

German Readers' Perception of Uzbek Culture Through the Translation of "Bygone Days"

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Abstract. This article examines how German readers perceive Uzbek culture through the German translation of Abdulla Qodiriy's *Bygone Days* (*O'tkan kunlar*), the first Uzbek novel published in 1926. By analyzing the translation's linguistic and cultural mediation, the study explores the challenges of conveying Uzbek cultural nuances to a German audience and how these shape readers' understanding of Uzbek identity, traditions, and historical context. Drawing on translation studies, reader-response theory, and linguo-culturology, the article employs a comparative analysis of translations by Arno Specht (1968) and Barno Aripova (2020), supplemented and revised using the original and qualitative data from German reader reviews. It is noteworthy that Arno Specht retitled the translation of the novel as "die liebenden von Taschkent" (the lovers of Tashkent). Findings suggest that while translations successfully introduce Uzbek cultural elements, certain nuances, such as idiomatic expressions and historical references, are partially lost, influencing readers' perceptions. The article highlights the translator's role as a cultural mediator and proposes strategies for enhancing cross-cultural understanding.

Key words: Translation studies, Uzbek culture, *Bygone Days*, German readers, cultural nuances, linguo-culturology, reader-response theory, cross-cultural perception, Abdulla Qodiriy.

Introduction

Abdulla Qodiriy's *Bygone Days* (*O'tkan kunlar*), published in 1926, is a cornerstone of Uzbek literature, often regarded as the first full-length Uzbek novel and a realist depiction of 19th-century Central Asian life. Set in pre-colonial Tashkent and Margilan, the novel explores themes of love, tradition, and societal reform through the story of Otabek and Kumush, framed within the Turco-Persian poetic tradition. Its translation into German, notably by Arno Specht (1968) and Barno Aripova (2020), has introduced German readers to Uzbek culture, yet the process of cultural transfer poses significant challenges due to linguistic and cultural disparities. This article investigates how German readers perceive Uzbek culture through these translations, focusing on the translator's role in mediating cultural elements and the impact of translation strategies on reader perceptions.

The study is grounded in translation studies (Bassnett, 2013), reader-response theory (Iser, 1978), and linguo-culturology, which examines the interplay of language and culture in translation. By analyzing translation methodologies and German reader feedback, the article addresses the following questions: How do German translations of *Bygone Days* convey Uzbek cultural nuances? What factors influence German readers' perceptions of Uzbek culture? And how can translators enhance cross-cultural understanding?

Literature review. Translation is not merely a linguistic act but a cultural transfer that shapes readers' perceptions of foreign cultures (Bassnett, 2013). Linguo-culturology emphasizes the need for translators to deeply understand both source and target cultures to convey cultural nuances effectively. Uzbek literature, characterized by rich idiomatic expressions and historical references, poses unique challenges when translated into languages like German, which lack direct equivalents for many cultural concepts.

Reader-response theory (Iser, 1978) posits that readers actively construct meaning based on their cultural backgrounds and the text's presentation. For German readers, unfamiliarity with Uzbek culture may lead to misinterpretations unless translations provide sufficient context. Recent studies, such as Berdialiev (2024), highlight the complexities of translating *Bygone Days* into German, noting that cultural symbols (e.g., Turco-Persian traditions) and social norms (e.g., family obligations) require careful mediation. Similarly, research on translating Uzbek films underscores the importance of cultural adaptation to maintain linguistic integrity and foster cross-cultural understanding.

The German translation market plays a central role in global literary exchange, often acting as a bridge for peripheral literatures like Uzbek (Unseld, 1988, cited in). However, translations of Central Asian works are rare, making *Bygone Days* a significant case study for examining how German readers engage with Uzbek culture.

Methodology. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining textual analysis of the German translations of *Bygone Days* by Arno Specht (1968) and Barno Aripova (2020) supplemented and revised using the original and qualitative data from German reader reviews. The methodology includes:

Comparative Textual Analysis: Examines linguistic and cultural elements in the original Uzbek text and its German translations, focusing on idiomatic expressions, historical references, and cultural symbols (e.g., “Bacha Bazi,” family honor). Translation strategies (e.g., retention, domestication, foreignization) are evaluated based on Vinay and Darbelnet’s (2000) framework. Key passages, such as the “Massacre of the Qipchaks” and “Yusufbek Hajji Disavows the Ways of the World,” are analyzed to assess how cultural nuances are conveyed.

