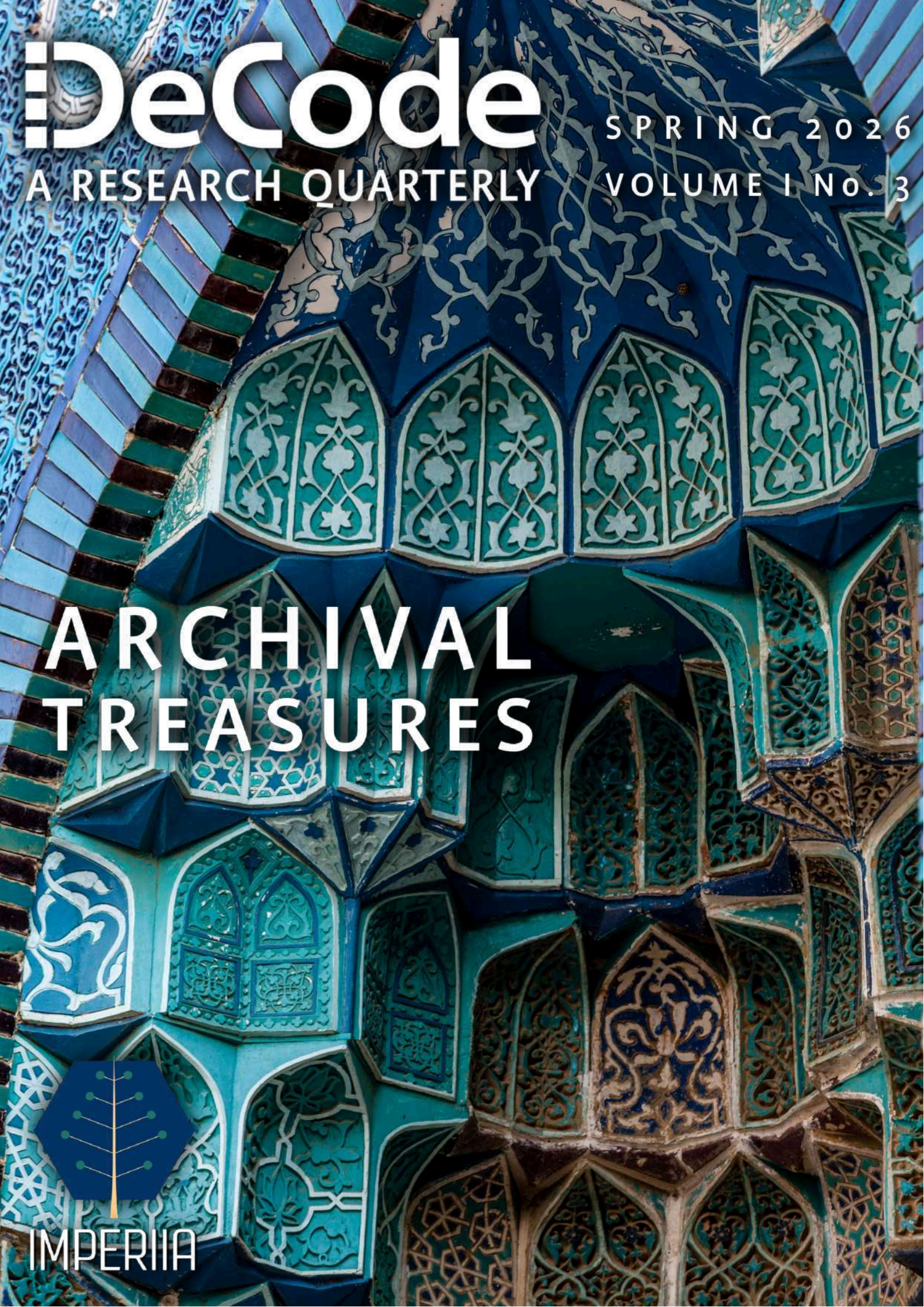
DeCode
A RESEARCH QUARTERLY
SPRING 2026
VOLUME I No. 3

ARCHIVAL TREASURES



IMPERIIA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Check out what our friends at the Boston Public Library's Normal B. Leventhal Map and Education Center are up to:

"Seashells and Whaling Grounds"

A new funded digital project

Guest Talk -May 18, 2026

A conversation with Dr. Katherine McDonough on AI and Map Collections

Book Launch - May 20, 2026

Andy Woodruff on "Boston in 50 Maps"

Foreword

No one leaves the archives without a story.

Sure, scholars have a habit of discovering long-forgotten facts and piecing together provocative new understandings of the human experience by wading waist deep in document collections. Archives have something to offer everyone, from the historian to the economist, the property owner to the genealogical researcher, the film enthusiast to the fashion designer. And if we were bold enough to describe a general trajectory for the past century, it would describe an increase in accessibility. It would be a trajectory of openness; of the democratization of knowledge. We know so much more now about past and present because of the archives (and those who create and manage them). We have even begun to cultivate awareness of archival silences and to insist an asking the questions archives cannot answer.

But it is also true that no one leaves without a story because archives are unpredictable places. They are places where favors are traded like currency and infrastructural weaknesses (exploding boilers, for example) and scheduling quirks can reshape research agendas with alarming speed. If you know anyone who has conducted research in an archive, you know someone who has competed in the silent-but-deadly-serious sport of racing for a seat in the reading room. Your friend has mastered the art of navigating endless catalogs without going cross-eyed and can probably even write with a pencil.

This issue of DeCode explores not just the nature and content of the archives, but the way they are experienced. Because, in the end, archives are as much about the humans who enter them as they are about the documents they contain. Once you are done reading, go find someone who has worked in an archive, and ask for their best story. It won't disappoint.

Kelly O'Neill (REECA 2000)



