

EDEN NABY

Bobodzhon Gafurovich Gafurov, 1908–1977

Among Soviet Central Asians who have achieved international attention, Bobodzhon Gafurovich Gafurov, the late director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, stands out as a leading figure. Gafurov was politically the most prominent Tadzhik, if not Central Asian, in the Soviet Union. During the twenty-one years that he served as the Institute's director, he influenced and made decisions which have led to an overall increase in scholarly research and publication about West Asia, and about Soviet Central Asia in particular, emanating from the Soviet Union.

Gafurov was one of a handful of Central Asians, born and partially educated before the Soviet period, who served as transitional figures. He survived the purges of ethnic intellectuals, during the post-World War II period especially, and helped to shape distinct Soviet-oriented nationalities out of former tsarist colonial peoples. Others who were important for the survival of the nationality system in Central Asia are fellow Tadzhiks Sadriddin Aini (1878–1953) and the recently deceased poet Mirzo Tursunzoda (1911–77). The public careers and personal characteristics of such persons reflect in some measure the transition of Soviet Central Asia itself from a remote, tradition-ridden Asiatic part of the tsarist empire to a center of natural resources and industry.

Gafurov's ethnic background was a mixture of Turkic and Iranian: his mother was an Uzbek and his father a Tadzhik. Gafurov was one of several children born to a gardener's family living in the village of Isfisari, now in the northern extension of Soviet Tadzhikistan, but in 1908 part of the Turkestan Government-General directly under Russian administration. After completing some basic education locally, he became a railroad worker in Khodzhent (present-day Leninabad).¹ In 1926, he began his lifelong involvement with politics by joining the Komsomol movement which was then being introduced in Central Asia. His political career culminated twenty years later when he was appointed first secretary of the Communist Party of Tadzhikistan, a position which he held from 1946 to 1956. Gafurov was not only the first Central Asian to serve as a first secretary but he was also the first indigenous person to serve with a local, rather than a Russian, as second secretary (for most of the ten years), and the first indigenous person to serve in a decision-making position who was allowed to make the actual decisions. He very prudently made many useful contacts unionwide during these ten years.

Following the formation of Tadzhikistan as a Union Republic separate from Uzbekistan, Gafurov left Samarkand (where he had been sent to study

1. Some sources state that he spent two years in a government boarding school and then worked in a candy factory (*Tojikistoni Soveti*, July 14, 1977, p. 2).

law in 1928) for the capital of Tadzhikistan. Dushanbe in 1929 was little more than a dusty village, but Tadzhik intellectuals were being sent there from all parts of Central Asia to transform the town into a capital and to strengthen the Soviet hold on a region of Central Asia with strong anti-Soviet, pro-*basmachi* sentiments. Gafurov, because of his Uzbek-Tadzhik bilingualism and his Kom-somol connections, was named to the editorial staff of *Qizil Tojikiston* (*Red Tadzhikistan*), a republic newspaper in Uzbek which served as the organ of both the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Tadzhikistan and the Supreme Soviet of the Tadzhik SSR. Together with many Central Asians of his age group, Gafurov was plucked from Tadzhikistan in the early 1930s and sent to Moscow to further his education. From 1931 until 1935 he studied at the All-Union Communist Institute of Journalism. Upon his return to Dushanbe he resumed work at *Qizil Tojikiston*, but also taught and worked on a dissertation in history, which he completed in Moscow during World War II. In the meantime, having weathered the Stalinist purges of the 1930s and retained his Communist Party membership (from 1932) he rose quickly in party ranks to secretary for propaganda (1941–44), then to second secretary (1944–46), and finally to first secretary in 1946.

Thus by 1956, when he took over the directorship of the Institute of Oriental Studies, he had amassed credentials in two fields, Communist Party politics and academia. His first publications about Tadzhik history appeared in the 1940s, and he subsequently wrote or supervised several important works about Central Asia and the Tadzhiks among which the following may be mentioned: *Istoriia tadzhikskogo naroda* (3rd ed., 1955), *Nekotorye voprosy natsional'noi politiki KPSS* (1959), *Dni kolonializma sochteny* (1963), *Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia i natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe drizhenie* (1967), *Kushanskaia epokha i mirovaia tsivilizatsiia* (1968), and *Tadzhiki* (1972).

Gafurov's political connections within the Communist Party, as important as they were, did not prevent his dismissal as first secretary of the Tadzhik Communist Party during the Khrushchev era. By the early 1960s his control over the Tadzhik party had diminished considerably as his protégés also lost ground. But because of his personal power outside the party hierarchy he continued to hold an important place in Tadzhik and Orientalist circles.

As an academician and director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, over and above his own contributions, Gafurov proved a key figure in opening contact between Orientalists of the Soviet Union and the West. Perhaps even more important, however, Gafurov's unique political and academic talents, together with his Central Asian background, served to initiate and increase contact between Soviet Orientalists and their Asian counterparts in a period when decreasing Cold War tensions provided opportunities for certain exchanges. Thus, aside from the six Orders of Lenin and a Red Banner of Labor which he earned from the Soviet state, Gafurov also received honors in West Asia: the Nehru Prize from India in 1968, an honorary doctorate from Aligarh University (the most prestigious Muslim university in India), and an honorary doctorate from Tehran University in Iran. He maintained close personal relationships with academicians and government administrators all over the world, and his Institute hosted the International Congress of Orientalists in 1960. Although he personally headed numerous Soviet Orientalist delegations abroad and was chief editor of the journal *Asia and Africa Today*, Gafurov retained the correct appearance of a *Soviet*

official on all formal occasions. In formal addresses, for example, even to Persian-speaking audiences, he used only Russian; in personal conversations with such persons, however, he slid into Tadjik. Through Gafurov's able administration Soviet Orientalism has expanded in number of staff and publications as well as in prestige inside and outside the Soviet Union.

For Central Asians, especially the Tadjiks, Gafurov's death removes from power a person who could be relied upon to provide Soviet Muslims with a voice in high political circles in Moscow. More than this, however, the death of Bobodzhon Gafurov marks the passing of an era of transitional Central Asian figures, men and women who through wit and tenacity survived the early Soviet period to rise to positions of all-union importance against great odds. On July 14, 1977, after lying in state in Dushanbe and receiving the homage of his fellow Tadjiks, Gafurov was buried near the tomb of Sadriiddin Aini, another Soviet Tadjik.