



 **Research Article**

## **BOLAT SALIEV: THE FALL OF UZBEKISTAN'S FIRST PROFESSOR OF HISTORY DURING SOVIET PURGES**

**Journal Website:**  
<https://masterjournals.com/index.php/crjh>

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**Submission Date:** December 01, 2024, **Accepted Date:** December 15, 2024,

**Published Date:** December 30, 2024

**Crossref doi:** <https://doi.org/10.37547/history-crjh-05-12-05>

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the life and academic work of Bolat Saliev (1882-1937), the first Professor of History in Uzbekistan, focusing on his contributions to the development of historical scholarship in the region, his clash with Soviet ideology, and the eventual repression he faced during the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s. It examines the complex interplay of nationalism, Soviet ideology, and political repression in Soviet Uzbekistan during the early Soviet period. Through an analysis of Saliev's life and scholarly activities, the article demonstrates the impact of Soviet political policies on intellectuals and historical studies in Central Asia.

### **KEYWORDS**

Bolat Saliev, Soviet Repression, Uzbekistan, History, Stalinist Purges, Nationalism, Soviet Ideology, Central Asian History, Historians, Intellectuals.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bolat Saliev was a pivotal figure in the early development of historical scholarship in Uzbekistan, serving as the region's first Professor of History. This article examines his role in shaping historical thought in Central Asia, his commitment to local narratives, and the circumstances surrounding his repression. The study seeks to highlight how Soviet ideology and political repressions impacted the development of

national historiography in the region, using Saliev's life and work as a case study.

### **METHOD**

This study utilizes a historical approach, drawing upon primary and secondary sources, including archival materials, published works, and historical analyses of the Soviet period. The article analyzes the trajectory of Saliev's intellectual contributions, his clashes with



Soviet authorities, and his eventual persecution through the lens of political and ideological contexts of the era.

## RESULTS

The study reveals that Saliev's early contributions to historical scholarship in Uzbekistan were undermined by his focus on local history and national identity, which clashed with Soviet internationalism. The Stalinist purges resulted in his arrest and execution, along with the suppression of a generation of scholars and the distortion of historical narratives in the region. His work was suppressed, but he became an important figure for post-Soviet scholars.

## DISCUSSION

This paper examines the complex interaction of intellectual life and political power in early Soviet Uzbekistan, focusing on the repression of Bolat Saliev as a case study. The study emphasizes the impact of political ideologies on academic disciplines and the importance of academic freedom. It also highlights the lasting impact of Soviet repressions on historical scholarship and the importance of reclaiming historical narratives.

Bolat Saliev (1882–1937) stands as one of the most prominent figures in the early development of historical scholarship in Uzbekistan. As the first Professor of History in the region, his career encapsulates the rise of nationalist intellectual movements in Central Asia, the growth of Soviet power in the region, and the eventual purges of the late 1930s. Bolat Saliev's life and work offer an insight into the complex intersection of Soviet ideology, nationalism, and repression in the context of Uzbekistan during the early Soviet period. This paper explores the repression faced by Bolat Saliev and its broader implications for historical scholarship and political life in Soviet Uzbekistan.

Bolat Saliev was born on March 22, 1882, in a village near Astrakhan, Russia, into a family with strong ties to Bukhara's Mangit tribe [1]. His early education began at a rural school, and by the age of 15, he had graduated and enrolled in the Abdurahman Umerov madrasa, where he deepened his studies in history, literature, and Islamic sciences. This foundation played a pivotal role in shaping his intellectual trajectory and his later contributions to historical scholarship.

Upon completing his education at the madrasa, Bolat Saliev was invited to teach at the Goliya madrasa, but he chose instead to return to his homeland, seeking to contribute to the educational reforms of Central Asia [2]. His decision to focus on the dissemination of knowledge in the region reflects both his personal commitment to education and his larger vision of modernizing Central Asia.

