

Fifty Years in the East: The Memoirs of Wladimir Ivanow, edited with annotations by Farhad Daftary (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015), xvi + 256 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78076-841-0, £25.00

Even when considering a sub-discipline that traces its substantive origin to a time as recent as the 20th century, it is easy for the scholar and student – much less the casual reader – to take Ismā‘īlism as an outgrowth of disembodied, medieval manuscripts. With indispensable texts such as Farhad Daftary’s on Ismā‘īlī history and doctrines, the reader is confronted with reliable, well-sourced information; less apparent is the considerable physical, political, and interpersonal effort spent in collecting manuscripts, the contemporary ethnographic significance of investigating a marginalized Shī‘ī sect further split into smaller groups, and the role of broader political forces in the focused life of a scholar. Daftary’s introduction to Wladimir Ivanow’s memoirs *Fifty Years in the East* lays out the seminal role in the development of Ismā‘īlī studies that Ivanow played, but Ivanow’s memoir itself should not be relegated to another title in the Ismā‘īlī bibliography.

Ivanow left Russia after the October Revolution in 1917 and spent the rest of his life living in India, Persia, and traveling between them and throughout the Middle East. He did not live as an adventurer, colonist, or soldier, though – he was only ever there to pursue his studies and collect manuscripts, and the way in which he made his living throughout seems to have been incidental. While it is a work by a major scholar of Shī‘ī Islam, because Ivanow’s travels covered India, Central Asia, and the Middle East and is accordingly interesting to any student or scholar of those regions, the book rightfully belongs in the genre of travelogue. In this genre, it stands out as it neither makes an exotic spectacle of these regions nor does it fail to mention the surprising and the bizarre that Ivanow encountered daily in his years abroad.

The book begins with the author’s own preface, a hesitant acquiescence to demands from his friends and colleagues to write his autobiography. Conceding that some autobiographical material might help later students understand his methodology, he explains that the

memoir is divided into two sections with one that is autobiographical, and the other that is a non-chronological collection of impressions and experiences from his wide travels. Daftary's introductory material consists of two articles: an introduction to the biography of Ivanow and his academic importance, and then an article on the role of his work in the development of modern Ismā'īlī Studies. In this second article Daftary also completes an integral task: he capably and succinctly outlines Ismā'īlī history and its study by Western scholars, and then he contextualizes Ivanow's role in that development. To demonstrate both the lasting contribution of Ivanow to Ismā'īlī studies and the continued vibrancy and quicker pace of study within the field, Daftary brings the narrative beyond the contribution of Ivanow to the present day and the efforts of the Aga Khan.

As indicated in the preface, Ivanow wrote his memoir in two parts, autobiographical and impressionistic. In the autobiographical section, he deals with the major events of his life – the boring days of secondary school, choosing to live abroad, never being able to return to Russia after the revolution – with a resigned detachment and a matter-of-fact tone. In his section on impressions, he collects highly specific anecdotes and vignettes from his years fails to fall into the gross generalizations of the Orientalists a century before him. Readers, especially those from within Islamic Studies, will delight in what was amusingly similar in his day: he complains that cramming Arabic verbs was not so different than Latin ones, though they were more unpleasant (p. 43) and that “like many incipient orientalists” he began his study of Islam with Sufism but ended up “greatly” confused (p. 103). Likewise, readers will appreciate challenges that are less common in today's world: for instance, when he looked for books in Bukhara's markets, he had to be familiar enough to recognize the book midway through, as pages would regularly be missing (p. 116).

At the end of the book, Daftary also provides three helpful appendices: an annotated bibliography of Ivanow's works, a list of the publications by the Islamic Research Association, and a list of the publications of Ismaili Society which he helped to found. Daftary's annotations throughout Ivanow's memoir are useful, complete, and welcome and should be taken in conjunction with the appendices as a separate reference material for students interested in the development of Ismā'īlī studies. I did not find an instance where I desired the explication of a note where there was not one. However,

I do suspect that many second-language students of Arabic and Persian would have appreciated if non-English terms had been transliterated with diacritical marks as they would be in other scholarly works.

The value in this memoir is twofold. First, Ivanow captures the spirit of a geographical wide region of the world in the early 20th century from the fascinating perspective of a scholar of Ismā‘īlism. Rather than relegating the people and places he saw to a timeless orient, he sharply and poetically recognizes the dynamic, changing world of his time: in describing the once-beautiful Hamun marsh in Persia, he notes that it was overgrown and full of pelicans and flamingoes, but now covered in salt and mud (p. 97). He records the sometimes gradual, sometimes immediate spread of modernity without eulogizing or romanticizing. Second, his life reminds us that in very recent history, the collection of new information meant considerable time “in the field.” Scholars and students today compete for mere months abroad in far-flung archives or villages; regional experts glean insights on a place from a few weeks’ stay. Ivanow shows us another level of connection with the people and places that made possible his life’s work.

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