

I wrote this statement of purpose as a Master's student for my application to PhD programs. This specific statement was for my NELC UChicago application, where I ultimately ended up.

I used versions of this statement for other universities, but each was tailored to the specific program (especially the last few paragraphs).

The statement is not perfect, and I would certainly write a different one now after spending 7 years in a doctoral program.

Academic Cover Letter: Better than the “what not to write” document.

The most strident reaction to date from my caring but cautious family had nothing to do with coming out as a young gay man, dropping out of high school due to bullying, or choosing not to be a neurosurgeon. To this day, they ask, “Why Uzbek?” They still have not come to terms with my decision to delve into the Turkic world, studying the one language they associate with the “irritable” nature of the Uzbeks. My parents grew up in Iran, knowing of Uzbeks only through the phrase, “*beh zeshiyi Uzbek ast*,” meaning, “He’s as ugly as an Uzbek.” Even after they immigrated to Los Angeles, California, I was raised and educated in a Persian-speaking enclave, exposed to English only when I entered formal education. Such phrases were repeatedly uttered around me, sparking a curiosity that led me to move to Russia in 2011 for a summer semester abroad at Russian State University for the Humanities. I came to understand the interactions between Russians and Central Asians and the subtle animosity that exists between them in post-Soviet nations. After developing advanced proficiency in the Russian language, my academic investment in Central Asia led me to learn Uzbek with Dr. X. Furthering this drive, currently I am enrolled in Dr. Y’s course in advanced Uzbek and Turkish, in addition to auditing Old Turkic.

Upon arriving at the University of Chicago, I started my Master’s coursework in the Center for Middle Eastern Studies under the guidance of my mentor, Professor John Woods, acquiring research experience in Central Asian history through the lens of Islamic history, specifically the 15th and 16th centuries. Currently, I am refining my thesis, *Millennial Shift: Effects of Time on Safavid Historiography*, on the subject of Soviet and post-Soviet discourses in 16th century Safavid Iran by analyzing two texts by Oktay Efendiev — one written in Russian in 1961 and the second translated into Azeri by Efendiev in 2006. Comparing these pieces of historical literature serves a two-fold purpose: first, it illuminates Soviet policies put in place during the mid-20th century and the subsequent effects of scholars in reappropriating the early modern period as directly linked to their contemporary histories; and second, it exemplifies the pliability of early modern history to serve specific goals and ideals for groups in power. In addition to developing my thesis, I have produced a number of academic papers about Central Asia on this and other themes, including Islamicized shamanic practices in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the state of scholarship on the early Uzbek dynasties (c. 16th century), and contemporary national identities.

During the summer of 2012, I traveled throughout Russia and Central Asia, experiencing firsthand the internal struggles (specifically in Uzbekistan) of Central Asians in attempting to come to terms with a century and half of Russian domination, while simultaneously reaffirming their Turkic and Islamic history. The contacts I made with scholars, students, and museum curators during my travels have thus far been helpful in obtaining sources on such delicate subjects as identity. These contacts inevitably will prove fruitful in my doctoral study, since my contacts and I have undertaken the essential steps in building trust and laying a foundation for communication. Furthermore, my acquaintances have sent articles and book manuscripts on the 15th and 16th centuries, in exchange for articles and works available in the US and at UChicago’s Regenstein. This mutual exchange of knowledge has been one of the highlights of my graduate career thus far.

For my doctoral study, I propose to focus on the effects of late Russian Empire (post-conquest) and early Soviet historians’ discourses and historiography on and in the construction of Central Asian history. Imperial historians, such as Baron Rozen, along with his students, including Vasilii Bartold, actively fabricated a grand narrative not reflective of the realities of 15th and 16th century Central Asia. In the service of forming an imperial identity, ethnic national histories were forged by the Russians for the masses and elites of Central Asia to solidify and promote connections of their homeland to the imperial state. In much of the existing scholarship, this subject is generally overlooked, serving merely as a reference point to incite theoretical arguments for later Soviet utilization and construction of titular nationalities in Central Asia. I will seek to develop nuanced approaches to investigate how specific aspects of 15th and 16th century Central Asian history were imagined by imperial historians to affect domination over Central Asia. Understanding the processes

Commented [ANS1]: Paragraph 1: describe how my background led to inquiries of race and religion in my field (Central Eurasia); what activities increased and informed my knowledge of my proposed area of research

Commented [ANS2]: The only reason I mentioned specific names is because I was applying from one program at UChi to another program at UChi. For my applications to UMich or OSU, I left the names out. Unless your faculty members are renowned scholars and universally known, naming them doesn’t really help.

Commented [ANS3]: Paragraph 2: discuss my arrival at the University of Chicago for my Master’s; explain briefly my thesis and theoretical approach for my MA thesis

Commented [ANS4]: PhD apps are due in November or December. I had about one page of my thesis written, but “refining” sounds so much better than “I will write.” Good luck being accepted to a PhD program when you haven’t even done actual research/writing on your MA. Also, the title of my thesis changed to something else in March (3 months after my applications!).

