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Museums in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe. Rethinking Soviet Museum Management

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Abstract: The paper presents four case studies probed at the online workshop "Museums in Central Asia, Caucasus, and Eastern Europe: Rethinking Soviet Museum Management" in October 2023. All authors and participants of the workshop highlighted the challenges of provenance research, forced transfers and alienations of art collections, as some of the most persistent systemic issues created by Soviet museum authorities in the museum domain across the region. The presented research explores the complex interactions between local communities and museum work, as well as the impact of Soviet colonialism on the establishment of cultural paradigms throughout the Soviet era. It was during this period that key institutions and patterns were formed, which continued to exert influence in the decades following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the development of sovereign successor states. Overall, all four case studies emphasize the importance of understanding and addressing the legacy of Soviet museum management in the context of museum and heritage studies that transitioned from domestic affairs to international relationships.

Introduction: State of Research and Tasks

Museums across Eurasia, including those in Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan, have grappled with the complex legacies of Soviet museum management, encompassing institutional, conceptual, material, and legal dimensions. This system entailed the nationalization of collections and rigorous ideological control over artistic production and public display methods. Since the 1990s, efforts to redefine this legacy have unfolded within various conceptual frameworks, most notably addressing post-Communist contexts.[1]

Today, the prevailing historiographical trend within the museum field is a decolonial framework defined by reassembling and delinking notions of the (post)Soviet into both new aspects of the relevant region(s) and/or analyzing certain elements of the systemic violence by the Soviet and other empires. Central to this approach is the re-evaluation of overarching discursive frameworks, which form the cornerstone of a decolonial vocabulary. Beginning as early as the 2000s, scholars embarked on a process of deconstructing Socialist art histories to challenge the uniform narrative imposed by the Soviet Communist Party regarding socialist and figurative art. Instead, they sought to elucidate the nuanced trajectories of artists within both Communist and national contexts. This approach necessitates an exploration of the diverse agents and hubs of artistic production, as well as an understanding of the particularities of the Socialist art market.[2] In this context, provenance research, once relegated

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1 Inga Karaia (ed.): Problems and Development. Perspectives of Post-Soviet Countries Museums: International Scientific Conference: November 7-10 2015, Tbilisi 2015.

2 Krista Kodres / Kristina Jõekalda / Michaela J. Marek (eds.): A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades, Vienna 2019; Special Issue: Red Networks: Postwar Art Exchange, in: Art History 45 (November 2022), No. 5; Sven Spieker et al. (eds.): Handbook of Socialist Exhibition Culture. International Art Exhibitions in the Socialist World, 1947-1989, forthcoming.

to the status of a minor technical detail in museum inventories, has emerged as a crucial tool for critical and historical analysis of museums as public institutions responsible for the accumulation, distribution, and promotion of art.[3] An examination of domestic histories has furthered a decade-long trend of unpacking the international dimensions of forced, illegal, and irregular circulation and displacement of art in the region, largely under the influence of Soviet Russia during times of annexation and occupation.[4] The countries of Eurasia situated within the sphere of influence or direct dominance of multiple empires and settler communities, are increasingly cognizant of the overlapping imperialisms that have shaped the complex, conflicting, or multidirectional dynamics of cultural landscapes.[5] The surge of scholarship by experts from local communities, both academic and activist, is notable

since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022.[6] These studies work directly with new sources and continue to critically revisit museum histories narrated from the perspective of Russia, addressed here as a legal successor of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union.[7] These broad perspectives – revisiting Socialist and national art histories, provenance research as a crucial element of the material histories of collecting and the art market, and the overlapping regional and cultural influences – served as focal points of scholarly attention at the workshop convened in autumn 2023.

The conference "Museums in Central Asia, Caucasus, and Eastern Europe: Rethinking Soviet Museum Management", held online with the support of the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (Stockholm) and the Centre de recherche Cultures – Arts – Sociétés (Montreal), addressed pressing issues in museum history and the current state of research on museums in the region. These topics included the politics and consequences of the Soviet nationalization of art collections and national heritage, efforts in provenance research, accessibility of archives, contemporary curatorial practices, the pursuit of (post)national displays in both past and future contexts, epistemological violence, and emancipation in knowledge production, among others. Due to the traditionally low accessibility of archives and limited public transparency within the museum domain in the region, the primary objective of the workshop was to examine firsthand experiences with archival and curatorial work involving museum collections and displays in art historical museums.

3   Renata Komić Marn / Tina Košak: New Markets for Old Items: Selling Aristocratic Collections of Art and Antiquities in Interwar Slovenia, in: Elisabetta Lazzaro / Nathalie Moureau / Adriana Turpin (eds.): Researching Art Markets: Past, Present and Tools for the Future, London / New York 2021, 194-207; Mathias Deinert et al.: Welchen Stellenwert hat Provenienzforschung zu Kulturgutverlusten in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone und in der DDR? Diskussionen, Literatur, Initiativen, in: *transfer* – Zeitschrift für Provenienzforschung und Sammlungsgeschichte / Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection 1 (2022), DOI: https://doi.org/10.48640/tf.2022.1.91520, 110-121.

4   Serhiy Kot / Oleksiy Nestulia: Ukrains'ki kul'turni tsinnosti v Rosii. Persha sproba povernennia 1917-1918, Kyiv 1996; Oleksiy Nestulia: Ukrains'ki kul'turni tsinnosti v Rosii: na shliakhu do dialogu 1926-1930, Poltava 2002; Oleksiy Nestulia / Svitlana Nestulia: Ukrains'ki kul'turni tsinnosti v Rosii: sproba dialogu pro povernennia. 1930 r., Poltava 2006; Jānis Kalnačs: The "Legitimate" Plundering of Riga's Apartments, 1944-1949, Riga 2017; Serhiy Kot: Povernennia i restitutsiia kul'turnikh tsinnostei u politichnomu ta kul'turnomu zhitti Ukraïni (XX–poch. XXI), Kyiv 2020.

5   Critical geography is part of this field of interest, see: Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius (ed.): Borders in Art: Revisiting Kunstgeographie, Warsaw 2000; Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius: Mapping Eastern Europe: Cartography and Art History, in: ARTL@S BULLETIN 2 (2013), No. 2, 14-25; Margaret Tali: Objects as Continuities through Layered Colonialisms: Johannes Mikkel Collection and the Potentials of Decolonial Curating, in: Erica Lehrer / Joanna Wawrzyniak / Łukasz Bukowiecki (eds.): Decolonial Museology Re-centered: Thinking Theory and Practice through East Central Europe, forthcoming; Hanna Rudyk: "Unconsciously White". The Khanenko Museum in Kyiv in the Wider Context of (De)Coloniality, in: ibid.; Tina Košak / Renata Komić Marn / Helena Seražin (eds.): Artistic and Architectural Heritage of the Nobility Between Old and New Regimes, in: Acta Historiae Artis Slovenica 28 (2023), No. 2, 5-7.

6   Tetyana Filevska / Maria Blyzinsky: A Global Approach to Decolonizing Ukrainian Cultural Heritage, in: Museum and Society 21 (2023), No. 2, 65-71; Maria Silina: Russian Cultural Expansion in Ukraine: Exploring New Perspectives for International Relations in the Region, in: Baltic Worlds 4 (2023), 13-22; Erica Lehrer / Joanna Wawrzyniak: Decolonial Museology in East-Central Europe: A Preliminary To-Do List, in: Europe Now 24 (February 2023), https://www.europenowjournal.org/2023/02/24/decolonial-museology-in-east-central-europe-a-preliminary-to-do-list/, <01.05.2024>.

7   Literature is extensive, see among others: Boris Groys: The Struggle against the Museum or, the Display of Art in Totalitarian Space, in: Daniel J. Sherman / Irit Rogoff (eds.): Museum Culture. Histories, Discourses, Spectacles, London 1994, 144-162; Karl Schlögel: Das Sowjetische Jahrhundert. Archäologie einer untergegangenen Welt, Munich 2017, 38-58; Sofia Gavrilova: Russia's Regional Museums: Representing and Misrepresenting Knowledge about Nature, History, and Society, London / New York 2023.

To provide an overarching framework for understanding the historical conditions of museum work in the region, the workshop focused on the material history defined by the Soviet museum management. As observed by all participants of the workshop, there are still significant conceptual gaps in our understanding of how museums were controlled in the region following the nationalization of art and cultural collections from 1918 to 1991. Globally, any museum possessing objects that purportedly left the territory of the Russian Empire after 1917 finds itself navigating a grey zone of historical art market and legal standards, with ethical and legal considerations arising due to the lack of scholarly and public consensus on matters of nationalization and subsequent transfers, both domestically and internationally. Today, more than 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, these domestic affairs have become matters of international relationships and cultural diplomacy, particularly in the context of wars and occupations led by Russia and other countries in the region. As a result, much of the discussion was centered around questions of nationalization, administrative and institutional reforms of museums, and the redistribution of objects during the Soviet era across institutions in the region. The following four presentations, condensed and edited for clarity, are published to showcase both individual case studies presented by the authors as well as systemic patterns characteristic of museums and cultural heritage institutions historically under Soviet museum management until 1991.

