

The Battle of Gökdepe in the Turkmen post-Soviet historical discourse

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The Battle of Gökdepe (1881) is considered to be a turning point in Turkmenistan's contemporary historiography. It led to the then independent Turkmen (Akhhal Tekke in this case) tribes coming under Russian control. Almost immediately after the event the battle became a controversial point of interpretation starting from Turkmen sources (rarely known to us), an immense number of Russian (mostly military) sources, up to the Soviet historians. The post-Soviet official Turkmen historiography of the event came from these foundations, but used its own mythological approach. As a result, the contemporary narrative of the Gökdepe defeat turned into a victory for the Akhal Tekke (and broadly Turkmen) nation. Additionally, this paper argues that the first and partly the second presidents of Turkmenistan incorporated the battle into their own personality cults, a fact which is still specific to the Central Asian context, albeit not unique in world history. In particular, the first president usurped the myth and connected it with his own historical narrative. The second president continues this in the frames of the already settled political culture in the country, adapting the Gökdepe myth to create his own ideological story. Therefore, the appropriation of the historical event in Turkmenistan represents a specific (albeit not unique) case of this kind and shows the way of thinking about the leader in current Turkmenistan.

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Newly originated nations modify history to suit their needs as part of building a state. Doing so is a natural component in the process of creating nationality and statehood (Thomson 1968). National histories in the states in which a particular ethnicity or perhaps sub-ethnicity prevails, be it a tribe, clan, interest group, political group or mafia group, are created in order to present a positive, heroic, grandiose image of that particular group's past. Authoritarian states usually monopolize the interpretation of events and do not permit alternative viewpoints. The regime thus not only creates or reshapes history, but also inserts itself into the historical context. This policy of influencing history (either directly or indirectly) with an exclusive emphasis on a single ethnicity may disregard the regional or global historical context and create a potentially dangerous division of the world into 'us' and 'them'. This dualism also often results in shifts whereby 'we' are seen as positive, large and friendly, while 'they' are associated with terms such as bad, backward, small, usurping, etc. Various interpretations of a single event may thus lead to historical wars or, as Viktor Shnirelmann (Shnirelmann 2003) labels them, wars of memory (in this case, historical memory). In such a dual approach, the national myth not only defines an ethnicity and places it in context, but also creates the image of an enemy or, at least, the image of 'they'. Central Asian states were created as the result of the creation of the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the 1980s resulting in the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Contrary to many other post-colonial states, their idea of

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independence did not appear as a result of a struggle for independence. Ethnicity should have become one of the most important state- and nation-building markers in the region (Cummings 2005, 77–79). Moreover, the revision of the Soviet historiography resulted in a reverse interpretation of past events – the historical periods and personalities neglected or suppressed in Soviet historiography became the central focus of the post-Soviet narrative (Adams 2010, 29).

A significant tool for marking one ethnicity off from the rest lies in the interpretation of revolutionary or breaking events. Since such turning points in the past were often results of conflict situations, victories or, by contrast, defeats are interpreted as the mythological rise or subjugation of the nation. These biased interpretations subsequently give rise to an ideology which, especially in authoritarian regimes, fulfils the role of the single correct determinant of the historical myth. The myth of defeat (or any other turning-point event) thus becomes:

a manner of perceiving the past which is not primarily based upon the expert reflection of historical facts but is chiefly fed by works of art, fiction or historical anthologies and popular overviews of history. The mythologized defeat is perceived as the most profound, irreversible catastrophe in history. The moral disintegration allegedly caused by this catastrophe is seen as the cause of current failures and used to explain or apologize for certain features in the national character. However, the method also possesses a mobilizing effect. It is portrayed as an insult that must be undone. The new historical period is then to follow the line of development disrupted by the mythologized defeat. (Petráň 1993, 142)

Moreover, dynamic interpretations of a mythological historical event that are dependent upon the current political or geopolitical concept are also possible. The historical memory may thus differ significantly from the mythology of the event. The British historian Duncan Bell (Bell 2003) refers to this process of rewriting narrative for the purposes of the present as a *mythscape*. Collective memory seems to be too general a term as it cannot clearly differentiate between the memory and the myth. This conceptualization sees collective memory as lacking constancy, with myths continuously being reconstructed, renewed and re-discussed. Authoritarian regimes tend to present the single, correct interpretation in the form of a state ideology. In the situation of an absence of alternative outlooks collective historical memory has a tendency to follow the state interpretation of the event.

