

Fifty Years in the East

The Memoirs of Wladimir Ivanow

Farhad Daftary is the Co-Director of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, and Head of the Institute's Department of Academic Research and Publications. Since the mid-1960s, when he was completing his doctoral studies at the University of California, Berkeley, he has cultivated his interest in Shi'i studies, with special reference to its Ismaili tradition, on which he is an authority. As well as serving on various editorial boards, Dr Daftary is a consulting editor of *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, co-editor (with W. Madelung) of *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, and the general editor of the 'Ismaili Heritage Series', the 'Ismaili Texts and Translations Series' and the 'Shi'i Heritage Series'. He is the author and editor of numerous publications, including *The Ismā'īlīs* (1990; 2nd ed., 2007), *The Assassin Legends* (1994), *A Short History of the Ismailis* (1998), *Intellectual Traditions in Islam* (2000), *Ismaili Literature* (2004), *A Modern History of the Ismailis* (2011), *Historical Dictionary of the Ismailis* (2012), *A History of Shi'i Islam* (2013), as well as many articles and encyclopaedia entries. Dr Daftary's books have been translated into Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Gujarati, Chinese and various European languages.



Wladimir Ivanow

Fifty Years in the East

The Memoirs of Wladimir Ivanow

Edited with Annotations

by

Farhad Daftary

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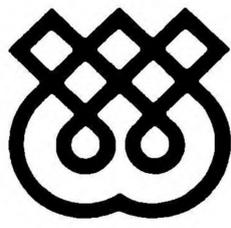
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The Institute of Ismaili Studies was established in 1977 with the object of promoting scholarship and learning on Islam, in the historical as well as contemporary contexts, and a better understanding of its relationship with other societies and faiths.

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2. Works exploring specific aspects of Islamic faith and culture, or the contributions of individual Muslim thinkers or writers.
3. Editions or translations of significant primary or secondary texts.
4. Translations of poetic or literary texts that illustrate the rich heritage of spiritual, devotional and symbolic expressions in Muslim history.
5. Works on Ismaili history and thought, and the relationship of the Ismailis to other traditions, communities and schools of thought in Islam.
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Preface

The circumstances of my life have unfolded in such a way that I have spent fifty years, virtually continuously, as a researcher in the field of Iranian studies (Persian dialects) and Ismaili studies. This period coincided with one of the most tragic eras in the history of mankind, one of radical change and enormous shifts in lifestyles, worldviews and of social and political changes in the life of nations, including the peoples of the East. Over such a long period of time I have accumulated a wealth of information, personal observations, experiences, feelings and impressions. Thus, some of this collected material may prove to be of academic interest and to have some value as an eyewitness testimony.

My friends and acquaintances of different nationalities and professions often advised me to publish at least some of this material, and perhaps I should have done so. It was invariably recommended that I should present it in the form of an autobiography rather than as a narrative of my travels, which would have been an easier task. Yet my advisors have sought to convince me that the inclusion of an autobiographical element would be most useful for a correct understanding of my approach to this subject matter and its interpretation. Even though I did not agree with their views completely, they have insisted and thus, as a compromise, I have agreed to provide a short biography along with examples of my observations, impressions and the most essential and characteristic experiences. I have tried my best to avoid giving excessive detail and tedious descriptions, while also not being too curt. One of the features of human memory is its capacity to remember events from the distant past and its comparative inability to recall the most recent experiences.

As I write this at the age of eighty-two, I am a novice in this genre as I have never written memoirs that could be readily classified as 'easy reading'. As my guide, I have taken a 500-year-old book of travels,

Khozhdenie za tri moria 1466–1472 (A Journey Beyond Three Seas), by the Russian merchant from Tver, Afanasii Nikitin, who, like me, also travelled through Persia to India.