Spring 2026
VOLUME I No. 3
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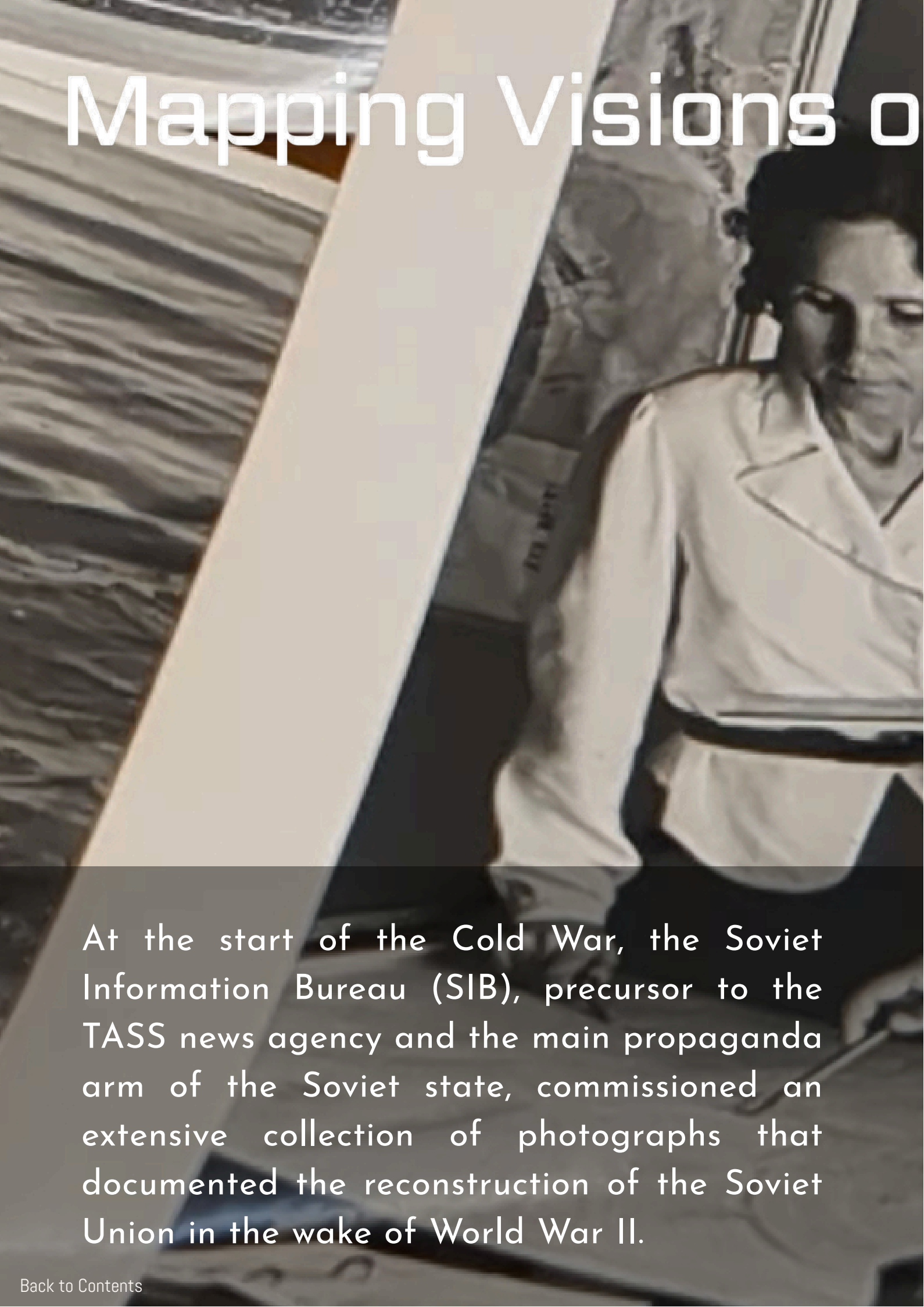
Wisdom In The Stacks



Mapping Visions o



At the start of the Cold War, the Soviet Information Bureau (SIB), precursor to the TASS news agency and the main propaganda arm of the Soviet state, commissioned an extensive collection of photographs that documented the reconstruction of the Soviet Union in the wake of World War II.

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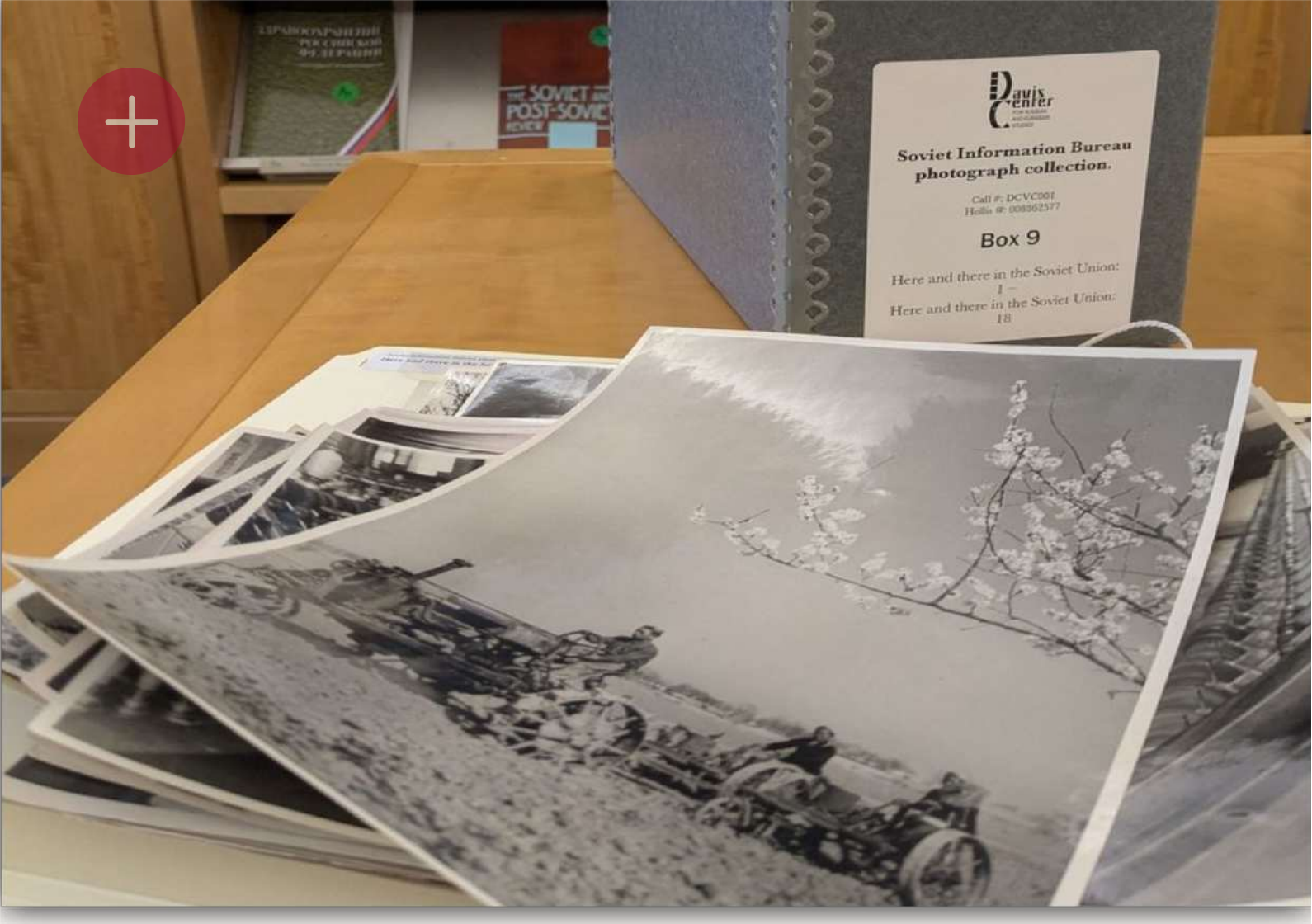
The nearly six thousand black-and-white photographs making up the collection were intended for distribution and publication in Western media outlets, with each photograph being accompanied by carefully composed captions in various languages, predominantly English.

The purpose of the collection? To promote the Soviet Union as a place of newfound energy, prosperity, and enlightenment. The photographs present scenes in modern hospitals and schools, humming factories and collective farms, proud soldiers and diligent students, contented herders and hardworking tractor drivers, as well as vibrant urban life together with jubilant parades in Red Square. They show workers repairing bombed-out buildings and constructing the next Metro station, smiling children in young pioneer summer camps and war orphans eating wholesome meals in state-run "children's homes".

They depict prominent figures like Joseph Stalin and Dmitrii Shostakovich and well-known events, from the Battle of Stalingrad to the 1948 world chess championship with the participation of Soviet chess grandmaster Mikhail Botvinnik. Taken by some of the country's most celebrated photo-journalists, the images suggest a Soviet World that has a place for all ethnic and religious groups and that remains open to the West, hosting visitors like Clementine Churchill – all while exerting an influence in satellite states like Czechoslovakia and Mongolia.