In Central European discourse, the Battle of White Mountain (1620) and the onset of the ‘subjugation of the Czech nation’ became one of the most visible objects of mythologizing in Czech history (Dostálková 2011). This myth includes a glorification of the defeat and its justification for the struggle for independence of the Czech nation. Tadeusz Kosciuszko’s uprising (1794) is perceived similarly in Polish history. In the case of Russia, the turning point is connected to the conquest of Kiev in 1240 and the subsequent ‘Tatar–Mongol yoke’. In the Central Asian region, the Battle of Gökdepe (1881) is one of the most idealized myths of this type, involving the tribes of Akhal Tekke and the Russian army in 1881 (sometimes also referred to as the Gökdepe War of 1879–81).¹ This battle gave rise to the greatest myth of defeat in current Turkmen historiography. The ‘mythscape’ of the Battle of Gökdepe is extraordinary in the regional context. No other Central Asian historiography refers to such a breaking historical event. Other regional historical narratives are focused on certain ‘golden’ historical periods as in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan (Adams 2010; Marat 2008), or making a heroic narrative from certain historical figures as in Kyrgyzstan (Manas), Uzbekistan (Amir Timur) or Kazakhstan (commemoration of Kazakh ‘*batyrlar*’) (Marat 2008). The interpretation of the suppression of the Kenesary Kasymov revolt could serve as the only relevant example in the region (Sabol 2003). However, the end of Kasymov’s revolt did not turn into a national catastrophe in Kazakh history. Moreover, the event did not become the subject of the presidential cult as in the Turkmen case.

For this reason, this article primarily aims to focus on the dynamics of the interpretation of the Battle of Gökdepe in post-Soviet Turkmenistan, although the background of prior interpretations

should also be examined, since they contributed to the formation of the current image of the battle. At the same time, we must bear in mind that the state- and nation-building process within Turkmenistan's political culture (including the myth of defeat at Gökdepe) is tied to the significant personality cult in the country. The events of 1881 are thus placed in the context of the presidential biography, serving as support for the ideologization of both presidents of post-Soviet Turkmenistan. This represents a specific aspect of state- and nation-building in the region in which the presidents are not incorporated into historical narratives to such an extent (despite their authoritarian style of rule). Therefore, the text aspires rather to understand why, during certain periods, prefabricated moral and ethical constructions were inserted into the past and also incorporated into the personality cults in the country.

I argue that the creation of history in Turkmenistan has been centralized in the hands of the president and those close to him by the so-called court historians and editors. Such thinking was developed from the highly centralized system which has existed in the country since the disintegration of the USSR. Alternative interpretations were excluded. For this reason, the role of political elites in forming an interpretive framework is absolutely essential. In this regard, I further develop the excellent and unique analysis (in Western discourse) on the Gökdepe battle written by Sébastien Peyrouse (Peyrouse 2008), who focused mostly on the post-Soviet historiography of the battle in the context of the (re-)Turkmenization of the country avoiding the role of personality in the formation of Turkmenness (*türkmençilik*).

The creation of the 'mythscape' is thereby narrowed to the current needs of the leader and places the historical discourse within defined frameworks in which the historical debate may be discussed and transformed. Aside from historians, the role of the non-historian public at large is much more substantial, in particular that of loyal journalists providing information on the battle and spreading the myth through the mass media. For this reason, the analysis of articles published by the newspaper, *Neutral Turkmenistan*, are the principal primary source for researching the Gökdepe myth as any serious historical debate has to follow this official discourse instead of determining the entire historical debate.

If we apply the creation of the 'mythscape' to individual presidents, the specifics of the interpretation of this event during the reign of the first and second Turkmen presidents must be differentiated. Although Berdimuhamedow adopted many features from his predecessor's ideology, the Gökdepe myth has been created with regard to the personal needs and attitudes of both leaders.

