

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE STUDY OF THE ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION OF THE ZARAFSHAN OASIS

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Abstract

The article explores the historiography of research on the ethnic composition of the population of the Zarafshan Valley. It analyzes the main stages, directions, and methodological approaches that have shaped scholarly understanding of ethnic processes in the region from ancient times to the present. Special attention is paid to the works of domestic and foreign historians, ethnographers, and archaeologists who have studied the demographic and ethnocultural development of the Zarafshan Valley. The paper highlights how political, social, and cultural factors influenced the interpretation of ethnic history during different historical periods. The results of the study contribute to a deeper comprehension of the historiographical evolution of ethnic studies in Central Asia and provide a foundation for further interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: Zarafshan Valley, historiography, ethnic composition, population, ethnic processes, Central Asia, ethnography, history of research.

Introduction

When examining the research conducted in the 20th century on the ethnic composition of the population of the Zarafshan Valley through the lens of ethnonyms and toponyms, it becomes evident that, although comprehensive studies in this area remain limited, various investigations have nonetheless been carried out from different perspectives within the framework of the topic. The earliest scientific observations concerning the population of the Zarafshan Valley date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, the scientific expeditions organized in 1870 across Samarkand, Bukhara, and Urgench—led by N.N. Karazin and N.E. Simanov—collected valuable ethnographic data that were significant for their time. Moreover, the works of researchers such as A. Vámbéry, A.D. Grebenkin, A.P. Fedchenko, L.N. Sobolev, A.P. Khoroshkhin, O.D. Chekhovich, P.P. Ivanov, Kh. Mukhamedov, Ya. Ghulomov, and B.V. Yusov, who studied the natural-geographical and historical characteristics of place names in this region, serve as important historiographical sources. These materials not only illuminate the toponymic and historical context of the Zarafshan Valley but also provide essential data for understanding the ethnic composition of its population.

During the period of Russian imperial colonization and the early years of Soviet rule, population census records, as well as archival materials preserved in the “Kushbegi Mahkaması Archive” housed in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan, were thoroughly analyzed and classified for this research. In addition, ethnographic data from the 1920s and scholarly works by historians, ethnographers, archaeologists, and other specialists—including M.S. Andreev, I.I. Zarubin, V.G. Moshkova, B.Kh. Karmysheva, E.M. Peshchereva, N.B. Nemtseva,



V.P. Alekseev, and N.A. Dubova—were critically examined and utilized whenever relevant to the objectives of the study.

Between 1928 and 1930, extensive field expeditions dedicated to the study of Uzbek culture, ethnography, and folklore were organized by prominent Uzbek folklorists G. Yusupov and H. Zaripov, in collaboration with the distinguished Russian ethnographer L.P. Potapov. These expeditions collected exceptionally rich materials that shed light on the unique cultural and social characteristics of the population of the Zarafshan Valley.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, a number of fundamental monographs and research works were published on the ethnogenesis, ethnic history, and regional sub-ethnic groups of the Uzbek people by scholars such as K.Sh. Shoniyozov, T. Fayziev, B. Akhmedov, M. Ermatov, B.Kh. Karmysheva, A. Mukhammadjonov, and Kh. Toshev.

Furthermore, this research draws upon the scientific and methodological contributions of scholars who studied the toponymy of Uzbekistan during the late Soviet and early independence periods, including S. Qoraev, T. Nafasov, E. Begmatov, N. Okhunov, U. Tuychiev, A. Turobov, N. Begaliev, and S. Buriyev. The data obtained from their works were taken into consideration while analyzing the toponyms of the Zarafshan Valley as key historical and ethnographic sources.

In addition, the recent studies of A. Malikov—who investigated numerous ethnonyms related to the population of the Zarafshan Valley, particularly the Uzbeks, as an integral part of the region's demographic structure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—were effectively employed and referenced in the present research to enhance the ethnohistorical analysis.