Researching the Kazakhstan Museums of the 1920s and 1930s

In her presentation, Kristina Bekenova, PhD student at Scuola IMT Alti Studi Lucca (Italy) and an expert well-versed in local archives, focused on the current state of research regarding museums in Central Asia with a particular focus on Kazakhstan. The country, with its multinational society, underwent the collapse of the Russian Empire and the emergence of national states in the 1920s, followed by several decades of the development of socialist Soviet culture. Since 1991, museums have been confronted with the need to either rebuild or update their public identity.[8] However, there remains a noticeable absence of critical, archive-based research on Kazakhstani museums, as well as museums across Central Asia, with only a few exceptions.[9]

In her research, Kristina Bekenova identified critical elements in the history of Central Asian museums, particularly in Kazakhstan, that require re-examination. Firstly, she underscored the imperial context surrounding the establishment of museums in their Westernized form. The majority of museums in the region was founded in the wake of Russian conquest, largely as a result of activities by imperial state institutions such as the statistical committees (the museums in Samarkand in 1896 and Almaty [Vernyi] in 1898),[10] and various imperial professional societies including the Russian Imperial Geographic Society (the museum in Semey [until 2007 Semipalatinsk] in 1883),[11] the Society of Amateurs of Natural Science, Anthropology and Ethnography, and the Society of Amateurs of

8 Anara Alzhanova et al.: The Cultural Policy of Central Asia Countries in the Sphere of Museums, in: Asian Ethnicity 25 (2024), No. 4, 569-587, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2024.2331118.

9 Svetlana Gorshenina: The Private Collections of Russian Turkestan in the Second Half of the 19th and Early 20th Century, Berlin 2004; Sergei Abashin: Mustakillik i pamiat' ob imperskom proshlom: prokhodia po zalam tashkentskogo Muzeia pamiati zhertv repressii, in: Neprikosnovennyi zapas 66 (2009), No. 4, 37-54; Zukhra Kasimova: The Improbable Museum: Igor Savitsky's Art Museum in Nukus as an Artifact of Postwar Soviet Reality, in: Ab Imperio 3 (2019), 119-143, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2019.0067.

10 On the local museum in Vernyi, see: Turkestanskie Vedomosti, 8th January 1880, No. 2, 8; Turkestanskie Vedomosti, 26th August 1880, No. 34, 136, mentioned M.N. Rostislavov's efforts in organising an archaeological museum at the chancellery office in Samarkand in 1873-1875. On the date of the inauguration of the Samarkand museum, also see: G. Upfal / E. Zabrodin: K voprosu o date vozniknoveniia Samarkandskogo muzeia, in: Ocherki istorii museinogo dela v SSSR 7 (1971), 400-415.

11 As for the two previous museums, the museum in Semipalatinsk was first opened by the members of the regional statistical committee, who were predominantly exiled by the Tsarist Russian authorities to Semipalatinsk due to their revolutionary activities, see: Vil' Galiev: Ssyl'nye revoliutsionery v Kazakhstane, vtoraia polovina XIX veka, Almaty 1978. However, due to the financial difficulties, in 1893, it was entrusted to the Society for Patronage of General Education of Semipalatinsk, and only in 1902 with the establishment of the Semipalatinsk subdivision of the Western Siberian Department of Imperial Russian Geographic Society, the work in the museum was revived. On the history of the museum, see: Alexandr Adrianov: Kratkaia istoriia Semipalatinskogo muzeia, in: Sbornik trudov Semipalatinskogo okruzhnogo muzeia 2 (1929), 3-14.

Archaeology (the museum in Tashkent in 1876).[12] The construction of railroads also played a significant role in the establishment of museums, as exemplified by the museum of Sand-Strengthening (Peskoukreplenie) of the Trans-Caspian/Central-Asian Railway,[13] set up at the Farab train station in 1898,[14] as well as museums directly commemorating the imperial conquest of the region,[15] such as the Geok Tepe museum founded in 1899.[16]

Bekenova also touched upon the creation of the Museum of the Semirechie Cossacks in 1913. Opening to the public in a specially designed building in 1916, the museum aimed to honor the Cossacks of the region who represented the imperial army, serving as yet another means to promote Tsarist authorities as active military and cultural powers in the region.[17] However, following the rise of anti-Tsarist sentiments supported by the Bolsheviks during the revolution, the museum was deemed politically alien, leading to its closure and the transfer of its collection to the Semirechie Regional Museum.[18] This transfer was just one among many forced by the Bolsheviks. It served, as will be shown in the following, to control the production of a dominant discourse through museums.

Indeed, the extensive and systematic restructuring of institutions under the strict control of Soviet Russia was another pivotal element in the existence of museums in Central Asia. This involved the reorganization of entire museums, including the division and merging of collections, as well as the forced relocation of collections.[19] Numerous institutions underwent mergers, divisions, and liquidations in adherence to statistical norms formulated in Moscow. Consequently, this led to the establishment of

12 On the museum, including the role of the Society of Amateurs of Natural Science, Anthropology and Ethnography, see: Alexander Dobromyslov: Tashkent v proshlom i nastoiashchem, Tashkent 1912; Boris Lunin: Nauchnye obschestva v Turkestane, Tashkent 1968; Iuryi Buriakov / Nafisa Sadykova: Muzei Istorii narodov Uzbekskoi SSR, 1876-1964, in: Ocherki istorii museinogo dela v SSSR 6 (1968), 190-243. On the role of these organizations in implementing geopolitical interests of the Russian Empire in the region, see: Valeriy Germanov: Epokha TKLA: primat nauki ili geopolitiki?, in: A. Kokoshin (ed.): Rossiia – Sredniaia Aziia: politika i islam v kontse XVIII-nachale XX vekov, Moscow 2011, 171-196.

13 In 1898, the Trans-Caspian railroad (Uzun-Ada – Samarkand) integrated a newly-built Samarkand – Tashkent – Andijan railroad and was renamed into the Central-Asian Railroad.

14 It was open at the Farab station, but twice moved to Ashgabat (1922 and 1946). On the history of the museum, see: V. Govorukhina: Muzei mestnoi prirody i peskoukrepleniia Sredneaziatskoi zheleznoi dorogi i ego rol' v istorii botanicheskikh issledovanii Turkmenistana, in: Izvestiia AN TSSR: Seriia biologicheskikh nauk 3 (1972), 50-54; A. Mikhel'son / O. Mikhel'son: Kistorii muzeia peskoukrepleniia (1898-1948), in: Problemy osvoeniia pustyn' 3 (1968), 94-96. On the move of collections between Farab, Tashkent and Ashgabat, see: National Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan, box R-394 [Sredazkomstaris], folder 1, document 29 [O muzeinoi sektsii Turkomstarisa], 83-84, 86-87; document 10 [Perepiska Zakaspiiskogo oblastnogo muzeia s Turkomstarisom], 8.

15 On the commemorating practices of the Russian Empire in Central Asia, see: Kristina Bekenova: (Re)creating the Conquest History in Exhibitionary Complexes in Turkestan in the Second Half of the 19th-First Half of the 20th Centuries, paper presented at the conference "Histoire visuelle de la conquête du Turkestan par l'Empire russe, 1860-1900 : témoignages, représentations, commémorations, décolonisation", Paris, 10-11 October 2022; Alexander Morrison: Commemorating the Russian conquest of Central Asia, in: E. Paskaleva / G. van den Berg (eds): Memory and Commemoration across Central Asia: Texts, Traditions and Practices, 10th-21st Centuries, Leiden 2023, 242-286.

16 The museum's exposition is well documented in memoirs, see: Joseph Castagné: Otchet o poezdke v Turkestan, in: Trudy Orenburgskoi uchenoi arkhivnoi komissii 16 (1906), 176-202; Wilhelm Harteveld: Sredi sypuchikh peskov i otrublennykh golov: putevye ocherki Turkestana, Moscow 1913. It was recommended to visit by the Guide to the Central-Asian railroad, where a detailed description of the memorial complex was given, see Putevoditel' po Turkestanu i zheleznym dorogam Tashkentskoi i Sredne-Aziatskoi, St. Petersburg 1912. On the Geok Tepe museum and its recontextualization in the post-independence Turkmenistan, see Svetlana Gorshenina: L'assaut et la prise du château fort de Geok-tepe : (re)mémorisation en trois sequences d'un épisode tragique de la conquête russe de l'Asie centrale, paper presented at the conference Histoire visuelle de la conquête du Turkestan par l'Empire russe, 1860-1900 : témoignages, représentations, commémorations, décolonisation, Paris 10-11 October 2022. On the changing discourse around the battle of Geok-tepe, see: Slavomír Horák: The Battle of Gökdepe in the Turkmen post-Soviet historical discourse, in: Central Asian Survey 34 (2014), No. 2, 149-161.