W. Ivanow

March 1968

Introduction

F. Daftary

Wladimir Ivanow,¹ the Russian author of the *Memoirs* published here for the first time, was destined to spend the bulk of his days in exile. In the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Ivanow abandoned his secure life and a guaranteed academic career in his native St Petersburg and embarked on a journey that would last more than half a century, until the end of his life. He never returned to Russia, not even for a brief visit. Ivanow led a lonely life. He had a chequered career and a generous share of unintended adventures during the fifty years he spent in the East, or *vostok* in his native tongue, which are so vividly described in these *Memoirs*.

Outside Russia, Ivanow experienced a variety of jobs, having stints as a bank official, language teacher and cataloguer of Persian manuscripts, before being formally commissioned by the Nizari Ismailis' contemporary spiritual guide or Imam, Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III (1877–1957), to study the history, literature and thought of that hitherto grossly misrepresented Shi'ī Muslim community. As we shall see in the next chapter, it was in that capacity that Ivanow made his invaluable contributions to modern scholarship in Ismaili studies. He retained his unofficial status as the historian of the Nizari Ismaili community when leadership of the community passed in 1957 to Aga Khan III's grandson, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, the 49th and present hereditary Imam of the Nizari Ismailis. Ivanow's work was indeed his life and, despite incessant hardship and vicissitudes, he never wavered in pursuing his academic goals.

¹ His full name in Russia was Vladimir Alekseevich Ivanov, which he changed to Wladimir Ivanow when he was outside Russia.

He devoted himself indefatigably to discovering and studying Ismaili textual sources until the very end of his life.

From early on Ivanow entertained an interest in Oriental studies, being the first member of his family to do so. Enrolled in the Faculty of Oriental Languages of St Petersburg University, he studied Persian language, literature and folklore, as well as Sufism – which he later denigrated – under a number of eminent Russian scholars. Upon his graduation in 1911, Ivanow unexpectedly accepted totally unrelated employment in a branch of the Russian bank in Persia, simply in order to obtain suitable opportunities to carry on field research there. He spent some three years in the country, collecting specimens of Khorasani and other local dialects and also studying the Persian gypsies who were by then rapidly disappearing. These materials, meticulously collected, catalogued and analysed, provided the bases of Ivanow's earliest linguistic and ethnographic publications, which are still valuable for scholars of Iranian languages and dialects. It was also in the course of these early fieldworks that Ivanow acquired a lifelong love for Oriental manuscripts.

By 1915, with the outbreak of World War I, Ivanow had returned to St Petersburg in the expectation of launching his academic career in a more structured manner. The right opportunity soon presented itself: he was offered the position of Assistant Keeper in the Asiatic Museum of the Russian Academy of Sciences, where he had earlier conducted some research in his student days. Shortly afterwards, the Museum's director, Karl Zaleman, dispatched Ivanow to Bukhara to collect manuscripts. Ivanow accomplished this mission admirably and enriched the Asiatic Museum's manuscript holdings by the so-called Bukharan Collection of some 1,057 items, all carefully listed and described, including dates of acquisition and purchase prices for every manuscript. In the spring of 1918, Ivanow was sent to Bukhara for a second time to collect Arabic and Persian manuscripts for the Asiatic Museum. He would never return to St Petersburg, then witnessing revolutionary upheavals following the demise of the Romanovs and the establishment of Bolshevik rule.

The Soviet era of Russian history had just commenced when Ivanow found himself stranded in Central Asia. The circumstances of Ivanow's life had now changed drastically. With little money and no obvious job prospects, he decided not to return to Russia, abandoning himself to

