

THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDEOLOGY THROUGH SOVIET CULTURAL POLICY: THEATER, CINEMA, AND LITERATURE IN UZBEKISTAN (1945–1991)

Djavliyeva Nigora Abduvaliyevna
1st year Master's student in History
University of Exact and Social Sciences
Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Abstract: The Soviet period from 1945 to 1991 represented a critical phase in the evolution of national consciousness in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, where state policies toward theater, cinema, and literature served as powerful instruments for shaping a distinct national ideology. While ostensibly promoting proletarian internationalism and the construction of a unified Soviet identity, these cultural domains facilitated the institutionalization and aestheticization of Uzbek national forms within a socialist framework. This article examines the complex interplay between central directives from Moscow and local cultural production in Uzbekistan, demonstrating how the principle of “national in form, socialist in content” enabled the consolidation of a modern Uzbek national narrative. Through the promotion of historical heritage, folk traditions, and contemporary socialist achievements, cultural policies contributed to the formation of a layered identity that blended pre-Soviet legacies with Soviet modernity. The analysis highlights both the integrative mechanisms of Soviet cultural governance and the unintended spaces for national assertion that emerged, particularly during periods of relative thaw and stagnation. This process laid foundational elements for the post-Soviet national identity, underscoring the enduring legacy of Soviet cultural engineering in Central Asia.

Keywords: Soviet cultural policy, Uzbek national identity, theater and ideology, Soviet cinema in Central Asia, socialist realism, nation-building, literature and nationalism, Uzbek SSR.

The aftermath of the Great Patriotic War marked a turning point in Soviet cultural life, as the victorious state sought to consolidate its ideological hold over diverse populations while rebuilding a war-torn society. In Uzbekistan, as in other Union republics, the cultural sphere became a primary arena for negotiating the tensions between centralized Soviet authority and emerging national sentiments. Theater, cinema, and literature, tightly regulated yet richly resourced by the state, played pivotal roles in crafting a national ideology that affirmed Uzbek distinctiveness while subordinating it to the broader Soviet project. This dynamic was not merely top-down imposition but a dialectical process involving local intellectuals, artists, and party functionaries who navigated the constraints of ideological orthodoxy to preserve and reinvent elements of national heritage. Postwar reconstruction in the late 1940s and 1950s emphasized themes of heroism, unity, and reconstruction. Uzbek theaters, building on prewar foundations such as the Hamza Theater and others, staged productions that celebrated wartime contributions of Central Asian peoples alongside classical works adapted to socialist realist canons. Plays drew upon historical motifs from the Timurid era or folk epics, reframed to highlight progressive struggles against feudalism and imperialism, thereby linking Uzbek historical grandeur to the Soviet victory. This selective revival of national history served to foster pride in a distinct Uzbek past while embedding it within the narrative of Soviet multinational brotherhood. Literary works similarly proliferated, with authors like Oybek (Musa Tashmukhamedov) producing novels that explored national themes through the lens of socialist

transformation. His biographical and historical novels on figures such as Alisher Navoi not only elevated classical Uzbek literary heritage but also positioned it as a precursor to Soviet cultural flourishing.

The Zhdanovshchina of the late 1940s, with its campaigns against “rootless cosmopolitanism” and formalist deviations, initially tightened controls, yet in the national republics it paradoxically allowed for greater emphasis on indigenous forms. In Uzbekistan, this manifested in the promotion of national languages in cultural production and the development of institutions dedicated to preserving and adapting folk arts. Literary journals and publishing houses expanded output in Uzbek, fostering a generation of writers who crafted narratives of kolkhoz life, industrialization in the Ferghana Valley, and the emancipation of women, all infused with local color, customs, and linguistic idioms. This period solidified the canonization of certain national symbols poets, historical sites, and traditional motifs that would endure beyond the Soviet era. The Khrushchev Thaw after 1953 introduced greater flexibility, enabling deeper explorations of national identity. Cinema, recognized since Lenin’s time as the most important art form for mass education, experienced significant growth in Uzbekistan. The Uzbekfilm studio produced features that blended documentary realism with fictional storytelling, portraying the modernization of Central Asia while celebrating ethnic traditions. Films often depicted the friendship of peoples, showing Uzbek heroes collaborating with Russian counterparts on grand projects like cotton cultivation or infrastructure, yet they also showcased distinctive landscapes, music, and costumes that reinforced visual markers of Uzbek nationhood. Directors navigated censorship by embedding subtle national assertions within approved ideological frameworks, such as anti-imperialist themes that resonated with both Soviet rhetoric and local historical memories of resistance. Theater during this era evolved into a vibrant medium for public discourse. Repertoire planning balanced classical European and Russian plays with original Uzbek dramas. Productions of works by local playwrights frequently addressed contemporary issues through historical allegory, allowing audiences to draw parallels between past glories and present achievements. Folk theater elements, including elements of maskharaboz and epic recitation, were integrated into professional stages, professionalizing national performance traditions while subjecting them to socialist content requirements. This hybridization created a distinctly Soviet Uzbek theatrical style that educated audiences in Marxist-Leninist principles while affirming cultural continuity.