A brief history of the Gökdepe war

Although the purpose here is not to discuss the causes and course of the Gökdepe War (*Gökdepe Söweşi*), the key factors leading to it must be discussed. In the course of the nineteenth century, Russian merchants appeared in the area of modern Turkmenistan. A Russian military garrison in Krasnovodsky Bay (currently Türkmenbashi Port) was set up in 1869 as a strategic point in the eastern portion of the Caspian Sea in order to surround the Central Asian states and prevent Great Britain from penetrating further into the region. In the 1870s, this location was rebuilt into a military base and port. This was possible by virtue of the relatively amicable relationship between the Russians and the local Turkmen tribes, the Yomuts, although the Russo-Yomut friendship with them was far from the ideal image constructed by the Soviet narrative (Iliasov 1960). Further advancement was complicated by geographic conditions in which desert areas with only rare wells prevailed (Kuropatkin 1879). Further Russian inroads could thus take place only gradually and with strong backing. At the end of the 1870s, a plan to occupy the territory of Akhal Tekke was prepared. The Gökdepe and Ashgabat oasis, the area with the most fertile soil and sufficient water, were their natural centres (Solov'iev and Sennikov 1946, 120). Gökdepe was the traditional

location of the most important gatherings of *khans* and *serdars* (leaders) of Akhal Tekke (Kuropatkin 1879, 45). Russian historical sources indicate that this was the strongest Turkmen tribe, in terms of both numbers and courage. They say the Akhal Tekke recognized no power, including the Russians (Kuropatkin 1879, 32). In this context, however, it must be pointed out – as the Turkmen historian and sociologist Shohrat Kadyrov does – that the Akhal Tekke were not (whatever the current Turkmen interpretation may say) native to the Akhal area but rather consisted of a population which had migrated to this territory and conquered it, taking it from inhabitants of Persian origin (Kadyrov 2001, 2011). Between 1873 and 1879, several meetings of Akhal Tekke took place at which the leaders did not arrive at a complete agreement on the attitude they should adopt towards the Russians (Kuropatkin 1879, 44–45). One fraction, in particular those living near to Kyzyl-Arvat, agreed to a transition to Russian serfdom, as did the Yomuts. The Russians won some popularity particularly by freeing Tekine captives from Khivian captivity after the fall of Khiva in 1873 (Karryev and Roslyakov 1956, 42). Some khans, including a great number of Akhal Tekke from the Gökdepe area, however, disagreed with this plan and tended to want to confront the Russian army.

In the context of the Great Game over Central Asia, the Gökdepe Oasis was considered a strategically significant point, since it was located on the trade routes leading from Persia to Bukhara and Khiva, and from Central Asia and Russia to Afghanistan and India (Kuropatkin 1879, 20–23; Steinberg 1934, 30). Akhal Tekke lands also remained as the last ‘white spot’ between Russian controlled territories, Persia and Afghanistan, which were partly dependent on Great Britain (Sergeev 2012, 167–173). In addition, it represented an important part of the chain connecting Turkestan with the shore of the eastern part of the Caspian Sea. Furthermore, the conquest of the Akhal Oasis (and the subsequent occupation of the then-strategic Merv) opened a path to the control of the entire Central Asian–Afghan border. It was especially important in the context of the results of the second British–Afghan War, which gave Britain significant influence over the foreign policy of the Afghan Emir. In addition, the line of control from the Caspian Sea to the strategic Merv allowed Russia to prevent the expansion of British influence in Central Asia beyond the natural border created by the Köpet Dag mountain range.

In 1879, a small forward column of Russian troops led by General Lomakin reached the fort at Gökdepe, but they were repelled by Akhal Tekke troops. This represents a key moment for both Russia and the Akhal Tekke. For the first time in the conquest of Central Asia, Russian troops were forced to retreat – even though it was more of a strategic manoeuvre. From the point of view of the Akhal Tekke, this was a moment in which a handful of poorly armed defenders drove away the Russian army, which had been unbeatable up to that point. This event later became one of the key objects of mythologization involving excessive esteem for an event.