Commented [ANS5]: Paragraph 3: explain how my travels through Russia and Central Asia have helped form my opinions on my research; my contacts have helped provide indispensable sources

Commented [ANS6]: This is literally the only way I got through my PhD. Lucky lucky lucky me! Networking is super important.

Commented [ANS7]: Paragraph 4 and 5: what I am proposing to do as a doctoral student; my theoretical approaches; current scholarship on the subject and the gap my research will fill; why my research will be important

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by which historians fashioned history, and the promulgation and assimilation of these ideas by subordinated peoples, will not only provide insights into the period between 1860s-1920s as an era of unification, but will also serve a secondary purpose of explaining current constructions of Central Asian identities through the reappropriation of Islamic roots.

My research will build upon the works of scholars such as Vera Tolz and Adeeb Khalid, both of whom have produced literature that complement the time periods on which I focus. Specifically, Tolz’s work illustrates Russian policies instigated in the late nineteenth century—and later assumed by the Soviets—toward a unifying a multi-ethnic imperial state by reinforcing the notion that Turkic groups have historically been peaceful with one another. Similarly, Khalid looks at the same period in *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* to draw attention to the cultural elites’ activities during the Bolshevik revolutionary period. However, these authors have not produced a thorough analysis of how 19th century historians constructed early modern Central Asian history (c. 15th-16th centuries), and how these constructions were utilized later in developing policies toward Muslim populations.

Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, the rivalry between the British colonial power and the expanding Russian empire resulted in the invasion and capture of the Turkic khanates by Russian forces. Though this region was incorporated into the Islamic sphere of influence, impacted by the Irano-Arabic populations of the Middle East and undoubtedly projecting its own influence on the Middle East, the Russian invasion marks the point from which this region slowly transformed from sovereign Turkic polities into the “Eastern” neighbor within a greater imperial state. In this context, Russian historians began a thorough reconstruction of Central Asian history, due to their fear that a multi-ethnic empire would lead to bitter rivalries and animosity between peoples, requiring their imposition of the fabricated discourse surrounding the shared history, values, and beliefs between non-Russian Muslim populations. Islamic undertones were utilized until the complete abandonment of religion by the Soviets. This, however, did not obliterate the thousand year Islamic influence in the region, often understood by current scholars as a nostalgic reaffirmation of Islamic roots in post-Soviet Central Asian countries. With this framework as the underpinning of my research, I plan to study the creation of such a precise history for their “Eastern” neighbors by the imperial historians, the mechanisms of promulgation of this grand narrative and the consequent impacts on the subject peoples.

In researching these issues, I have found the work of Dr. X of the Department of History influential for my area of interest. Dr. X’s work on Ukraine during the imperial period places them in a position that will benefit my research when utilizing imperial historiography and discussing national identities and localized politics, since many of the policies in Ukraine were applied to Central Asia. Working with Professor X, Dr. Y, and Professor Z will be instrumental in continuing my research on Central Asia, since they each have specific methodological expertise relating to the historical sources and historiographies of Eurasia to guide my research. In addition, Professors A, B, C, D, and E will provide invaluable insights to my approaches to Central Asia through literary, theoretical, and historical perspectives. With proficiency in Persian, Uzbek and Turkish, as well as Russian and French as research languages, I have already fulfilled all the language requirements for the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and will therefore be able to focus substantially on coursework. While “*beh zeshthiyi Uzbek ast*” is an innocuous vestige of the 16th century Safavid-Uzbek conflicts, the Russian imperial constructions of the Central Asian peoples continue to have pernicious repercussions to the present day. I strongly believe that the academic resources at the University of Chicago coupled with the guidance of distinguished faculty and my language facility will position me to contribute significant and nuanced perspectives on the artificial construction of identities, as well as their ramifications in this geo-politically sensitive region of the world.

Commented [ANS8]: Paragraph 4 and 5: what I am proposing to do as a doctoral student; my theoretical approaches; current scholarship on the subject and the gap my research will fill; why my research will be important

Commented [ANS9]: Paragraph 6: “history lesson” (remember, there are people on the acceptance committees who know nothing about your proposed area of research, so it is important to provide a brief “lesson”); after providing three of four concise sentences about your focus, tie it to your research; how and where will your research add to what we know

Commented [ANS10]: Paragraph 7: discuss the professors you intend on working with at the institution (mention you have met them); explain that your language skills will help in working with sources; make clear that this institution is essential for you to continue your research because of the professors and the resources at the institution.

Commented [ANS11]: Be careful with the laundry lists. I would change this now to include more specific information about *how* they could help me specifically.

Commented [ANS12]: This department requires 4 languages as part of the program, so it was part of my strategy to show that I could focus on “content” rather than “tools” (i.e. language).