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Russia And The Ismailis

2012 marks a hundred years since Mawlana Sultan Mahomed Shah first visited Russia. **Rasool Daya** reports on the milestone, celebrated with a series of events, organised jointly by the Department of Diplomatic Affairs at Aiglemont, the Aga Khan Foundation in Russia, The Institute of Ismaili Studies and the UK National Council



◀ The head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the UK examines an early photo of Mawlana Sultan Mahomed Shah. *Photo: Alim Kassam.*

The past century has brought about much change to the global landscape, with the influences of modernity continuing to shape the world in which we live. Features that have remained constant throughout however, are the pursuit of new knowledge and traditions of scholarship. The striving to learn, research and debate the development of human societies and civilisations remains important in academia, even whilst the practices of acquiring and disseminating information have been refined over time.

It was Russian scholars who first studied and documented the history of Ismaili Muslims in Central Asia, during research expeditions to the Pamirs in

the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They included the esteemed historians N.V. Bobrinsky, A.A. Semonov, and W.A. Ivanow, who met with community leaders and wrote about the traditions and practices of the people in Badakhshan. Ivanow led the way in contemporary Ismaili Studies, spending time in Persia and India to catalogue manuscripts and publish various volumes on Ismaili literature. His work in particular caught the attention of Mawlana Sultan Mahomed Shah, who a hundred years ago, in the autumn of 1912, visited the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg as a guest of the aristocracy. In his memoirs written forty years later, he recounted the visit and his meetings

▶ Dr Shafik Sachedina, Director of the Department of Diplomatic Affairs, and Amin Mawji, President of the UK National Council guide The Russian Ambassador, Alexander Yakovenko, around the exhibition. *Photo: Alim Kassam.*



▲ A collection of books, manuscripts and photos displayed at the Ismaili Centre. The items were nominated for the prestigious Alexander Nevsky Prize for museum memorial projects earlier this year. *Photo: Sadrudin Verjee.*

with great warmth and affinity. Thus began a more formal relationship between the Russian Federation and the Ismailis – an association which has become more pronounced over the past two decades under the current Imam.

Mawlana Hazar Imam paid his first official visit to Russia in 1995, meeting with political, religious and academic figures, and visited again in 2002 to meet with President Vladimir Putin. The meetings facilitated a dialogue of cooperation on humanitarian assistance, sustainable development and the improvement of quality of life in the country and region as a whole. This led to the establishment of Focus Humanitarian Assistance and Aga Khan Foundation offices in Moscow in 1998 and 2007 respectively to provide a social safety net and support social development potential.

In striving to build on the relationship and continue the shared traditions of learning and scholarship, The Institute of Ismaili Studies invited distinguished scholars from the Russia Academy of Sciences to London in November, for a joint seminar to share and discuss current research. Professors Andrey Smirnov and Stanislas Prozorov spoke in detail about early Shi'a thought and philosophy. This was a follow up to an initial gathering of scholars held at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in St. Petersburg a year ago.

The seminar was followed by a dinner reception at

the Ismaili Centre, attended by the Russian ambassador to the UK, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the UK and the Russian ambassador to the Republic of Ireland. Also in attendance were eminent Russian scholars, guests from the diplomatic corps, and staff representing the Aga Khan Development Network. On display in the social hall was a small exhibition of books and manuscripts, detailing the work of Bobrinsky, Ivanow and other Russian scholars who contributed to the study of Ismailis over the past century. A gallery of photos was also displayed, including images of Mawlana Sultan Mahomed Shah and the prominent Russian emissaries he spent time with. In his remarks, President Amin Mawji of the UK National Council welcomed guests, and highlighted common values between Russian people and the Ismaili community, including a rich cultural heritage, and traditions of learning and sharing. Guests were given the opportunity to discuss topics of relevance, and served with a traditional Russian style meal.

While modernity and globalisation continue to create change in our world, it is important for us to identify and draw upon shared ideals, ethics and principles to strengthen ties and build relationships. As we look to the past to inform our decisions and actions in the present, we can be confident that these values will form a strong basis for the next hundred years.



▲ Delegates at the Seminar, including Professor Andrey Smirnov (front-left), Davlat Khudonazarov (centre), and Professor Stanislas Prozorov (front-right). *Photo: Courtesy of The Institute of Ismaili Studies.*