In 1880, after a prior unsuccessful campaign by General Lomakin, the Russian leadership decided to conquer the Turkmen Akhal Tekke Oasis. On the basis of Lomakin’s report, a detailed plan for a military attack was drawn up, to be led by the experienced and decisive General Skobelev (Solov’iev and Sennikov 1946, 113). The General was known for being a hardliner towards local inhabitants (Shcherbak 1900, 52–53). He also called for the military occupation of Afghanistan (Hopkirk 1991, 402–403). The preparations for the expedition included also the construction of the Transcaspian railway in order to support the military units through the desert (Annenkov 1881). By contrast, the *serdars* (leaders) of the Turkmen tribes and families of this tribal union of Akhal Tekke decided to remain until the end, encouraged by their prior victory, despite the death of Nurberdy Khan, the most respected leader of Akhal Tekkes and even Turkmens (Saray 1989, 184).

After General Skobelev succeeded in conquering the first, westernmost areas of the Akhal region and creating an advanced post at Fort Bami, the decision-makers of the Akhal Tekke retreated to Fort Gökdepe, which they thought would protect them as it had in 1879 (Shcherbak

1900, 49–50). Here several thousand Akhal Tekke gathered, backed up by around 4000 people from Merv.² They faced approximately 6000 Russian troops equipped with about 60 canons (O'Donovan 1883, 65–71).

After several days of siege and preparations, the decisive attack was carried out on 12 January 1881 (24 January according to the Gregorian calendar). Russian troops attacked the western section of the fort in an evasive action. Then almost a ton of explosives were detonated, splintering the south-eastern section of the fort and creating a 30 metre opening through which troops under General Kuopatkin (later to become the administrator of Transcaspia) entered. The Russian army effectively surrounded the fort from three sides and gradually brought it under control. Pursuits took place over the following four days and General Skobolev ordered a three-day looting of the fort. Under the Turkmen interpretation, the local Turkmen population was liquidated, including many women and children. The Turkmen historiography, which makes reference to Russian and British sources, indicates a total of up to 20,000 dead.³

Regardless of whether the number of Turkmen victims was overestimated, a great portion of the Akhal population died, including its leading chiefs (*serdars*). In contrast to the Caucasus, no blood feud broke out among the Tekke to complicate colonization of the location or result in a certain failure to pacify the area. In the long term, the Akhal–Tekke region became the new centre of the entire region. The military camp and later the Ashgabat fort became the administrative centre intended to control the most rebellious Turkmen tribe. After Russian officers forced the tribal chiefs of the Mary province Tekke to enter Russian serfdom, there was no reason to exchange the Ashgabat oasis for the Merv oasis (which at that time was politically, geographically and economically more significant) (Tikhomirov 1960; Kadyrov 2011a).

In addition, the Russian side tried to accommodate as much as possible the most significant authority figures of the Akhal and the Merv Tekke. One of the first gestures was to invite the Tykma Serdar – one of the leading Gökdepe chiefs who survived – to St Petersburg for an audience with the Tsar. Here he was provided with many gifts, an annual salary and a military rank (Solov'iev and Sennikov 1946, 181–188). The accomplishment of the Transcaspian railroad, involving the Akhal Tekke in the construction work, in the 1880s was another element in the stabilization of the entire oasis region and the position of the Tsar.

Russian and Soviet historiography

Before the October Revolution, Russian sources produced an enormous quantity of literature on Lomakin's and Skobolev's expeditions, mostly in the form of memoirs and reports of Russian officers. General Grodekov published the most detailed report of both expeditions (Grodekov 1883–1884), however, there were numerous other contributions to the topic, usually with similar interpretations (Annenkov 1881; Baranovskii 1881; Geins 1882; Maslov 1885). Detailed descriptions of military actions in Turkmen lands between 1879 and 1881 make up a substantial part of the 3rd volume of Terent'ev's monumental *History of the Conquest of Central Asia* (1906). All these publications, however, focus mostly on the Russian side of the conflict. They interpreted the Battle of Gökdepe primarily as a combat of the civilized against fanatical obscurantists and 'wild nomads', who, with ever greater boldness, attacked Russian troops and interpreted the lack of an attack on the Russian side as weakness (Kuopatkin 1879, 56–57). However, it should be noted that statements about the fanaticism of the population were to a great extent compensated for by a number of much more conciliatory publications characterizing the Tekke as moderate Muslims whose clergy had almost no authority unless they were also secular (and military) authorities (Solov'iev and Sennikov 1946, 193–194). The Tsar's army had no other choice but to attack the Akhal Tekke and establish 'firm order and civilization'. In the description of the battle itself, the order of the Tsar's army versus the chaos and lack of organization of the Tekke

