

Chapter 1

Educating the Central Asian Librarian: Considering the International MLIS in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

Why do Central Asian librarians enter the profession, and how do they decide which educational strategies to pursue in developing their careers? Using 13 conversations and 10 qualitative interviews with Kazakh and Kyrgyz librarians, this chapter finds that librarians enter the profession due to personal interest, by happenstance, or for university funding and continue when they perceive an opportunity for career growth as well as salary mobility. Central Asian librarians evaluate their educational options, including local bachelor's degrees; distance education from Russia; MLIS programs in Asia, Europe, or America; and short-term online training, while balancing family responsibilities and career prospects in and outside of librarianship. Prospects for creating a local MLIS or other improved professional training programs are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Librarianship has a long history in Central Asia, flourishing in medieval Bukhara, and praised by scholars of the time such as Avicenna. But the experience of recent librarians in the region has been rockier, as stable Soviet employment shifts to

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stagnating wages and pensions in the post-Soviet era. Modern library administrators who seek to recruit and retain talented librarians are constrained by bureaucratic structures that limit the pay and incentives they can offer. And contemporary professionals pursue library education while evaluating their career against their marketability in comparable careers and their own changing personal needs. At what point, then, do Central Asian librarians seek out a professional education, and how can we improve education in the region? This chapter uses face-to-face and online interviews with librarians from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to explore how librarians enter the career, make educational choices, and balance career objectives with economic and family pressures common to the region.

Most contemporary libraries in the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan were founded during the Soviet era, at a time when communist librarians were expected to support political goals (Anghelescu, Lukenbill, Lukenbill, & Owens, 2009), goals such as public education and scientific progress (Zverevich, 2014). Yet Soviet librarians were also expected to limit access to approved readers depending on their rank, connections, or social status (Vaiseta, 2012).

As Zazersky (1974) outlines, Soviet librarians were to promote “Marxist-Leninist ideas, and scientific and technological achievements, devoting their efforts to harmonious development of the individual” (1974, p. 222). Aspiring librarians from the Central Asian republics could attend teachers’ training colleges in Tashkent and or Alma-Ata, study at one of 23 higher education institutions in the Russian Federation, or attend lectures in Tashkent, Shymkent, Frunze [Bishkek], and Alma-Ata, by visiting library science professors (Zazersky, 1974, p. 221). When the Tajik SSR’s new state library was opened in 1954, librarians were required to have a library education, a specialized secondary education, or at least to have worked in the library field for ten years (Mamadzimova, 2018). Soviet librarians controlled access to information as well as to the indexes used to locate books (Kasinec, 2001), and yet could also subvert government directives by showing selected readers the full catalog of restricted books (Rogachevskii, 2002). Indeed, some post-Soviet archives still require documented scholarly affiliations (*razreshenie*) before providing access to researchers (Rosenberg, 2001).

Even after 1991, post-Soviet librarians have relatively low pay and status (Benz, 2009). Central Asian librarians in particular work under lingering Soviet models of closed stacks and control of books (cf. King, Dowding, & Pflager, 2013) in spite of a growing pressure to adopt international models for librarian education and professional conduct. For instance, at independence, Kazakhstan had the advantage of 99% literacy rates and a good infrastructure, yet it is still striving for the goal of “establishing research and innovation as a key driver of economic growth” (OECD, 2017, p. 3). As with the other republics, Kazakhstan struggles to

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