

Research Note: The New Role of a Central Asian Diaspora - The Case of Bukharan Jews and Uzbekistan

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Abstract

One of the common features of post-Soviet Central Asian diapora is its close connection to the homeland (the independent countries of the former Soviet Central Asia) manifested in various economic ties, including investments into kinship networks and business ventures. This research note discusses the transnational Bukharan Jewish diaspora and its links to Uzbekistan that do not fit into this general pattern. Drawing on the history of Bukharan Jews as a 'go-between' minority at the time of Russia colonisation of Central Asia in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it investigates the ways in which this structural role has been actualised after the collapse of the USSR and mass emigration of the Bukharan Jews from Central Asia. While the Bukharan Jewish diaspora do not seem to establish new economic links to Uzbekistan, the Bukharan Jewish community organisations strive to become a recognised player in the field of people's diplomacy.

Keywords: people's diplomacy; middleman minority; post-Soviet migration

Introduction

The decline and collapse of the Soviet Union unleashed mass emigration - entire ethnic or ethno-religious communities have moved away and established new homelands elsewhere.¹ Bukharan Jews from Central Asia - a minority speaking and writing in Judaeo-Tajik as their native tongue (Burton 1996: 46) - have almost completely disappeared in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Classified as a 'small people' by the Soviets (*malyi narod* in Russian, the label given to an ethnic group no larger than ca. fifty thousand people), they are believed to have lived in Central Asia, on and off, long before the Mongolian conquest in the

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thirteenth century.²

The name 'Bukharan' as a description of Jews of Central Asia is attributed not only to the fact that Bukhara was one of oldest known settlements of Eastern Jews, but also to the importance of linguistic forms of identification.³ All Jewish speakers of the Jewish dialect of Tajik – also known as 'Bukharan-Jewish language' or Bukhori language (*zaboni bukhori* in Tajik; Aulov 2020: 253) in vernacular usage – are defined as Bukharan Jews. Speakers of Bukhori are not only those who historically resided in or came from Bukhara, but also those who moved to other cities (e.g. Tashkent, Samarkand, Dushanbe) and, later, countries (e.g. Afghanistan, Palestine), and who abandoned Persian for the Sephardi rites (Burton 1996: 47). This does not imply that Bukhori has been used in any uniform manner throughout the region. Moreover, from Soviet times onwards in big cities like Tashkent or Dushanbe, different versions of Bukhori have been used in private, while Russian, Tajik or Uzbek have often been deployed in the public sphere and at places of work (Aulov 2020: 253).

By some estimates, not more than 2,000 Bukharan Jews are left in Central Asia today, mainly concentrated in Uzbekistan (Pinkhasov 2021). For instance, the city of Bukhara, which was the capital of the Khanate and later the Emirate of Bukhara until the Soviets came in the 1920s, is now a small regional centre and home to only 100-150 Bukharan Jews. At the time of my fieldwork in February 2022, there were only two synagogues in the city – one was hardly functioning, and the family of the caretaker of this synagogue was already planning to emigrate to Israel since their elder children and extended network of relations have already settled in Israel. As a result of this mass emigration, and concomitant sales of properties, the traditional Jewish quarters (the Jewish *makholia* or *mahalla*, 'neighbourhood') with its narrow streets and clay-walled buildings have become a main residential area for tourists – the houses of the departed Jews have been reconstructed and transformed into numerous guesthouses, hotels and occasional local craft shops and tailors. Most owners of the new businesses are local Uzbeks, Tajiks and Tatars. There are virtually no Jewish owners operating these businesses remotely. Similarly to post-World War II and postcommunist Europe, where old Jewish quarters have been developed into tourist attractions, Jewish heritage and cultural traces are now acknowledged in the absence of living Jewish culture (cf. Gruber 2002).

During the late Soviet times, the first mass wave of Jewish emigra-

tion took place in the 1970s (Gitelman et al. 2003). Since the late 1980s, the majority of Bukharan Jews have moved to Israel (today there are approximately 110,000). There is also a sizeable community in the USA (approximately 50,000), mostly concentrated in New York's Queens neighbourhood, where Bukharan Jews now have forty synagogues, and, to a lesser extent, in Brooklyn. Vienna and Moscow have, in turn, become the main European destinations. In Vienna, many Bukharan Jews have settled in the centrally located district of Leopoldstadt, which historically had been popular with Austrian and European Jewry. In many instances, these various locations do not represent the final points of destination for Bukharan Jews (see also next section on earlier migration). Some families and individuals initially moved to Israel, and from there they relocated to Vienna or the USA and Canada; some have moved to New York after years spent in Vienna, and yet others moved to Israel, US or Canada after years spent in Moscow.