fighters was highlighted (Solov'iev and Sennikov 1946, 151–162). After the Russian army's victorious battle, the peace which spread in Southern Turkmenistan fairly soon thereafter was highlighted, along with the ability of the Tsar's army to maintain it (Fait 1910, 21). A small museum of the battle with Russian interpretations had already been established by the end of the nineteenth century by General Kuropatkin, then governor of Transcaspia and a participant of the Gökdepe campaign. This step was in accordance with the Russian concern for historical places in their conquered territories (Gorshenina 2014).

The predominance of Russian sources about the battle determined to a great extent the discourse of most Russian, Soviet and even non-Soviet scholars. The missionary goal of the Gökdepe campaign was underlined even by local Turkmen scholars. At the same time, a few scholars mentioned at least partly the Turkmen side of the narrative (Sarlı 1384). Tekke oral poetry developed a Gökdepe cult of martyrdom, which was expressed in a number of songs, poems and other expressions (Semenov 1903, 125–127). An oral history of the Turkmen (Akhhal Tekke) interpretation of the battle was rediscovered (often with a legendary and pathetic tone) at the end of the Soviet period.

Initially the Soviet interpretation was based upon the concept of class struggle, according to which the focus was primarily on the Russian and Akhal Tekke (and in the figurative sense also the entire Turkmen) elites. Tsarist Russia, according to early Soviet discourse, desired to usurp new market outlets, land resources for the Russian population and wished to gain control over trade with India (Steinberg 1934, 30–32). Furthermore, for this reason, Russia sent a 'strong army' to humble the last bastion of resistance in Central Asia (albeit even Soviet historiography admits a small number of Russian troops participated in Gökdepe battle). General Skobelev was described as the 'chief ideologist of Russian colonial expansion and a representant of the Tsar's agitative propaganda' (Steinberg 1934, 34). On the other hand, these interpretations depicted the Turkmen leaders as oppressors, thieves and slave sellers supported by a fanatical clergy. Neither side thus based its interpretation on the interests of the Russian and Turkmen nations. Furthermore, under these interpretations Turkmen leaders were supported by British secret intelligence (Karryev and Roslyakov 1956, 43–46; *Bitva u Geoktepe: kak eto bylo* 2013). Reference to the interference of the imperialistic superpowers (particularly Great Britain) in Central Asia was a standard tool in Soviet historiography. The battle resulted in allegations that pressure was subsequently applied to integrate the Merv Turkmens into Russia (Karryev and Roslyakov 1956, 47). This thesis is entirely in line with the generally accepted Soviet thesis on the occupation of Central Asia by Russia, which emphasizes the voluntary acceptance of Russian serfdom. Such an interpretation also includes the battle of two imperialistic superpowers.

Beginning in the 1930s, the notion that the Turkmen had voluntarily affiliated themselves with Tsarist Russia began to prevail in Soviet historiography. Friendly communications between the Yomuts and Russians or peaceful acceptance of Russian supremacy by Merv leaders supported the thesis (Iliasov, 1960). Open threats to Merv Tekkes or Skobelev's punitive expeditions against Yomuts, not to mention the thousands of deaths at Gökdepe, were excluded from the discourse or at least marginalized. According to the new narrative, the conquest of Transcaspia attached Turkmens to an imperialistic superpower, on the one hand, but on the other, opened up to them an opportunity to leave behind the old, conservative way of life in favour of joining what was at the time the world's peak civilization. Turkmen leaders failed to represent the interests of their people, instead entering into a senseless war against the country's and nation's own interests. In this sense, Soviet historiography developed and updated the pre-Soviet interpretation of the event. Soviet order represented another step forward in the development of the Akhal Tekke (and Turkmens or Central Asians as a whole) from feudalism to socialism (Gapurov, Roslyakov, and Annanepesov 1984).