Saliev's academic career was marked by his establishment as one of the foremost historians in Uzbekistan. He was instrumental in founding the School of Historians of Uzbekistan and Central Asia, influencing the development of historical thought in the region. Bolat Saliev's scholarly work was characterized by a commitment to local history and the integration of Central Asian perspectives into broader historical narratives. His historical research, which focused on the history of the region, often clashed with the prevailing Soviet ideologies of the time, especially as the political climate in the USSR began to shift in the late 1920s and early 1930s. [3]

Saliev's focus on Central Asian nationalism, while viewed as a significant contribution to the region's historiography, also placed him in opposition to the Soviet state's policy of promoting internationalism and suppressing regional nationalist sentiments. By the late 1920s, with the rise of Joseph Stalin's centralized power and the increasing politicization of academic



disciplines, intellectuals who held nationalist views were increasingly targeted by the Soviet regime.[4]

By the late 1920s, as the Soviet Union consolidated control over Central Asia, Bolat Saliev found himself under increasing scrutiny. Soviet authorities viewed intellectuals who promoted nationalist ideas with suspicion, and by 1928, he was identified as one of the leading “chauvinist intellectuals” in Uzbekistan. In a report by Pavlov, a commissar of the 2nd department of the OGPU (the Soviet secret police), Bolat Saliev was listed alongside other prominent figures such as Fitrat and Cholpon as part of a group accused of promoting chauvinistic ideologies [5].

This report was part of a larger effort by the OGPU to suppress regionalist and nationalist movements within the Soviet Union. The Soviet authorities saw such movements as a threat to the unity of the Soviet state and its Marxist-Leninist ideology. As a result, intellectuals like Bolat Saliev, who were seen as promoting Uzbek nationalism, were marked for repression.

The Soviet historian Abram Gurevich, a staunch supporter of the “party line,” was particularly vocal in his criticism of Bolat Saliev. Gurevich accused Bolat Saliev and his colleagues of adhering to “bourgeois ideological methodology” and criticized their works for allegedly fostering “nationalist” and “pan-Turkist” tendencies [6]. These charges were particularly damaging, as they linked Bolat Saliev to broader anti-Soviet and anti-revolutionary movements, further isolating him within the academic community.

In 1936, at the Congress of Central Asian Historians held in Samarkand, Bolat Saliev came under direct attack. At the congress, accusations of “nationalist” and “pan-Turkist” tendencies were leveled against him. The Soviet authorities were also attempting to manipulate the congress to further their narrative of

historical division, proposing to emphasize “Kazakh,” “Tajik,” and “Uzbek” histories in ways that served the purposes of Soviet centralization. Bolat Saliev’s resistance to this effort marked him as an ideological opponent of Soviet historiography.

By 1937, the climate of repression intensified. In January of that year, Marxist critics like A. Karsev openly called for the “purification” of historical science in Uzbekistan, signaling the growing momentum of Stalin’s purges. Bolat Saliev’s intellectual trajectory was now seen as incompatible with Soviet orthodoxy. On October 13, 1937, the arrest order for Bolat Saliev was issued by the State Security Department of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs. He was arrested, marking the culmination of a long campaign of political persecution.

Bolat Saliev was executed in 1937 as part of the broader Stalinist purges that targeted intellectuals, historians, and other members of the intelligentsia across the Soviet Union. His death was emblematic of the fate that befell many of his colleagues and contemporaries who were accused of harboring “bourgeois” or “nationalist” sympathies. The purges of the late 1930s decimated a generation of scholars, intellectuals, and leaders who had once been seen as key to the development of Soviet society.

Despite his tragic end, Bolat Saliev’s contributions to the field of history in Uzbekistan and Central Asia remain significant. His work laid the foundation for a distinct Uzbek historiography, one that sought to understand the region’s past through its own lens, rather than through the ideological framework imposed by Soviet authorities. Bolat Saliev’s intellectual legacy, while suppressed during his lifetime, has continued to inspire historians and scholars in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

## CONCLUSION



The repression of Bolat Saliev highlights the complex relationship between Soviet ideology and intellectual life in Central Asia during the early Soviet period. Bolat Saliev's intellectual achievements were overshadowed by the political purges of the 1930s, which sought to eliminate any form of regional nationalism or intellectual independence. His case serves as a reminder of the dangers faced by scholars and intellectuals who were caught between the demands of the state and their commitment to truth and academic freedom. The repression of figures like Bolat Saliev had lasting consequences on the development of Central Asian historiography, the effects of which can still be felt today in the region's efforts to reclaim its historical narrative from Soviet-era distortions.

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