
Reports on Research Conditions

Report on the State of Library Conditions in Uzbekistan

Victoria Spain, Research and Instruction Librarian, Northeastern University, Boston, Mass., USA,
v.spain@neu.edu

Background

My research began in 2002 when I was invited as a consultant to advise the libraries at the Uzbekistan State World Languages University (WLU) in Tashkent.¹ My interest in Central Asia is an expansion of my long-standing involvement in international librarianship with Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union since 1990 (Spain 1996, 1997).

My findings are based on my English language database research prior to and following my travel to Uzbekistan, and on visits to five of WLU's eight libraries, the Alisher Navoi National Library, the Fundamental Library of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, the Hamkorlik Library (a private English language research library, modern in design and technology, developed by Partners in Academics and Development) — all in Tashkent, and Bukhara's Abu Ali Ibn Sino Regional Universal Scientific Library. Further information was gained from my attendance at the "Central Asia 2002: Internet and Library-Information Resources in Science, Culture, Education, and Business" conference held in Bukhara from October 14-18,

¹ My three-week travel was an extension of the ongoing formal relationship between Northeastern University (NU) and WLU — a relationship initiated by Professor Nicholas Daniloff of NU's Journalism Department through authorship of a four-year grant from the US State Department. The purpose of the grant, which ended August 2004, was to introduce American style fact-finding journalism to the students and faculty of WLU through exchanges, teaching, and publications. The grant was extended to assist WLU's libraries. The trip was sponsored by the Central Asian-American Partnership for Academic Development, a non-governmental international organization located in Tashkent, which has sponsored programs in Uzbekistan since 1999 (<http://uzngos.uzsci.net/en/activity/027.html>).

2002, and my contacts in Uzbekistan, notably with Dr. Marat Rakhmatullaev, executive director of the Uzbekistan Library Association (ULA).

Research Process

The focus of my trip was to assess library needs at WLU.² Because I speak neither Uzbek nor Russian, the US State Department grant provided for interpreters to assist me throughout my visits. My meetings with the librarians in Uzbekistan confirmed that the condition of WLU's libraries and the additional libraries I visited appear, to a lesser or greater degree, to be the norm. Many of the libraries reflect the inner workings of methods and practices still based on the Soviet system. My conclusion regarding the libraries at WLU was that the American model of librarianship would be difficult to adopt if the academic curriculum at WLU continues to be based on Soviet-style education.

Research Results

Even without designing a survey to assess more than 15,000 libraries in Uzbekistan (Rakhmatullaev 2002), it is certain that libraries in Uzbekistan need considerable improvements. Until Uzbekistan's libraries are better funded, even obvious needs

²WLU is a language-oriented institution with an enrollment of over 6,000 students and 680 faculty members located on three campuses. WLU is evidently less well financed than some of the universities in Uzbekistan and consequently has greater needs. The courses are centrally planned, and students have few elective courses throughout their four years of study. Their system of education is based on the Soviet style and is fairly regimented. The British Council has developed WLU's webpage (<http://uswlu.freenet.uz>). Little information was publicly available to foreigners about WLU except a dated, but attractive booklet given to me by an Uzbek delegation visiting Northeastern.

cannot be met. The mentality inherited from totalitarianism pervades the majority of Uzbekistan's libraries. Their needs are similar to what Russian libraries faced following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Libraries in Uzbekistan are approximately ten years behind the best libraries in Russia in technical practices and modern concepts of user services. Russia was fortunate to have strong, progressive library leadership and a Ministry of Culture that studied Western achievements and implemented national library policies. "The situation brought about a thorough reappraisal of the very foundations of Soviet librarianship" (Kuz'min 2001: 231). Risk-taking was possible in the new Russia, which appeared to be forming a Russian-type democracy. Uzbekistan adopted a conservative approach to its reforms. Russia benefited from numerous Western scholars using, studying, and writing about the Russian libraries, publicizing their needs abroad. In contrast, Central Asia remained unknown to most, investigated by few.