17 On the opening and construction of the museum: Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, box I-39 [Voiskovoe upravlenie Semirechenskogo kazach'ego voiska], folder 1, document 2087 [Voiskovoi muzei]; box I-44 [Semirechenskii oblastnoi statisticheskii komitet], folder, document 49114 [Zhurnal zasedanii], 160; box I-44 [Semirechenskoe oblastnoe pravlenie], folder 1, document 49172 [Kniga assignovanii i raskhodyvaniia sum po Voiskovomu muzeiu 1913-1917].

18 On the resistance of the Semirechie Cossacks against the Bolsheviks, see: Maksim Ivlev: Gibel' Semirechenskogo kazach'ego voiska (1917-1920): stranitsy istorii, in: Belaia Gvardiia 8 (2006), https://vernoye-almaty.kz/cossacks/gibel.shtml, <05.09.2024>. In accordance with the directive of the People's Commissariat of Education (31st October, 1918), the museum was transferred to its jurisdiction, see State Archive of the Almaty Region, box 489 [Ispolnitel'nyi komitet Dzhetysuiskoi gubernii], folder 1, document 114 [Perepiska ob uchebnykh zavedeniiakh], 99. While the building was handed over to the regional department of local economy (Gubotdel mestkhoza), its collections were given to the Vernyi Museum, see State Archive of the Almaty Region, box 187 [Almatinskii okruzhnoi muzei], folder 1, document 8 [Otchet muzeia za 1921 god], 22; document 20 [Perepiska], 23.

19 On the forced merging of the collections of the Semirechie regional museum and the Central Museum, see State Archive of the Almaty region, box 187 [Almatinskii okruzhnoi muzei], folder 1, document 63 [O sliianii Almatinskogo okruzhnogo muzeia s Tsentral;nym muzeem]; Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, box 693 [Obschestvo izucheniia Kazakhstana], folder 2, document 4 [Perepiska], 13-14; and box 81 [Narodnyi Komissariat Prosvescheniia KazSSR], file 1, document 1392 [Godovoi otchet o rabote muzeia], 120, 129-130.

a deeply entrenched, imperialistic, hierarchical, and highly coercive museum landscape in the region that persisted for decades. For instance, by 1940, over 20 museums had been established in Kazakhstan, categorized into central (national or republican), regional or oblast (a second-level unit of administrative division in the USSR), and local museums, in accordance with Soviet policies aimed at rationalizing the state museum network and its budgets.[20] These divisions also dictated acquisition policies in a hierarchical manner: regional museums were tasked with acquiring objects of high value, while local museums primarily dealt with more common items, often replicas and reproductions. Additionally, regional museums were expected to share duplicates with local museums. Central museums exerted control over exhibition and educational policies at lower-level institutions.[21] The decade-long process of systemic recalibration across all levels of museums generated local and interregional tensions that remain difficult to disentangle and address in the present day.

The division of collections represented another significant aspect of the repressive Soviet museum management style. This division, in practice, entailed the alienation, exchange, and deprivation of objects or entire collections under the direct pressure of local or central government authorities, rather than as decisions made by museum practitioners or local communities themselves. A compelling case illustrating this phenomenon is that of the Orenburg Museum, established in 1830.[22]

In 1920, the predominantly Russian city of Orenburg was designated as the capital of the newly established Kirghiz/Kazakh autonomous Soviet Republic. However, by 1925, Orenburg was officially "returned" to Soviet Russia, prompting Kazakhstan to relocate its capital first to Kyzylorda and ultimately to Almaty (the nation's capital until 1997). This relocation necessitated moving collections endemic to the region – including Russian, Indigenous, and Kazakh items – some 2.000 km inside Kazakhstan. The division of the Orenburg collections, completed by 1928, was overseen by the Kazakh Narkompros (Ministry of Culture) and supported by the Museum Department in Moscow.[23] Collections were divided based on several principles: natural history collections were reclassified according to the geography of their origin, while the placement of ethnographic collections was determined by a more ambiguous criterion – the "internal content of an object" and its association with a particular ethnicity.[24] Such transfers often sparked tensions between museums and entire republics, as they were carried out as legal but irregular operations, lacking transparency.[25] Frequently, the division and restructuring of institutions were deeply intertwined with the reinforcement of new geopolitical and cultural hierarchies, dividing communities and administrative units according to the directives of Soviet Russia and the federal authorities.

As agreed upon by participants, administrative delimitations implemented as part of a repressive policy, unheralded, one-sided, and non-consensual, were exercised by central powers, including Soviet Russia as a federal authority, since 1917 throughout the entire country. For instance, the

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20 Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, box 1692 [Upravlenie politichesko-prosvetitel'skimi uchrezhdeniiami KazSSR], folder 1, document 290b [Godovye otchety muzeev za 1939 god], 2.

21 On the museum network and the role of the State Central Museum, see Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, box 81 [Narodnyi komissariat prosvescheniia KazSSR], folder 1, document 1541 [Protokoly zasedanii kul'turnoi komissii], 118-119, 135-136; folder 3, document 602 [Rezoliutsii Nauchno-metodicheskogo soveta], 32-35; box 1252 [Komitet nauki pri Prezidiume KTsIK KSSR], folder 1a, document 2 [Vypiski iz protokolov], 64; box 1308 [Tsentral'nyi Muzei Kazakhstana], folder 1, document 245 [Perepiska], 268, 273-274.

22 On the history of the Orenburg museum, see P. Stolpianskii: Gorod Orenburg, materialy k istorii i topografii goroda, Orenburg 1908; Iuryi Komlev: Rol' Orenburgskogo muzeia v sokhranenii kul'turnogo naslediia, in: Kul'tura i iskusstvo 8 (2019), 68-81, DOI: https://doi.org/10.7256/2454-0625.2019.8.30290; Galina Matvievskaia: Orenburgskii Nepliuevskii kadetskii korpus: ocherk istorii, Moscow 2016; T. Savinova: Sto let iz zhizni estestvennonauchnykh muzeev Orenburgskogo kraia (1830-1930), in: Priroda 4 (2019), 80-90; A. Ermekbaeva / N. Alimbai / B. Smagulov: Orenburgskii period v istorii Tsentral'nogo gosudarstvennogo muzeia Respubliki Kazakhstan (1831-1929), in: Oriental Studies 15 (2022), 436-450.

23 On the division of the Orenburg collections, see Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, box 1308 [Tsental'nyi muzei Kazakstana], folder 1, document 35 [Protokoly zasedanii], 29-30; and documents 55-60 [Spiski eksponatov]; box 30 [Sovet narodnykh komissarov KSSR], folder 1, document 485 [Perepiska KTsIK i SNK], 79; and box 81 [Narodnyi komissariat prosvescheniia], folder 1, document 1392 [Godovoi otchet o rabote muzeia], 69-69ob, 72, 74, 140-142.

24 Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Council of People's Commissars of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. Correspondence of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars. 1925-1928. Box 30, folder 1, file 485, 91-91ob.

25 Svetlana Gorshenina: Turkomstaris-Sredazkomstaris-Uzkomstaris: Institutional Formation and Ethnocentric Divisions of Central Asian Cultural Heritage, in: Anthropology & Archaeology of Eurasia 52 (2013), No. 2, 51-72.

now-independent Kyrgyzstan had initially been part of the Turkestan Republic, which encompassed regions such as Semirechie, Syr-Darya, and Ferghana, territories that were later divided between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. These divisions into republics also led to forced exchanges between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, notably because the Semirechie Regional Museum was responsible for collecting objects within the newly formed Kyrgyz republic prior to national delimitation.[26]

There still exist numerous gaps in the histories of Soviet-era museum exchanges and the paths of circulation of artworks and artists, as observed by Boris Chukhovich, an art historian affiliated with the University of Montreal and President of the International Observatory Alerte Héritage. For instance, the A. Kasteyev State Museum of Arts in Almaty, Kazakhstan, boasts a rich collection of paintings by classic Uzbek artists such as Alexander Volkov (1886-1957) and Ural Tansykbaev (1904-1974), as well as avant-garde painters active in the 1920s, and modernist artists from the 1960s to the 1980s who gained prominence in Uzbekistan, including Yuri Taldykin (1932-2002), Chingiz Akhmarov (1912-1994), and Leikim Ibragimov (born in 1944), among others.[27] In contrast, the Tashkent Art Museum lacks a similar collection of Kazakh artists. Understanding the underlying politics of representation in such displays and the rationale behind inter-republican transfers, which are now international matters, requires further exploration to comprehend the exchange routes, personal trajectories, and influences involved.

