



History in Colour

Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky 1909-1915



*Self portrait by Sergey Prokudin Gorsky (1915).
Despite the idyllic riverside scene, at this time Russia was in continuing
political turmoil.*



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Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky

Photographer of a lost world

A CENTURY AGO WHEN photography was still something of an experimental proposition, Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky embarked on an extraordinary mission to document the diversity of life in the vastness of Imperial Russia. Equipped with a clever spring-operated camera of his own design and travelling in a private railroad carriage provided by Tsar Nicolas II, he journeyed the length and breadth of the empire, photographing villages and cities, churches and mosques, princes and vagabonds – and most startling of all, his vibrant pictures were all captured in colour. The often candid scenes are even more arresting to the modern viewer when one considers that within a few years of Prokudin-Gorsky's first shots, the Bolsheviks had seized power in the October Revolution, the Tsar and his family had been murdered, and the lives of those who were caught on camera would never be the same again.

The Prokudin-Gorsky method

At its inception in the 1830s photography was a black-and-white affair; colour photography would languish in the dark-room until the late 1860s when various rudimentary methods were devised for recreating primitive colour images. Prokudin-Gorsky's technique, developed in the first decade of the twentieth century, relied on a camera that took three images in quick succession through different coloured filters. It was then possible to reconstruct the original scene in colour by projecting all three monochrome plates simultaneously through the right quality of light. Although groundbreaking for its day, the Prokudin-Gorsky method was not without its drawbacks. As the three images were taken at slightly different times (at best, over a period of six seconds but frequently taking much longer) any restlessness on the part of the subject during the exposure time showed up in print as garish multicoloured smudging. We can only imagine, therefore, that our valiant and road-weary hero suffered frequent exasperations at the hands of fidgeting children and agitated camels as he went about his delicate labours.

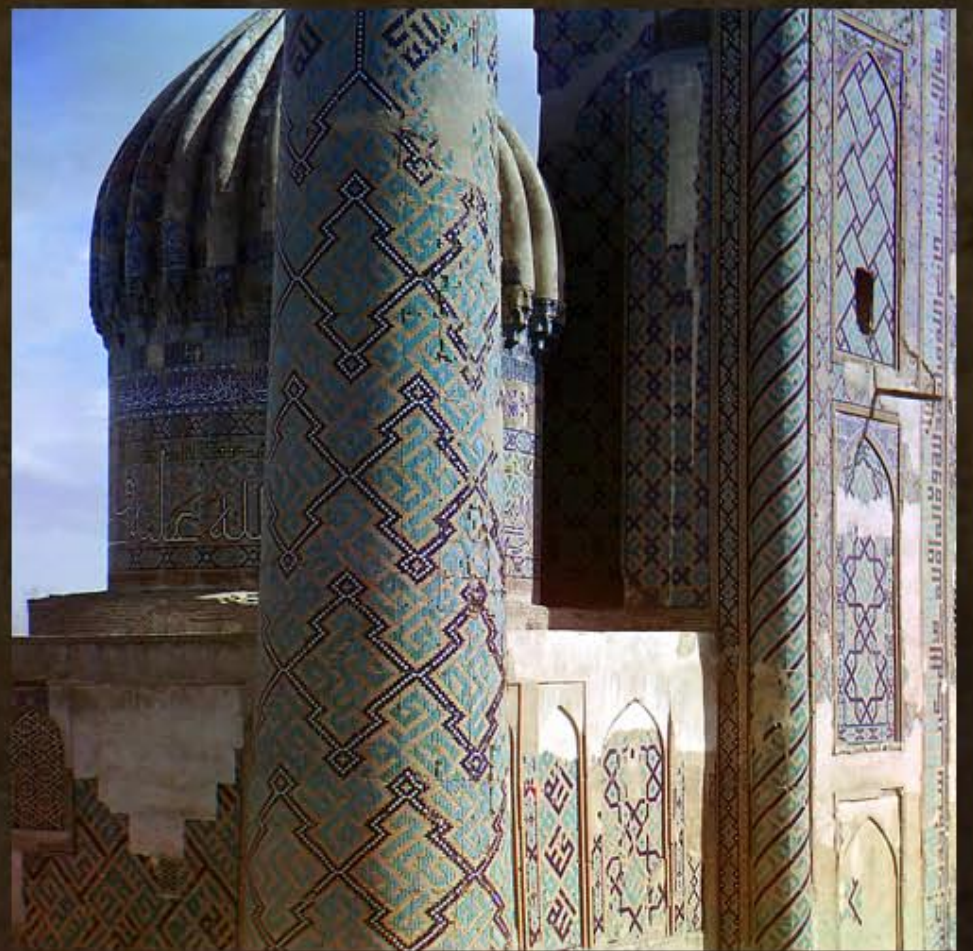
Ironically it is only recently, in the age of Photoshop and the digitisation of photography, that Prokudin-Gorsky's venerable images have been widely seen at their full potential. Curious observers in the Tsar's day generally had to be satisfied with slideshow projections, as a long and laborious printing procedure prohibited the mass production of colour prints. Prokudin-Gorsky also found himself dedicating much of his time away from the camera lense to touring the lecture circuit in order to help fund his ongoing expeditions, thereby leaving precious little time for the business of printing. However, some of his pictures did reach the public in their true quality, sometimes appearing in contemporary journals and books, or at other times featuring on postcards - a hugely popular communications phenomena at the time and in some ways the Edwardian equivalent of a text message.

Before he was famous

Prokudin-Gorsky was born in St Petersburg in 1863 into a minor noble family with a long-standing military tradition. Having a more cerebral bent than his forefathers, Prokudin-Gorsky passed on a military career and decided instead to enter



Self portrait by a stream, 1915



Shir Dar minaret, Samarkand (1911)

the Saint Petersburg Institute of Technology to study chemistry, also finding time to study painting and music at the Imperial Academy of Arts. Chemistry and the Arts may not sound immediately like a happy marriage of subjects but Prokudin-Gorsky's interest in both would meet perfectly in his passion for photography.

In 1889, at the age of twenty-six he travelled to Germany to study photochemistry at the Berlin Technical University. There he met and studied under Adolf Miethe, a fellow pioneer of colour photography, who was conducting early experiments with a three-color system.

Realising that Miethe's methods of colour photography needed further development, Prokudin Gorsky established his own photographic studio upon his return to Russia in the early 1890s allowing him to continue his research. As the years passed he made a name for himself in Russian photography circles, winning prizes for his colour exhibitions, publishing a booklet on instant handheld cameras, and writing technical articles on the principals of colour reproduction. By 1907, however, he was developing grander designs. A desire was building in his heart to undertake a comprehensive visual survey of the Russian Empire, documenting the rich diversity of its people, places and geography, across all its disparate regions. Surely the sheer might and enormity of the Russian realm was deserving of such an ambitious endeavour? And Prokudin-Gorsky, with his rapidly improving colour photography skills, believed he was just the man to carry it out.