The Soviet Information Bureau handed this particular photograph collection to the staff of the Moscow and Prague bureaus of World News Service, an internal news agency of McGraw-Hill, Inc. The photos' circuitous journey from the USSR to the United States via Toronto eventually culminated in their donation to Harvard University in the 1950s. They lay forgotten in the Widener Library vault until the early 2000s, when they were rediscovered and transferred to the Davis Center Collection.



To quote one of the photos' earliest Davis Center curators, Ernest Zitser, "the … collection's breadth, depth, and English-language accessibility endow it with enormous potential, both as a pedagogical tool in the classroom and within the wider community of specialists, not only on the Soviet Union, but also on the history of the Cold War, everyday life, and twentieth-century visual culture."

This potential was realized to a significant degree in 2018, when all the photographs were digitized and all captions transcribed, turning the collection into a full-text-searchable visual database, accessible to students and scholars worldwide. So, whether you are undertaking scholarly research or are simply curious for a glimpse into life in the Soviet Union, you can **access the entire collection here!**



The SIB photographs are stored in the Davis Center Collections at Harvard's Fung Library. Click to enlarge.

Time and Place

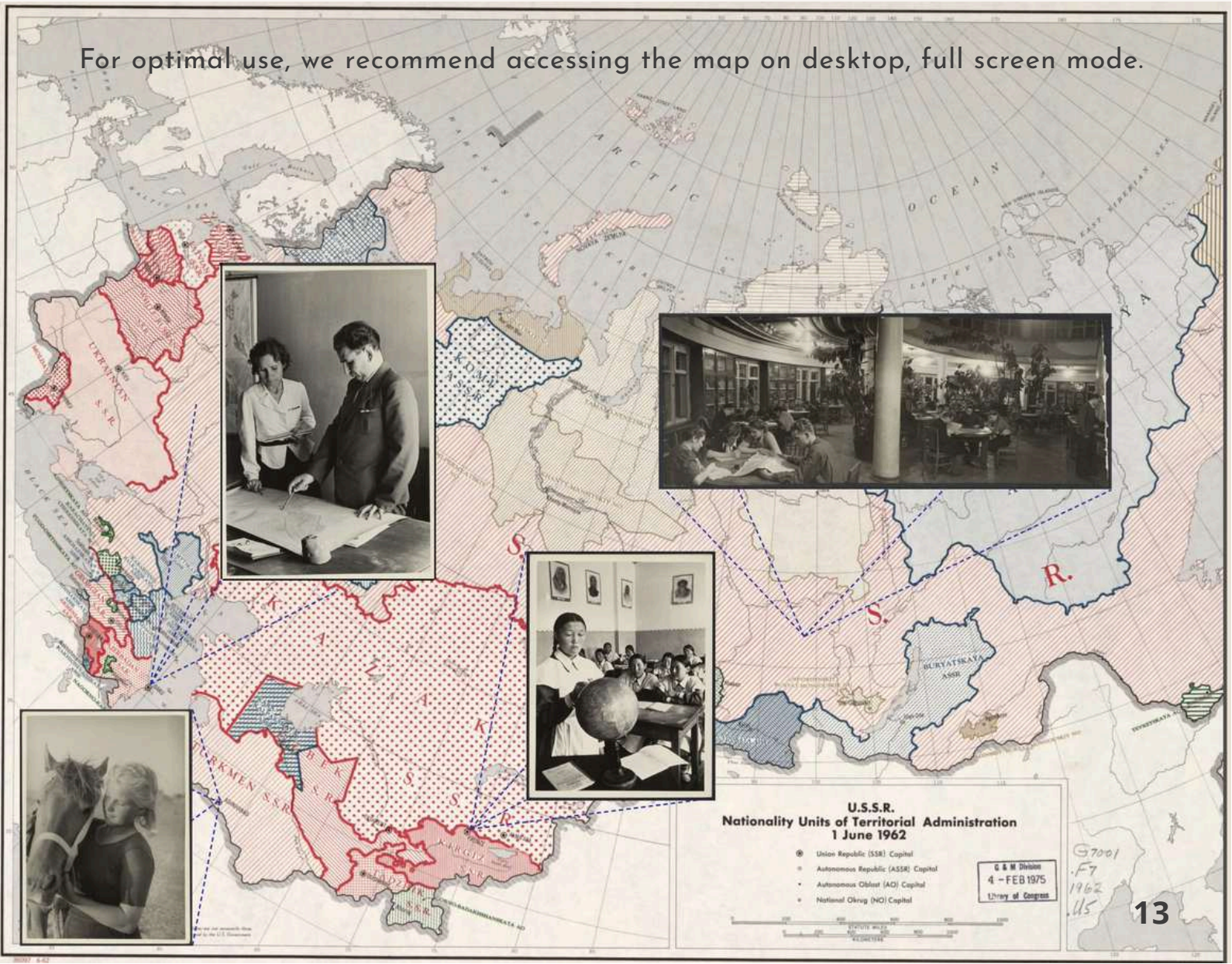
Even after digitization, Svetlana Rukhelman, the Librarian for the Davis Center Collection, knew that this phenomenal archival trove had many more secrets to reveal. Dr. Rukhelman has teamed up with the Imperiia Project on an ambitious project to map the entire Soviet Information Bureau Photograph Collection. That means geolocating every photo in the collection, taken throughout the vast Soviet space. The goal is to offer our Davis Center community and the public the opportunity to explore how geography was employed to promote a Soviet Narrative.

Work on the project has just begun and will require many hours collecting spatial data and digital map-making. In the meantime, we invite you to take a sneak peek into the various visions of empire that SIB propagandists sought to project. And while they were especially focused on life, leisure, and labor in major Russian cities – more than half of the collection's material is focused like Moscow and Saint Petersburg – they also sent photographers in all corners of the Soviet Union and beyond, from Estonia and Ukraine to Siberia and North Korea.

Click the map below and take a moment to reflect on how each photograph connects to all others to promote the universalist ideals of communism.

Use the ***filter*** option to explore carefully constructed scenes depicting joyful farmers in the fields, eager students conducting scientific experiments, focused workers operating new machinery, and new mothers casting their votes for a better tomorrow.

As you navigate our curated map, you will travel a space that was meant to evoke industrial development, scientific progress, and cultural inspiration, as well as ethnic diversity and gender equality.





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Manuscripts Unbound

A recently launched manuscript digitization project between Harvard University and Kazakhstan's leading research institutions heralds a new chapter in Regional Studies and Central Asian philology.



We consume and generate knowledge in a rapidly evolving information environment that gives us a misplaced sense of confidence that the answers to all our questions are just a few clicks away. However, in a world where A.I. bots are ready to indulge even our most obscure queries, it is worth remembering that knowledge has reached us in no small part due to the vicissitudes of history.

Indeed, all the world's knowledge has reached us - and our search engines – thanks to centuries-long efforts to discover, collect, catalogue, study, and preserve myriads of manuscripts and artifacts in libraries and archives across the globe. Sadly, such efforts have sometimes failed, and invaluable texts are forever lost to us either by accident or design.

Within this historical reality, the national archives of Kazakhstan hold the promise of reclaiming veritable founts of wisdom. Extensive collections of old and fragile manuscripts that have not yet been catalogued, digitized, or even identified, populate the stacks.

