

"Brilliantly assembled. . . . A theoretically sophisticated, yet very accessible, study of Russian visual culture."

—William Mills Todd III

PICTURING EXPLORATIONS IN VISUAL CULTURE RUSSIA

Edited by Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger



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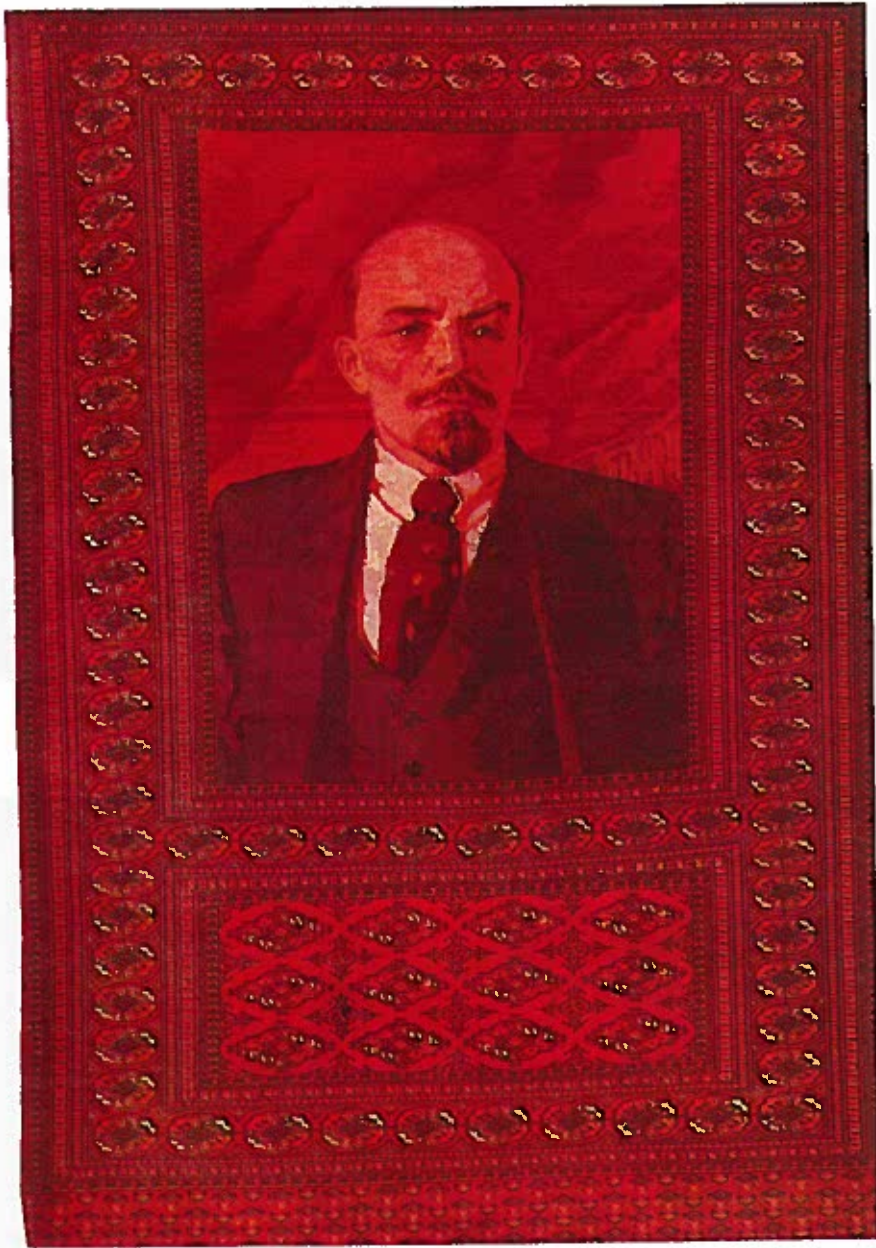
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36.1. *Portrait of Lenin*. Carpet by Durdygozel Annakulieva, Aili Taganmuradova, and Nabat Khodjamova, Honored Carpet Makers of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, Ashgabat, 1955.

Portrait of Lenin

Carpets and National Culture in Soviet Turkmenistan

Adrienne Edgar

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the carpet titled *Portrait of Lenin* occupied a prominent place in the collection of the Turkmen State Museum of Art in Ashgabat (fig. 36.1 [color section]). Handwoven in the rich colors and delicate patterns characteristic of Turkmen carpets, it portrays a stern-looking Lenin framed by a traditional carpet border. It may seem incongruous to see the face of a Russian revolutionary leader peering out of a Central Asian carpet. If we look more closely, however, this image can tell us a great deal about the nature of the Soviet multinational state and the Bolsheviks' relationship with their non-Russian citizens.