A transformation of Turkmen historiography, including the challenge to the myth of voluntary accession to Russia and the Battle of Gökdepe, was initiated in the late 1980s. The predominance of Akhal Tekke in academic and, in particular, in the political sphere also stimulated research into the issue. Gökdepe formed a key event upon which the new version of Turkmen history could be anchored, however, challenging the voluntary nature of the accession to Russia was at least problematic for other tribal unions. Agzybyrlyk, an alternative movement, was one of the first promoters of the revision of the historical Battle of Gökdepe. The first commemoration ceremony at the remains of the fort, which took place on 12 January 1990, was a fairly logical way to call attention to the event, which had been almost ignored during the Soviet period (Kadyrov 1990). The then-leadership of the Soviet Republic, headed by then-First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR, Saparmyrat Niyazow, accused the members of the movement of promoting nationalism.

The Battle of Gökdepe in the Turkmen post-Soviet historiography

President Niyazow quickly accepted some points of the Agzybyrlyk programme, including a request to revise the history of the Battle of Gökdepe. For this reason, shortly after the declaration of independence in 1991, 12 January was established as Memory Day (*Hatyra günü*) and it was promoted as a key holiday connected to the traditional Turkmen custom of commemorating dead ancestors. The Agzybyrlyk movement had been suppressed by the beginning of 1993, after which president Niyazow remained the main person determining the historical discourse of Gökdepe. Public meetings began to be organized at tombs and graves of important personalities. In contrast to the Tsarist and Soviet periods, the celebrations were based on openly anti-Russian rhetoric. The period of the Gökdepe military encounters from 1879 to 1881 was called the Patriotic War (*Watançylyk urşuny*) juxtaposing the Soviet Patriotic War (i.e. The Second World War). All the victims of the Gökdepe battle were sanctified and declared heroes (Ryblow 2004, 178). Archival documents were reinterpreted and the aim, in particular, was to demonstrate the positive characteristics of the defenders of the fort and emphasize the importance of fighting until the end, and of all other virtues (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 11, 2003; Türkmenbaşy 2005, 81). In the figurative sense of the word, *Hatyra günü* became a symbol of the cult of the war victims and heroic ancestors in Turkmenistan's history. An annual exhibition of artefacts from the battle also contributed to the development of the Gökdepe cult. The exhibition also reinterpreted the number of deaths in the battle and the impact of Russian massacres on life in Gökdepe and in its environs (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 11, 2005).

Officially, Gökdepe was to become a model for Turkmen unity and the battle became a part of the history of all Turkmen, even though for some Turkmen regions and kins the event might have an entirely different meaning than glorification. The interpretation of the Battle of Gökdepe as involving the entire Turkmen nation is thus supported by events taking place in all regions of the country, even those whose inhabitants came under Russian protection without a fight (Western Turkmenistan, Mary) or were not under Tsarist administration at all (Eastern and Northern Turkmenistan under the Bukhara Emirate and Khiva Khanate respectively). In 2004, an order was given to create a park zone in Gökdepe in which all regions in Turkmenistan had to participate (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 13, 2007).

While Soviet historiography strove to forget the event and pointed instead to the common elements shared by the Turkmens and the Russians (oppression by their own feudal lords or the Tsarist colonial administration), the new interpretation accentuated the ethnic or sub-ethnic (Akhal Tekke) factor. However, at this point it must be noted that a similar discontinuity is also characteristic of a number of other post-Soviet or post-imperial historiographies of smaller or 'subjugated' nations. The Soviet concept of voluntary accession to Russia has been

marginalized in contemporary historiography as it did not fit with the negative image of the Russian colonization of the entire Turkmen nation. As we pointed out earlier even these relations were far from ideal and Skobelev used threats to secure the loyalty of decisive Yomut tribes (Grodekov 1883–1884, 44–52). Thus, the history of the Turkmens has been narrowed to the history of the Akhal Tekke, while the role of other Turkmen tribes and regions has been artificially suppressed. The Battle of Gökdepe thus was woven into the general discourse of the discontinuity of Turkmen history which sees the conquest of the Akhal Oasis as a symbol of a grand defeat and a turning point in Turkmen (i.e., Akhal Tekke) history. The event also provides a certain path to the legitimization of Akhal Tekke domination in Turkmenistan (Gente 2013). In this sense, the *Hatyra günü* holiday may also be perceived as a transference of the Akhal-Tekine tradition to the Turkmen nation even within the non-Turkmen population as the commemoration of the event is mandatory in Orthodox churches (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 11, 2005).