Transnational families and extensive, global socio-economic networks sustained by the everyday and ritual practices have become a characteristic feature of the Bukharan Jew diaspora. For example, a small project of an individual based in London could involve relatives living in Toronto and Jerusalem (e.g. Cordell 2017: 124). A wedding of a couple living in Vienna could take place in Israel for practical reasons, such as being less expensive or more accessible to a larger number of relatives, and many members of the Viennese community would be obliged to attend and travel to Israel. Funerals and memorial services regularly activate face-to-face community gatherings both nationally and transnationally. Main diasporic periodicals, some with their head offices in the US and some in Israel, publish mainly in Russian and Hebrew and circulate online.⁴

There are different cultural-political aspirations that have run in tandem in the diaspora since the early days of mass emigration in the 1990s. Some people have been in favour of joining the ranks of the world Jewry where regional-cultural differences play very little, if any, role. Others have preferred to preserve 'the Eastern ways' and are proud of representing the achievements and durability of 'Asian Jewry' ('the extraordinary Asian branch', *nezauriadnaia aziatskaia veto*; Shukurzoda 2019: 37) that have a unique historical pathway and experiences. The strength of Bukharan Jews' transnational links and connections as well as the emphasis on their cultural, Central Asian specificity have led to new institutional forms: various diasporic organisations, such as The Congress of Bukharan Jews of the USA and Canada and The Bukharan

Jewish Communities of Austria and Israel, have been consolidated under the aegis of The World Congress of Bukharan Jews in 2000. The World Congress has been declared a new structure aimed to create 'a global system of communities that would enable a restoration of the former glory of Bukharan Jewry' (Pinkhasov 2021).

Given the prominence of the transnational global connectivity via family kinship ties and diverse migration routes, one of the initial enquiries discussed in this research note deals with the nature of present-day links between the diaspora and Uzbekistan. It raises questions regarding what kinds of new relations have been forged and what types of engagement have not been undertaken. Before I discuss to the present-day connections with Uzbekistan, I take a brief look at the historical positioning, and the representations thereof, of Bukharan Jews in Central Asia. It is against the historical background outlined below that today's options, strategies and aspirations of Bukharan Jews are particularly illuminated.

A Middleman Minority

Bukhara - now situated in Uzbekistan - was a city of the medieval Silk Road. Dyeing, small-scale manufacturing (e.g. silk scarfs) and other crafts were traditional Jewish occupations in the region. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, travellers produced different accounts of the status and 'well-being' of the Jewish communities. Some highlighted the prosperity of the Bukharan communities and their participation in foreign trade and business in jewels and precious metals (see in Burton 1996: 56). Others, focusing on the Emirate of Bukhara, pointed out that Jews were mainly engaged in crafts, rather than trade, and were heavily taxed and oppressed. Political-economic marginalisation in the Emirate stimulated Jewish migration to Turkey and Syria (Vamberi 2003 [1865]). With the Russian conquest of some areas of Central Asia and the creation of Russian Turkestan in the 1820s, Bukharan Jews came to be seen as potential 'go-betweens' for the colonisers (Russians) and local (Uzbek/Tajik) authorities, and were welcomed by the Russian administration as traders and interpreters; Russia was interested in importing cotton and manufactured goods from Asia and Bukharan Jews embraced these new opportunities. They were allowed to trade in certain Russian cities (e.g. the city of Orenburg; Burton 1996: 54) on the same terms as Bukharan Muslims. Despite some formal limitations, Central Asian Jewish trading networks

quickly extended to other Russian cities, including Moscow, and as far as London and Leipzig, giving rise to a new class of Bukharan Jewish cotton merchants. As a 'connecting link between the colony and the metropole' (Kaganovich 2016: 25), Bukharan Jews enjoyed preferential treatment compared with other foreign Jews in Russia; this imperial strategy also aimed at securing 'devotion to Russia' (Burton 1996: 54) in the new colonies. As the Jewish traditional occupation as dyers became obsolete (unprofitable) by the end of the nineteenth century due to technological advances in textile production, people shifted en masse to (petit) trade and real estate whilst the wealthiest merchants invested in various industries (Nazar'ian 2020: 226).

