



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**Vladmir Alekseevich Ivanow**

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### **Early life of Ivanow**

Vladimir Alekseevich Ivanow, (b. St. Petersburg, Russia, 3 November 1886, d. Tehran, 19 June 1970; variously spelt Ivanov and Wladimir), was a Russian orientalist and leading pioneer in modern Ismaili studies. His father was a military doctor, and he spent his youth in his native city and Moscow, graduating in 1907 with distinction as a gold medallist from a gymnasium in St. Petersburg. From 1907 to 1911 he studied at the Faculty of Oriental Languages of The University of St. Petersburg. After studying Arabic with the noted Russian scholar Victor Rosen (1849-1908), Ivanow read Islamic and Central Asian history with Vasilii Vladimirovich Barthold (1869-1930), while specialising in Persian dialects under the eminent Russian authority, Valentin A. Zhukovsky (1858-1918; Barthold, p. 320).

In 1910, Ivanow visited Persia for a few months on a scholarship to improve his knowledge of Persian. After graduating from The University of St. Petersburg with a first class diploma in 1911, he joined the Persian subsidiary of the State Bank of Russia and served in Persia from 1912 to 1914, a career decision primarily motivated by his scholarly interests. Sent initially to Birjand and later to Kermanshah, Ivanow embarked on his field research into Persian dialects as well as the folk poetry of Khurasan and elsewhere in Persia. The results of these linguistic and related ethnological and folkloric studies, which he pursued intermittently until the 1920s, were later published in some twenty articles (Daftary, 1971, pp. 62-63). They retain their importance as works of reference in the field of Iranian languages.

In 1914 Ivanow resigned from the bank in Persia and returned to Russia where a year later he joined The Asiatic Museum of The (Imperial) Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. The Asiatic Museum, then under the directorship of the eminent philologist Karl Salemann (1849-1916), had built up an important library. In the same year, 1915, Ivanow was sent to Bukhara to collect manuscripts and acquired over a thousand Arabic and Persian manuscripts for the museum. He was described as a “fanatical lover of manuscripts” by Ignatyi Ulianovich Krachkovskii (p. 68), who was at the time working on the Arabic collection of the museum. In 1916 Sergei Fedorovich Oldenburg (1863-1934), Salemann’s successor at the museum, appointed Ivanow as an assistant keeper of oriental manuscripts. His lifelong interest in Islamic manuscripts provided him with the basis for his pioneering work in Ismaili studies.

### **A Shift in Research**

It was at The Asiatic Museum that Ivanow had his first contacts with Ismaili literature, his main research interest in later years. He catalogued a small collection of Persian Ismaili manuscripts acquired for the museum by Ivan Ivanovich Zarubin (1887-1964), the renowned Russian scholar of Tajik dialects and ethnology (Ivanov, 1917, pp. 359-86). These, like other Persian Ismaili manuscripts dating from the Alamut and post-Alamut periods in the history of Nizari Ismailis, had been preserved in Shugnan, Rushan and other districts of Badakhshan in Russian Central Asia, a region now divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

In the spring of 1918, Ivanow was once again sent to Central Asia to enlarge the Asiatic Museum’s so-

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called Bukhara collection of Islamic manuscripts, but the mission was cut short because of the unsettled conditions of Russia in the wake of the October Revolution. For the same reason, Ivanow had to abandon his plans to visit the Samarkand region to conduct field research in certain local dialects related to Sogdian. Unable to return to St. Petersburg, he decided to go to Persia. He arrived at Mashhad in June 1918, and served there during 1919-1920 as a Persian interpreter to Major-General W. E. R. Dickson, commander of the Anglo-Indian forces in Eastern Persia in World War I. During these years, he also met many Persian Ismailis and acquired valuable details about their community and literature.

### **Ivanow meets Aga Khan III**

In November 1920, Ivanow went to India in the company of an Anglo-Indian force which was about to be disbanded. Thus began his long residency of some four decades in the Indian subcontinent. Soon after, Ivanow settled in Calcutta, where Sir Ashutosh Mukerji, president of The Asiatic Society of Bengal, commissioned him to catalogue the extensive collection of Persian manuscripts in the Society's library. He completed this task meticulously in two annotated volumes and two supplements, which were published during 1924-28 in the *Bibliotheca Indica* series (Daftary, 1971, p. 64). The same decade saw the appearance of his first major Ismaili publication ("Ismailitica," in *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 8, 1922, pp. 1-76), which contained first editions of certain Nizari Ismaili texts. In 1928, Ivanow went to Persia to collect manuscripts for the Asiatic Society, as he had done frequently in India. On this occasion, he made the first of several visits to Alamut and other former Ismaili strongholds in northern Persia. Having done considerable work also on a catalogue of the Asiatic Society's Arabic manuscripts, later completed by H. Husain and published in 1939, Ivanow ended his association with the Asiatic Society in 1930 and moved to Bombay. This initiated a new phase in his scholarly career, a phase devoted exclusively to his path breaking Ismaili studies.