Redistributions and the circulation of objects and collections also occurred through forced sales of cultural heritage facilitated by trading organizations, as Bekenova noted. These organizations were established by federal and local authorities to streamline the export of cultural heritage in the 1920s and 1930s, aimed at amassing foreign currency to procure equipment from Europe and the USA. Despite increasing attention to these topics in Russia and Ukraine, the case of Kazakhstan remains largely overlooked.[28] Bekenova provided a brief overview of the activities of the Kazakhstani trade organization *Novoexport*. Among the various collaborators expected to work with this trading organization, discussions were held between the Society for the Study of Kazakhstan and museum workers regarding the potential creation of entomological, zoological, and ethnographic collections to be distributed by *Novoexport* abroad. Bekenova's research, based on archives and local press sources, suggests that the Semirechie Regional Museum had been tasked with creating collections, primarily entomological, botanical, and ethnographic, for potential sale.[29] However, it remains unclear whether this task was fulfilled. The surviving archives of trading organizations represent potential sources (that are relatively accessible today) for studying the large-scale alienation of cultural heritage from the region.

As Bekenova observed, the ambition to create a large-scale network of museums across the Soviet Union was perceived as harmful from the perspective of local communities. In the context of the USSR during the 1920s, the nomadic lifestyle led by these communities was often considered backward by Soviet socialist authorities, resulting in museum practices that involved extracting objects from these communities and their lands. As highlighted by Bekenova, archival documents have revealed conflicts between communities and heritage experts. For instance, the establishment

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26 On the division of collections between the Semirechie regional museum and a newly-organised museum in Bishkek (Frunze), see State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, box 81 [Narodnyi komissariat prosvescheniia KazSSR], folder 1, document 1218 [Otchet o rabote dzetysuiskogo muzeia], 122, 124, 130; and document 1312 [Postanovleniia, protokoly], 4-5.

27 Since 2023, Galina Syrlybaeva has been studying paintings by Kazakh artists who worked in Uzbekistan, as well as artworks by their Uzbek counterparts which are collected by the Kasteyev State Museum of Arts. Her research is part of the project "The Cultural Legacy of Uzbekistan in the world collections", see Knigu o kul'turnom nasledii Uzbekistana posviatiat rabotam kazakhstanskikh khudozhnikov, Fergana Media, 23rd March 2023, https://fergana.media/news/129580/, <05.09.2024>.

28 One of the case studies in Russia and Ukraine: Waltraud M. Bayer: "A Past that won't Pass": Stalin's Museum Sales in a Transformed Global Context, in: Journal for Art Market Studies 2 (2018), DOI: https://doi.org/10.23690/jams.v2i2.22; Mykola Horokh: Zoloto – Derzhavi! Torhsyn u Radians'kyí Ukraïni, 1931-1936, Kyiv 2020; Elena Osokina: Stalin's Quest for Gold. The Torgsin Hard-Currency Shops and Soviet Industrialization, Ithaca 2021.

29 Botanical, entomological, zoological, and ethnographic collections for export are mentioned in: Central State Archive of the Republik of Kazakhstan, box 81 [Narodnyi komissariat prosvescheniia KazSSR], folder 3, document 3 [Otchety o rabore muzeev], 30; and box 773 [Kazakhskaia kraevaia kontora po zagatovke vtorostepennogo eksportnogo syr'ia Kzagoteksport], folder 1, document 32 [Plany i kontrol'nye tsifry, spiski novykh vidov], 1, 2, 6, 104-125.

of a network of national parks in the 1920s faced resistance from local nomads, who relied on the land reserved for these parks for their sustenance.[30] This conflict was particularly intense and poignant given the backdrop of the Kazakh famine of 1930-1933. Bekenova emphasized that today, one of the interconnected tasks for historians dedicated to advancing knowledge emancipation would be to study the traditional Kazakh and nomadic approaches to memory institutions. This involves moving beyond Russian imperial and Soviet colonial patterns of museums as institutions of memory and cultural heritage.

Finally, an often overlooked topic in the history of regional museums, with some notable exceptions, is the repression of museum practitioners and curators during the 1930s, serving as yet another means of controlling the domain.[31] Ana Lolua, a PhD student at the Ilia State University, Tbilisi and Georg-August University of Göttingen and presenter at the conference ("Conducting historical and ethnographic research at Georgian State Museum: reflections of an engaged outsider"), posed a question about the national composition of museum practitioners in Kazakhstan. In response, Bekenova referred to the *korenizatsia* project, a policy aimed at granting more public space and initiative to local communities that had experienced centuries of marginalization and racialization under the Russian Empire. As Bekenova pointed out, the number of Kazakhs employed in museums was very low initially: the systemic conditions established during imperial times meant that the primary actors in developing local cultures were mostly Russian nationals educated before the revolution.

In the 1930s, following the *korenizatsia* policies, authorities encouraged museums and educational institutions to hire local staff. Kazakhs were predominantly employed as guides, particularly those fluent in the Kazakh language, often in sections focusing on anti-religious or historical revolutionary topics, which were deemed ideologically significant by the Soviet government. Soon, local experts and activists who had made significant contributions to the study of Kazakh culture after the revolution, such as Zhakyp Akpaev (exiled 1929-1934), Zhakhansha Dosmukhamedov (arrested 1939), Magzhan Zhumabaev (executed 1938), and Akhmet Baitursynov (executed 1938), fell under suspicion of separatism and nationalism. The *korenizatsia* project was eventually overturned by Soviet Russia. Consequently, local experts who initially took pride in promoting the development of national and autonomous cultures, found themselves denounced, and their projects were rejected as harmful and nationalist. To add further complexity to the museum history of the region, Bekenova highlighted that there were also museum workers from Russia who were forced to work in Central Asia as a result of purges, being restricted to certain regions like Kazakhstan.[32] Their legacy receives at least some public interest.[33]

Speaking about Stalinist repressions and the study of museum collections in general, Bekenova noted that people's belongings, as was the case elsewhere in the USSR, were confiscated and transferred to museums during the purges and the *debaizatsia* campaign (dekulakization in Kazakhstan)

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30 On the conflict between the organization of the national park and the nomads, see Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, box 81 [Narodnyi komissariat prosvescheniia KazSSR], folder 1, document 1312 [Postanovleniia, protokoly], 204; and document 1315 [Materialy Kraevogo obschestva po izucheniiu kazakhstana], 404-405, 416, 429-430.

31 On the repressions against scientists, cultural professionals, including museum practitioners, in Uzbekistan, see Boris Lunin: Deiateli kul'tury I nauki – zhertvy politicheskikh repressii, in: National Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan, box 2868 [Lichnyi arkhiv: B.V. Lunin], folder 1, document 10 [Deiateli kul'tury I nauki – zhertvy politicheskikh repressii]; Germanov: Istinno govoriu, chto odin iz vas… , in: National Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan, box 2868, folder 1, document 10, 392-398. In 2021, the GULAG History Museum initiated a project called "Muzeinoe delo" aimed to create a database on repressed museum practitioners; one of the outcomes of the projects was the exhibition "Muzeinoe delo. Sibir", see https://memoryfund.ru/news/tpost/lvn-9md5g21-fond-pamyati-issleduet-sudbi-repressirov, <05.09.2024>.

32 Among them, for example, archaeologist and head of the Russian Ethnographic Museum Alexander Miller (1875-1934) was exiled to Kazakhstan in 1934. He worked at the regional museum in Petropavlovsk. In the 1930s, the Central Museum of Kazakhstan in Almaty became a temporary shelter for Sergei Popov (1905-1986), director of the regional museum of Komi, Zinaida Uspasskaia, also an employee of the Komi museum, and ornithologist Vsevolod Sokira-Iakhontov.

33 A recent article on the topic of repressed artists and museum practitioners who worked in exile in Kazakhstan: Ramil Niyazov-Adyljian: "This is our native Auschwitz". Russian avant-garde in the labor camps and museums of Soviet Kazakhstan, in: Sibir', Realii, April 21st 2024, https://www.sibreal.org/a/eto-nash-rodnoy-osventsim-russkiy-avangard-v-lageryah-i-muzeyah-sovetskogo-kazahstana-/32907665.html, <06.05.2024>.

in the 1930s.[34] Presently, no museum in the former USSR provides information on these items – a problem that is virtually absent from public discourse, both among officials and political activists. The unlawful and unethical alienation of private property and its transfer to museums is a shared challenge for any scholar studying the legacies of Soviet museum governance, as well as the long history of repressions and mass deportations.