Capturing the empire on film

To have any chance of bringing his monumental plans to fruition, Prokudin-Gorsky required an equally big break. Fortunately, he didn't have long to wait. The catalyst for his sudden rise to prominence came in 1908, and in rather unexpected fashion, when he chanced his luck with a letter to Russia's grand old man of letters, Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy:

*Dear Lev Nikolaevich,
Not long ago I had the occasion to develop a colour photographic plate which someone had taken of you (I forget the person's name). The result was extremely bad, since, apparently, the photographer was not well acquainted with his task...*

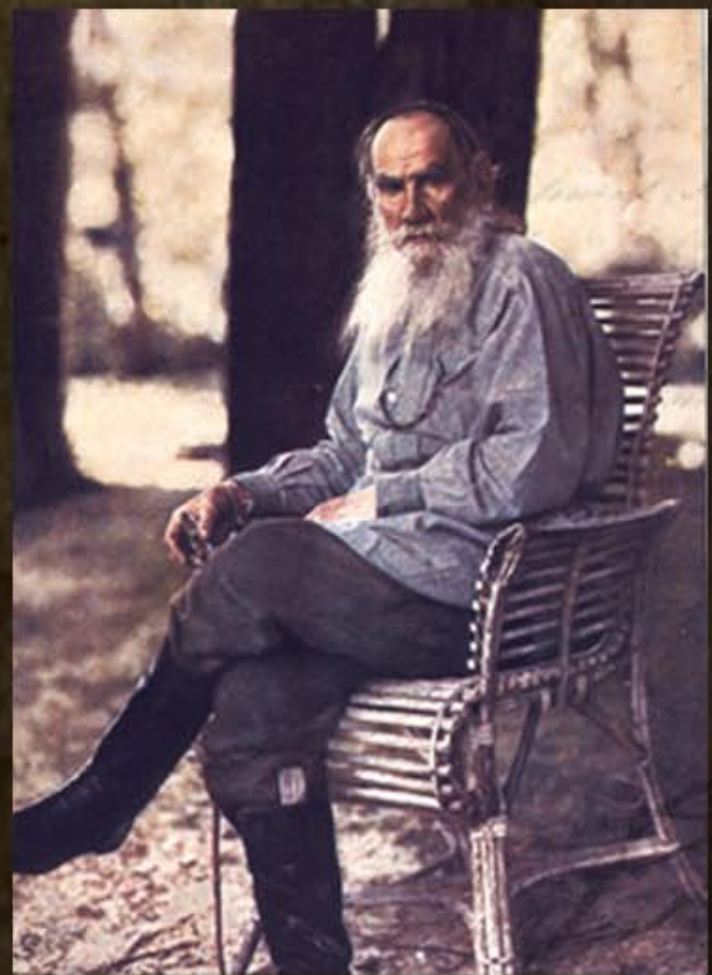
As it turned out, the trashing of a competitor's professional skills paid dividends and the elderly author of gratuitously long literature was willing to indulge Prokudin-Gorsky's request for a photoshoot. The resultant (superior) colour portrait, produced after a short stay at Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana country estate, became a huge hit across the nation. It was reproduced in books, in journals, on postcards and would no doubt have been put on T-shirts had the technology been available at the time. Much more importantly, however, it caught the eye of the only man who could make Prokudin-Gorsky's dream of an Imperial photographic survey a reality - Tsar Nicolas II himself.

Prokudin-Gorsky was invited to give a presentation to the Tsar and his family in 1909, and used the opportunity to propose his grand ethnographic venture. So taken was the Tsar by the colour photographs on show, that he agreed to give Prokudin-Gorsky his backing, granting him royal funding as well as providing all necessary visa documentation for his travels - no mean feat in a bureaucracy such as Russia's. With all obstacles thus surmounted, Prokudin-Gorsky set off on what he regarded as his life's work, taking over 10,000 photographs over the course of the next nine years, right up until the days of the October Revolution.

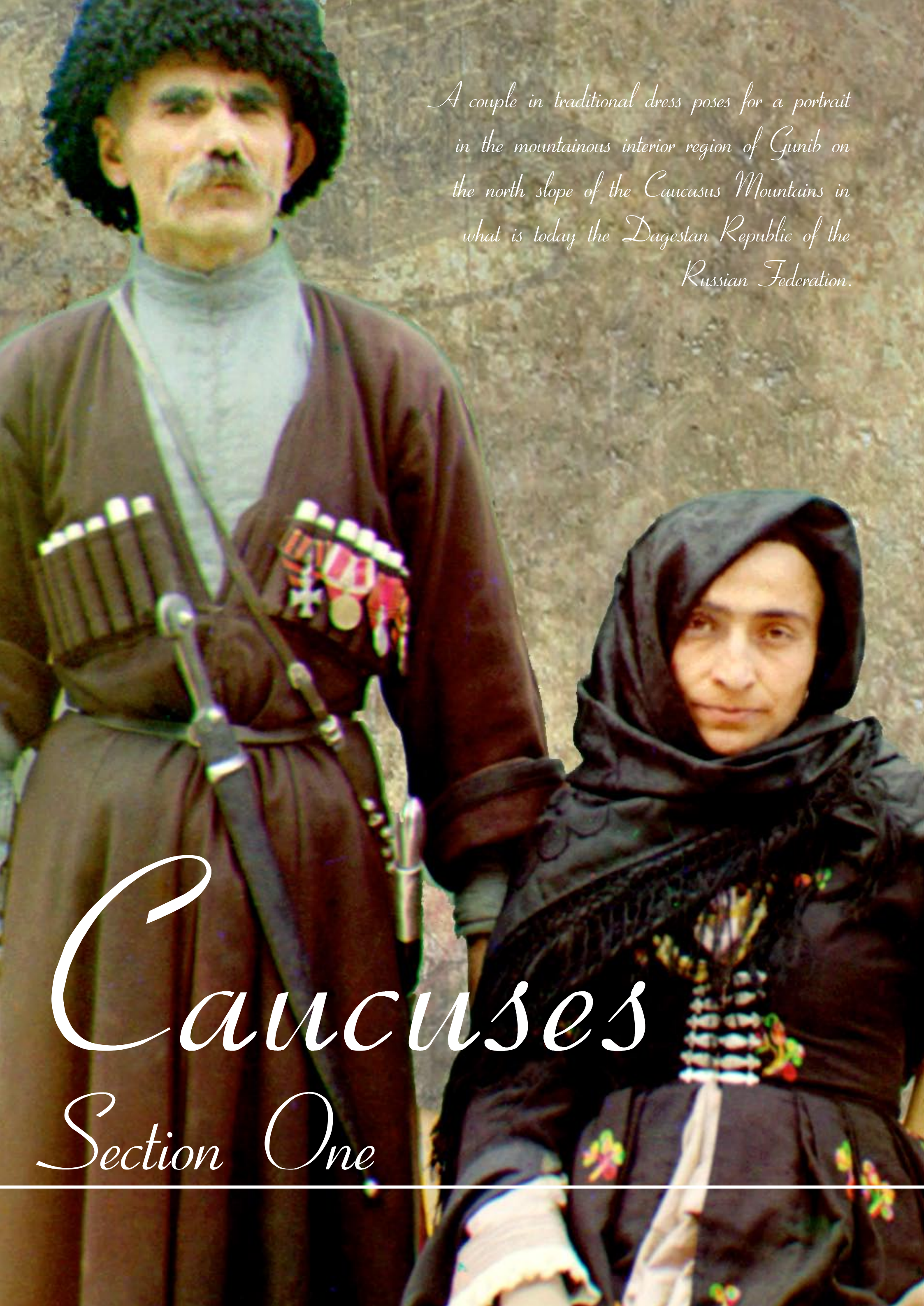
Prokudin-Gorsky left Russia for good in 1918, dying in German occupied Paris as an old man in 1944. Several hundred of his colour photographs have survived the caprices of history and continue to enthrall, startle and inspire. Now, thanks to the wonders of digital imagery, they have been preserved in their full finery as an exotic record of a bygone age and a lost world.