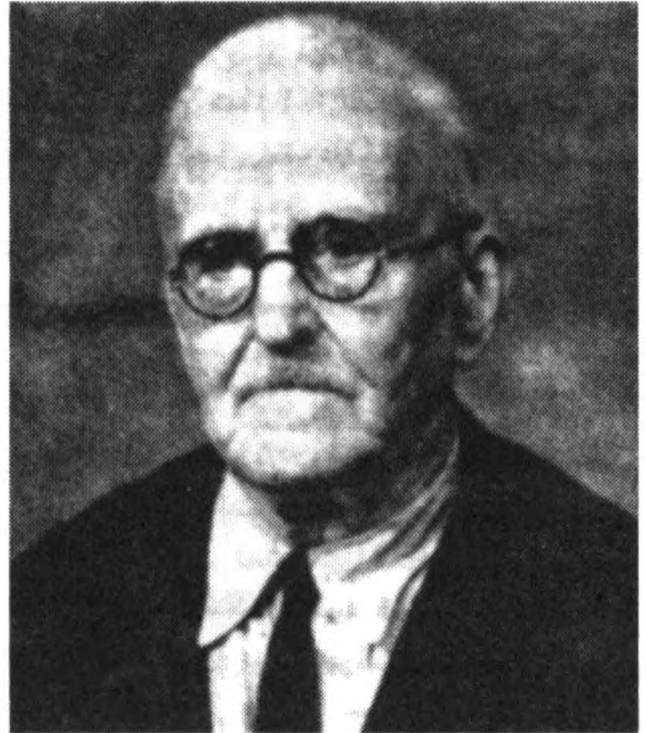
what fate might have in store for him. It was under such bleak circumstances that he travelled from Bukhara, then in the grip of an anti-Russian Basmachi revolt, to Mashhad (written as Meshhed in his *Memoirs*), the capital of the north-eastern province of Khorasan in Persia. The next couple of years in Ivanow's life, as recounted in the *Memoirs*, were filled by constant anxiety, worsened by the deplorable circumstances afflicting Russian diplomats of the *ancien régime* in Persia. Ivanow turned out to be one of the more fortunate Russian émigrés, however, as he succeeded in attaching himself, as a Persian translator, to an Anglo-Indian force, the Malmisa Force, then stationed in eastern Persia in the aftermath of World War I. At the time, this force had been charged with patrolling the Persian–Afghan border region, through which German and Turkish agents penetrated into Afghanistan. Strangely enough, our young Russian scholar was then also made responsible for a large number of camels and horses, all serving in the force. Destiny next landed Ivanow in India in 1920, when the force was disbanded on its return to Quetta. Ivanow was once again out of a job, but he was permitted to stay in India and seek employment there.

Soon after his arrival in India, Ivanow went to Calcutta and found employment at the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He was commissioned to catalogue the large collection of Persian manuscripts in the Society's library. Constantly annoyed by the petty rivalries and draconian bureaucratic procedures he witnessed at the Asiatic Society, Ivanow completed the task assigned to him in four catalogues, published during 1924–1928 in the well-known Bibliotheca Indica Series. In the meantime, he collected 1,500 Arabic and Persian manuscripts for the Society. In addition, unknown to the scholarly world and omitted from his *Memoirs*, he also acquired, during 1926–1927, a collection of 238 manuscripts, on the science of medicine, and to a lesser extent on general literature, at the request of McGill University in Montreal.² In 1930, Ivanow suffered the consequences of Hindu–Muslim rivalries in

² These manuscripts were, in due course, donated to McGill University by Dr Casey A. Wood (1856–1942), an ophthalmologist; they are currently kept there in the Blacker–Wood Library. Ivanow himself provided a handwritten list of this collection: 'Annotated Catalogue of the Casey A. Wood Collection of Persian, Arabic and Hindustani Manuscripts', which remains unpublished. In 1994, this editor had the opportunity of seeing Ivanow's handwritten letters and other archival materials

India and within the Asiatic Society, and lost his cataloguing post because the management of the Society had then decided to terminate such 'Islamic' projects as Ivanow had been involved in. The catalogue of the Society's Arabic manuscripts, on which Ivanow was then working, was thus left unfinished for several years.