The Imperial Russia's positive attitudes and liberal policies were neither stable nor long-lived (Burton 1996: 57-59), but it was the arrival of the Soviets and the religious persecutions that followed that provoked a wave of migration away from the Soviet dominion. In the 1920s-1930s, approximately 15 per cent of the Bukharan Jewish community (ca. 4,000 people), mainly those who could afford to do so, escaped to Afghanistan and Iran (Kaganovich 2020: 149-150). Many went further on to Palestine, giving rise to a new community in Jerusalem; some individual families making it all way to London.

Today, the pre-Soviet commercial expansion of Bukharan Jews and their transformation into a middleman minority in the nineteenth century is juxtaposed, in public discourse, with the centuries-old history of the Silk Road to produce a narrative of tolerance of Central Asian society writ large. It is these visions of earlier kinds of cosmopolitanism that are now often recalled in the diasporic press and oral history and that are postulated as inherent features of Central Asian peoples⁵. But while we learn, from recently published research and popular publications, about the influential Bukharan Jewish merchants, industrialists and traders of the pre-Soviet past who were successful middlemen operating in and between Central Asia and the metropole, there are virtually no stories in circulation about the present-day Bukharan Jewish trade with or investments in Uzbekistan.

The 'Dead' Links

The only significant ongoing public link to Uzbekistan involving financial investment from the Bukhara Jewish diaspora seems to be Jewish cemeteries. Bukharan Jews' relations to their dead are central to communal and family life; the commemoration of the dead ancestors and

relatives has remained an important aspect of the global diaspora's ritual life that is financially supported by community members in various ways. Regular big feasts to commemorate one's dead – that often take place in restaurants – are communal, not only family events. The appearance of an organised business of nostalgia tourism had its heyday in the 1990s when those who emigrated in the 1970s and their descendants could visit the post-Soviet country for the first time (see also Cooper 2012: 237). While individuals and families now travel to their Central Asian homelands on their own accord (and not too often), the tourist business specialises in collective tours to graveyards and secures kosher environments for the travellers.

Numerous charitable foundations that are dedicated to the maintenance, restoration and protection of Jewish burial sites have been set up in the USA at the outset of post-Soviet migration. Many of these foundations work with specific cities only and receive donations primarily from the former residents of these cities. There are, for example, charitable funds 'Fergana' (est. 1994), 'Samarkand' (est. 1997), 'Bukhor' (est.1997) , 'Tashkent' (est. 1999), 'Margilan' (est. 1999), 'Namangan' (est. 2012) and so on.⁶

The restoration and maintenance of the Jewish cemeteries is predicated on the close cooperation with the Uzbek Muslim population and local authorities. And in Uzbekistan, just as in the Russophone and Tajik-speaking migrant communities of New York or Vienna,⁷ mutually beneficial cooperation and work relations have been established between Muslim Uzbeks/Tajiks and Bukharan Jews. In the city of Bukhara, local authorities invested in the landscaping of the Jewish cemetery, while the eventual progress with the restoration efforts and good maintenance of the cemetery were attributed (in 2022) to the recently appointed local Muslim Uzbek director and his team of relatives who were responsible for the daily maintenance of graves. The Uzbek director was praised for his achievements and was said to be more efficient in this role than his Jewish predecessor. This is but one example that today supports popular memories of cooperation across religious and ethnic divides and the rhetoric of past cosmopolitanism in Soviet Uzbekistan (see also Humphrey, Marsden, Skvirskaja 2005).

Yet, it is the ethnic-religious divide that is often seen today as an actual or potential barrier to a broader investment portfolio than 'the dead' and more far-reaching economic relations between the Bukharan Jewish diaspora and independent Uzbekistan. On the one hand, for ordinary Bukharan Jews I talked to both in Bukhara and in New York

and Vienna diaspora, there is an ever-present threat of Islamicisation of Central Asia, imagined and understood by them as growing intolerance towards non-Muslims. The succession of post-Soviet leaders in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is seen as the last 'reliable' generation of Muslim leaders. Their Soviet roots, upbringing and political networks have functioned as a warranty against religious radicalism in the region. The current leaders, however, also represent the last generation of these agreeable 'post-Soviet' leaders: for my interlocutors, the future Muslim leaders will no longer be marked or moulded by Soviet legacies, including secular dispositions or lifestyles. There are thus potential risks associated with future leadership, such as stricter Islam or religious intolerance, and the uncertainty about the future political-religious climate is what prevents long-term business interests and financial investments in the former home countries.

On the other hand, there are stories about certain Bukharan Jewish emigres who had tried to start business ventures or bought commercial properties in Uzbekistan only to be squeezed out or undermined by local Uzbek actors who could rely on their clan and kinship networks. Not being part of these kin-based networks or being excluded from Uzbek clan-based nepotism could easily result in building permissions being reworked, contracts not honoured and unexpected taxes demanded. Some limitations on inter-religious/inter-ethnic interactions that were present in Soviet times in both formal and informal spheres (e.g. in marriage practices and promotions at work; see also Humphrey, Marsden, Skvirskaja 2005 on Bukhara) have now also surfaced in the business sphere.