Investigating Provenance of Avant-Garde Artworks from the Museums in Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan

Konstantin Akinsha heads the *Avant-Garde Art Research Project* (UK), a non-governmental organization that provides expertise in provenance research and art authentication, with a focus on avant-garde works from Eastern Europe and owners who trace the origins of the works to the former Soviet Union. He presented a case study on avant-garde works on the European art market with false provenance ascribed by forgers to museums in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The whole problem initially emerged in the context of the Soviet system of museum management, which enabled brutal, arbitrary, and harmful divisions and restructurings of collections, disseminating them across the country. Today, forgers exploit the history of large-scale displacements and circulations to create false provenances. Akinsha demonstrated how the system established over a century ago by the collapsed regime still directly affects provenance research and the contemporary art market. Akinsha first outlined key challenges for scholars and experts dealing with Soviet art. The most systemic issue with provenance research in the region is undoubtedly the nationalization without compensation initiated in 1918 across the country. Often, the alienation of private and corporate property, including that formerly owned by the Romanov dynasty, the Orthodox Church, and the Imperial Russian Army, left no documentation.[35] Objects were removed from their original collections and redistributed across numerous collecting points (branches of the State Museum Reserve, 1918-1927, de facto 1929). Despite being supervised by experts acting on behalf of the Museum Department, museums now lack documentation and clues about the provenance of many works. Akinsha highlighted the universal nature of this practice in the Soviet Union, exemplified by the case of the Odesa National Fine Arts Museum, where the collection, in absence of any archives, is only known from memoirs, indicating that the museum had once been filled with artworks confiscated from bourgeois apartments, without names or details. Supported by many conference participants, it was acknowledged that the system of object redistribution controlled by Soviet Russia created a complex and contested legacy of nationalization.

According to Akinsha, the pattern of transferring artworks across Soviet republics sheds light on the particular characteristics of Soviet colonialism and the establishment of the Soviet cultural paradigm. Akinsha provided an example of the National Museum of Tajikistan in Dushanbe, where Russian classics such as Ilya Repin (1844-1930) and Ivan Shishkin (1832-1898), along with their secondary works or reproductions, were sent from the Tretyakov Gallery in 1952.[36] Akinsha noted that this same selection of Russian classics was sent to every major museum in the region during this period. This rotating practice contributed to the creation

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34 Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, box 1308 [Tsentral'nyi Muzei Kazakhstana], file 1, document 87 [Otchety okruzhnykh muzeev], 27, 32, 54reverse; and document 183 [Stenogramma muzeinogo soveschaniia], 46; box 81 [Narodnyi Komissariat Prosvescheniia KazSSR], file 1, document 1392 [Godovoi otchet o rabote muzeia], 148. On the *debaizatsia* campaign in Kazakhstan, see Isabelle Ohayon: La sédentarisation des Kazakhs dans l'URSS de Staline : Collectivisation et changement social (1928-1945), Paris 2006; Saule Zhakisheva: Eliminatsiia baiskikh khoziaistv v Kazakhstane na rubezhe 20-30kh godov XX veka: novye podkhody, metody i technologii, Almaty 2021; Arailym Musagalieva: Chistka kolkhozov ot "baisko-kulatskogo elementa": repressivnaia politika Sovetskoi vlasti v Tel'manovskom raione Karagandinskoi oblasti v 1932-1933, in: Otan tarihy 96 (2021), No. 4, 126-135; Ziyabek Kabul'dinov: Politicheskie presledovaniia baev i drugikh kategorii aul'nogo naseleniia v kontse 1920kh godov XX veka, in: Ult zhady 2 (2022), No. 2, 53-71. On the participation of the museum in this campaign, see Kristina Bekenova: Institutsional'noe uchastie muzeia v kampanii debaizatsii v 1920e-1930e gody v Kazakhstane, in: Svetlana Koval'skaia (ed.): Kazakh Bais under Imperial and Bolshevik Modernization: Materials of the Round Table, Astana 2024.

35 Marina Kharlova: The Nationalization of Private Collections as a State Project: The Redistribution of Icons after October 1917, in: Russian Studies in History 54 (2015), No. 4, 286-312. For museum inventories, see the recent case study by Anna Pushakova: Buying and Selling East Asian Art during the First Decade after the October Revolution in 1917: Museum Purchases in Moscow, in: Journal for Art Market Studies 2 (2018), No. 3, DOI: https://doi.org/10.23690/jams.v2i3.68.

36 Information provided by the National Museum of Tajikistan in Dushanbe.

of a Stalinist cultural model with a focus on high arts from Russia, which had to be replicated across art museums in all republican centers of the USSR. Akinsha emphasized that the pattern differed from other known relationships between imperial metropolises and colonies, as for example, as if paintings by J. W. M. Turner would have been sent to the Punjab region by a British museum department. The supply of Russian classics to other republics to establish Russia-centered museum displays can be designated as a typically Soviet practice. Akinsha and other participants supported the idea that this form of Soviet colonial expansionism should be highlighted and studied as historically unique to the region.

Research on domestic art collections is further complicated by the large-scale sales of thousands of objects and entire collections in Western European auctions during the late 1920s and early 1930s facilitated by Soviet trading institutions, as well as private sales. While some work has already been conducted by institutions like the Hermitage, which had been a major source for these sales, museums in other affected countries such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan have hitherto only received scant attention in terms of research and the assessment of losses.[37]

Another challenge identified by Akinsha for scholars of Soviet museums is the Soviet analogue of the National Socialist campaign against "degenerate art". A notable case in this regard is the Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow (1919-1929), which is relatively well researched. This museum is renowned for having one of the first state-subsidized collections of avant-garde art in the world, featuring works by prominent artists such as Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962), and many others from Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, and Belarusian backgrounds, known for their contemporary abstraction.[38] The museum's collection was redistributed among museums across the Soviet Union and stored in special repositories for decades after the 1930s. The history of these redistribution practices, as Akinsha demonstrated, served as a major motivation to forgers to create false provenances for works by employing imperial stereotypes to justify why these works had been alienated by museums.

To illustrate the complexity of provenance research within the context of Soviet museum management, Akinsha drew upon case studies from his practice at the *Avant-Garde Art Research Project*. The large-scale alienation of avant-garde artworks in the 1920s, alongside defamatory campaigns against modernist art in the 1930s and 1950s, resulted in significant gaps in knowledge and documentation, which are today exploited by forgers. Akinsha presented a painting attributed to Natalia Goncharova, which surfaced on the art market in recent years. This artwork changed hands several times and was ultimately sold to an unwitting private collector by the Shchukin Gallery in New York, amidst a lawsuit over contested ownership of several Soviet avant-garde works.[39] According to this provenance, in 1957, the painting was transferred to the Art Museum of Tajikistan (founded in 1934 and renamed in honor of the late 15th century Persian painter Kamaleddin Behzād in the 1950s) in Dushanbe. Subsequently, in 1970, the painting was confiscated by the Tajik Communist Party and presented as a gift to a Tajik party official. The provenance narrative draws upon two overlapping storylines. Due to Akinsha, forgers exploited the chaotic nature of forced transfers, which often lacked proper documentation. The narrative also capitalized on the campaigns against avant-garde art, which rendered such artworks undesirable and easily disposable by Soviet institutions, particularly to non-European regions. Akinsha noted significant conceptual and factual inconsistencies in the offered provenance. Given the condemnation of Russian avant-garde art during that period, it is implausible that a Communist party member would be honored with such a gift. Thus, forgers combined

37 Most notably: Natalia Serapina (ed.): Ermitazh, kotory my poteriali: Dokumenty 1920-1930 godov, St. Petersburg 2001; Elena Solomakha: Gosudarstvennyj Ermitazh: muzeinye rasprodazhi 1928-1929 godov: archivnye dokumenty, St. Petersburg 2006.

38 Irina Vakar / Tatiana Mikhienko (eds.): Avangard. Spisok No. 1: K 100-Letiiu Muzeia Zhivopisnoi Kul'tury, Moscow 2019. Most recently on the transfers of avant-garde art to Uzbekistan in the early 1920s: Mikhail Ovchinnikov: The avant-garde in the State Museum of Arts of Uzbekistan: New Archival Insights, in: Giuseppe Barbieri / Silvia Burini (eds.): Uzbekistan: Avant-Garde in the Desert, Florence 2024, 171-179.

39 Tess Thackara: Lawsuit claims $100m damages in tangled case of hidden Russian art worth $60m, in: The Art Newspaper, 7th January 2021, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/01/07/lawsuit-claims-dollar100m-damages-in-tangled-case-of-hidden-russian-art-worth-dollar60m, <02.05.2024>.

multiple myths, actual knowledge gaps, as well as prejudices to construct false provenances.