From this perspective, according to official historiography, the Turkmen were rather anti-Russian and strove for independence (Interv'iu A. Kuliieva o problemakh Turkmenistana 1996). However, in some years, during the remembrance of the Battle of Gökdepe, the tone has been more conciliatory toward other nations, in the spirit of the fading Soviet concept of the 'friendship of nations'. Tsarist soldiers were depicted as victims of Tsarist despotism, forced to fight on Turkmen soil and also deserving of respect (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 12, 2005).

However, when *Ruhnama*, a holy book of the President Niyazow/Türkmenbashy was published in 2001, it became the only source of Turkmen historiography. According to this work, the Gökdepe War of 1879–81 was the cause of later irreparable harm to the political, economic and social life of Turkmen. The last residues of Turkmen statehood were destroyed during the war. Consequently, Russia brought its own colonial administration, religious propaganda and cultural policy to Turkmenistan (Türkmenbaşy 2005, 36). A question arises in this context as to what sort of statehood *Ruhnama*'s author had in mind. Again, this interpretation evokes that mythical unified Turkmenistan under the Akhal Tekke, i.e. the national elite, existed at the end of the nineteenth century, a fact which is open to doubt. In another passage of *Ruhnama*, the author warns against the fragmentation and diversification of Turkmen tribes, which is considered to be one of the main causes of the defeat of the Tekke at Gökdepe (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 13, 2003). Therefore, the so-called Golden Age of the Turkmens, proclaimed by the first president which led the unified Turkmen nation (unconsciously under one leader of Akhal Tekke origin) into the best period of its history, should have been firmly connected with the lessons of Gökdepe (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 12, 2007).

In the end, the defeat of the Akhal Tekke is interpreted as a victory, albeit factual or symbolic. On a factual level, the defeat of the Tekke was rejected because the Russian army was unable to overpower the defenders (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 15, 2001). On a figurative level, according to this interpretation, 'the memory of their heroism is transferred from one generation to the next' (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 11, 2005).

The Battle of Gökdepe as a part of the personality cults

The Battle of Gökdepe was one of the first tools employed in the development of the personality cult of President Niyazow/Türkmenbashy. Official biographies of the first president mention memories of Tangrykuly, the alleged president's grandfather and Artyk Khan, his great-grandfather. According to these documents, they both took part in the Battle of Gökdepe – Tangrykuly died in the war and Artyk Khan was injured so severely that he succumbed to his wounds (Türkmenbaşy 2005, 229). From a historical point of view, this is fairly likely, since almost every member of the Akhal Tekke tribal union took part in the battle.

The most visible phenomena of the personality cult related to Gökdepe are found in architecture and the establishment of certain ritual traditions. The great Saparmyrat Hajji mosque (Beýik Saparmyrat Hajji metjidi) was constructed at the location of the battle. It is one of the key architectural works in post-Soviet Turkmenistan in the Niyazow epoch and pioneering in defining the character of mosques in post-Soviet Turkmenistan. It drew its inspiration from the Turkish/Ottoman model (previously not used in the country), combined with elements of the local architectural tradition (Esenow 2003, 382; *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 12, 2008). The memorial was built officially as a celebration of President Türkmenbashy's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1992. Its main ideological ambition was to create a place of pilgrimage for the Turkmen – a kind of 'national Mecca' or 'Ka'aba of all Turkmen'. This status was confirmed by a decision by the Majlis of Turkmenistan, dated June 1996 (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 12, 2001). Some acts and decrees were even symbolically declared at the location. Therefore, the mosque's symbolic importance was intended to be analogous to that of the first mosque built by Muhammad in Mecca (Türkmenbaşy 2005, 254).

The president also became the key figure in the annual performance on Memory Day. Aside from the fact that some authors say the location has been desecrated by loud revelry, music and dancing, the performance has become more and more a celebration of the creator of independence – the first president of Turkmenistan and his ancestors connected to this battle.