By the 1960s and 1970s, under Brezhnev’s stability, cultural policy in Uzbekistan reflected a mature form of “developed socialism.” Literature flourished with epic-scale novels that chronicled the transformation of Uzbek society from pre-revolutionary backwardness to Soviet modernity. Authors such as Pirimqul Qodirov and Odil Yoqubov produced works that delved into historical themes, including the legacies of Amir Temur and Ulugh Beg, portraying them as enlightened rulers whose scientific and cultural contributions prefigured Soviet progress. These texts contributed to a national historiography that emphasized Uzbekistan’s ancient urban civilization along the Silk Road, distinguishing it within the Soviet family of nations. Cinema reached new technical and artistic heights, with color films and wider distribution networks bringing Soviet Uzbek productions to both local and all-Union audiences. Themes expanded to include everyday life, moral dilemmas, and intergenerational conflicts, often set against the backdrop of Tashkent’s reconstruction after the 1966 earthquake or rural transformations. International festivals, such as those in Tashkent hosting

Afro-Asian filmmakers, positioned Uzbek cinema as a bridge between Soviet socialism and the decolonizing world, enhancing its national prestige.

Throughout these decades, the Union of Writers of Uzbekistan and corresponding creative unions for theater and cinema professionals acted as key intermediaries. They provided platforms for debate, material support, and ideological guidance, while also serving as sites where national elites could advocate for greater attention to local concerns. Party resolutions on culture periodically reaffirmed the need to combat nationalism, yet enforcement varied, allowing for the persistence of national motifs. The policy of *korenizatsiya*, though earlier in origin, continued to influence cadre development, ensuring that cultural institutions were staffed predominantly by titular nationals who brought authentic perspectives to their work.

The late Soviet period, marked by stagnation and then Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* from the mid-1980s, witnessed both intensification and liberalization of national themes. Literature and drama increasingly addressed previously sensitive topics, including environmental degradation in the Aral Sea region or historical reevaluations. Cinema benefited from relaxed censorship, producing more nuanced portrayals of Uzbek life. However, the underlying framework of Soviet ideology remained, with national expression still channeled through approved forms. This era revealed the depth of national consciousness that had been cultivated over decades, as cultural producers began to articulate identities with less overt deference to central narratives.

The formation of national ideology through these arts was neither purely manipulative nor entirely autonomous. Soviet policies provided unprecedented resources for cultural development studios, theaters, publishing houses, education that elevated literacy, professionalized the arts, and created a modern national intelligentsia. At the same time, they imposed ideological boundaries, suppressing overtly separatist or religious expressions. The result was a syncretic identity: proudly Uzbek in language, folklore, and historical memory, yet Soviet in its commitment to progress, secularism, and internationalism. Historical figures were reinterpreted as progressive precursors, folk arts modernized, and contemporary achievements nationalized. This cultural scaffolding proved remarkably resilient. The narratives, symbols, and institutions developed between 1945 and 1991 provided ready materials for post-1991 nation-building in independent Uzbekistan, where Soviet-era constructions of heritage were repurposed with the socialist content largely excised. Theaters continued to stage adapted classics, film studios built upon existing infrastructure, and literary canons retained many Soviet-formed masters while expanding their interpretation.

In conclusion, the Soviet experience in Uzbekistan demonstrates the profound capacity of state-directed cultural policy to engineer national forms within a supranational state. Theater, cinema, and literature were not peripheral adornments but central mechanisms in the dialectical process of identity formation. They fostered a sense of Uzbek distinctiveness that coexisted with Soviet loyalty, creating a complex legacy that continues to shape cultural and political life in the region. Understanding this period is essential for comprehending both the mechanics of Soviet multinational governance and the roots of contemporary Central Asian nationalisms.

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