



# reading

## BOOKS ABOUT UZBEKISTAN / 1

Our reading recommendations for Uzbekistan cover a lot of ground. For fiction fans, there's innovative, imaginative novels by dissident authors but also a page-turning thriller. And on our non-fiction list, you will find books about the area's often brutal leaders but also tales of ordinary people and extraordinary musicians. There are also some diverse depictions of the country's Jewish community and culture. Enjoy!

### Fiction

Hamid Ismailov, *The Railway* (2006)

This novel, comic and complex, examines how the coming of the railway changes a small town in Uzbekistan at the turn of the 20th century. The town's band of colorful characters includes "outgoing Mullahs, incoming Bolsheviks," Uzbeks, Russians, Persians, Jews, and Koreans. *The New Statesman* called it "a work of rare beauty," while the *Daily Telegraph* said it was "bold and inventive" and a kind of Central Asian *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Hamid Ismailov, *The Devil's Dance* (2018)

Ismailov's books are banned in Uzbekistan for what the regime calls their "unacceptable democratic tendencies" but have impressed overseas reviewers. *The Devil's Dance* tells, in a far from straightforward way, the story of two real Uzbeki writers. On New Year's Eve, 1937, the author Abdulla Qodiriy is taking a break from writing his book about the 19th-century poet-queen-slave Oyxon, when he is arrested by Stalin's secret police. *The Financial Times* commented that "for all its complexity, *The Devil's Dance* is utterly readable."

Andrey Platonov, *Soul* (1935)

Not an easy novel but according to some critics, a great one. Platonov, who Stalin described as "scum," died in obscurity in 1951 but has been rediscovered and lauded as one of the best Russian writers of the 20th century. This is a bleak, mysterious story about a saintly man who tries to convert to Communism a nomadic tribe living between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. According to *The Observer*, "Rarely does literature come this close to being music."

Hank Steinberg, *Out of Range* (2013)

For something completely different, how about a thriller? Charlie Davis, a journalist from LA, flees Uzbekistan after reporting on a massacre carried out by government troops. But when his wife is kidnapped, he returns to Central Asia to discover what has happened to her. *Kirkus Reviews* called it "fast-paced, well-plotted, and scenic" but "familiar."



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### Non-Fiction

Christopher Aslan Alexander, *A Carpet Ride to Khiva* (2009)

Alexander went to Uzbekistan as a volunteer for a Swedish NGO but became entranced by the place, the people, and the ancient tradition of carpet-making. *The Independent* said this description of his seven years in Khiva “hangs together beautifully, giving a pungent sense of what life is like for ordinary Uzbeks today.”

Ingeborg Baldauf, Moshe Gammer, & Thomas Loy (eds.), *Bukharan Jews in the 20th Century* (2008)

Written by leading researchers, these articles look at the lives of Bukharan Jews both in Central Asia and in émigré communities in Israel and the US. *Religious Studies Review* described it as an innovative collection which includes a fascinating article comparing Jewish and Islamic enlightenment movement in Central Asia.

Beit Hatfutsot, *Threads of Silk: The Story of Bukharan Jewry* (2013)

Beit Hatfutsot, the Museum of the Jewish People released this book to accompany their exhibition on the Jewish communities of Central Asia. It includes discussions about their cultural, spiritual, and economic achievements plus photos of the colorful objects and artifacts that appeared in the exhibition.

Bibish, *The Dancer from Khiva; One Muslim Woman's Quest for Freedom* (2008)

In this “plainspoken, candid, charming” memoir, Bibish tells the story of her impoverished upbringing in a conservative Muslim village in Uzbekistan, her survival of gang rape, and the criticism she faced from her neighbors when she appeared on television as a dancer. *Publishers Weekly* called it a “memoir of raw hardship and desperate courage.”

Alanna E. Cooper, *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism* (2012)

Based on years of research and interviews, Cooper analyzes the factors that shaped and transformed Bukharan Jewish identity over three centuries. The H-Net website called it “an important work, well-written, well-argued, and very readable.”

Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (1990)

This is considered the classic account of the “Great Game,” the secret war between Tsarist Russia and Victorian England for supremacy in Central Asia. The *BBC History Magazine* called it “brilliant and engrossing” while the *Financial Times* thought it “immensely readable, a gripping and impressive narrative of adventure and war.”

Theodore Levin, *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God* (1996)

Levin traveled through Central Asia (and Queens, New York) to talk with musicians, the “fools of God” who created the area’s rich musical heritage. He argues that, despite Soviet and nationalist attempts to control and “own” the area’s music, Central Asia has a unified musical culture in which Jews as well as Muslims play a pivotal part. Reviewers praised the book as engrossing and erudite.



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## BOOKS ABOUT UZBEKISTAN / 3

Janet Malcolm, *Iphigenia in Forest Hills: Anatomy of a Murder Trial* (2012)

On a sunny New York morning in 2007, a young Jewish immigrant from Uzbekistan was gunned down in broad daylight. The *Jewish Review of Books* called this real-life whodunnit a “riveting account” of the subsequent trial that also provides a fascinating picture of the Bukharan Jewish community living in Queens.

Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World* (2004)

Using Samarkand as his capital, the Mongol emperor Tamerlane (also known as Timur) conquered all of Eastern and Central Asia and parts of the Middle East, leaving a trail of dead in his wake. But as the architecture in modern Samarkand still shows, he was a builder as well as a destroyer. *Ha'aretz* called this a “wonderful book” on “an extraordinary chapter in human history.”

Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkand* (2006)

In the 1990s, Craig Murray, a British ambassador to Uzbekistan, launched a one-man campaign against the brutal rule of President Islam Karimov. Despite Murray’s own personal flaws, *The Independent* called this a “compelling tale” about a brave effort to prevent torture and abuses of human rights.

Monica Whitlock, *Beyond the Oxus: The Central Asians* (2002)

An account of life in Uzbekistan and neighboring Tajikistan during their first, troubled decade of independence from the Soviet Union. It weaves together the recent history of the area with stories of the lives of local people. *The Guardian* called it, “well informed and highly illuminating.”