That Is, Until Now

Harvard University's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies has joined forces with Kazakhstan's Republican State Enterprise (RSE) "Gylym Ordasy" on an ambitious digitization project titled "Kazakhstan's Manuscript Heritage" to preserve and unlock the country's manuscript archives. Preliminary observations have already revealed invaluable historical manuscripts in numerous regional lan-





guages - Chaghatay, Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Manchu, Tibetan, Old Kazakh, as well as Tote Zhazu – that touch on everything from poetry, religious thought, and philosophy to medical treatises, historical accounts, and legal documents.

The project architects aim to not only plant the seeds for lasting collaboration and expertise exchange between U.S. and Kazakhstan-based scholars and staff, but to reposition the region as a central pillar in the intellectual dialogues and cultural exchanges between Eastern and Western civilizations.

A Timely Collaboration

Backed by a mega-grant from Kazakhstan's Ministry of Higher Education and Science Committee of Science, the origins of "Kazakhstan's Manuscript Heritage" project lay in an initial effort to solve a relatively modest problem: to facilitate access for Harvard graduate students to archival materials in Kazakhstan. But as the director of the Davis Center's Central Asia Program Nargis Kassenova explains, it quickly became evident to all parties involved that they were facing a wonderful opportunity to fulfill broader institutional and intellectual needs.





At a time when many countries are signaling a shrinking interest in the humanities and the avenues for inter-institutional collaborations are becoming narrower, Dr. Kassenova and her Kazakhstani counterparts dared to "think big" and introduce a plan to not simply facilitate access to Kazakhstan's manuscript treasures, but to modernize the entire system of organizing and accessing archival knowledge.

After gaining access to new scanning technologies for conservation, restoration, and digitization, staff at "Gylym Ordasy" have also been joined by interdisciplinary scholars from the Khoja Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University to help organize and manage academic and codicological research. To do so, local personnel will benefit from the expertise and assistance of scholars and library staff at Harvard University through various training workshops and internship opportunities organized by the Davis Center, both in Cambridge and Central Asia. Meanwhile, Harvard students will have the unique opportunity to do fieldwork in previously inaccessible archives and build new scholarly connections with their Kazakhstani counterparts at co-organized international conferences, specialized workshops, seminars, and summer schools.

Cultural Preservation through A.I.

While the project exemplifies the ideals of international academic collaboration, it also holds a deeply personal meaning for scholars associated with the project, like Harvard's Gulnar Eziz Yulghun, director of The Uyghur/Chaghatay Language Program in Harvard's Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations - the only program in the nation that offers philological training in Chaghatay at all levels.







Prof. Elliott and Dr. Kassenova inside the yurt of the U.S. Embassy in Astana after a conversation with American diplomats on the potential of academic cooperation between Harvard and leading Kazakhstani universities. June 2024.

Speaking with us about the long-term value of the "Kazakhstan's Manuscript Heritage" project, Dr. Yulghun noted that as of September 1st, 2017, China imposed a ban on the use of the Uyghur language and the study of Chaghatay manuscripts on its territory. The ban also calls for the seizure and destruction of any books written in Chaghatay across the entire Xinjiang region; a policy of cultural erasure that impacted her own family.

Accordingly, while thinking about the "Manuscript Heritage" project, Dr. Yulghun expressed hope that the discovery, digitization, and dissemination of manuscripts in can bring about a renaissance in the preservation and study of the Chaghatay languages, which for over six centuries had been the lingua franca of mediaeval and early modern Central Asia, from the 1400s until the middle 20th century.

Having previously worked on the **Chaghatay 2.0** project at the University of Kansas, Dr. Yulghun has teamed up with fellow philologists as well as IT specialists from Astana IT University to produce not just scans of rediscovered texts but also high-quality translations, transliterations, and linguistic annotations for each manuscript focused on, but not limited to, the Chaghatay language. Though the task seems monumental if approached with conventional textual analysis methods, given the large volume of potential texts that have yet to be identified, the team is employing Artificial Intelligence tools to make the process much more streamlined. Specifically, they are using A.I. for Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to extract digital text from newly found handwritten manuscripts that may never have even been transcribed, let alone translated in another language. The process involves turning pixels into text, which are then interpreted, cleaned, and organized through Large Language Models.

But beyond the process of making texts accessible and analyzable from a linguistic and philological perspective – which is in itself an impressive achievement - these efforts will further facilitate the creation of teaching materials, including interactive language apps, textbooks, as well as a much-needed online Chaghatay dictionary for future generations of students.

Going Forward, Looking Back

While "Kazakhstan's Manuscript Heritage" project - slated to run through 2027 - is in many ways exciting and innovative, it is also an homage to centuries-old efforts to (re)discover, preserve, and disseminate knowledge, beauty, and fundamental truths. Somewhere in a reading room in Almaty, in a lab in Astana, or in a classroom in Cambridge, the past is being carefully unbound so that it can be freely found in the future. And our Davis Center colleagues will be there to see it through.



Stacks in the Harvard Libraries Depository.

реніе 19

~~Въ Грамотѣ~~ Высочайше пожалованной

Благородному россійскому дворянству въ 21. день апрѣля 1785. года Грамоты 80ть статей повелѣно: ~~въ Статьѣ 80ть напечатано~~ въ 4

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и наоборотъ въ толкованіи иностранные роды не иные суть, какъ тѣ, кои въ россійское подданство вступили, и о коихъ упомянуто въ указѣхъ 195. года, о пополненіи разрядной родословной книги, повелѣвая что бъ таковые царскіе, владѣтельные, княжескіе и иные вѣдомые честные роды вносить въ особую часть родословной книги. — въ табелѣ о рангахъ 1722. года генваря 24. дня въ концѣ 16. пункта написано сими словами: въ нашей службѣ обрѣтающіеся чужестранные роды имѣютъ или