In the meantime, Ivanow had established relations with some members of the Nizari Khoja community of Bombay who, in turn, introduced him to Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (1877-1957), the forty-eighth Imam of the Nizari Ismailis. In January 1931, the Aga Khan employed Ivanow on a permanent basis to research into the literature, history, and the teachings of the Ismailis. Henceforth, Ivanow rapidly found access to the private collections of Ismaili manuscripts held by the Nizari Ismailis of India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Persia and elsewhere. At the same time, he established scholarly contacts with Asaf Ali Asghar Fyzee (1899-1981), the leading authority on Ismaili law, and a few other scholars of the Ismaili Bohra community of Bombay, who placed at his disposal their valuable family collections of Arabic Ismaili manuscripts dating to the Fatimid and Must'ali Yamani phases of Ismaili history. It was in Bombay of the early 1930s that these scholars, led by Ivanow, brought about a breakthrough in Ismaili studies. Through the network of his Ismaili connections, Ivanow managed to identify a large number of Ismaili texts, which he described in an annotated catalogue (*A Guide to Ismaili Literature*, London, 1933). This catalogue was the first pointer to the hitherto unknown richness and diversity of the literary heritage of the Ismailis and remained an indispensable research tool for several decades, providing the material for the advancement of Ismaili scholarship. By 1963, when Ivanow published a second edition of his Ismaili catalogue (*Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey*, Tehran, 1963), he had identified a few hundred more manuscript sources while the field of Ismaili studies as a whole had undergone a revolution, thanks to the concerted efforts of Ivanow and a few other scholars, notably A. A. A. Fyzee, Husayn F. al-Hamdani (1901-1962), Zahed 'Ali (1888-1958) and Henry Corbin.

### **Pioneering Steps in Ismaili Studies**

Ivanow was also instrumental in founding The Islamic Research Association in Bombay in 1933. Several of Ivanow's early Ismaili works, including his major study on early Ismailism (*Ismaili Tradition Concerning the Rise of the Fatimids*, London and New York, 1942), appeared in the Association's series of publications. In these seminal Ismaili studies, Ivanow used archaeological and epigraphic evidence, as well as literary sources. In 1937, he discovered the tombs of several Nizari imams in the villages of Anjudan and Kahak, in Central Persia, enabling him to fill important gaps in the post-Alamut history of the Nizaris (see V. Ivanow, "Tombs of some Persian Ismaili Imams," *Journal of the Bombay Branch of*



*the Royal Asiatic Society*, N.S. 14, 1938, pp. 49-62). In 1957-58, building on his earlier work carried out in 1928 and 1937, he undertook extensive archaeological studies of the fortress of Alamut, the seat of the Nizari Ismaili state (483-654 AH /1090-1256 CE), and Lamasar, producing what still remains the most comprehensive monograph on the subject (*Alamut and Lamasar*, Tehran, 1960).

Ivanow's systematic efforts in recovering Ismaili manuscripts and facilitating research and publication in the field led to the creation in 1946 of The Ismaili Society of Bombay under the patronage of Aga Khan III, with Ivanow as the Society's honorary secretary and the editor of its series of publications. The bulk of Ivanow's numerous Ismaili monographs and editions and translations of Ismaili texts appeared in the same series. It was also mainly through Ivanow's efforts that the Ismaili Society came to possess an important library of manuscripts in Bombay; these manuscripts were subsequently transferred, in the late 1970s, to The Institute of Ismaili Studies Library in London, which currently holds the largest single collection of Ismaili manuscripts in the West. In 1959, Ivanow settled permanently in Tehran where he spent his final years.

Ivanow was the moving spirit behind the modern progress in Ismaili studies; and as his associate of four decades has observed, his work will endure and constitute the basis for further studies in almost every major field of Ismailism (Fyzee, p. 93). It was, however, the Nizari branch of Ismailism to which he devoted most of his attention. He identified, recovered, edited, translated and indefatigably studied a good portion of the extant literature of the Nizari Ismailis, a literature produced mainly in the Persian language (see Daftary, 1971, pp. 58-62), and he stands as the unrivalled founder of modern Nizari Ismaili studies (Hodgson, pp. 30-32; Berthel's, pp. 51-52). Largely thanks to his pioneering research and numerous contributions, the Nizari Ismailis of the Alamut period are no longer judged on the basis of mediaeval crusader legends and Marco Polo's fantasies as a band of drugged assassins led by a fanatical "Old Man of the Mountain."

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