Since ancient times, the Zarafshan Valley has served as a homeland primarily for sedentary agricultural communities and, to a lesser extent, for nomadic pastoral groups. Located at the crossroads of Central Asia, the valley has been a strategic and cultural intersection since the first millennium BCE. Various historical sources written in Greek, Chinese, Arabic, and Indian languages provide valuable evidence about the region's population and its ethnocultural evolution.

Systematic scholarly research on the ethnic composition and toponymy of the Zarafshan Valley began in the late 19th century. Russian orientalists and ethnographers who visited the region were among the first to record scientific observations and propose preliminary interpretations of its ethnic diversity. Among the early contributors was N. Khanikov, whose pioneering work was later continued and expanded by A.D. Grebenkin with greater methodological consistency.

The renowned Russian Turkologist V.V. Radlov also conducted field research in several districts and provinces of the valley, providing detailed descriptions of the local population's ethnic composition, linguistic features, and dialectal distinctions in his writings.

At the beginning of the 20th century, studies within this field intensified, and during the 1920s–1930s a number of scholarly works were published that addressed various aspects of the topic. During the same period, local researchers who were collecting linguistic data also paid attention to the ethnic structure of the valley's population and toponyms derived from ethnonyms. In particular, prominent Uzbek linguists and literary scholars such as Gh. Olim Yusupov, Kh. Zarif, and S. Aini expressed their views on the historical and ethnic characteristics of the Zarafshan Valley, thereby contributing to the formation of early national historiography on the subject.

From the 1920s onward, ethnographic research on the population of Central Asia entered a new



stage of development. The historiography of this period shows that studies conducted during these years were not only analytical in character but also of significant scholarly and methodological importance. These investigations built upon the extensive research conducted during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while placing particular emphasis on the systematic collection of new ethnographic and statistical data. Much of this work was associated with the national-territorial delimitation of Turkestan, which stimulated large-scale field studies aimed at defining the ethnic and cultural characteristics of its regions, including the Zarafshan Valley.

In this regard, a particularly valuable source for studying the Zarafshan Valley is the Statistical Yearbook of the Samarkand Province (“Samarkand Viloyatini Ma’lumot Kitobi”), published from the second half of the nineteenth century onward. This statistical journal served as an important reference work, containing abundant historical, ethnic, and ethnographic information. Among the notable contributors to this publication were V.L. Vyatkin, the editor M.M. Virsky, and M. Andreev, whose research reflected the growing interest in the region’s population and historical monuments.

V.L. Vyatkin’s translation of Abu Tahir Khoja’s “Samariya” and his studies of Samarkand’s historical sites, including the ancient city of Afrasiyab, culminated in his monograph “Afrasiyab”, which remains a significant contribution to the historiography of the Zarafshan Valley.

During the 1920s, several ethnographic works emerged that focused on the ethnogenesis of the Uzbek people, their tribal and clan structures, social and family organization, economic activities, and traditional way of life. Among the earliest and most noteworthy publications of this period were the works of Professor E.D. Polivanov and the ethnographer L.P. Potapov, whose research offered valuable insights into the sociocultural composition of the Uzbek population.

Statistical materials compiled during this time provided not only data on the Zarafshan Valley but also a comprehensive overview of the entire Turkestan region. These records included detailed information on the ethnic composition of the population, the number and distribution of various ethnic and subethnic communities, and their settlement patterns across districts, counties, and rural communes, thereby serving as indispensable sources for subsequent ethnographic and historical analyses.

At the beginning of the 20th century, research conducted by scholars such as M.S. Andreev, I.I. Zarubin, and I. Magidovich on the ethnic composition, lifestyle, and economic practices of the population of Turkestan—including the Zarafshan Valley—constitutes an important body of sources for the historiography of the region.