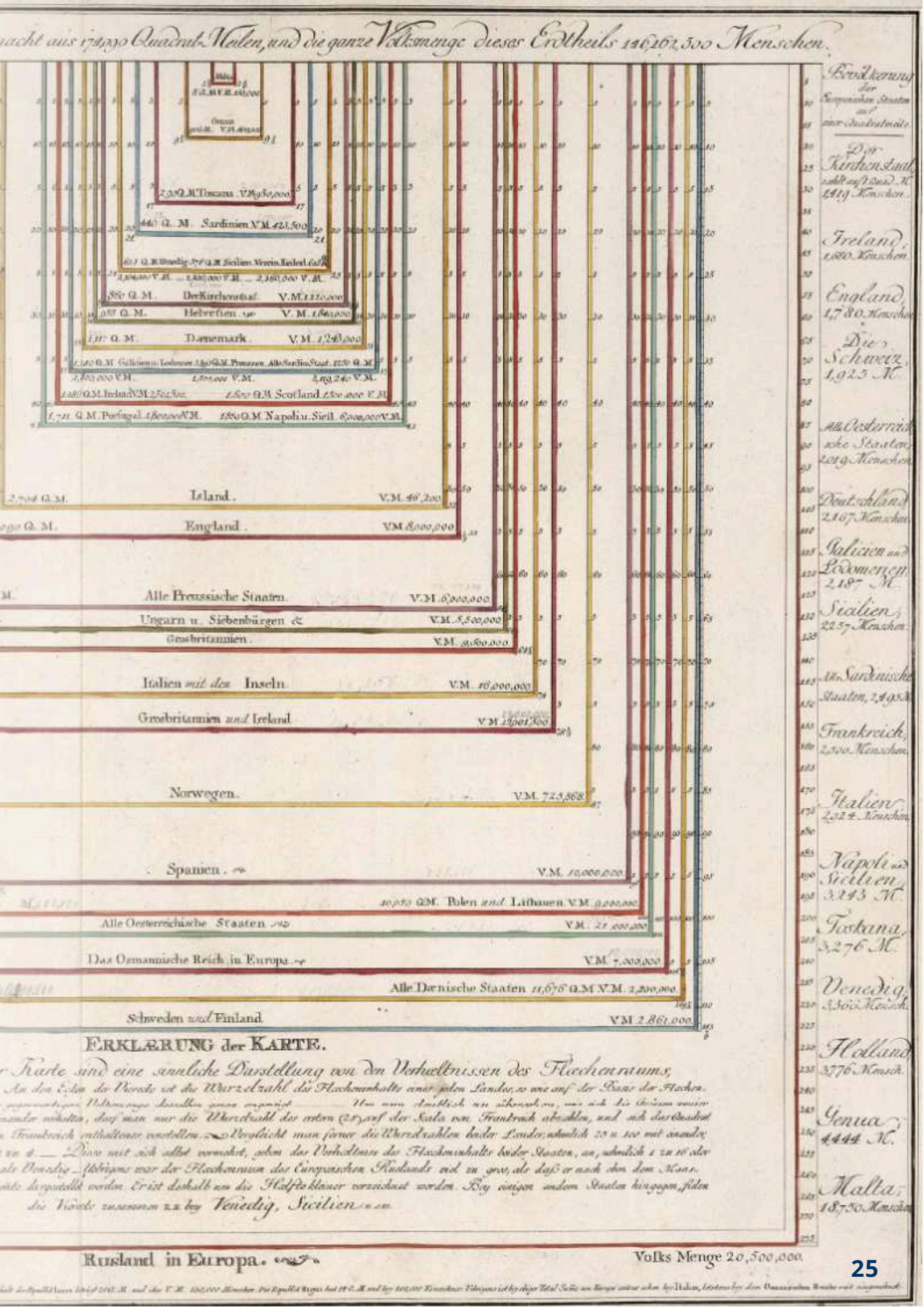

AT THE [CUTTING] EDGE

Imperiia Map of the Week

Over the years, the Imperiia Project has gathered and created thousands of maps describing the Russian Empire. Now we are delivering them to your inbox!

Each issue delivers a map - either original or historic – accompanied by a brief statement of significance and a link to a related (Imperiia-produced) resource

Sign up here!



ERKLÆRUNG der KARTE.

Karte sind eine ähnliche Darstellung von den Verhältnissen des Flächenraums,
An den Ecken der Vierecke ist die Wurzelzahl des Flächeninhalts einer jeden Länder, so wie auf der Tasse der Flächen-
gegenseitigen Volksmenge darstellen ganz angezeigt. Um nun deutlich zu übersehen, wie sich die Grösse meiner
Länder verhalten, darf man nur die Wurzelzahl des ersten (2,8) auf der Scala von Frankreich abzählen, und sich den Flächeninhalt
von Frankreich enthaltener vorstellen. Vergleicht man ferner die Wurzelzahlen beider Länder, nehmlich 2,8 u. 100 mit einander
zu 4. Diese mit sich selbst vermehrt, geben das Verhältniss der Flächeninhalte beider Staaten, an, nehmlich 1 zu 16 als
wie Venedig. Uebrigens war der Flächenraum des Europäischen Rußlands viel zu gros, als daß er nach dem dem Maas-
stabe dargestellt werden. Erist deshalb um die Hälfte kleiner verzeichnet worden. Bey einigen andern Staaten hingegen, finden
die Vierecke zusammen z.B. bey Venedig, Sicilien u.s.w.

VELES
data catalog

Archives and libraries are filled with a wealth of useful information. But converting these records of the human past into usable and meaningful data requires labor and expertise (and a lot of coffee).



That's where we come in. Named after the Slavic god of the underworld and wilderness, the Imperiia Project's data catalog provides freely accessible, well documented utterly fascinating data about the world that was once the Russian Empire to a primarily English-speaking audience.

Our goal is to lower the barrier for spatial analysis so that students, scholars, and members of the public can connect the Tsarist past with today's technology.

Access our data through
Harvard's Dataverse portal



Wisdom In The Field



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NAVIGATING ARCHIVES



Student Voices

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Where to Look

by Leora Eisenberg

Archives have long been considered the lifeblood of the historical profession. And though historians' methods are modernizing for the better – oral history, for instance, is becoming more and more popular! – most of us still rely on archival materials. Now in the fifth year of my Ph.D., I've spent copious time in archives throughout Central Asia (read: every summer since 2022 and the entire 2024-2025 academic year) and am eager to share my experience with readers. I hope that this will give you a taste of what it's like to work in the region – and perhaps even encourage some of you to pursue research there.

Because my dissertation compares the development of national music in Soviet Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, these are the two countries where I spend most of my time. Kazakhstan's archival landscape is quite straightforward: Almaty, the country's largest city and former capital, is home to the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan (the Soviet-era state archive) and the Archives of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (the Soviet-era Communist Party archive).

Because the Soviet state and the Communist Party were, officially speaking, separate institutions, most people researching the Soviet period will need to work in both archives, although usually one is more relevant to their work than the other. In my case, musical organizations, like the State Academic Theater of Opera and Ballet, were generally state organizations (as you can see in the name), so I tend to spend more time at the Central State Archives. Nevertheless, the Presidential Archive often holds useful files from the Communist Party cells of the theaters themselves, where I've found invaluable ideological discussions on opera scripts and denunciations from Stalin's Great Terror.

Separately, while both archives are relatively easy to access, regulations have changed over the past few years, and researchers now need to apply for access before arrival. This can take up anywhere from a few days to a month, so be sure to get in touch with your country's Kazakhstani embassy in advance.

In a rare treat, I also had the chance to work at the State Archives of the City of Almaty this past summer. Historians often miss the forest for the trees – that is, they focus on the "central" picture instead of the regional or local one – and ignore city archives. I found this experience to be hugely helpful, however, as many individual musicians and performers, like composer Ablahat Espaev and ballet dancer Dauren Abirov, donated their personal archives there!

Getting to the archives was a trip: the building itself looks like a massive cruise liner, and it's about thirty minutes out of town. All the better for me: there was virtually no one there, and the very helpful staff was able to bring me my files quickly!

"Personal archives are an incredible treasure trove."

There and Back Again

Last summer, I also worked in the delightful State Central Archives of the Kyrgyz Republic for the first time. While the general trend in Kazakhstan is toward digitization – as of 2025, you place your orders for archival files on the computer! – this archive is still somewhat low-tech, with everything by hand and on paper. This was, however, the most relaxed state archive I've worked in; though most archives require you to leave your phone in a locker at the entrance, here you were allowed to bring it in, provided that you didn't take any pictures (copies/scans are many archives' primary source of income). I found a great deal of documents here about Kyrgyzstan's cultural development, though because neither Kyrgyzstan nor Bishkek was a regional center in the Soviet or imperial period, this archive will likely not be as useful to those aiming for a more centralized picture of the region.

