s departments. In this regard, the establishment of relations with Bukhara became one of

the important directions of Turkkomstaris's activity. An analysis of documents related to the organization's work shows that the fourth point of its work plan for 1922 specifically mentioned a visit to Bukhara and the establishment of cooperation between Turkkomstaris and the government of the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic regarding the protection of historical monuments. This indicates that Bukhara was regarded as a territory of particular scholarly and practical significance in terms of historical heritage sites. At a meeting of Turkkomstaris in January 1923, a report by A.A. Semyonov entitled "On the Archaeological Excavations Conducted in the City of Bukhara and the Samanid Mausoleum" was also heard, representing a direct continuation of this objective. Moreover, an analysis of the memorandum attached to the meeting minutes shows that permission for Turkkomstaris to operate in Bukhara was based on an agreement reached in January 1923 between D.I. Nechkin and the head of the Bukharan government, Fayzulla Khodzhayev[13].

In accordance with this agreement, it was determined that one half of the funds required for archaeological exploration in the territory of Bukhara would be provided by Turkkomstaris, while the remaining half would be allocated by the government of the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic. This agreement served as the organizational and financial basis that enabled Turkkomstaris to operate officially in Bukhara. A.A. Semyonov noted the necessity of conducting archaeological investigations at the Ark Fortress, the Ismail Samani Mausoleum, the Sayfiddin Bokharzi Mausoleum, and the monuments of Fathobod, while also emphasizing the need to prepare an album-atlas of Bukhara's architectural monuments. These proposals indicate that the concept of systematic documentation, classification, and scholarly cataloguing of Bukhara's historical heritage had begun to take shape, rather than mere observation of monuments. Turkkomstaris considered V.L. Vyatkin to be a suitable specialist for carrying out such large-scale work. This demonstrates that the organization was able to mobilize scholarly expertise effectively.

Later, Professor Dmitriy Aleksandrovich Morozov of Central Asian State University also visited Bukhara on August 22, 1923, on the instructions of Turkkomstaris, carrying out the task of inspecting historical monuments and observing processes related to their restoration. This fact shows that the activities of Turkkomstaris were not one-time or merely formal measures, but rather systematic efforts conducted consecutively, according to plan, and with the participation of specialists. Such visits also indicate that elements of scholarly monitoring, practical observation, and expert evaluation had begun to emerge in matters concerning the preservation of Bukhara's monuments[14].

The information presented above and its analysis demonstrate that the protection and restoration of Bukhara's historical and cultural heritage underwent, in the early 1920s, a transition from episodic initiatives to systematic institutional activity. While the first expeditions focused on registering monuments, photographing them, identifying manuscripts and archival materials, determining which monuments required repair, and developing measures for their preservation, later specialized bodies such as Turkkomstaris continued these efforts on a legal, organizational, and financial basis. At the same time, the position of the local government regarding archival documents, the participation of local scholarly societies such as the Tarikhi Anjuman Society, and the practical work of specialists such as Nechkin, Vyatkin, Semyonov, and Morozov confirm the multi-layered and complex character of this process. Therefore, this period should be regarded as an important historical stage in the history of monument preservation in Bukhara, during which the first institutional model emerged through the interaction of state administration, scholarly expertise, local initiative, and practical restoration measures[15].

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the early 1920s constituted a decisive phase in the transformation of heritage protection in Bukhara from fragmented, initiative-based efforts into a coherent institutional system grounded in legal authority, scientific expertise, and administrative coordination. The findings highlight that the establishment of organizations such as Suardel and later Turkkomstaris, alongside the activities of scientific expeditions and the engagement of prominent scholars and local intellectuals,

enabled systematic documentation, registration, and prioritization of monuments, manuscripts, and archival materials. The transition from descriptive observation to practical restoration measures—such as compiling restoration lists, allocating funding, and initiating photographic documentation—reflects the emergence of an integrated approach combining research, preservation, and governance. These results imply that effective cultural heritage protection requires not only scholarly input but also strong institutional frameworks, intergovernmental cooperation, and community involvement. The historical experience of Bukhara suggests that sustainable preservation systems are built through the alignment of legal, financial, and scientific mechanisms. At the same time, the study underscores the importance of further research focusing on comparative analysis of similar institutional developments in other regions, deeper archival investigations, and the long-term impact of early Soviet policies on heritage management practices in Central Asia.

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