Qualitative Analysis of Reader Feedback: Collects reviews from German online platforms (e.g., Amazon.de, Goodreads) and literary blogs to gauge readers’ perceptions of Uzbek culture. Thematic analysis identifies recurring themes, such as fascination with exoticism, confusion over cultural practices, or appreciation for historical context.

Semi-structured interviews with five German readers (conducted in 2024) provide deeper insights into their interpretations of Uzbek traditions and identities.

Theoretical Framework: Integrates linguo-culturology to assess cultural transfer, reader-response theory to analyze reader interpretations (Iser, 1978), and translation studies to evaluate methodologies (Bassnett, 2013).

Findings. Translation Challenges and Strategies. The German translations of *Bygone Days* face significant challenges in conveying Uzbek cultural nuances:

Idiomatic Expressions: Uzbek idioms, such as those rooted in Turco-Persian traditions, often lack German equivalents. Specht’s 1968 translation tends to domesticate expressions (e.g., translating “aksakal” as “Älterer” instead of retaining it with a footnote), potentially diluting cultural specificity. Aripova’s 2020 translation adopts a foreignization strategy, retaining terms like “chopon” with explanatory notes, which enhances cultural authenticity but may confuse readers.

Historical Context: References to pre-colonial Tashkent and the Jadid movement require extensive footnotes. Aripova’s translation includes over 400 annotations, similar to Mark Reese’s English translation, to explain cultural and historical terms. However, Specht’s earlier translation provides fewer notes, leaving readers to infer meanings.

Cultural Symbols: Practices like “Bacha Bazi” or the role of the aksakal are central to the novel’s cultural landscape. Aripova’s translation explicitly addresses these, while Specht’s version neutralizes them, reducing their cultural weight.

German Readers’ Perceptions. Analysis of reader reviews and interviews reveals three key themes in German perceptions of Uzbek culture:

Fascination with Exoticism: Many readers describe *Bygone Days* as an “epic journey into an unknown world,” appreciating its depiction of Uzbek traditions, such as hospitality and family obligations. Reviews on Amazon.de praise Aripova’s translation for its “vivid cultural details,” suggesting that foreignization enhances exotic appeal.

Confusion over Cultural Practices: Some readers express difficulty understanding practices like polygyny or ethnic tensions (e.g., between Uzbeks and Qipchaks). Specht’s domesticated translation is often cited as “accessible but vague,” while Aripova’s detailed notes help but overwhelm less experienced readers.

Appreciation for Historical Context: Readers with an interest in Central Asian history value the novel's portrayal of pre-colonial Uzbekistan and its critique of corruption. Interviews indicate that Aripova's annotations deepen understanding of the Jadid movement, though some readers find the novel's Soviet-era subtext challenging to grasp without prior knowledge.

Impact of Translation on Perception. The translation strategy significantly influences reader perceptions. Aripova's foreignized approach fosters a deeper appreciation of Uzbek culture but risks alienating readers unfamiliar with Central Asian contexts. Specht's domesticated translation makes the text more accessible but sacrifices cultural depth, leading to a superficial understanding of Uzbek identity. Both translations highlight the translator's role as a cultural mediator, balancing fidelity to the source text with accessibility for the target audience.

Discussion. The findings align with linguo-culturology's emphasis on cultural understanding in translation. German readers' perceptions of Uzbek culture are shaped by the translator's ability to convey nuances, such as the significance of the aksakal or the Turco-Persian poetic tradition. Reader-response theory further explains variations in perception, as readers' cultural backgrounds influence their interpretations (Iser, 1978). For instance, readers with knowledge of Islamic or Central Asian cultures are more likely to appreciate the novel's critique of societal norms, while others may view it as an exotic historical narrative.

The study also reflects broader trends in the German translation market, where peripheral literatures like Uzbek are mediated through a central language to gain global recognition. The success of *Bygone Days* in Germany underscores the potential for Uzbek literature to contribute to cross-cultural dialogue, but only if translations prioritize cultural fidelity and accessibility.

Conclusion. The German translations of *Bygone Days* play a crucial role in shaping readers' perceptions of Uzbek culture, introducing them to traditions, historical contexts, and social issues. While Aripova's foreignized translation enhances cultural authenticity, Specht's domesticated approach prioritizes accessibility, each influencing reader interpretations differently. Challenges in translating idiomatic expressions, historical references, and cultural symbols highlight the translator's role as a cultural mediator. To enhance cross-cultural understanding, future translations should combine foreignization with comprehensive annotations and engage German readers through cultural exchange programs, such as those proposed by Mark Reese's Muloqot initiative. Further research could explore comparative perceptions among readers of other translations (e.g., English, Russian) to broaden insights into global receptions of Uzbek literature.

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