Uzbekistan is the most logical place to find those kinds of documents – Tashkent was an administrative center in the imperial period, the capital of the short-lived Turkestan A.S.S.R., and the (second!) capital of the Uzbek S.S.R. – as well as the largest city in Soviet Central Asia. Because of its direct relevance to so many scholars' projects, I generally recommend applying for archival access at least 3-4 months before your arrival. You can generally do this through your embassy. If, however, this approach does not work out for some reason – not to fear! There are plenty of other fantastic archives in Uzbekistan, such as, for example, those of various house-museums (which, if they are state museums, require the permission of the Agency for Cultural Heritage): I myself worked at the House-Museums of Ural Tansykbaev and Tamara Khanum, the latter of which was a veritable treasure trove for my research.

Public vs. Private

But don't stop at state museums: there are plenty of private ones, too! I was also able to scan many of the files held at the house-museums of Uzbek musician and musicologist Yunus Rajabi and composer Suleyman Yudakov. It is best to call these museums directly – writing emails is not an efficient method of communication in Uzbekistan. I'd also like to remind everyone that personal archives are an incredible treasure trove – I was able to track down the songs and daughters of famous performers, as well as, occasionally, the performers themselves, all of whom generously shared their materials this way.

I'm looking forward to going back to Central Asia this summer to gather the last dribbles and drabbles of archival material for my dissertation research. I'll be visiting many of the archives I listed here… but rest assured, I'll be getting permission before I even land in Almaty and Tashkent!



Leora while working in the Presidential Archive, photo taken by archive staff, 2022.

Leora Eisenberg is a doctoral student in the History department. Her dissertation focuses on the music industry in Soviet Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and argues that rather than creating novel genres, becoming musically Soviet meant creating national versions of bourgeois European ones. Leora explains that although Central Asian republics all produced national operas in the 1930s and British-style Beat groups in the 1970s, they took different approaches, shaped by their distinct demographic and geopolitical situations. Specifically, Kazakhstan disproportionately produced Kazakh-language, Kazakh-performed music to obscure its demographic realities -- namely, a Kazakh minority, whereas more culturally Uzbekistan had greater resources, freedom, and a larger population to generate a broadly accessible, multilingual repertoire. But whatever shape it took, the outcome was irreversible: even as contemporary Central Asian societies increasingly embrace national traditions, European idioms still dominate local cultural production, from the harmonies of popular music to the promotion of national operas and ballets.

Archival Luck

by Alice Volfson

I am, by nature, a planner. I take pride in the research and preparation that make travel smooth: backup options for housing, food, and activities, all lined up before I ever board a plane. When I set out this summer for archival work in Almaty, Kazakhstan, I was no different. I had booked an apartment within walking distance of both archives I intended to work in: the Presidential and the Central State. I had printed multiple copies of my letter of invitation on Davis Center letterhead, and had gone so far as to contact the First Secretary of the Kazakh Embassy in Washington, D.C., personally to secure permission. I had, as our advisor George Soroka always counseled, a plan A, B, C, and D.

I Did Not Expect to Need A Plan E

It became clear almost immediately after arriving in Almaty in early June that the rules had changed, specifically, in the few weeks before my arrival. The written permission I had obtained from the First Secretary was no longer valid for the Central State Archive, my primary source. In its place, I now needed a signed physical certificate from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The front desk handed me an email address and a phone number to submit my request. Neither responded.

With little choice but to wait and hope, I spent the first month working in the Presidential Archive –a smaller institution



focused on party bureaucracy holdings. Before I could begin, I sat for an interview with the director, a warm, sharp Kazakh woman who quizzed me about other archives across the former Soviet space and, almost offhandedly, suggested several angles I hadn't considered for my thesis.



The Presidential Archive has an unusual character: its documents are entirely digitized, and yet no electronic devices are permitted inside. Each morning, I locked away my phone and laptop and took notes exclusively by hand. My only company in the small computer lab was Jonathan Raspe, another visiting researcher, and Demir, a local researcher-for-hire whose path, as it turned out, I was far from done crossing.

After a month, I had exhausted the relevant materials at the Presidential Archive. I returned to the Central State Archive and was turned away just as quickly as before: come back with a physical certificate. I sat down on the bench outside, unsure what to do next, when Demir appeared. I explained my situation.

He listened, then handed me a phone number, explaining that if I sent a photo of my invitation letter via WhatsApp, I should be able to get permission. No name. No explanation. Nothing else. I had no idea who I was texting. But twenty minutes after sending the photo, my phone buzzed with a blurry image of a certificate authorizing me to work in the Central State Archive. Without that lucky encounter – without Demir happening to cross the same courtyard at the same moment – I would never have set foot inside.

Proper Protocol

The Central State Archive is an imposing place. A hulking Soviet-era concrete building, it is almost as difficult to navigate as it is to enter. Every morning, I checked in with the woman at the front desk to receive my daily pass. Phones had to be surrendered to a bank of lockers before proceeding; getting caught with one past the desk carried a three-month ban. Up on the third floor, the reading room sits to the right: a medium-sized hall of ornate

windows trimmed in Kazakhstan's signature gold and blue. After clearing yet another director's interview, I finally found myself there, ready to work but was immediately confronted with a process far more elaborate than anything at the Presidential Archive.

First, the finding aid: four half-typed, half-handwritten volumes. Then, the order. Each morning I was issued a card with my name and a QR code. I would scan it at one of the reading room computers to log into the system and place a request for up to three dela, (essentially folders of secondary finding aids) which would then be delivered within 24 to 36 hours. From those, I could identify the specific opisi, or files, I actually wanted, and place another order for up to five at a time. The woman who managed the desk, I learned quickly, preferred that you order the maximum each time. I did not make that mistake twice.

Luck, it turns out, is an unreliable archivist's companion, it is present some days, absent on others. I was lucky when I arrived early enough to claim a table by one of the tall windows, where a thin breeze occasionally cut through the heat. Lucky when I stumbled across, on my very last day in the reading room, the document I had spent the entire month searching for: the complete speeches from the 1973 Afro-Asian Writers Conference. *Lucky* when I ran into Rossen Djagalov – the scholar whose book had first inspired my project – at the café next door to the archive, as if the city itself had arranged the encounter. *Lucky* each time I opened a folder to find that its documents were in English, giving my brain a merciful rest from hours of Russian – a language in which I am orally fluent but which, after a long day of dense bureaucratic prose, still gives me a persistent headache.

Archival research has a reputation for requiring patience and method, which is undeniably true; it's a tedious and exhausting process made worth it in the end when you are holding the document which you searched high and low to find. But no letter of invitation, no embassy contact, no plan A through D prepares you for a locked door and a phone number with no name attached.

I came to Almaty as a planner, bright-eyed about the opportunity to work in the archives and hold precious materials in my hands. I left having learned that the most important document I collected all summer arrived as a blurry WhatsApp photo from a stranger on a bench. Some things, it turns out, cannot be planned for. You just have to be sitting in the right place.



Alice Volfson is a 2nd year REECA student. Her work primarily focuses on the creation of post-colonial culture between Africa and Central Asia during the Cold War. **Right:** Some of Alice's hundreds of pages of notes she took while in the archives.