The Turkmen were one of more than a hundred ethnic groups making up the population of the Soviet Union. Before the Soviet era, these Turkic-speaking Muslims did not form a unified or cohesive group; rather, the Turkmen population consisted of a number of tribes that spoke different dialects and were often politically at odds with one another. Historically nomadic and stateless, they inhabited a large, arid territory between the Caspian Sea and the Amu Darya along the southernmost frontier of the Russian Empire. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Turkmen tribes gradually fell under the control of neighboring states, including tsarist Russia. After the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, some of these tribes were incorporated into the Soviet Union while others remained across the border in Persia and Afghanistan.

Like many Middle Eastern and Central Asian nomads, Turkmen were skilled weavers of carpets. Lightweight and easy to transport on the back of a camel, carpets constituted the ideal form of home furnishings for a nomadic (and later seminomadic) people. Turkmen families slept, ate, and sat on carpets, using them to cover and decorate the floor and walls of their portable felt tents, or yurts. Woven carpet material was also used to make a variety of other everyday objects, including saddle bags, storage containers for household goods, and adornments for camels and horses in wedding processions. Useful and durable, these colorful artifacts—traditionally woven by women—were an important source of beauty and artistry in a harsh environment.¹ Carpets also served as identity markers for the various Turkmen tribes, each of which was associated with a specific carpet design. (The pattern on *Portrait of Lenin* is typical of the Tekke tribe, which inhabits the central areas of Turkmenistan near the capital

of Ashgabat.) Moreover, weaving was an important source of cash income for the Turkmen, whose carpets—known as Bukharans after the city where they were traded—were prized by connoisseurs throughout the world.

Carpet weaving retained its importance in Turkmenistan after 1917, but customary ways of producing and viewing carpets were reinvented under Soviet rule. First, the Soviet state encouraged the formation of carpet-weaving cooperatives, which received raw materials and other assistance from the government and sold their carpets directly to state agencies. Co-operative workshops were billed as a way of promoting women's emancipation by encouraging female economic self-sufficiency within Turkmen villages; the workshops were also intended to eliminate the "capitalist middlemen" who had hitherto dominated the carpet trade. Second, carpets ceased to be merely objects of everyday use and came to be valued as works of art in their own right. The most beautiful were placed in museums, and their creators were acknowledged as "honored artists of the Soviet Union." These "artistic" carpets were removed from their functional context and transformed into objects to be viewed, not used. Displayed on the walls of the republic's museums, they were intended to inspire visiting schoolchildren and workers with reverence for the artistic genius of the Turkmen people. Finally, and most importantly for understanding the genesis of the *Portrait of Lenin*, carpets became an important element of the new Soviet Turkmen "national culture."

One of the surprising things about the Soviet multinational state was that the Bolsheviks did not try to impose Russian culture on the non-Russian periphery; instead, they promoted the indigenous languages and cultures of all Soviet peoples. Lenin and Stalin believed that Soviet citizens could best be reached with the Bolshevik message in their own languages. Moreover, they argued that the Soviet state could hasten the eventual merging of all Soviet nations into a single socialist family by encouraging the development of each nation's special character. A key aspect of this Soviet nationality policy was the creation of national territories for each ethnic group. In 1924–25 the Soviet regime divided Central Asia into five national republics, one of which was the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. Within each territory, the indigenous nationality enjoyed preferential access to education and jobs, and the Soviet leadership promoted the establishment of books, newspapers, and schools using the native language.²

Soviet authorities also promoted the development of a distinct national culture within each republic. Because Soviet nations were supposed to be modern and socialist, however, the communist leaders in Moscow took it upon themselves to decide which customs and traditions were acceptable and which were "backward" or "exploitive" and therefore destined for elimination. Aspects of indigenous Central Asian cultures that were deemed oppressive to women, such as veiling and polygamy, were banned. Religion was targeted for elimination in accordance with the Soviets' atheist and materialist philosophy. The works of prerevolutionary writers and poets who allegedly possessed a "class-alien" or "anti-Soviet" orientation were banned.