Government Official, Bukhara c.1910



Leo Tolstoy, 1909

A photograph of a man and a woman in traditional Caucasian attire. The man, on the left, wears a dark brown tunic with a light blue turtleneck, a dark fur hat, and a sword at his waist. He has a mustache and is looking directly at the camera. The woman, on the right, wears a black headscarf and a black tunic with colorful embroidery. She is also looking at the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

*A couple in traditional dress poses for a portrait
in the mountainous interior region of Gunib on
the north slope of the Caucasus Mountains in
what is today the Dagestan Republic of the
Russian Federation.*

Caucuses

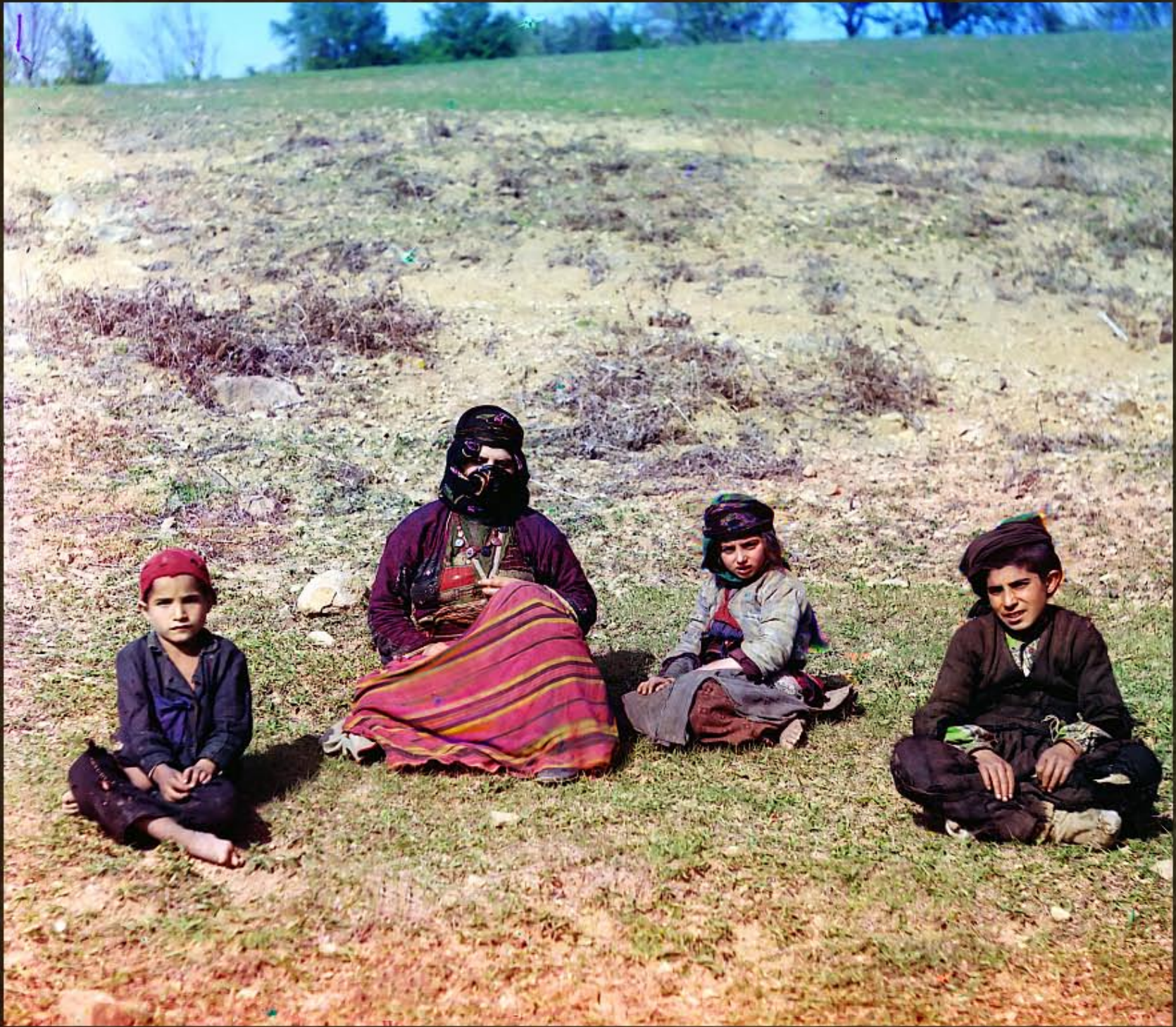
Section One



The mountain town of Artvin. In the early 20th century the town was part of the Russian Empire, but now lies on the territory of north eastern Turkey.



A mullah with two children, Artvin.



A Kurdish woman with children.



Mullahs in the Azizya Mosque, Bati.



*Old house on the left bank of the
River Kura.*



Borzhomi is a small town in the Caucasus Mountains in the interior of what is now the Republic of Georgia. Noted for its mineral waters, it was a fashionable spa at the end of the nineteenth century. Shown here are elegantly dressed visitors posing for a photograph by the Eugenievsky Spring.



Ekaterininsky Spring, Borjomi



Gagra, now in the modern day disputed region of Abkhazia, was formerly a popular seaside holiday destination for the well off.



The landing station at Gagra.



*A view of Tiflis, now Tibilisi, capital
city of Georgia. Taken from the terrace of
the Church of St. David.*



Eastern part of Tiflis located on the slopes of the Botanical Mountain.



Armenian women in traditional dress.



Georgian woman in national costume.



The moderate, Mediterranean-like climate of the Black Sea region allowed cultivation of crops that would not grow in most parts of the empire, such as tea and cotton. Sukhumi, on the east coast of the Black Sea in what is now the northwestern part of the Republic of Georgia, had an important botanical garden and experimentation station. Shown here is a stand of cotton plants at the Sukhumi Botanical Gardens.



Chinese master grower Lao Zhang Zhou poses with established tea plants and new plantings at a tea farm and processing plant in Chakva, a small town just north of Batumi. The semi-tropical climate of the Black Sea coast in modern-day Georgia was ideal for growing tea.



Workers, identified by Prokudin-Gorsky as Greeks, pose while harvesting tea from plants spreading over rolling hills near Chakva, on the east coast of the Black Sea. This region of the Russian Empire, in present day Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, had a significant Greek minority, some families going back many centuries to the Classical and Byzantine eras.



This photo shows the interior of a tea packaging and weighing operation located at the Chakva tea farm and processing plant just north of Batumi, close to the Black Sea coast in what is now the Republic of Georgia. The Chakva farm and plant was one of the major suppliers of tea to all parts of the Russian Empire.



A Dagestani man and woman. Dagestan, meaning land of mountains in Turkic languages, is populated by many nationalities, including Avars, Lezgi, Noghay, Kumuck, and Tabasarans.



Five Dagestani women.



A Sunni Muslim man of undetermined nationality wearing traditional dress and headgear, with a sheathed dagger at his side.



In the mountains of Dagestan.