Ivanow, once again, found himself looking for a suitable job. A couple of prospective cataloguing projects, including one for the Nizam of Hyderabad, failed to materialise, however, leaving him utterly despondent. At this juncture in his *Memoirs*, he complains bitterly about the circumstances of his life, characterised for the most part by financial insecurity and lack of appreciation for his talents; he remained without any academic affilia-



Wladimir Ivanow

tion throughout his life. Henceforth, Ivanow appears as a lonely man, his loneliness made all the more acute by the fact that he never married and did not start a family of his own. For the greater part of his subsequent three decades of residence in Bombay, Ivanow was looked after by an Indian female servant. His later harsh, and at times blatantly biased, judgement of his peers may not be fully understood except within terms of the sad realities of his own life.³

Ivanow first encountered some Persian Ismailis in 1912, when he was engaged in fieldwork in Qa'in and Birjand, in southern Khorasan. Subsequently, he published some notes on them.⁴ More importantly, in 1928 he established contacts with certain

related to this collection at McGill University. See Adam Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts in the Libraries of McGill University. Union Catalogue* (Montreal, 1991), pp. vii–viii, x.

³ Note, for instance, Ivanow's demurrals about the scholarship of Marshall Hodgson (1922–1968), amongst other scholars of Islamic studies, as expressed in his letters to Henry Corbin; see *Correspondance Corbin-Ivanow. Lettres échangées entre Henry Corbin et Vladimir Ivanow de 1947 à 1966*, ed. S. Schmidtke (Paris and Louvain, 1999), especially pp. 141–144; see also University of Chicago Library, 'Marshall G. S. Hodgson Papers 1940–1971', series II, box 2, folders 10–11.

⁴ See W. Ivanow, 'Notes on the Ismailis in Persia', in his *Ismailitica*, in *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 8 (1922), pp. 50–76.

‘enlightened’ leading members of the Nizari Ismaili (Khoja) community in Bombay. And in 1930, while seeking employment, he offered his scholarly services to them. Ivanow’s proposal was duly brought before Aga Khan III, whose approval was required. The Ismaili Imam gave his consent; and in January 1931 Ivanow was formally recruited to study the literature and intellectual contributions of the Ismailis. Thus commenced, in a sense coincidentally, Ivanow’s distinguished career in Ismaili studies.

Ivanow remained in Bombay for about three decades, establishing an extensive network of contacts with the Ismailis of various branches and regions. He systematically collected Ismaili manuscript sources, and produced his Ismaili publications. In 1959, he transferred his residence to Tehran, where the climate suited him better. He was offered complementary lodgings at the ‘university club’ (Bashgah-i Danishgah) of Tehran University, on Shah Reza Avenue, never relenting his study of the manuscripts that were regularly sent to him from India. It was also in the final years of his life, in Tehran, that Ivanow compiled his *Memoirs*, drawing selectively on diaries, or perhaps notes, that he had evidently kept throughout his life. He completed the *Memoirs*, which were destined to be his last work, in March 1968. His retirement was formally accepted early in 1970, shortly before his death. He died on 19 June 1970, at the age of eighty-three, and was buried in the Russian cemetery outside Tehran.

Having completed the *Memoirs* in Russian, he very much wished to publish the work in his native land. As a result, he sent a copy to Yuri Vladimirovich Gankovskii, the then deputy-director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences USSR in Moscow. Ivanow had evidently met Mr Gankovskii in Tehran earlier in 1968. The typescript of Ivanow’s *Memoirs* was, in due course, forwarded to the chief editor of the ‘Vostochnaia Literatura’ (Eastern Literature) section of Nauka Publishers in Moscow. By July 1968, Nauka Publishers had conveyed the sad news to Ivanow that they could not consider such an autobiographical genre of work for publication, since they functioned as an academic outfit. Meanwhile, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV had expressed his own interest in the *Memoirs*, and had asked Ivanow to prepare an English translation of the work. Ivanow apparently never accomplished this task. The present editor obtained the above details from Professor Oleg Fedorovich Akimushkin (1929–2010), a Russian

scholar of Islamic studies and noted cataloguer of Persian manuscripts. The late Professor Akimushkin was a friend of mine and kindly edited several of the Russian translations of my own works.