The aspects of national culture vigorously promoted by the Soviets included folk arts, such as handicrafts and folkloric dancing. The state also encouraged the development of a national literary and musical culture in each republic, as long as it was free of the taint of "feudalism." These national cultures, however much they might differ from each other superficially, were all supposed to be infused with "Soviet" or "socialist" ideology. As Stalin famously declared

in 1925, the cultures of the Soviet nations would be “national in form, socialist in content.” Often this meant that they were to become more similar to Russian culture, which was deemed more modern and socialist than that of Muslim Central Asians. Thus, Central Asian writers were encouraged to abandon their indigenous traditions of epic poetry for Russian genres like the novel and short story. Indigenous traditions of musical performance were to give way to European-style operas and symphonies (albeit with Central Asian musical motifs and instruments). From the early 1930s, Central Asian music and literature were also expected to adhere to the socialist realist style and to incorporate socialist themes and ideas. Like other Soviet peoples, Turkmen, Tajiks, and Uzbeks began writing odes to tractors, factories, and Lenin in their own languages.

Turkmen carpets became a key aspect of the folk culture promoted as the basis for Soviet Turkmen nationhood. Even this seemingly most apolitical of national forms was destined to absorb a certain amount of socialist content. While the female artisans of Turkmenistan continued to produce carpets in traditional styles, in the 1920s some began to incorporate Soviet themes into their designs. (Naturally, the Soviet authorities strongly encouraged this development.) These new “theme carpets” and “portrait carpets” portrayed the most important communist leaders—Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and, of course, Lenin—or celebrated Soviet holidays, such as Lenin’s birthday, and Soviet policies, such as the friendship of the Soviet peoples. The link between carpets and socialism was even memorialized in stone in the 1920s, when a monument to Lenin erected in the center of Ashgabat placed the leader on a pedestal decorated with Turkmen carpet motifs. In the words of a Soviet Turkmen commentator, this statue demonstrated the “real continuity of new socialist artistic traditions with the achievements of the old national culture.”³

Portrait carpets in subsequent decades honored the Russian writers Alexander Pushkin and Maxim Gorky, the eighteenth-century Turkmen poet Mahtımgulı, the Communist Party secretary Leonid Brezhnev, the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, and such foreign communist figures as Fidel Castro. Well into the postwar period, Lenin remained a favorite subject for depiction, as in the example here from the 1950s. These carpets provided a perfect visual representation of the Stalinist principle that national forms should contain socialist content. In the *Portrait of Lenin*, the leader who became the human embodiment of socialism and the Great October Revolution was literally woven into the fabric of Turkmen culture. Displayed in museums and exhibits in Turkmenistan and throughout the Soviet Union, such carpets were intended to show that the formerly nomadic and tribal Turkmen had successfully absorbed socialist ideas and practices. They declared—wordlessly but with perfect clarity—that the Turkmen had consolidated their national identity under Soviet rule while also acquiring a Soviet identity that they shared with other citizens of the USSR.

How did the Soviet Turkmen themselves respond to the *Portrait of Lenin*? It is impossible to know with certainty, since only positive views of this new art form could be expressed in the Soviet era. Yet we can imagine a range of responses, depending on the viewer’s standpoint. Devoted Turkmen communists would have regarded *Portrait of Lenin* with pride as a uniquely Turkmen contribution to Soviet socialist culture. Anti-Soviet nationalists might have been angry at the sully of a traditional carpet pattern with the image of a Russian communist.

Devout Muslims would have been offended by the carpet's violation of the Koranic injunction against visual representation of the human form. And it is entirely possible that some citizens of this remote republic would have failed to recognize the famous revolutionary leader.

In the post-Soviet era, themed carpets such as the *Portrait of Lenin* have become historical curiosities, of interest mainly to Western tourists in search of Communist kitsch. Although carpets remain important as a national form in independent Turkmenistan (the country celebrates Carpet Day along with more conventional state holidays such as Independence Day), the socialist content of the Soviet era has been abandoned. The *Portrait of Lenin* no longer graces the walls of the National Museum, and Turkmen couples no longer pose for photographs in front of the carpet-themed Lenin monument on their wedding day. Instead, an imposing statue of the late Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov, self-proclaimed national hero and leader of the Turkmen until his sudden death in December 2006, has become the preferred backdrop for wedding snapshots.

NOTES—1. For more information on Turkmen carpets, see the trilingual book *Türkmenistaning Halilari* (Ashgabat: Turkmenistan Publishing House, 1983); and Robert Pinner and Murray L. Eiland, Jr., *Between the Black Desert and the Red: Turkmen Carpets from the Wiedersperg Collection* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1999).

2. On the Soviet nationality policy, see Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

3. *Türkmenistaning Halilari*, 7.