*The home village of Imam Shamil, the
great resistance fighter who led his forces
against Russian expansion in the Caucasus
from 1834 until his capture in 1859.*



A monument that marks the spot where Imam Shamil was finally captured by the Russian Imperial forces. Shamil would spend his final years living in exile in Kiev, until granted permission to perform the Hajj to the holy city of Mecca. After completing his pilgrimage he died in Medina in 1871

West Russia

Section Two

A Compound locomotive with a Schmidt boiler somewhere between Perm and Ekaterinburg. The rail car in the background is thought to be Prokudin-Gorsky's traveling photographic laboratory and living quarters.





Workers and supervisors pause for a photograph amid preparations for pouring cement foundations for a sluice dam across the Oka River southeast of Moscow, near the small town of Dedinovo.



*Children sit on the side of a hill near
a church and bell-tower in the countryside
near White Lake, in the north of Euro-
pean Russia.*



Young Russian peasant women offer berries to visitors to their izba, a traditional wooden house, in a rural area along the Sheksna River near the small town of Kirillov.



In the early years of the First World War, Prokudin-Gorsky photographed a group of prisoners of war from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The men are probably Poles, Ukrainians, and members of other Slavic nationalities.



*Prokudin-Gorsky and others ride the
Murmansk Railroad in a handcar
along the shores of Lake Onega near
Petrozavodsk.*



2009





Left: The Nilov Monastery, founded in 1594 and situated on Stolobny Island in Lake Seliger, Tver Oblast, is one of the most impressive ensembles of Neoclassical architecture in Eastern Europe. Its large cathedral was built between 1821 and 1825, but some of its churches date back to the 17th century. Thirty years after this photograph was taken, the monastery would be used as a prisoner of war camp to house the 7000 Polish officers and intellectuals who were later killed by the Soviets in the notorious Katyn massacre.

The 2009 photograph shows the monastery looking almost the same, except for a new colour scheme.

Above: Monks plant potatoes nearby the Nilov Monastery.



*Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky and two others,
Murman.*



An early autumn scene from 1909 shows farmers taking a short break from their work. The location, though unidentified, is probably near the town of Cherepovets in north central European Russia.



Pinkhus Karlinsky, the supervisor of the Chernigov floodgate, stands by a ferry dock along the Mariinsky Canal system in the northern part of European Russia. In the photo album of his tour of the canal system, Prokudin-Gorsky noted that Karlinsky was eighty-four years old and had served for sixty-six years. The canal system, known today as the Volga-Baltic Waterway, was constructed to link the extensive river system of the Volga and its tributaries to provide access from the interior of European Russia to the Baltic Sea.



Lumber ready to be taken upstream.



*Two men and a boat, north-western
Russia.*



*Hay baling machine, north-western
Russia*

The Urals

Section Three

*A small village near the town of Zlatoust
in the Ural mountains - the range that
separates European Russia from Siberia*





*A Bashkir switch operator poses by the
mainline of the railroad, near the town of
Ust-Kataw on the Yuryuzan River be-
tween Ufa and Cheliabinsk in the Ural
Mountain region*



A. P. Kalganov poses with his son and granddaughter for a portrait in the industrial town of Zlatoust in the Ural Mountain region of Russia. The son and granddaughter were employed at the Zlatoust Arms Plant - a major supplier of armaments to the Russian military since the early 1800s. Kalganov displays traditional Russian dress and beard styles, while the two younger generations have more Westernized, modern dress and hair styles.



A street in Zlatoust.



The Ural Mountain region is noted for the richness of its iron deposits and ores. The Bakaly Hills, in the area outside the city of Ekaterinburg, provide the locale for a small-scale family mining operation.



Founded in 1747, the Kasli Iron Works, was located in the heart of the Ural Mountains between the cities of Ekaterinburg and Cheliabinsk--a region rich in iron ore. The plant was known for the high quality of its cast iron products and for its highly-skilled work force, which numbered over three thousand persons at the time this photograph was taken.



A dirt road passing over a stone bridge leads to the small town of Kolchedan in the Ural Mountains, southeast of Ekaterinburg. Originally founded in 1673 as a frontier stockade, by the time this photo was taken in 1912, the town was a center for sandstone mining and processing and had two substantial stone church buildings, including a convent with a school.



Stacks of hay in a village near Zlatoust.



The Bashkirs are a Turkic people living mainly on the slopes of the southern Ural Mountains and the neighboring plains. They speak the Kypchak-based Bashkir language, a close relative of the Tatar language. Here we see a Bashkir woman on the steps of her house.



A Bashkir man at home.

Siberia

Section Four

*A logging station at an unidentified location
somewhere east of the Urals.*





The town of Dalmatovo.



Woodcutter's hut.



*Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky and companions
at camp, somewhere in western Siberia.*



*The humble hut of Artemy the settler,
nicknamed the Kot (Cat), who had been
living in this unidentified Siberian location
for over forty years.*



Windmills near Tobolsk.



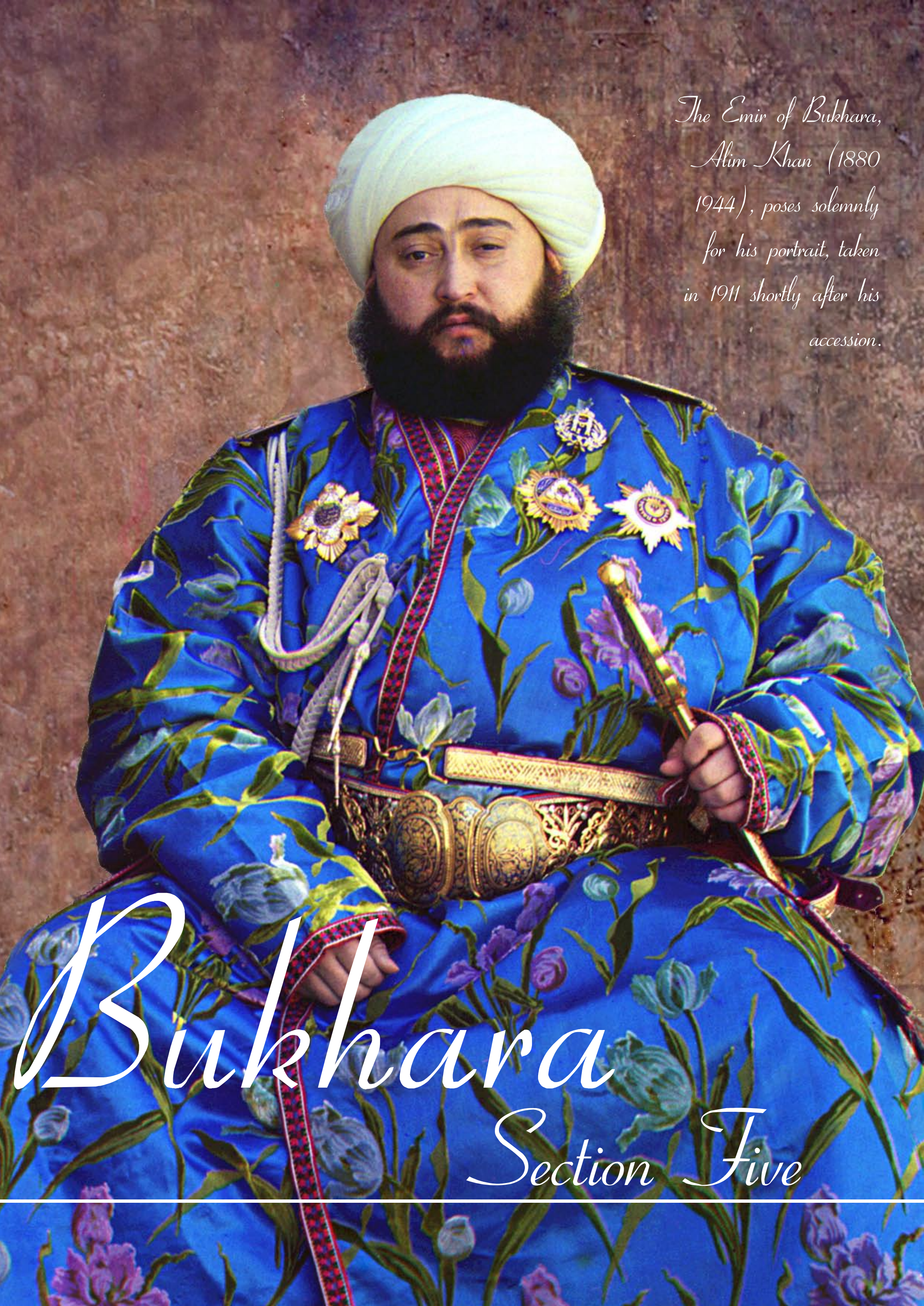
Above: The city of Tobolsk was founded by Yermak Timofeyevich's Cossacks in 1585-1586 during the first Russian advance into Siberia. It became the seat of the Viceroy of Siberia and prospered on trade with China and Bukhara. It was there that the first Siberian school, theatre and newspaper were established, however the city's importance declined when the Trans-Siberian Railway bypassed it in the 1890s.