People's concerns that were voiced to me in private in the language of 'exclusion' and 'not-belonging' to local structures are also voiced and discussed in public. In September 2022, when a delegation of American journalists visited Uzbekistan together with the representatives of the Bukharan Jewish community, the high-ranking hosts (governors, city mayors, ministers) were asked directly how potential investments could be safeguarded and protected from the Uzbek state, local oligarchs and kinship networks.⁸ The American delegates were assured that new legal reforms were on the way. As the major diasporic newspaper 'The Bukharian Times' reported: 'There were little doubts that Uzbeks are sincerely interested in conducting business with us'.⁹ How and whether Bukharan Jewish entrepreneurs and traders will include Uzbekistan into their business realm remains to be seen. In the meanwhile, the go-between identity of Bukharan Jews has been

deployed in a new arena of international relations.

The Middleman Minority and People's Diplomacy

Many Bukharan Jews, especially the first and second generations of emigrants, identify culturally with Central Asian peoples like Uzbeks and Tajiks (e.g. food, traditional music and clothing, interior design, gender relations). In some popular literature, the culture of Bukharan Jews is defined as a synthesis of Jewish, Uzbek and Persian/Tajik cultures. Bukharan Jews are said to be 'the bearers and guardians of Muslim art of Central Asian peoples' (Shukurzoda 2019: 99-100). 'Being a different kind of Jew' has, however, posed a dilemma of belonging in the diaspora, including Israel. Some of my interlocutors recalled the arrogance of Ashkenazi compatriots who, after emigrating to the US, referred to them as Uzbeks, i.e. a 'less advanced' people, a Russian racial slur, as well as humiliating experiences in Israel where Soviet Central Asian Jews were attributed the lowest social status. 'After leaving behind Soviet antisemitism, it was painful to experience discrimination once again in Israel', a man in his early seventies shared his experiences with me.

With time, however, Bukhori language and Bukharan traditionalism have been gradually disappearing among the younger generations, including those who were born in the USA. In this context, one of the key goals declared by The Congress of Bukharan Jews of the USA and Canada, The Bukharan Jewish Communities of Austria and Israel and The World Congress of Bukharan Jews is to unite Bukharan Jews and to secure their 'self-perception of a separate ethnic group' (Shukurzoda 2019: 41) without resorting to ethnic stereotypes. This goal of 'unification' has had wider repercussions (or ambitions): drawing on the established institutional framework, and on the postulated cultural affinity with the peoples of Central Asia and skills of peaceful co-existence, Bukharan Jews have re-established themselves as a go-between diaspora – as 'a new link' (Shukurzoda 2019: 18) between the USA and the countries of Central Asia.

Recently, Uzbekistan has increasingly become interested in 'soft-power' and establishing relations with its former citizens and its citizens abroad. Some expensive (and extensive) projects have been set up to improve the country's public image, to re-connect successful Uzbek migrants with Uzbekistan and to introduce their stories of success to the Uzbek audience. Among these various projects,¹⁰ there is an

NGO cum public fund 'Vatondoshlar' founded in Uzbekistan in 2021 with the support of several Ministries (Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and so on). The fund is responsible for the development of partnerships with Uzbek compatriots living abroad, popularisation of Uzbek language and culture abroad, promoting Uzbek sportsmen and cultural figures and securing their active participation in activities organised by the diaspora, encouraging Uzbek diaspora to participate in business and cultural ventures in Uzbekistan, and the like.¹¹

During my fieldwork in New York, the President of The Congress of Bukharan Jews of the USA and Canada, Boris Kandov, was awarded the 'Friendship of Peoples' badge by the representatives of the 'Vatondoshlar' fund for his contribution to the strengthening of ties between the USA and Uzbekistan. As 'The Bukharian Times' reported, the Uzbek visitors were pleasantly surprised by the sight of a Uzbek flag in the Cultural Centre of Bukharan Jews in Forrest Hill, Queens, where the event was taking place.¹² The Uzbek delegation that included journalists, a private entrepreneur and officials from the Uzbek Embassy and the Presidential Administration, presented a multivolume Uzbek dictionary and traditional Uzbek pottery to the Bukharan Jewish community. While the 'Friendship of Peoples' badge has the connotation of the Soviet discourse on internationalism which was often framed in precisely this idiom, the visit of the 'Vatondoshlar' has also highlighted the political aspirations of Bukharan Jewish diaspora in developing people's diplomacy projects in the US: the diaspora have the necessary cultural capital, knowledge and (diplomatic cum middleman) skills to represent (the mostly Muslim) Uzbek culture and the whole of Uzbekistan in the US and a neutral positioning to encourage or even facilitate cultural and business contacts of Americans and the diasporic Uzbeks in Uzbekistan.