Film/recording Arch # 3449

ф. р-210
ф. р-944
ф. р-980 - Journal lit + art kz
- 1219 - info agency
- 1242 - искусств делам
- 1365
- 1367
- 1970 * внешней торговли
- 1778 * - writers union
- 1955 - ministry of FA
- 2044 - committee on defense of earth
- 1890 - commited on culture
- 1824 - journalist union

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1778 → 92, 879, 71, 9, 224

1 2
1824 → 273, 34

1955

1808

Правление союза советских писателей Казахстана
- 2 (1912-1968)
- 2доп (56-65)
- 3лд (37-63)

1890

1
1доп
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Правление союза

Art De



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Stories from Uzbekistan's Cotton Fields

THE THINGS THEY SHARED

Last year's visitors at the Davis Center would have had the opportunity to admire a stunning work titled "Pay Locals" by American visual artist Farrah Karapetian: a large cyanotype print on cotton rag, on display in the main hallway.

At once artistic, political, and anthropological, the piece is part of an ongoing art project entitled "Fieldwork" that explores through a comparative lens the personal narratives of cotton laborers in the United States and Central Asia over the institutional narratives that have predominated both visually and verbally since the end of the U.S. Civil War.

Sharing a deep personal connection with o
2022 to Uzbekistan and worked with multip
unpack their memories while picking cotton fo

DeCode caught up with the artist to learn
personal memories and sensory experiences i



DeCode: "Pay Locals" was displayed at the Davis Center together with five silver gelatin prints depicting objects like chocolate, cognac, toilet paper – what is it all about?

Karapetian: In June 2022, I went to the Ilkhom Theater on my first residency in Uzbekistan through the Art Prospect Network of CEC Arts Link. I had read Langston Hughes' autobiography and was struck by his faith in the socialist project and how it was manifesting in the cotton fields.

That was, of course, only part of the story and I wanted to know how, in fact, people were still feeling about the cotton fields and how that had changed since Soviet times.

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more about her creative process in turning nto art.



But I wanted to enter the political conversation through the personal, considering that the history of representation of labor, let alone cotton, is usually dictated by the people who benefit from it financially. Specifically, I wanted to access people's stories through the senses. This led me to ask about food, about smells, and about the moments that surrounded them.

A detail that was regularly mentioned was the lack of abundance of food or luxuries. It turns out that in the cotton fields toilet paper was consistently mentioned as a luxurious scarcity, but one that anybody who did happen to have would gladly share with others. Same with chocolate; it was an in-demand item that was routinely shared among cotton pickers.

Drinking cognac was also a lingering detail for a lot of people, in part because it was something they learned to do. For instance, I was told a touching story by a woman who recalled learning to drink Cognac with lemon in the field from an Armenian soldier who had been deployed in the Afghan War. She shared how the young man was her first love, and that all the other girls really liked him, but that he had eyes only for her.

DeCode: In your video "Who to Cotton" about the cotton pickers in Uzbekistan we witness much joy and music among the farmers. I would even say that joy is the main motif there. It offers a stark contrast with other reports we get about the situation on the ground that mention forced labor, harsh working conditions, and exposure to chemicals.

Karapetian: I think there is a difference from the happy farmers depicted by photographers like Max Penson of happy people making big bushels of cotton for Stalin - "we have reached our quota and we would like to serve the government with respect to having surpassed our norm." Here it was more like "I am living my life on this field. It is somewhat of a reprieve from my daily life." And it is very counter to the narrative of "I want to be in school;" rather, "oh, I got to leave college for a minute." There is one negative photograph of a girl who got sick and then ran away from the fields. They wouldn't let her stop work, so she ran away to go home. In the interview she said she was kicked out of the Komsomol. But then, strangely, she wraps up the interview saying, "but I had a good life because I found this other one."

Everyone wanted their stories of their lives to evoke either that they had made a particular kind of friendship or a new experience. The one thing I did notice, though, that I would have loved to resolve, and I still would like to resolve, is that because of the network at the Ilkhom, I was mostly talking to people from the urban areas who had been bussed out to the fields. In fact, other people from the rural areas were being paid by these urbanites so that they could relax. In more than one picture, even the one about the first love, there's a woman in the background who's got a big bushel of cotton on her back and she's clearly working while these other people are drinking their cognac in the foreground.



But at the same time, I didn't want to impose a certain outsider narrative upon their stories, which is to say, "no, you really were having a bad time. You really were being exploited." I just feel like that's wrong too. I don't want to enter as someone judging the personal experience of people who actually are telling me how it went for them. I did want to include my observation that locals experienced this labor differently throughout several of the pieces, especially the one displayed at Harvard in which the idea is centered, but I didn't have more of the narrative of people from the regions with which to flesh out their experience on its own.

And the people from the cities who had this experience of leisure, it felt like they wanted to justify it to themselves as far as it was a local economy: “these people were making extra money, we were paying them beyond that.”

DeCode: How were you thinking about presenting or working with the body?

Karapetian: First of all, because I entered the project through Langston Hughes, looking to understand his relationship not only to literature but also theater, it felt particularly justified – it rhymed, so to speak - to bring theater to the table and my practice in other projects to this context, which is to say that other than simply oral history, people do re-enter their memory or begin a kind of surrogacy with other people's memories through their bodies.

For instance, during my second trip to Russia on a Fulbright grant in 2018, I was working with young people on questions pertaining to the difference between personal sense of security and state sense of security, and how they could enter both of those models through Meyerhold's biomechanics. For years I had been working on a question of muscle memory without any Soviet references. I have always worked with people to resuscitate memories through their bodies. Veterans will get back into a particular posture. For example, if they say, “I knocked down a door,” I say, “what kind of door? What kind of object do you need to remember that?” and they'll say, “this gun!” and I will then remake it as a transparent material. They can hold it. I will remake the door. Then they don't have to work so hard to get back into that posture.

And when I discovered Meyerhold's trajectory through theater and theory, I felt there was a match between my practice and a local one in Russia. And after 2022 I went instead to Uzbekistan, where I entered with the same stream of practice of confidence in the body as the route to memory.

I was hoping that the younger Uzbek people who had not been subject to the requirement to leave school would be able to re-enact some of the stories they were hearing from family and friends and to understand even more viscerally the narratives that they had heard and didn't otherwise have a real connection to.



Farrah Karapetian's "Pay Locals" on display at the Davis Center, from April through December, 2025. Click the image and zoom in to discover all the fascinating details.

DeCode: Your focus on personal experiences hints at the lingering tension of individualism within communism, almost like an echo of capitalism. How did you approach it during the creative process?

Karapetian: Nobody has this black and white feeling about this time. They don't come down on it and say, "I'm so nostalgic for collectivization." Even some of the Svetlana Alexievich interviews in her *Secondhand Time* book are more specifically nostalgic in many ways than these people's memories.

In Uzbekistan, they did linger on really good memories. Even a younger guy, when he was asked about what he remembers in terms of sound, he said "World Behind My Wall" by Tokio Hotel. Every time he hears that, he's right back in the fields. That is not a song you would associate with the Soviet Union.



Farrah Karapetian is Associate Professor in the Department of Art, Architecture + Art History at the University of San Diego, as well as affiliated faculty in the Africana Studies minor. Her artwork is collected in institutions such as the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

So, you go from the very institutional things like “we are doing this together, let's sing about the eagle” to these kids who were remembering smoking, drinking, listening to music, falling in love, and then being trapped. But the way that they talked about being trapped was more like teenagers being trapped, like “I wanted to go home for the night, so I had to sneak out and somebody hid me.”

I tried to resist drawing big conclusions. I was nervous about making a project that would appear to be too sympathetic to the harvest’s history. I don't think I did. I think the pictures don't feel saccharine, or like they have a particular positive slant on them like the photo books from the first ten years of Uzbekistan. These are in fact individual experiences, and capitalism doesn’t have a monopoly on that. You live and die alone. I don’t think it’s capitalist to know that.