Many forged artworks enter the market with provenances purportedly from museums in Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan) and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan). Notably, individuals such as Paris-based Alexander Arzamastsev, whose activities in forging have already been under scrutiny, remain active on the market.[40] Recently, Arzamastsev has even come up with a hand-written inventory, allegedly from the museum in Dushanbe to bolster provenances created under his guidance, as to Akinsha's understanding.

Investigations by Akinsha revealed Arzamastsev's involvement in several other offers on the global art market, including works by avant-garde artist Mikhail Larionov (1881-1964), allegedly from a repository in Karaganda (Kazakhstan), and an artwork purportedly by Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), the original housed in the Tretyakov Gallery, a proven fake from Edik Natanov's collection, which purportedly originates from special repositories in Uzbekistan. Natanov's collection came under scrutiny in 2013 when journalists uncovered a series of alleged avant-garde artworks from the USSR.[41] The foundation in which Akinsha is actively involved is currently finalizing a project documenting transfers from museums of the Russian Federations to Tajikistan. The broader objective is to examine the redistribution of objects across Central Asia and the Caucasus to effectively identify any false provenance rooted in the chaos resulting from Soviet museum management, where transfers were legal but irregular and documentation was lacking.

Finally, Akinsha highlighted two crucial issues related to the context of the Second World War. Firstly, he discussed the Nazi looting of museum collections, which was poorly documented from the outset. The second issue is intertwined: the massive return of Nazi-looted artworks from the American and British occupation sectors in Germany to the Soviet Union, which were handed over to the Soviet military administration. Many of these returned works never made it back to the museums from which they originated.[42] The most affected regions were the western parts of the USSR, such as Belarus and Ukraine. However, many works from these museums were returned to Soviet Russia based on former imperial geopolitical hierarchies. Akinsha underlined that it is now a pressing task for Ukrainian and Belarusian scholars to locate missing objects both in Russia and in Western Europe.

The conference participants concurred with Konstantin Akinsha's assessment that provenance research, even on the basis of available archives, is particularly challenging in the case of Soviet museum management due to the nature of paperwork during that era. While archives in museums and federal archives now serve as invaluable sources for studying provenance and the history of collections, they also present significant challenges. Some collections were physically destroyed, but there is no reliable information about the veracity of these actions. There are instances where documents indicate that works were in fact destroyed, but they were actually hidden and preserved. One such case is the Ukrainian Special Fund, where banned artworks by Ukrainian avant-garde and modernist artists were concealed in the 1930s. These works were only publicly displayed in 2015 in Kyiv.[43] Akinsha also highlighted examples such as the collection of modernist paintings at the Odesa National Art Museum, which included significant works by artists like Vasily Kandinsky and Liubov Popova (1889-1924). Archival photographs of the displayed paintings are now available online, but there are no documents detailing the fate of this collection, aside from popular legends suggesting that the paintings would have been destroyed in the 1950s, a claim unsupported by documentation. Another example is the Mendele Moiher-Sforim Museum of Jewish Culture in Odesa (1927-1941), which disappeared almost without a trace. While some objects from this museum were accidentally discovered in the Ethnographic Museum in Saint Petersburg, further study is needed to understand how these ended up there and what happened

40 Simon Hewitt: Skewered Chashnik. French auction-firm grilled over avant-garde imbroglio, 10th May 2016, https://www.izbaarts.com/article-skewered-chashnik-french-auction-firm-grilled-over-avant-garde-imbroglio-by-simon-hewitt/, <18.09.2024>.

41 Sven Röbel / Andreas Wassermann: Kandinsky im Kleiderschrank, in: Der Spiegel 31 (2013), 116-119.

42 Konstantin Akinsha: Stalin's Decrees and Soviet Trophy Brigades: Compensation, Restitution in Kind, or 'Trophies of War?', in: International Journal of Cultural Property 17 (2010), No. 2, 195-216, here: 211.

43 Yuliia Litvinets (ed.): Spetsfond 1937-1939 : z kolektsiï NKhMU : kataloh, Kyiv 2016.

to the other objects from Odesa. Was it taken by the Romanians, or by the Germans, or destroyed? Akinsha stressed the necessity for comprehensive research into these cases: exploring the contents of the collections, investigating their fate, and determining whether they were taken by occupying forces, have been destroyed, or survived but are now hidden.

As the speakers concurred, the forced transfers and alienations of objects and entire collections, particularly orchestrated by Soviet Russia in a systematic manner, are poised to elevate these domestic issues to a new international level. It is anticipated that research into the history of museums in formerly Soviet-controlled independent countries will foster an increasing readiness among these nations to assert their claims to their national heritage, particularly from Russia. Uzbekistan has already initiated the development of a national registry of Uzbek artifacts and artworks located abroad, encompassing all countries, with particular emphasis on the Russian Federation.[44] Mongolia, which was targeted by Soviet archaeologists in the 1920s, has also publicly expressed her interest in conducting provenance research on her collections scattered not only in Russian museums but also across museums in other post-imperial states like the UK.[45]

Belarusian National Arts Museum in Minsk: Creation of the Soviet Display

Vera Dzyadok, currently a Fellow at the Instytut Pileckiego in Warsaw, delved into the intersection of national art histories and repressive museum politics. She used the Belarusian National Arts Museum in Minsk as a case study to illustrate the pervasive influence of Soviet dominance and control over museum and art historical narratives. Established as an art gallery in late 1939, the National Art Museum in Minsk emerged at a significant juncture when the western part of Belarus (de jure, part of the Second Polish Republic, 1918-1939), was as it was called in the USSR "reunited", or more accurately annexed, with Eastern Belarus into the Soviet Union.[46]

Dzyadok's research began when she discovered a discussion documented in the National Art Museum's archive, which took place in 1961.[47] The young museum worker Eleonora Veter had presented her lecture on Belarusian art to be approved by the Methodological seminar of the museum, an organ that controlled the content of guided tours and public lectures created by the museum employees. In the 1961 discussion, art historians and curators present at the seminar discussed the very fact of the existence of Belarusian art before the Russian Revolution. The whole discussion whether the Belarusian art ever existed might seem perplexing, especially in the presence of Sender Palees (1898-1964), an art historian and curator who had played a prominent role in shaping the history of Belarusian art since the 1920s. Palees was known as a co-author of an important publication, a catalogue for a large exhibition titled "Visual Art of the Belarusian Soviet Republic" (Vystavka izobrazitelnogo iskusstva Belarusskoi SSR), dedicated to the Festival (Dekada, or ten days, in Russian) of Belarusian Culture in Moscow in 1940.[48] This exhibition showcased art from across Belarus, including the recently annexed territories of Poland, presenting Belarusian art from the 19th century up to the 1930s as national art.

The 1940 catalogue featured some previously marginalized and overlooked participants. Jewish art and art by women held a prominent place in the presentation, which included inter alia works by Avraam Berman (1906-1978), who had studied in Munich and Paris, and Esther Berenzweig and Tadeusz Bornstein (1919-1942), both of whom had studied in Kraków. The emphasis was also placed

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44 The Minister of Culture of Kazakhstan, Aida Balaeva, called the issue of the return of cultural values from the Russian Federation urgent, in: TASS, 17th November 2023, https://web.archive. org/web/20241002160622/https://tass.ru/kultura/19311763, <02.10.2024>.

45 Mongolia has cultural restitution in its sights, in: Returning Heritage, 30th January 2024, https://www.returningheritage.com/ mongolia-has-cultural-restitution-in-its-sights, <02.05.2024>.

46 For more information on the context of the museum history of Belarus, see Alexander Huzhalouski: Soviet Museums and Political Censorship: The Belarusian Experience, in: Museum History Journal 8 (2015), No. 2, 209-222, DOI: https://doi-org.proxy. bibliotheques.uqam.ca/10.1179/1936981615Z.00000000050.

47 Minutes of the meeting of the Methodological Council of the State Art Museum, 28th June 1961, in: Belarusian State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art. Fond. 164, op.1., d. 84, l.8.

48 Elena Aladova / Sender Palees (eds.): Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo Belorusskoi SSR. Katalog vystavki. Moscow / Leningrad 1940; see also Multimedia CD-edition "Natsyianal'ny mastatski muzei Respubliki Belarus'. Z gistoryi davaennykh zboraŭ. Straty i viartanne", Minsk 2010.

on crafts and decorative arts (as created at the synagogue in Mogilev in 1680 by Chaim ben Isaak Segal in in the 1740s) that had been of vital importance for local religious communities. However, after 1945, when new restrictions on the display of multinational art and culture were imposed by the USSR, this diverse array of artists disappeared from the museum's display and public programs.[49]

This formed the context for Dzyadok's investigation that since then has been focused on the period from the pre-war era until 1961, when the discussion on the existence of Belarusian art took place. Her questions were: what happened in this period and why have experts in Belarus even bothered to discuss these seemingly simple and obvious questions? Furthermore, in how far is the 1961 discussion relevant to the fact that, indeed, Russian 18th and 19th century art was presented as central at the Minsk museum for decades to come. In her presentation, Dzyadok aimed to unravel how these two narratives intersect within the framework of the Minsk museum by examining the institutional processes through which Belarusian museums were sovietized.