Right: A street in Tobolsk. In the 2009 photograph we can see the steeple of the red brick Catholic Church which had been built to serve the growing number of Catholic residents - predominantly prisoners of war from Russia's conflicts with Poland. It is probable that Prokudin-Gorsky climbed the steeple to take his photograph. Sadly, few of the original buildings on this street seem to have survived to our own day.



2009

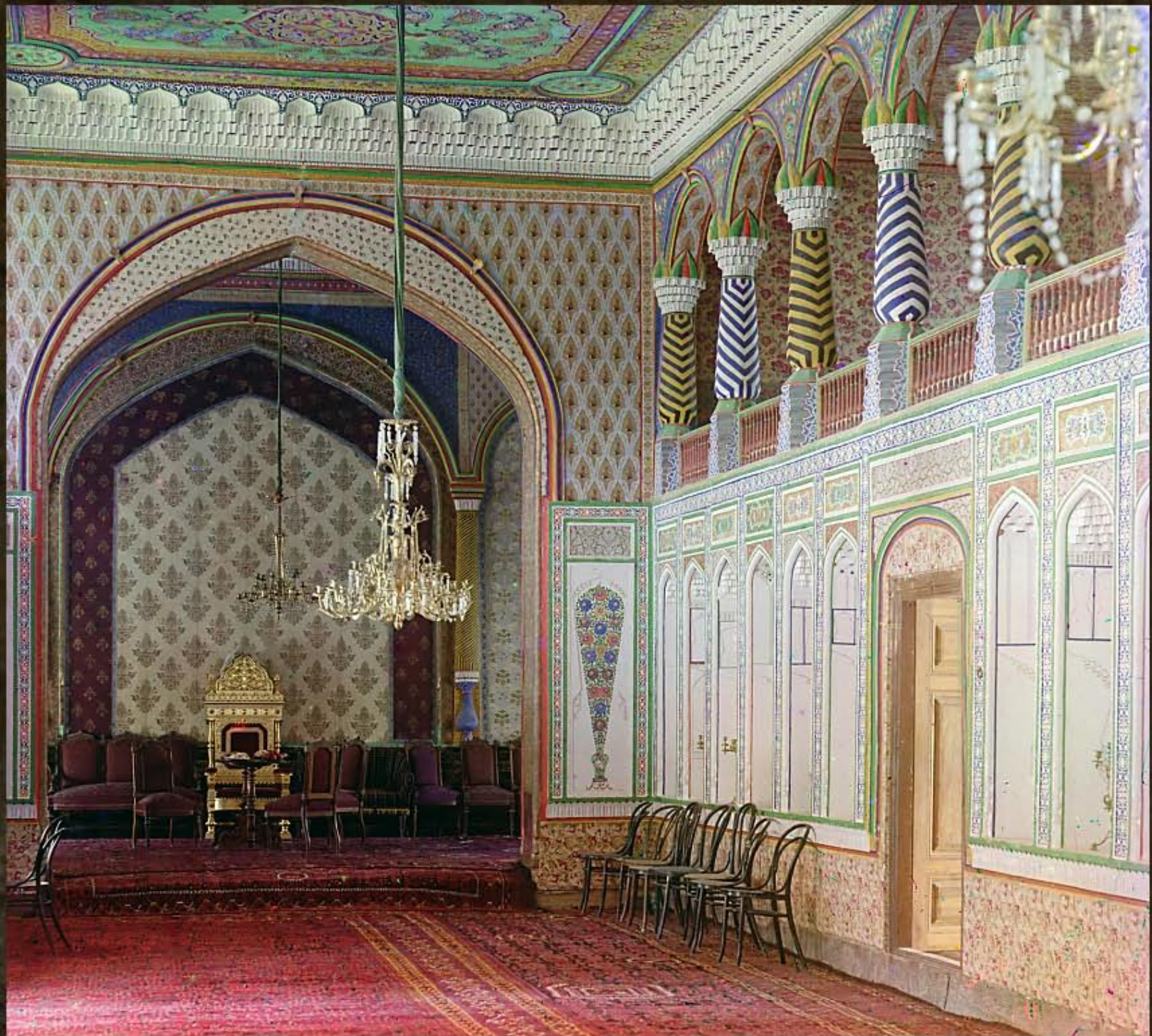




*The Emir of Bukhara,
Alim Khan (1880
1944), poses solemnly
for his portrait, taken
in 1911 shortly after his
accession.*

Bukhara

Section Five



Like his father, Alim Khan disliked life in the Bukharan capital, and quickly retreated to the Palace of Shirbudun pictured here. In 1913, the emir built a new mansion in the Style Moderne.



*Sentry at the palace, and old cannons.
Bukhara.*



Kush-Beggi, the Minister of Internal Affairs. Most likely the name comes from Kushbegi, the title of the second highest official in Bukhara.



A government official.