Besides academic journals, she has also published in numerous arts publications including the Brooklyn Rail and the Los Angeles Review of Books. Her writing has also earned her the Warhol Arts Writers Grant.

Check out the artist's art portfolio, learn more about upcoming events, and gain access to her published work by visiting her official website - just click the link below:

www.farrahkarapetian.com

Wisdom In Practice



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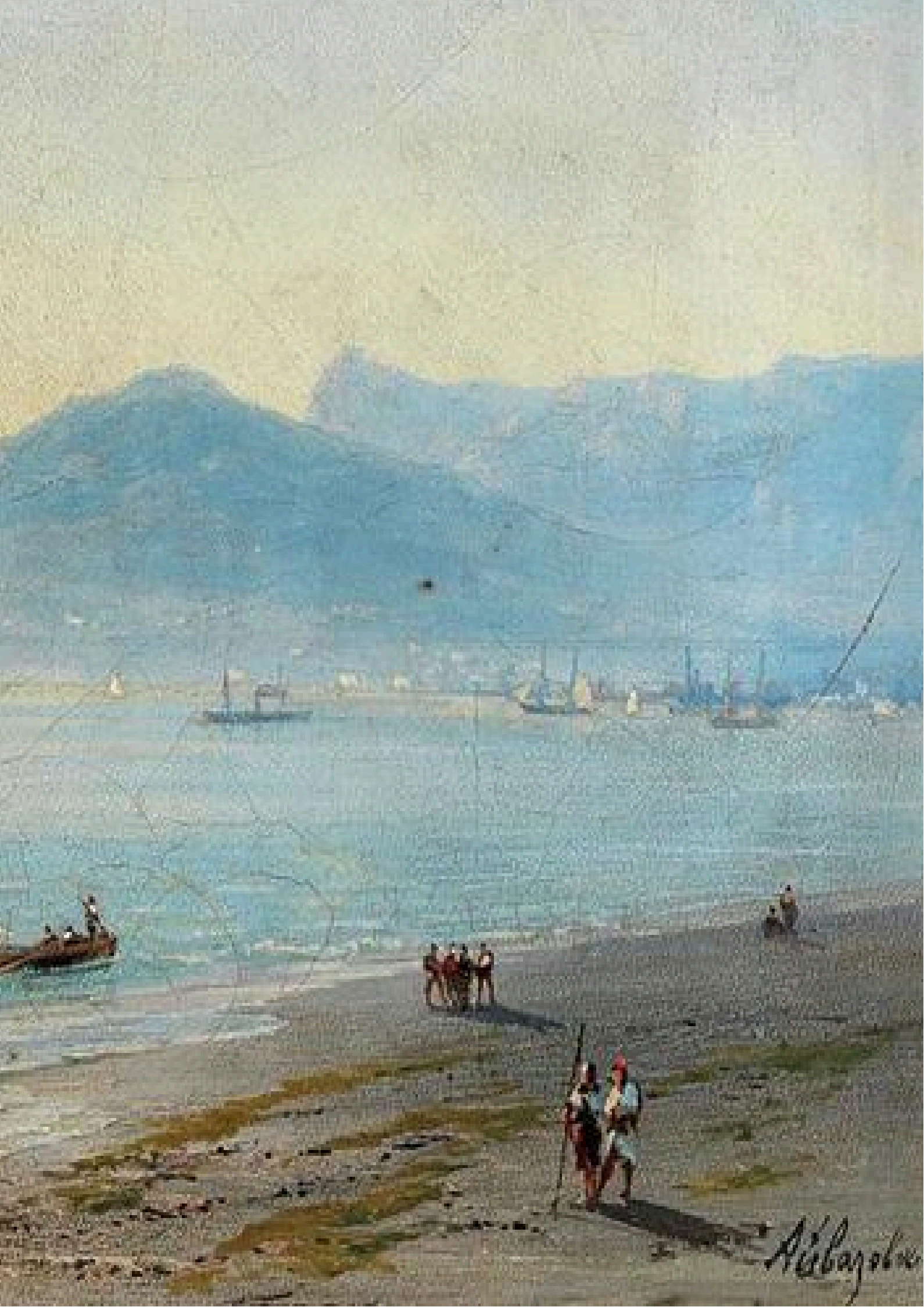



Valerie Browne
REECA '25

Since graduating, Valerie is pursuing her interest in Ukrainian studies and translation. During Summer 2025, she participated in the Translating Ukraine Summer Institute, hosted in Wrocław, Poland. While there, she completed her translation of Ukrainian dissident Ivan Bahrianyi's pamphlet "Why I Don't Want To Go Back to the USSR," due for publication later in the year.

In November 2025, Valerie presented at the 2025 ASSEES convention in D.C., on the phenomenon of "Mazepinstvo" and current Russian propagandistic notions of Ukrainian "fascism." This Spring, while teaching English in Almaty, Kazakhstan, she will also research Taras Shevchenko's exile in Kazakhstan.

As Research Assistant for the Imperiia Project, Valerie produced a digital "excavation" of archaic Crimean place names in historical maps. She spoke about her work in a MapMaker podcast episode, "Shakespeare Versus Stalin: Why Place Names Matter."



Julian Gonzales-Poirier
REECA '25

After graduating from the Davis Center, Julian moved to Kyiv to work as a professional development fellow at the Kyiv School of Economics. He also works at a boutique consultancy assisting American businesses operate in Ukraine. The Ukrainian language education he received at Harvard positioned him well to navigate bilingual environments in country.

While at the Davis Center, Julian worked as the Innovation Fellow for the Program on Georgian Studies, a role for which he explored the role of Türkiye and Iran in the South Caucasus. His thesis explored a similar topic, investigating role Turkish-Russian relations have on the wider region.

While at Harvard, Julian was also involved in organizing Black Sea Lab events, co-leading the Black Sea Frames project, and contributing to DeCode.

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2-3 Mark Waugh, Alamy, J34PGF. The Boston Public Library detail Boston, Massachusetts, United States, USA. April 2017.

4-5 Alice Volfson, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 2025.

6-7 "Here and There in the Soviet Union." Soviet Information Bureau Photographic Collection Collage. Paul Vădan, Cambridge, MA. 2026.

8-9 "Here and There in the Soviet Union." Soviet Information Bureau Photographic Collection Video Collage. Paul Vădan, Cambridge, MA. 2026.

11 Paul Vădan, Cambridge, MA. 2026.

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13 "Visions of Soviet World." Collage created by Paul Vădan, Cambridge, MA. 2026.

16-17 Paul Vădan, Cambridge, MA. 2026.

16 Courtesy of RSE Gylym Ordasyargis, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 2025.

17 Courtesy of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Almaty, Kazakhstan. June 2024.

18 Nargis Kassenova, Cambridge, MA. January 2026.

19 Nargis Kassenova, Almaty, Kazakhstan. December 2025.

21 Nargis Kassenova, Cambridge, MA. January 2026.

21 Courtesy of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Almaty, Kazakhstan. June 2024.

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30-31 "First Love", detail, Farrah Karapetian, 2023.

32-33 Paul Vădan, Featuring selected works by Farrah Karapetian's "Fieldwork" project. Cambridge, MA, 2026.

35 "Who to Cotton," Farrah Karapetian. Vimeo. https://vimeo.com/779804383. 34:09. 2022.

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