Marketing. Most libraries do not have web pages or online catalogs. The best overview of Uzbekistan's libraries is provided through the ULA's website at <http://ula.uzsci.net>, but just a few libraries are represented and the information is not always up-to-date. Within Uzbekistan, printed library information is minimal. American library users are accustomed to a plethora of library handbooks and newsletters describing library hours and services, but these are not commonly produced in Uzbekistan. Printed subject bibliographies and lists of recent acquisitions were the most prominent library handouts that I found in Uzbekistan. Creating an image of success through publications is not yet high on the priority list of Uzbekistan's library achievements.

Respect and Esteem. An Uzbek librarian makes the equivalent of \$15-25 a month — two to three times less than university professors. She (most librarians in Uzbekistan are female) has not been trained in the latest methods, her library may not have computers and if it does, qualified technical specialists are often lacking to keep the computer systems up-to-date and operating. She is not as professionally involved. Writing professional articles and attending conferences are less common. Librarianship is a job rather than a career, and any small amount of money helps the family survive. She may work the standard eight to ten hours a day, six days a week. She will be required to retire at age 55. If she has a professional library degree, it was received from one of two library schools in

Uzbekistan — the A. Qodiri Tashkent State Institute of Culture, or the Tashkent College of Culture. During our interview, the library school dean of the Tashkent State Institute of Culture emphasized the need for a progressive library curricula and training of its teachers in modern methods. Due to the low esteem of librarianship in Uzbekistan, the field is not attractive to many.

Public Services. Students do not usually check out books, but use them in the library in exchange for their passports. Notes are taken by hand. Few photocopy machines are available for public use. Students consult the card catalog for library holdings. Few libraries have online catalogs and if they do, they are only for recent acquisitions. Retrospective conversion of catalog holdings has yet to take place in most of the libraries. Because a card catalog does not normally indicate holdings in branch or consortium libraries, and interlibrary loan is not handled electronically, knowledge about a book's location throughout Uzbekistan is not possible. In Tashkent, two years ago at least, the head librarian of a major university would bring a list of the needed books to the monthly meeting of academic library directors for distribution among their staff, followed by motor vehicle delivery of the books.

Collections. Library periodicals might not be bound in permanent volumes due to lack of funds. There is not a range of sophisticated electronic databases to select and print out articles. Since the larger percentage of published research in the world is produced by English-speaking countries, Uzbek libraries participating in the eIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) project benefit. Through eIFL, a humanitarian service provided by EBSCO, Inc., developing nations have access to over 3,170 full-text English language and several Russian journal titles at a fraction of the normal price. Some libraries have access to Russian produced databases. There are a number of local efforts in Uzbekistan to develop specialized databases of published journal literature and other resources, but national databases of information are lacking. Consequently, the countrywide information base cannot yet be shared.

Researchers might notice a dearth of current imprints, multimedia materials, and reference books, with many titles out of date. A strength of Uzbek libraries is their rich collections of historical books and rare manuscripts. Funds, equipment, and professional expertise to digitize and preserve them for shared purposes are in the rudimentary stages.

Automation and Standards. Many library operations in Uzbekistan are routinely done by hand. The catalog cards are prepared with a typewriter, after consulting one of several Russian cataloging standards. There is no uniform cataloging method practiced in Uzbekistan. The fortunate library (over 20 in Uzbekistan) has purchased a subscription to IRBIS — a Russian-based automated library system that includes modules for acquisition, cataloging, circulation, users, and administrators — or to another integrated library system. Russia has set a precedent which might be considered by Uzbekistan. Russia joined the United States' OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) in 1995 and developed a Russian version of the MARC record, enabling electronic cataloging, and bibliographic record-sharing among OCLC members (Shraiberg 1995). The OCLC worldwide database integrates over 30,000 libraries, which could include Central Asia among its 82 country members.

Relationships. An Uzbek academic librarian is not as involved as her American counterpart in departmental activities, committee work, selecting resources to support faculty research, or working with a "liaison" faculty member on issues jointly faced by the academic community and the library. Out of her library budget, she purchases the textbooks requested by her faculty for their students. The students do not challenge her expertise daily with questions at the "reference desk" (which did not exist in most of the libraries I visited) regarding the best resources for their term papers, citation of references, formulation of a research strategy, critical reading, or evaluation of Internet information.