Concluding Remarks

Prior to Soviet advances in Central Asia, Bukharan Jewish entrepreneurs and traders were an important link between Central Asia regions (i.e. the Russian Turkestan and the Bukhara Emirate) and the metropole. Today, this history is often used to talk about the 'times of friendship between Muslims and Jews' and 'valuable cosmopolitanism' embodied by the Bukharan Jewish community. At present, as post-Soviet Central Asia is said to undergo democratic transformations, and a rebirth of the Silk Road is becoming imminent, traditional cosmopolitanism of

Bukharan Jews is hoped to once again become useful in the international arena.¹³ In the three post-Soviet decades, the Bukharan Jews' business involvement in Central Asia seems to have been minimal and focused mainly on nostalgia tourism and maintenance of the Jewish cemeteries. But whereas the economic impetus is still to be seen, and the Silk Road of the yesteryear is still to be revived, people's diplomacy has emerged as a new field of ambition, engagement and exchange where Bukharan Jews strive to mediate between Muslim Central Asia and the Western World.

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NOTES

- 1 This research note is based on the author's ethnographic fieldwork in Bukhara, Uzbekistan in February 2022, Vienna, Austria in May/July 2022 and New York, USA in September 2022. The research project 'The Afterlife of Great Muslim Cities' (2022-2024) is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), UK.
- 2 There is no scholarly agreement on the exact period when Bukharan Jews arrived or settled in the region. The idea that Bukharan Jews moved to Central Asia when Persians annexed Babylon in the 5th century BCE is widely accepted in the community.
- 3 Cooper (2012: 128-129) argues, however, that the community had come to identify themselves as Bukharan Jews only at the turn of the twentieth century when they came into contact with Jews from other parts of the world in Jerusalem and had to define themselves as separate from the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities. Be it as it may, at present, Bukharan language is considered crucial for Bukharan national identity and some community activists object to Bukharan language being glossed over as (a dialect of) Tajik in mass media or transnational diasporic press; instead they argue that Bukharan language is an independent language, not unlike Yiddish – the language of Ashkenazi Jews (Shlomo Ustonizov, President of the VBJ, the Association of Bukharian Jews in Austria Vienna, 2022, personal communication).
- 4 E.g. The Bukharian Times (NY), Menora (Israel), Druzhba (NY).
- 5 The Bukharian Times, 2022. no. 1078: 6; 6-16 October.
- 6 For an overview of the charitable foundations see e.g. Pinkhasov 2021; Shukurzoda 2019: 40-41.
- 7 In New York, for instance, it is common for Bukharan Jews to employ recent Uzbek migrants as domestic help/nannies, workers on construction sites, in restaurants and other businesses. Perhaps with the exception of domestic help and child care, there is no evidence that Uzbek or Tajik compatriots are preferred due to cultural and linguistic familiarity, since migrants from Latin America, Mexico and other regions of the former USSR are also widely present in businesses owned by Bukharan Jews. In Bukharan Jewish supermarkets and

- restaurants (both in New York and Vienna), it is common to meet Russophone Christian Slav employees displaying cross necklaces.
- 8 Similar concerns are widely held by other international investors such as Afghan Muslims (Magnus Marsden, personal communication, September 2022).
 - 9 The Bukharian Times, 2022. no. 1078: 6; 6-16 October.
 - 10 See e.g. the project 'Ozbekistonlik'. Ozbekistonlik comes out in installments that are uploaded on YouTube with Russian subtitles. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfCFnOcXebw> (for Episode 1). Some Uzbek viewers praise the project for its patriotic spirit. But questions also asked as to why these talented Uzbeks had to emigrate to achieve success, and why the Uzbek state could not secure that the talent stays home.
 - 11 https://www.norma.uz/novoe_v_zakonodatelstve/sozdan_obshchestvenny_fond_vatandoshlar, 13.08.2021. Last accessed 5.12.2022.
 - 12 The Bukharian Times, 2022. no. 1076: 24; 22-28 September.
 - 13 The Bukharian Times, 2022. no. 1078: 6; 6-16 October.

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