*The Emir of Bukhara's Citadel (or
Arc) - destroyed by the Bolshevik army
that captured the city in 1920.*



Two prisoners shackled together

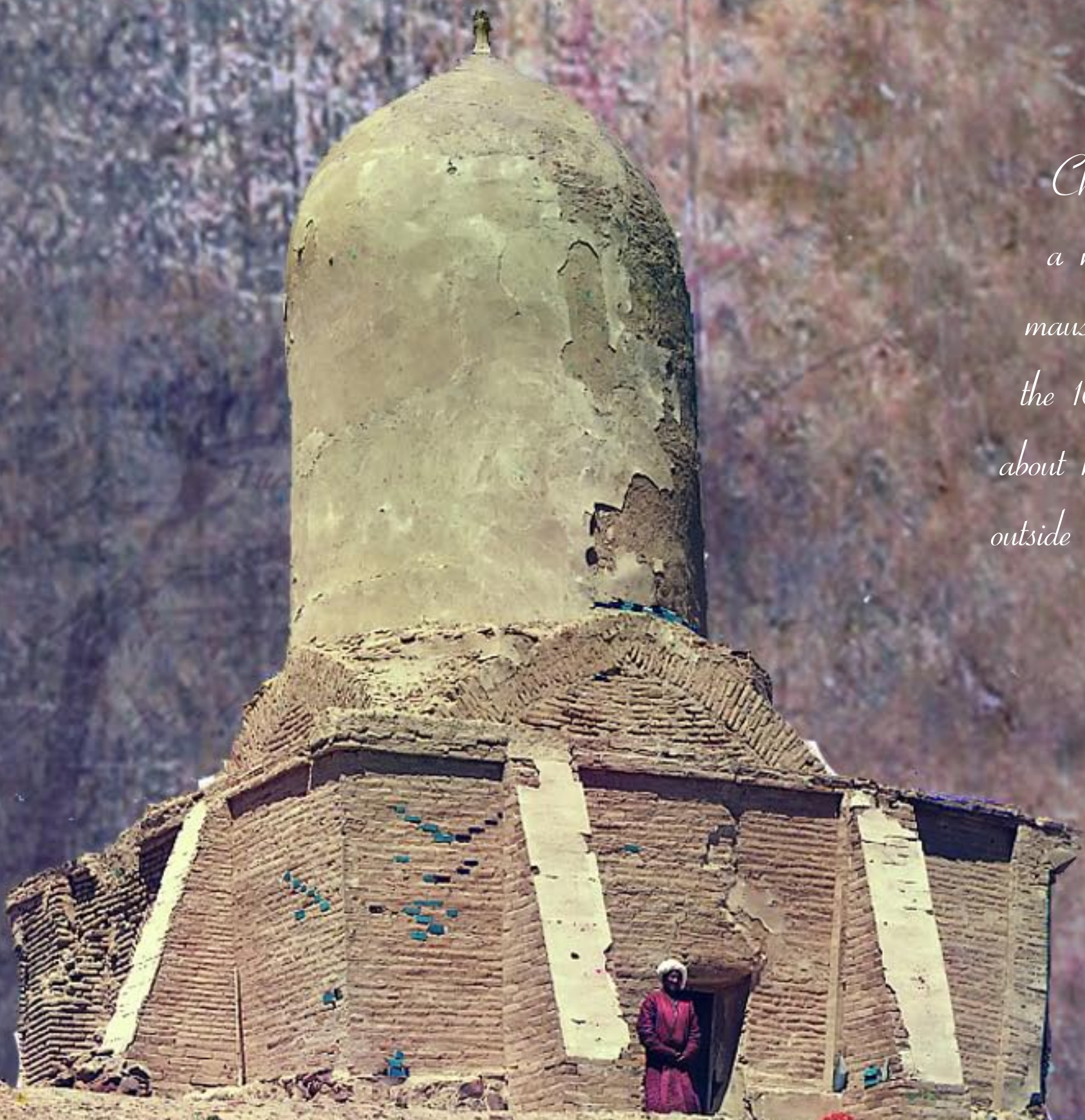


Five inmates stare out from a zindan, a traditional Central Asian prison, in essence just a pit in the earth with a low structure built on top. The guard, with Russian rifle and bayonet, is attired in Russian-style uniform and boots.

Samar kand

Section Six

*Ch-pan Ata,
a mosque and
mausoleum from
the 16th century,
about half a mile
outside of Samar-
kand.*





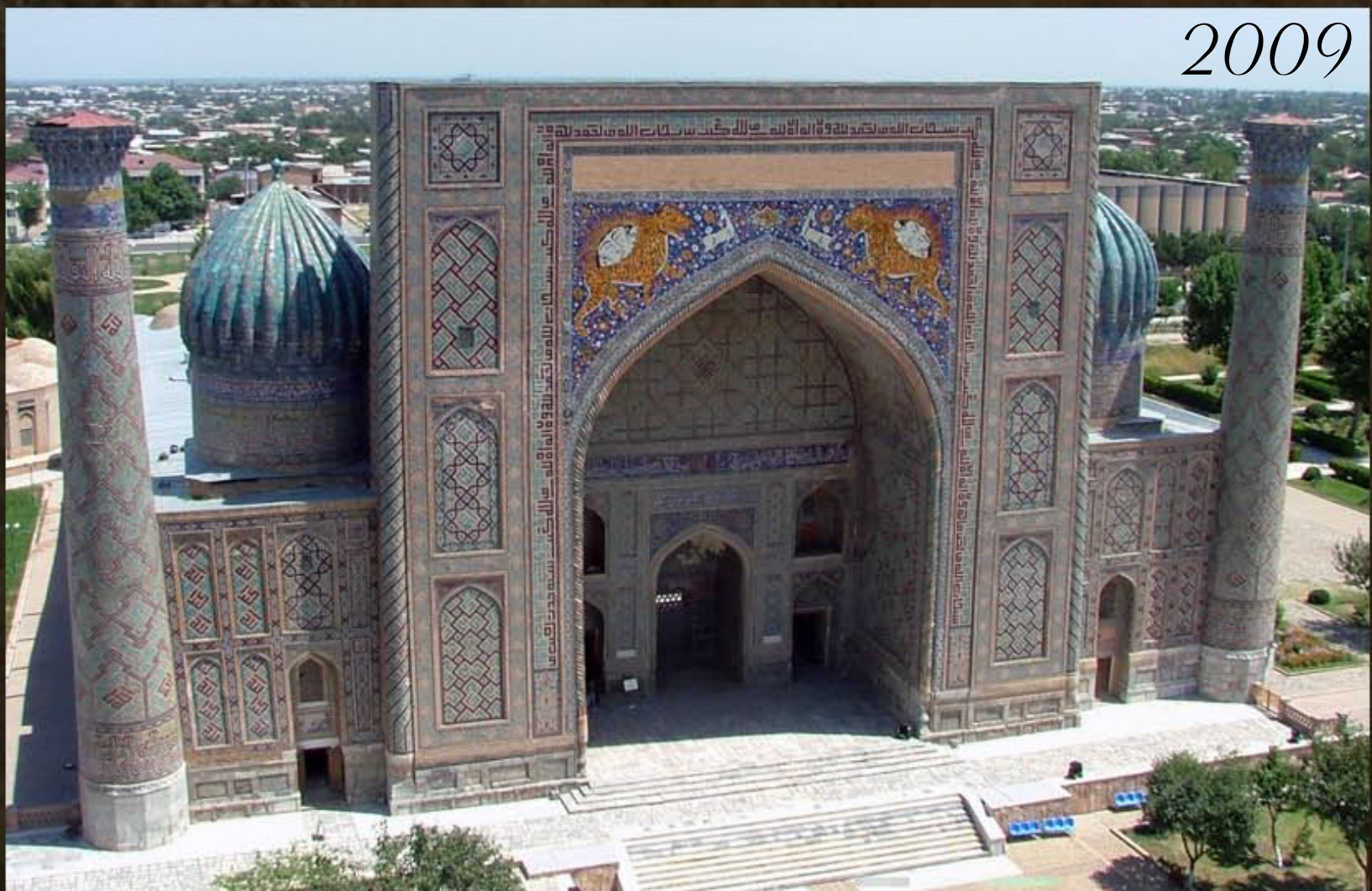
A merchant at a Samarkand market displays colorful silkcotton, and wool fabrics as well as a few traditional carpets. A framed page of the Quran hangs at the top of the stall.