Library Instruction. Library tours are common, but group sessions on how to use the card catalog, compile a bibliography, select the most appropriate books, narrow down a topic, or formulate a research question are not the norm. Several universities have opened American Centers or designated computer rooms that are separate from the library. Technology specialists rather than librarians are teaching the students intelligent use of the Internet. A professional gap exists between librarians and computer specialists. Unfortunately, one successful American Center located at the WLU was recently closed, due to the current political conflicts between the US and Uzbekistan.

Outreach and Professional Development. The Uzbek librarian has a close relationship with her staff, but communicating with colleagues in other

regions is not as common. She may not have e-mail access. In Uzbekistan, a modern professional library and information science literature base has yet to significantly develop. Librarians have little incentive to publish, and what they do publish rarely reaches the Western world. Development and production of at least one core library and information science professional journal would provide a forum for issues and concerns. Uzbek librarians currently publish in *Biblioteka* — a Russian library science journal published monthly in Moscow; information scientists publish in *Campes Journal*, a computer journal published in Tashkent.

Lack of funds and meager salaries prevent opportunities for professional development and travel to conferences. Exposure to new ideas would undoubtedly inspire Uzbek librarians to improve their libraries, including rewriting job descriptions, developing strategic plans, and developing a more business-like approach to librarianship through updated organizational, administrative, and managerial methods.

Ultimately, Uzbekistan will decide if it wants to be transformed into an information society by becoming part of an international information network, to remain isolated, to adopt a middle-way approach — associating primarily with culturally-similar countries — or another model. Currently, Uzbekistan is moving away from the West and embracing Russia and China. Gradual fulfillment of its library and technology needs is a long road, but should lead to the development of a professional librarian identity, so that librarians will be able to answer key questions: "What does it mean to be a librarian in Uzbekistan and how are our libraries unique?" "What kind of libraries do we want?" "What are our values?"

Positive Happenings

A fundamental step for libraries in Uzbekistan was the formation of the Uzbekistan Library Association (ULA) in October 1999, which includes 15 regional associations and 84 member libraries.³ Notable also is the Association of Women Librarians of the Samarqand region, established in September 1999. Another achievement is the changed status of the Alisher Navoi Library from a state to a national library (since 2003) allowing it to receive additional funding. For instance, the Alisher Navoi National Library opened up an eIFL Training Center,

³ See <http://ula.uzsci.net>.

financed by a grant from the Eurasia Foundation, applied for through ULA. The development of the Central Asian component of the eIFL-Net Multi-Country Consortium for countries in-transition⁴ — now provides libraries in Central Asia with electronic databases and additional services at a substantially reduced rate.⁵ Eighty-four academic and government-related organizations in Uzbekistan are members of the eIFL Central Asia consortium.

Through a Soros Foundation grant, the Fundamental Library of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences in Tashkent received computerized equipment and other resources to set up an in-house IRBIS Training Center.⁶ Further, the Fundamental Library was one of several in Uzbekistan to receive hundreds of books through the now finalized "Pushkin Bicentenary Project for Books and Libraries."⁷ More than 30 Uzbek libraries and universities participated in the Pushkin Project, receiving approximately 40,000 of the "best" Russian books. A highly important event, partly financed by the Soros Foundation (prior to closure of its Tashkent office) is the establishment of the Central Asia International Library and Internet Conference, held biennially, with three conferences to date in Samarqand, Bukhara, and Tashkent.⁸

At the government level, two of Uzbekistan's seven "State Working Groups" organized in 2003 focus on reforming library activity, by developing computerization and information technology projects. A "Law on Library Science of the Republic of Uzbekistan" is pending approval by the Uzbek Parliament. Its purpose is to protect libraries and librarians, and promote library and information technology development. "The Concept of Library Development to the Year 2010," being prepared by members of the State Working Groups and to be endorsed by the Cabinet of Ministries and Uzbek Parliament will outline new strategies for

⁴ A non-profit advocate organization developed by the Open Society Institute, EBSCO, and others.

⁵ See <http://ula.uzsci.net/eifl/en/eifl.php> and <http://www.eifl.net>.

⁶ IRBIS is the preferred automated integrated library system.

⁷ A project of the Soros Foundation: <http://www.osi.hu/cpd/spf/10'97.html>. The Soros Foundation — Open Society Institute — which provided significant funds for library development in Uzbekistan from 1996 through April 2004 is sorely missed since its registration was revoked.