The period of 1929-1931 was marked by a ruthless anti-emancipatory campaign enforced by Soviet Russia against local activists and experts who elaborated art and culture of local communities in Belarus. During those years, many art historians and curators were arrested by the Soviets being accused of separatism and nationalism in view of their exploration of national themes in culture and arts.[50] Among those affected was the prominent art historian Mikola Shchakatsikhin (1896-1940), author of the first comprehensive overview of Belarusian art history ("Narysy z historyi belaruskaha mastatstva", 1928). Shchakatsikhin's book aimed to define the characteristics of Belarusian art and

to compare these with the characteristics of other cultures in the region. His approach had been tested a decade earlier during the first exhibition of Belarusian art in Vilnius in 1918, then under German occupation. Titled "Vilnius-Minsk. Old Fine Crafts", this exhibition featured an introduction by German archaeologist and art historian Albert Ippel (1885-1960).[51] The repressions targeting alleged supporters of Belarusian nationalism, like Shchakatsikhin, in the 1930s resulted in significant ruptures in historiography. His work was banned and restricted from use or mention for decades. Ultimately, these developments led to the omission of the entire notion of national art from public displays by the 1960s.

Dzyadok further delineated several less brutal yet consistent and enduring mechanisms of control introduced by Soviet Russia in Belarusian museums. The hierarchy of artists and genres was solidified in the Soviet Union through professional discussions and commissions. For instance, the *Peredvizhniki* (The Wanderers), a popular group of artists active in Russia in the late 19th century, were considered precursors of social realism. Their prominence in a canon imposed by Soviet Russia swiftly influenced acquisition policies, urging museum directors across Soviet republics, including Belarus, to prioritize artworks by Russian Peredvizhniki.[52] Displaying Peredvizhniki and other Russian or Russian-labeled classical realists meant better funding for museums. For them, the Minsk museum competed not only with other museums in the Soviet Union but also with others in Belarus. An example for this is the art gallery in Pinsk, known as the Pinsk Tretyakov Gallery, established in 1965. The Soviet Ministry of Culture instructed the Art Museum in Minsk to transfer 40 works by artists of the Russian Empire, including Ivan Shishkin, Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900), and Ilya Repin, to

49 For connected histories of de- and re-nationalization in Estonian art history, see Kädi Talvoja: (Re)nationalizing Estonian Art During the Thaw. Lively Legacy of Kristjan Raud, in: Krista Kodres / Kristina Jõekalda / Michaela J. Marek (eds.): A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades, Vienna 2019, 177-183.

50 See A. Huzhalouski: Soviet Museums and Political Censorship: The Belarusian Experience, in: Museum History Journal 8 (2015), No. 2, 209-222. For the most complete records on repressed cultural workers, see: L. U. Marakoŭ (ed.): Represavanyia litaratary, navukoŭtsy, rabotniki asvety, gramadskiia i kul'turnyia dzeiachy Belarusi, vol. 4, book 1, Minsk 2007; Represavanyia litaratary, navukoŭtsy, rabotniki asvety, gramadskiia i kul'turnyia dzeiachy Belarusi, 1794-1991, vol. 3, book. 2, Minsk 2003.

51 Albert Ippel (ed.): Wilna – Minsk: Altertümer und Kunstgewerbe. Führer durch die Ausstellung der Zeitung der 10. Armee, Vilniaus 1918, https://www.europeana.eu/item/2021803/C1B0004134389, <01.10.2024>. See also Mikola Shchakatsikhin: Narysy z gistoryi belaruskaga mastatstva, Minsk 1928, 6; Laima Laučkaitė: Vilniaus dailė Didžiojo karo metais, Vilniaus 2018, 94-106.

52 Elena Aladova: Muzei – ee sud'ba. Vospominaniia, dokumenty, issledovaniia, Minsk 2006, 26-28, 56-60.

Pinsk.[53] The Pinsk city administration argued that their right to these artists in their collection would be natural due to their shared heritage. The idea of the primacy of Russian art and its prominence in museum collections was tightly interwoven with the larger budgets that museums displaying Russian artists could claim.

As Dzyadok pointed out, the USSR employed a wide array of other instruments and mechanisms for control, ranging from direct brutal repression to more subtle and normalized methods, such as education, public celebrations, and all-Union anniversaries. Art seminars held in Moscow and Leningrad, intended for museum practitioners from other republics, promoted a Russia-centered framework of Soviet art history.[54] Interestingly, as Dzyadok mentioned, the practice of professional development in capital cities was criticized by art historians of the era as colonial, but only when referring to the pre-revolutionary period. For instance, documents from the archive of the National Museum in Minsk reveal that Sender Palees wrote about how during the 19th century Belarusian nationals, notwithstanding their ethnicity, had become prominent artists. However, as to Palees, due to the colonial policy of the Tsarist regime, Belarus lacked educational art institutions, forcing Belarusian artists to study in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, where many then settled permanently. At the same time, the contemporary Soviet practice, mirroring the Tsarist one, was never publicly acknowledged by Belarusian art historians.

The obligation to inaugurate annual republican exhibitions, held by some museums like the Minsk Museum of Art, formed another aspect of negotiating power relations within the Soviet museum network. In many other republics, separate organizations supervised these prestigious regular shows, hence local museums were freed from this cumbersome task and effort by the whole museum stuff. In Belarus, the Minsk museum had to over

see the commissions and further distribution of the featured artworks until 1968, granting it even more control over local creative work.[55]

Centrally commissioned anniversaries were also used to exert control, with all large Soviet museums required to inaugurate them. Dzyadok provided examples from Minsk, where recommendations for the 1952 anniversary included celebrations of Ukrainian-Russian writer Nikolay Gogol (1809-1852) and Russian academic painter Karl Brullov (1799-1852), alongside Leonardo da Vinci as an artist of all-Soviet value.[56] Subsequently, in 1963, Michelangelo was similarly supposed to be celebrated Union-wide among other artists, regardless of the availability of their artworks in local collections.[57] As a main takeaway, Dzyadok proposed that the museums historically engaged in prestigious production claimed more budgets and power over local artists and creative life.

Imperial control was evident even in less public domains of expertise, notably in the field of restoration. In the Soviet Union, only one restoration workshop was available for museums in Belarus: the central workshops in Moscow, and the number of pieces eligible for restoration was capped due to geopolitical hierarchies. Elena Aladova (1907–1986), the director of the National Art Museum in Minsk from 1944 to 1977, attempted to circumvent these imposed limits by sending works to restorers in Leningrad. However, this practice was entirely voluntary and unregulated. Belarus, like many other Soviet republics since the 1960s, initiated field trips and expeditions to abandoned monasteries and churches to locate and collect sacral art, necessitating the need for more highly skilled restorers. In the 1960s, some employees from the Minsk museum were permitted to participate in internships and restoration workshops in Moscow and

53 Viacheslav Il'enkov: 55 let tomu nazad otkrylas' Pinskaia kartinnaia galereia, in: Pinski vesnik, 18th May 2020, https://p-v.by/news/culture/55_let_tomu_nazad_otkrylas_pinskaya_kartinnaya_galereya/, <17.10.2024>.

54 Minutes of the meeting of the Methodological Council of the State Art Museum, 17th February 1957, in: Belarusian State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art. Fond. 164, op.1, d.73.

55 Resolution of the Ministry of Culture of the BSSR No. 67. Belarusian State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art. Fond 164, op.1, d.98.

56 Work Plan for 1952. Belarusian State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art. Fond 164, op.1, d.46.

57 Letter from A. Khalturin, Acting Head of the Department of Fine Arts and Monuments Protection, to E. V. Aladova, Director of the State Art Museum of the USSR, Minsk, 25.11.1963. Work plan of the State Art Museum for 1964, in: Belarusian State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art. Fond 164, op.1, d.128. On global anniversaries and the Cold War, see Patricia García-Montón González: 1956. Old Masters and the Ephemeral Borders, in: Irena Kossowska / Agnieszka Chmielewska / Marcin Lachowski (eds.): State Construction and Art in East Central Europe, 1918-2018, New York 2022, 174-184.