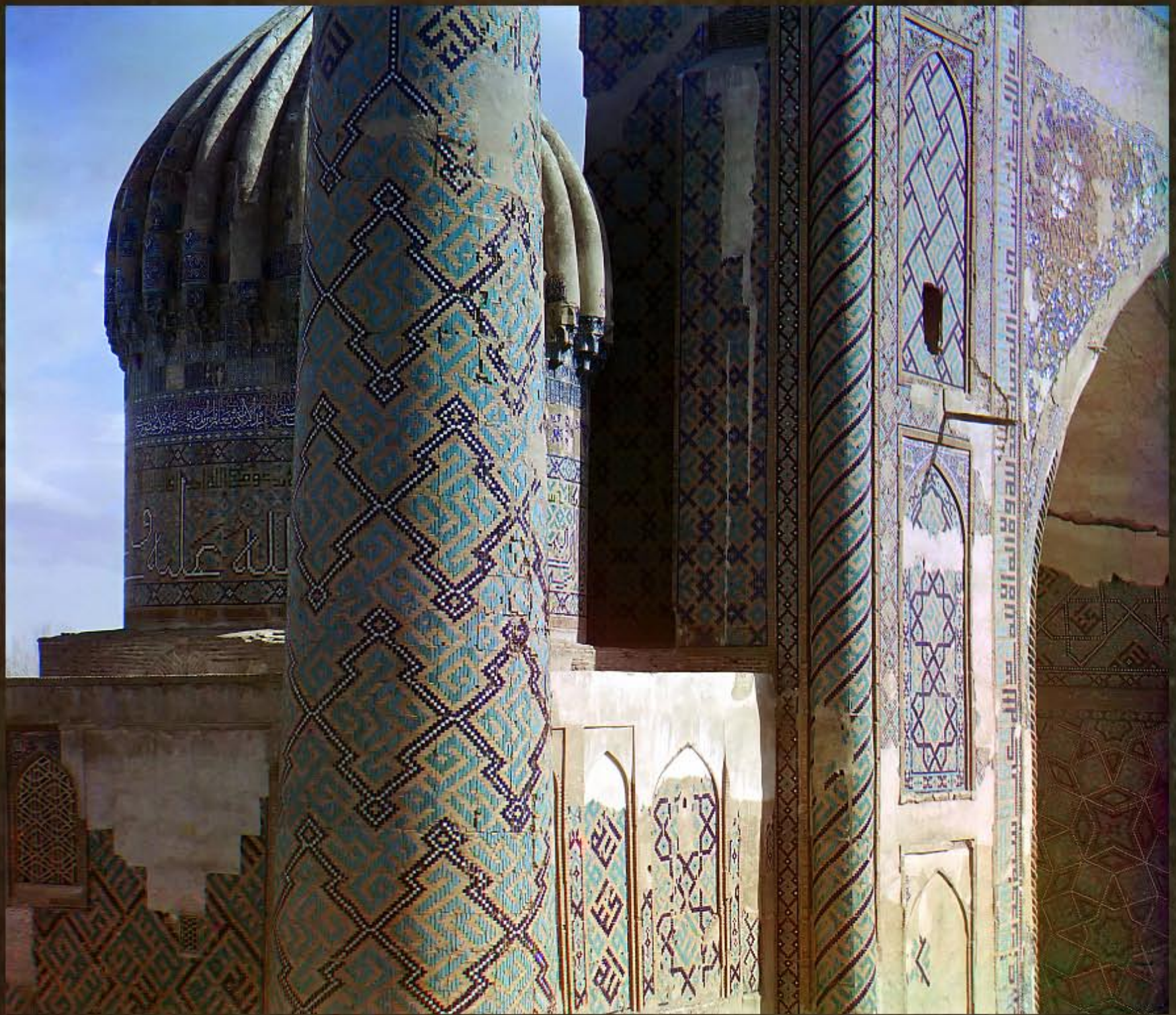


Uzbeks in typical dress.



Three beggars.





Above: The tiled columns, walls, and domes of the Shir-Dar Madrasa show the elaborate abstract designs and use of calligraphy typical in much of Islamic and Central Asian architecture. The Shir-Dar, constructed from 1619 to 1636, is one of three madrassas that make up Samarkand's awesome Registan, the old heart of the medieval city.

Left: Compare the two photographs taken 100 years apart. During the Soviet era restoration of the Shir-Dar Madrasa, three meters of sand was excavated to expose the building's full height.