⁸ See http://www.eifl.net/docs/INFORM_conference.doc.

implementing the best library practices of foreign libraries, promote international cooperation, develop library standards, and provide legal protection. On the local level, a German library specialist, Prof. Dietmar Kumar, supported by the Goethe Institute, lecturing at the Tashkent State Institute of Culture's library school for two years, is offering opportunity for Uzbek librarians to publish for pay in the German library journal, *Bibliotek IT*.

During July 2005, the Alisher Navoi National Library was to receive a grant of \$50,000 from the US Embassy in Tashkent to create a "USA Corner." President Karimov's October 2005 trip to Malaysia resulted in negotiations with the Malaysia National Library to construct a new building for the Uzbekistan National Library. This project will include a Digitization and Restoration Center for Uzbekistan's valuable and rare literature.

The ULA recently received a grant from the Eurasia Foundation for \$9,000 to hold seminars with library leaders across Uzbekistan and Parliament members. Dr. Rakhmatullaev reports, however, that as of October 2005, plans previously made with a number of US foundations and the US Embassy to improve libraries have stopped. Additionally, the Eurasia Foundation approved closure of its Tashkent Regional Office, effective March 6, 2006.⁹ Rakhmatullaev and others hope the situation is temporary and that relations between the US and Uzbekistan will improve. During November 2005, the Uzbekistan National Library received a gift of 100,000 books from Russia.

In certain regions of Uzbekistan, library development is rapidly progressing. In Jizzakh (Jizzax), the repair of the Regional Public Library is funded by the local government totaling \$170,000. The library is to be automated, connected to Internet, and its librarians trained in IRBIS. The State Commission on Library Reform has proposed an "open access" mission for the public libraries, and reorganization of the structure of Uzbekistan's public libraries, including to whom they report, causing heated discussion. A new library for the Khorezm (Xorazm) Mamum Academy is opening soon in Khorezm Province. Since 2003, the Asian Development Bank has embarked on projects to improve the school libraries in Uzbekistan, with a

⁹ The Eurasia Foundation has worked in Uzbekistan for 12 years, donating more than 22 million dollars since 1993 for various civic-oriented projects, including the libraries. This closure is an important loss for Uzbekistan.

recent proposal aimed at computerizing 900 Uzbek school libraries. The ULA is deeply involved in these and other projects.

It is hoped that these broader achievements and further projects will open doors to improve the basic functions and ordinary practices, which must take place in hundreds of Uzbek libraries. Much depends upon the value that Uzbekistan decides to place upon its libraries, which appears to be increasing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The important contribution of my research is to point out the little known needs of Uzbekistan's libraries. I recommend librarians in Uzbekistan to study not only the American system, but also Russian and Chinese ones. Russian and Chinese librarians have made great strides and benefited from numerous exchanges with American libraries, including the Library of Congress, but a closer affiliation should occur with Uzbek librarians. The American Library Association's Central Eurasian Subcommittee of the American Library Association's International Relations Committee is interested in collaborating with Uzbekistan on grant writing projects. Further affiliation with the International Federation of Library Associations, the Russian Library Association, and similar groups are recommended. Consortium development is a fairly new concept in Uzbekistan to be further explored.

References

- Kuz'min, Evgeny
2001 "New information technologies in Russian libraries." In: *Advances in Librarianship*, 25: 229-251, Frederick C. Lynden, ed. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Rakhmatullaev, Marat A.
2002 "Advanced information library infrastructure as an important social tool for the prevention of crisis situations in Central Asia," *Library Hi Tech News*, 19 (9) (November), 12-14.
- Shraiberg, Yakov, and Mikhail Goncharov
1995 "First Russian experience with OCLC," *OCLC Newsletter*, no. 218 (November/December), pp. 1-2. <http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/aw/reuse/intnl.htm>
- Spain, Victoria J.
1996 "Russian libraries, an indestructible part of national memory: A study guide for librarians," *Reference Services Review*, 24 (1), 73-96.
1997 "Crimea International Conference 1996: International librarianship issues and activities," *Library Hi Tech News*, 141 (April), p. 1-13.