Another copy of the Russian original of Ivanow's *Memoirs* had been given by the author himself to Kamol Ayni (1928–2010), who had first met Ivanow in 1966 in Tehran on the occasion of the First World Congress of Iranologists. Much earlier, Ivanow had met, in Bukhara, Kamol's father, Sadr al-Din Ayni (1878–1954),⁵ a poet, novelist and the leading figure of Soviet Tajik literature. The Ayni family hailed from Samarkand but settled in Tajikistan. Educated at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of Leningrad State University, Kamol Ayni had started his own career as the first head of the Manuscripts Department of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan; and, subsequently, he served in other sections of the Academy, including its Iran Division. Kamol Ayni was also one of the few Tajik scholars of the Soviet era who was permitted to visit Iran. He did, in fact, spend some time in Tehran collaborating with a number of Iranian scholars, and several of his works, too, were published in Tehran.

The present writer was introduced to Kamol Ayni in Dushanbe in 1995, on the occasion of Aga Khan IV's first historic visit to Tajikistan. The large Nizari Ismaili community of Tajikistan, concentrated in the mountain region of Badakhshan, were now seeing their Imam for the first time. Kamol Ayni must have been informed about Ivanow's unsuccessful attempt to publish his *Memoirs* in Russia. At any event, knowing about this editor's affiliation to The Institute of Ismaili Studies, Kamol Ayni gave me a copy of W. Ivanow's *Memoirs* (in Russian), and expressed his interest in seeing it published. Many other commitments have prevented me from taking up this project until now, almost twenty years later.

I have had my own keen interests in this important work. After all, it was mainly through reading Ivanow's numerous publications in the Central Library of the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s that I had started to develop a passion for Ismaili studies and so corresponded with Ivanow towards the very end of his life. And some three decades later, in recognition of his contributions, I collected and published in 1996 a volume of essays on Ismaili studies in memory of

⁵ See K. Hitchins, 'Ayni', *EIR*, vol. 3, pp. 144–149.

W. Ivanow,⁶ who had never had a *Festschrift* produced in his honour. Also, in 2011, The Institute of Ismaili Studies and the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences jointly organised a conference in St Petersburg devoted to Russian scholarship on Ismailism; this conference and its Proceedings were dedicated to the 125th anniversary of W. Ivanow's birth.⁷

The Russian text of these *Memoirs*, typed by Ivanow himself, was originally translated into English, in the late 1990s, by Dr Sergei Andreyev, who was then a Research Fellow at The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. The original translation has now been substantially revised and edited. We have remained faithful to Ivanow's choice for the main title of the work, *Piat'desiat Let na Vostoki*, translating it as *Fifty Years in the East*. In editing these *Memoirs*, we have constantly striven to retain the flavour of the author's prose as well as his personal 'humour'. Annotations have been provided to describe and contextualise many of the personalities, events, places or terms mentioned by Ivanow.

In preparing Ivanow's *Memoirs* for publication I have received the assistance of several individuals at The Institute of Ismaili Studies; it is my pleasant duty to thank all of them. Sergei Andreyev did an admirable job of producing the first draft of the English translation of the work. More recently, Sultonbek Aksakolov checked the translation against the text of the original Russian, provided additional passages, and also assisted with Russian sources, terms and annotations in collaboration with Russell Harris and Najam Abbas. Wafi Momen kindly helped with a number of Hindustani terms. Nadia Holmes patiently prepared various drafts of the work, and Isabel Miller copy-edited the final draft. In identifying, assembling and preparing the images that appear in the publication I have been variously assisted by Hakim Elnazarov, Patricia Salazar and Russell Harris. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to all these colleagues at The Institute of Ismaili Studies.

⁶ F. Daftary, ed., *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁷ See S. Prozorov and H. Elnazarov, ed., *Russkie uchënye ob Ismailisme/Russian Scholars on Ismailism* (St Petersburg, 2014).