Leningrad. However, archival documents reveal significant disparities in the professionalism of restoration teams from Moscow, Lithuania, Poland, and Belarus. This is how Soviet Russia maintained control over expertise and skills for decades, albeit indirectly.

Dzyadok highlighted several significant exhibitions that aimed to reintroduce forcefully erased names to public display. One such exhibition, titled "To the 100th Anniversary of Ivan Lutskievich's Museum in Vilno" in 2021, showcased the collection of Belarusian art initially established in Vilnius. This collection was transferred to the Belarus Soviet Republic in the late 1940s, but many of the artworks were hidden in storage while thought to be destroyed. Another noteworthy exhibition was "Second Birth: Reconstruction of the Jewish Collection of the Belarusian State Museum in the 1920s-1930s", held in 2020 in the National History Museum of Belarus. This exhibition presented artworks that had been stored away for eighty years, shedding light on the Jewish art legacy in Belarus.

Working in Kyrgyzstan Museums: Historical Research and Curatorial Practice

The living legacy of museums created and funded under the Soviet Union and their post-Soviet fate was addressed by art historian, researcher, and curator Oksana Kapishnikova (Bishkek School of Contemporary Art). Kapishnikova talked about several projects that involved archival legacy of museums and ways it can be displayed today in the museums that are severely underfunded. Adding to this, the integrity of those archives is often largely compromised.

The *Memomusor* project (2019-2023), curated by Oksana Kapishnikova, Alima Tokmergenova, and Lilit Dabagian, took place in the basement of the Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Art. Prior to the exhibition, Kapishnikova had conducted research on the evolution of the narrative at the museum, spanning from the 1970s, when the permanent building was constructed, up to the present day. While preparing the exhibition, Kapishnikova and her curatorial team discovered that the museum archives had substantial gaps, with documents from the 1980s and 1990s surviving only sporadically. The museum staff at the Kyrgyz National Museum

of Fine Art indicated that some archives were lost following the collapse of the USSR. As discussed by Vera Dzyadok in her presentation, imperial control exerted by Soviet Russia over museum management in the republics hampered the capacity of local museum practitioners to receive training in various subdomains of museum studies, including restoration, public outreach, and archival work. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this meant that Russian experts were brought in to organize the archives. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a brief period during which trained archivists to manage the archives and storage facilities were unavailable. In 2019, the Director of the Research Department at the Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Art showed Kapishnikova some archives discovered during the cleaning of one of the rooms in the museum's basement. Initially earmarked for destruction, the director wanted to consult with Kapishnikova first to ask whether she would be interested in reviewing them. These archives primarily consisted of documents from the 1980s and 1990s, mostly from the museum's HR department. Inspired by these findings and the unfortunate state of their storage, Kapishnikova and her co-curators embarked on a concept for an exhibition. Their aim was to research into the Kyrgyz museum's engagement with the Soviet ideological framework by juxtaposing it with the personal documents unearthed in the museum's basement.

The exhibition, initially titled "Museum Sorts Out Its Archives", featured an interactive display. The curators arranged the documents to appear as if they were concealed behind images, inviting visitors to open improvised curtains crafted from canvases and reproductions. Behind these curtains, visitors discovered both the hidden documents and artworks from the permanent collection. This approach aimed to underscore the notion that museum archives unveil the often overlooked, non-public aspects of daily museum life.

Artworks from the permanent collection were strategically juxtaposed with documents to either complement or contrast the idealized vision of socialist culture celebrated by Soviet artists. For instance, alongside a note detailing the shortcomings of an ordinary worker from the HR department, the display demonstrated the portrait of the idealized worker. A painting of an Italian

cinema diva (*The Portrait of Monica Vitti,* 1978 by Suymonkul Chokmorov) from the museum's collection was displayed alongside a document discussing the daily fears stemming from a nuclear explosion during a military exercise. This juxtaposition created a dynamic interplay between desire and anxiety, reflecting on the theme of the death drive. Similarly, another pair of artifacts featured a portrait titled "Portrait of the Revolutionary" (1972) by Suymonkul Chokmorov (1939-1992), serving as a metaphor for the bold aspirations of the Soviet era. This portrait was accompanied by a document highlighting food shortages in 1984, offering a poignant contrast to the idealized image of progress.

The exhibition revealed differences within the museum staff in their attitudes towards museum legacy and cultural programs. It was largely perceived as an activist project by both curators and museum staff with no educational value to the audience as it was constituted of many objects that were in disregard by museum curators for decades. For Kapishnikova and her curatorial team, the introduction of the forgotten archives would have been a step towards embracing the past, for many other museum practitioners, the displayed artefacts had no links to the core collection whatsoever. The difference in approaches finally revealed itself in an unexpected way. While Kapishnikova was away from the museum, some objects from the exhibition were discarded by her colleagues in the museum, who were not part of the curatorial team responsible for the exhibition. Kapishnikova noted the term "trash" in conversations with museum workers, indicating that they did not view the exhibition as part of the museum's program and considered it disposable. The word "trash" also denoted an ambivalent attitude towards objects and documents that were stored in the museum, but were not part of inventories. In response to these discussions, the curatorial group offered a creative response and rebranded the exhibition as an art intervention under the new name: the "Memomusor" (Memory-Garbage). The title effectively problematized the idea of reflections on these experiences, as well as interactions with the museum staff. The results were subsequently published in a magazine titled "Memomusor" (forthcoming).

Kapishnikova explored the fate of Soviet archives and collections through another project in collaboration with the Bishkek School of Contemporary Art. Members of the School of Contemporary Art organized an expedition to the North-West of Kyrgyzstan, specifically the Talas region up to the Kazakhstan border, to explore community museums (narodnye muzei) established as self-organized institutions during the Soviet era. Culture for masses and self-organization as grassroot initiatives were paradigmatic to Soviet culture. While this concept was meant to be collective, in practice, as Kapishnikova observed, such museums were often inaugurated as individual initiatives. One such example is the Kyrgyz State Museum of Fine Art of the Kolkhoz Red Dawn in the Talas region (now Theodor Gerzen Museum), established by a self-taught artist with the aim of providing aesthetic education to workers and promoting the achievements of Kyrgyzstan. The collection, comprised of highly artistic and unique works, remains of significant interest, yet urgently needs funding to continue operations.

Another example is the Michael Tur school museum in the village of Bolshaya Kirovka, located in the Talas region. Established in 1980 through the personal initiative of Mikhail Tur, who was a painter and sculptor with expertise in archaeology, history, and art, the museum boasted unique exhibits, including a mammoth tusk, which is typically displayed at regional history museums but certainly not at a local-level grass-root school museum in a remote village. The collection of the museum was formed thanks to private archaeological expeditions by its founder and his numerous collaborators. In 2010, Mikhail Tur, native of Kara-Buura district of Talas region, left for Russia. Today, due to lack of funding and supervision, the museum is closed, and its future remains uncertain.

These cases, as Kapishnikova asserts, helped her to grasp and formulate one of the paradoxes of Soviet culture. While it was promoted as collectivist, many of the major efforts in establishing museums were made by individuals who structured displays based on their own expertise or interests. Unfortunately, many of these museums were short-lived; when the individual behind them passed away or moved, the museum often closed. Some managed to survive, but they often face dire conditions, as in the case of a local Talas museum where artworks are exhibited directly next to

central heating units. As a result of the expedition and research, the team from the Bishkek School of Contemporary Art developed an educational program based on their observations and findings regarding small museums in Kyrgyzstan. They conducted audience research, artistic investigations, exhibitions, and publications, and also created a museum manual. The School of Contemporary Art hopes to develop participatory practices across the above mentioned museums and hopes to give new life to their public programs and activities.

Contribution and Perspectives of Research in the Region

The conference called together art historians, curators, and museum scholars who are uniquely positioned to have some, however limited, access to museum archives in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, among others. These cases, as well as the larger historical and critical perspective exercised by the scholars convened, helped to identify pressing tasks for further research into museums in the region, primarily focusing on archive-bound and expert-led investigations. First, there is a pressing need for an in-depth analysis aimed at dismantling imperial and colonial frameworks that shape the perception and accessibility of museum histories. Addressing this requires a thorough examination and reform of the historically limited access to expertise in areas such as provenance research and archival management. Furthermore, it is crucial to challenge the dominance of Russia-centric narratives in professional education, which has historically overshadowed the creation and circulation of local knowledge.

Embracing emancipatory practices led by experts is fundamental to fostering a deeper understanding of the material conditions surrounding institutional museum histories. This includes grappling with the complex and often contested regimes of object circulation (forced alienations and redistributions, de-contextualization) that have shaped both Soviet and contemporary (post) national cultural heritage. These questions, aside from their discursive value, are key to understanding the complexity of the functioning of memory and cultural institutions in the present and future.

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