In his monograph “The Population of the Samarkand Province”, I.I. Zarubin analyzed the number, ethnic structure, and settlement distribution of the inhabitants of the province. M.S. Andreev, meanwhile, examined the ethnographic characteristics of the population through the study of mural paintings and inscriptions preserved in historical monuments across the region. I. Magidovich not only studied the Zarafshan Valley but also compared the historical geography of Central Asia as a whole by analyzing ancient cartographic and written sources, thereby providing data on the location of settlements and demographic patterns.

However, it should be emphasized that much of the research conducted during the colonial



period—and later under the Soviet regime—was shaped by the ideological context of the time. Studies were often influenced by the imperial and Soviet principles of “divide and rule,” resulting in one-sided interpretations of the ethnic situation, customs, and toponyms of the local population. While these works focused mainly on statistical data such as population size, land development, migration processes, and the occupations of resettled groups, they largely neglected broader questions concerning the dynamics of population growth, assimilation with the local inhabitants, and the historical formation of tribal and ethnic identities. Today, these issues remain central to contemporary ethnological and historiographical inquiry.

In short, during the early decades of the 20th century, the works of foreign scholars—particularly Russian military officers, orientalist, geographers, and specialists in related fields—who attempted to describe the ethnic composition of the Zarafshan Valley based on the existing ethnic groups and ethnonyms, serve as both valuable historical sources and scientific studies in their own right. These researchers introduced new methodological approaches characteristic of Western scholarship, which, although unfamiliar to the regional academic tradition of that time, were distinguished by their systematic nature and empirical precision.

For many of these authors, local customs, traditions, and ethnographic observations that seemed ordinary to indigenous scholars appeared unique and scientifically significant, offering insights into a culture markedly different from their own. Consequently, wherever they conducted their research in Turkestan, they approached issues such as language, ethnic structure, demography, daily life, and economic organization with considerable thoroughness.

Nevertheless, their works were not without shortcomings. In several instances, ethnonyms and toponyms were recorded inaccurately, often violating established ethnolinguistic conventions. Moreover, some researchers interpreted data through the lens of their own worldview, nationality, or religious background, occasionally leading to biased or one-dimensional conclusions due to limited field observation or selective analysis.

Conclusions

The historiographical review of research on the ethnic composition of the Zarafshan Valley population demonstrates that the study of this region’s ethnographic and demographic structure has a long and multifaceted history. From the first scientific observations made by Russian orientalist and travelers in the late nineteenth century to the comprehensive ethnographic and linguistic studies of the Soviet period, the Zarafshan Valley has consistently attracted scholarly attention as one of Central Asia’s key cultural and historical centers.

Early investigations by scholars such as N. Khanikov, A.D. Grebenkin, and V.V. Radlov laid the foundations for understanding the valley’s ethnic diversity through the documentation of local languages, dialects, and customs. The subsequent works of M.S. Andreev, I.I. Zarubin, and I. Magidovich expanded the field by integrating archaeological, historical, and geographical data, thus linking ethnographic observations with broader regional dynamics. Despite their scientific contributions, however, many colonial and early Soviet studies were constrained by ideological and political frameworks, often leading to one-sided or selective interpretations of ethnic identity and cultural development.

During the mid- to late twentieth century, the research of Uzbek scholars such as K.Sh. Shoniyozev, T. Fayziev, B. Akhmedov, and others marked a significant shift toward a more



objective and nationally grounded understanding of ethnogenesis, ethnic composition, and regional subethnic processes. In the years of independence, the works of researchers like S. Qoraev, T. Nafasov, and A. Malikov have further deepened the study of toponymy and ethnonyms as key tools for reconstructing the historical ethnic landscape of the Zarafshan Valley. Overall, the evolution of historiographical approaches—from descriptive ethnography to interdisciplinary ethnohistorical analysis—reflects the growing maturity of this field within Central Asian studies. The accumulated body of research not only provides valuable insight into the complex formation of the valley's multiethnic population but also highlights the need for continued scholarly inquiry based on modern research methods and critical evaluation of earlier sources.

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