



Dr Shirin Akiner

Tribute by Burzine Waghmar, SOAS Library and Centre for Iranian Studies

Shirin Akiner, senior lecturer in Central and Inner Asian Studies (1985-2008; but since 1974 at the University of London), was a globally renowned and prolifically published staff member of the SOAS Near & Middle East department. An unparalleled breadth and unparochial perspective informed her areal approach wherefore evinced in personal industry, collaborative endeavours with scholars, and consistent support to students. Her authorship and editorship of works on Tatar, Tajik, Mongol, Kazakh, Turkmen, Tibetan, Uzbek, Iranian cultures and politics perforce led to the realisation one was pursuing neither post-Soviet studies nor sequestered semi-nomads of Haute Asie.

Akiner's solid grounding, as with so many of her generation who taught at SOAS, was predicated on philology: Dhaka-born and of Welsh-Pakistani parentage, she joined SOAS as an Uzbek lecturer in 1985. Her 1980 UCL dissertation on the religious semantics of Belarusian Muslims (Polish/Lithuanian Tatars of Turko-Mongol stock) is a seminal analysis of the British Library's Tatar kitab written in medieval Polish-Belarusian. Her meticulous examination of this Slavo-Christian and Islamo-Turkic linguistic admixture was possible given her predictably effortless facility, following a first class undergraduate Russian and ancillary Turkish degree, in reading and researching nearly a dozen plus sources ranging from Old Church Slavonic to Ottoman Turkish. An expanded (457 pp.) version with a CD-ROM of this BL mss. appeared following her 2008 retirement. By then she was an Associate Fellow of the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House) and routinely called upon for authoritative written submissions and oral briefings to Parliament's Central Asia All-Party Parliamentary Group, House of Commons' Select Committee on Defence, NATO's Parliamentary

Assembly, and Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council Security Forum. Her 2005 report on the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan was published under the aegis of the Johns Hopkins University's Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, one of the most prestigious centres for International Relations anywhere.

It was Harvard's Richard Frye, Mary Boyce's fellow student after the war under W B Henning at SOAS, who impressed on me, upon my departure from New England for the Old, to call upon Akiner without fail although my own proposed research was in Iranistics. No sooner had I settled in at the School than she asked me to provide her introductory Central Asian politics and history course students an overview of the Silk Road, an annual 'talk' I offered for several years at the beginning of first term. It was Mary Boyce's successor, David Bivar, who taught me Pashto—from his own notes prepared as Sir Olaf Caroe's ADC during the last years of the Raj—and a primer Akiner published, with accompanying audio material recorded by her and a native informant, in-house at the School. She steered several works for the School's Publications Committee on Central Asian seminars and conferences, all planned and convened by her. She jointly edited with Bivar's successor and my teacher, Nicholas Sims-Williams, a volume of papers on Turkic and Iranian philology by visiting lecturers delivered under the auspices of the Central Asian Studies Association, now our Centre of Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus (CCAC). Beyond the School was evident her enthusiasm in providing welcome commentary as a much-sought expert for numerous award-winning radio and television documentaries on Central Asia; promoting multi-disciplinary research as founding editor of Routledge's Central Asia Research Forum series; and as UNESCO-appointed rapporteur of its Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue project (1988-97). She held visiting professorships at Royal College of Defence Studies, London; NATO Defense College, Rome; Oberlin University; National University of Seoul; Uppsala University; Kazakh National University, Almaty; and Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki. Shirin Akiner joined that distinguished company of SOAS staff and alumni comprising of Akbar Ahmed, Charles Beckingham, Mary Boyce, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Ann Lambton, Sir Cyril Philips and William Watson, when awarded the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs (formerly Royal Central Asian Society) in 2006. NATO Defense College conferred an honorary fellowship on her two years later when she also became a senior fellow of the Cambridge Central Asia Forum. In 2013 she received the International Chingiz Aitmatov Award, established for that namesake Kyrgyz intellectual and adviser to Mikhail Gorbachev, marking her 'promotion as well as extensive contribution to the understanding of Central Asian countries and their cultures'.

Given her aforementioned training as a medievalist, she was determined to afford her students a profounder understanding of the past to comprehend the present, a familiar bane among those of us trained in an appreciation of the historical context, frequently unshared by contemporary analysts forever focused on the here and now. It is this which lent an enduring impress to her teaching and writings so many of us profited from for so long as will others assuredly and retrospectively.