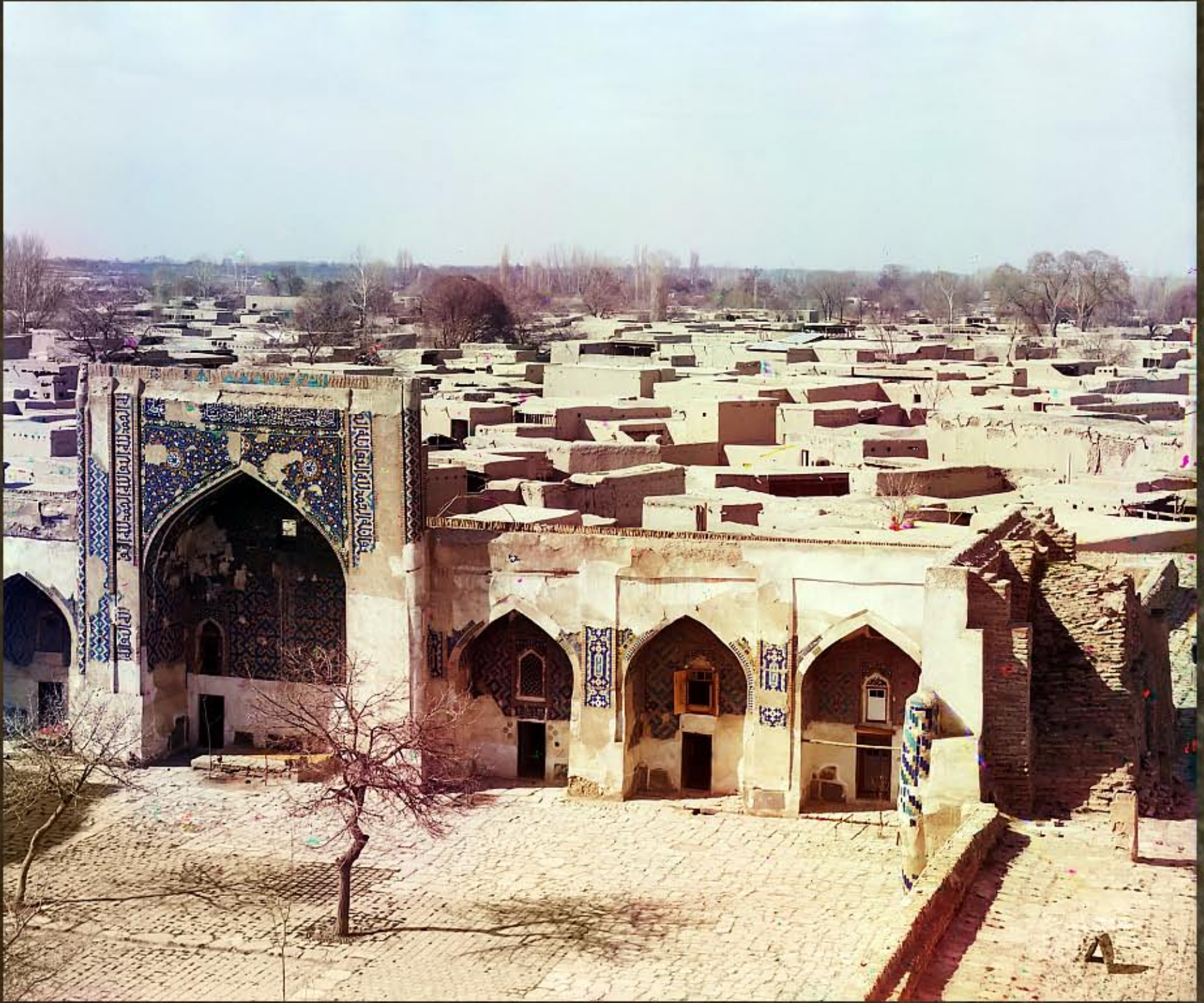


Above: The Pamir Mountains provide a dramatic backdrop for an evening view of the Shakh-i Zinda Mosque in Samarkand, a complex of graves and mortuary chapels built over many centuries for the women of the dynasties descended from Tamerlane, the great medieval ruler of Central Asia.

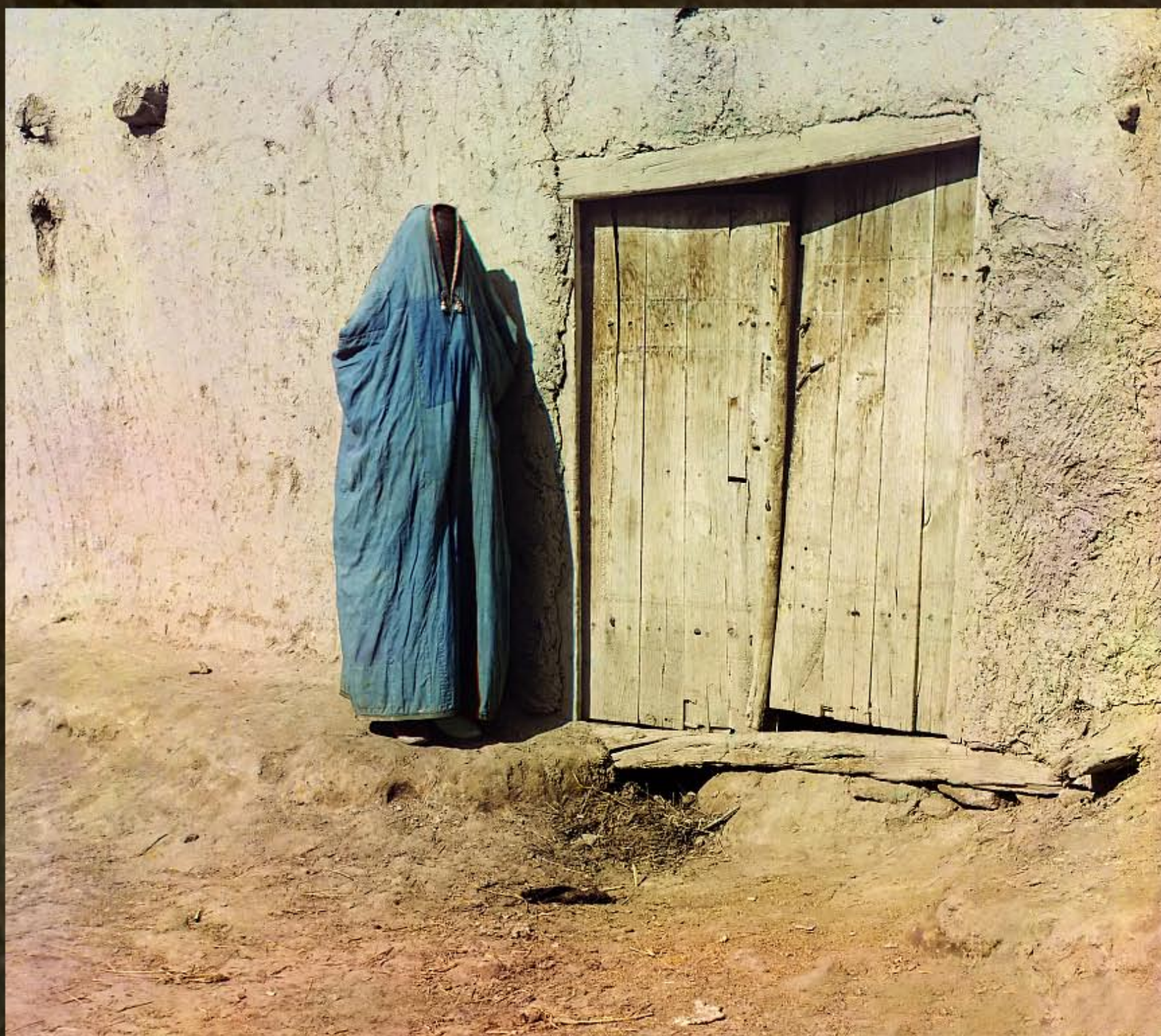
Right: We can see from the 2009 photograph the results of the Soviet era restoration, as well as the growing number of more modern graves that cluster around the main complex



2009



A view of Samarkand.



An Sart woman dressed in a traditional costume covering the whole body. Until the Russian Revolution of 1917, 'Sart' was the name for Uzbeks living in Kazakhstan.



A water carrier.



Shashlik (kebab) is meat, usually mutton, grilled on a skewer with vegetables. It is a traditional food in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and is popular also in the Balkans, Ukraine and Russia



*A group of Jewish boys, in traditional dress,
studying with their teacher.*



*Dressed in traditional Central Asian attire,
a vendor of locally grown melons poses at his
stand in the marketplace.*



Physicians.



Currency changers on the Registan.



Samarkand bread - puffy, with a golden crust and baked in a big clay oven called a tandoo - is still available, to the present day - and can be bought from contemporary street side vendors.



An old man, probably an ethnic Tajik, holds birds he has just caught. Samarkand and its region were noted for wide diversity in ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Tajiks, Persians, and Arabs as well as the more recently arrived Russians.

Steppe

and beyond

Section Seven



*The Golodnaia (or Hungry)
Steppe, Kazakhstan.*



*Observing a solar eclipse on January 1st
1907 near the Cherniaev Station in the
Tien Shan mountains.*



Caravan on the Golodnaya Steppe.



*A family of Russian settlers to the Mur-
gan Steppe region, south of the Caucasus
and west of the Caspian Sea.*



*A scene from a bayga - a traditional long-
distance horse riding competition, over 25, 50
or 100 km*



A caravan outside of Samarkand



A Turkmen camel driver



A Kyrgyz or possibly Kazakh family resting on the Golodnaya Steppe.



*Portrait of a woman, possibly of Turk-
en ethnicity, standing on a richly deco-
rated carpet at the entrance to a yurt,
a portable tent used for housing by the
nomadic peoples of Central Asia.*



Family on the Golodnaya Steppe.



*The ruins of an unidentified mosque.
Note the man standing to the right.*



*At work near the source of the Syr-
Darya River.*



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