A monumental opera about the Battle of Gökdepe, which was presented in January 1993, later turned into a film, and has been re-enacted many times since, usually in January, quickly became one of the theatre plays and films of the personality cult of the Türkmenbashy era. The newly introduced interpretation of the battle penetrates both the play and film. Saparmurad Türkmenbashy himself became the key hero of the performance, appearing at the conclusion as the uniter of Turkmenistan. This was also reinforced at the opening night of the opera by the personal presence of the president, who suddenly appeared on stage as a dramatic character in the final, this time representing himself (Ryblow 2004, 115).

Apart from the construction of a monumental mosque dedicated to the Turkmen president, the celebration of the holidays was connected to the cult of Türkmenbashy's father and mother. Memory rituals of *Hatyra günü* usually began at Kipchak, the birthplace of the first president, where a funeral complex with alleged relics of both parents was built. Only then did the main portion of the event move to Gökdepe, obviously with the participation of the president (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 15, 2001). This succession symbolically demonstrates both the inter-connection of the cult of the Battle of Gökdepe with the cult of the first Turkmen president and his family, as well as the superiority of the latter over the former.

The Battle of Gökdepe may serve as a significant example of the dismantling of the cult of personality of the first president, with the myth being adapted to suit the new president. In January 2007, shortly after the death of Saparmurad Türkmenbashy, the name of the president was still the key subject of commentaries for Memory Day and the deceased president was symbolically connected to the heroes of the Battle of Gökdepe (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 12, 2007). The remembrance event for the highest government officials began, in line with tradition, in Kipchak at the then-fresh grave of the first president and was only later shifted to Gökdepe for the traditional ceremony (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 13, 2007). In subsequent years, however, the remembrance rituals were focused only in Gökdepe. In 2008 and 2009, on the occasion of Memory Day, the mosque was referred to using the name of Saparmurad Hajji but, as of 2010, it is referred to now only as the 'mosque at the battle location', even though its grandness has not been challenged.

For the new President Berdimuhamedow, this place is a key location in the development of his own personality cult. Just like the first president, Berdimuhamedow was born relatively nearby. The power and family base of President Berdimuhamedow lies even closer to Gökdepe – in the

villages of Yzgant and Babarap. One of the first acts of the president related to the change in the perception of Gökdepe was to elevate the municipality to a town and make it a centre of the *etrap* (district). Remarkably, the president did not use historical facts about the battle to connect them with his own kin places. Yzgant, for example, was the place of the war council of the Akhal Tekkes before the second Russian campaign in 1880 (Saray 1989, 183). As Niyazow had already filled the place with his own memorial, another form of worship had to be found for the New Renaissance (and the second president's) era. In May 2009, a museum was opened in Gökdepe as part of the Gökdepe memorial (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 16, 2009; *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 18, 2009). Since the opening of the museum, the stress has been placed on its existence and the fact that it was built thanks to the actions of the new president, rather than on the mosque in which the commemorative events take place (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 11, 2010). President Berdimuhamedow, in destroying and assuming for himself the memorials of his predecessor in the new period after his re-election in 2012 also ordered a new memorial commemorating all Turkmen heroes from the Battle of Gökdepe through to the Second World War and the victims of the Ashgabat earthquakes, to be built (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 14, 2013). In this fashion, the President not only parts ways with the legacy of the first president (whose previous monuments were dismantled) but builds his own memorials. In addition, all three principal catastrophes in the last 140 years will be commemorated at a single location. Moreover, the new pilgrimage location could probably replace (at least partially) the celebrations in the mosque built by Türkmenbashy.

On the other hand, it must be noted that Memory Day has not become a celebration in the personality cult of President Berdimuhamedow yet. On the contrary, the growing cult of his father and grandfather is being incorporated into the Gökdepe myths. As Berdymuhammed Annaev, the grandfather of the current president, fought in the Soviet Army during the Second World War, heroes of this war are connected with those of Gökdepe (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 11, 2014). As for the president himself, the country's officials limit themselves to publishing an annual letter highlighting the successes of the president of the country for the anniversary of the battle, but similar texts are also published for other occasions and Memory Day is no exception in this regard (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 12, 2011). The connection of the peaceful character of the Turkmens, who were unified in the fight against their common enemy in 1881, to the peaceful and neutral politics of President Berdimuhamedow during the New Renaissance period is much more interesting (*Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 13, 2011). In the context of the development of the presidential personality cult, Gökdepe serves as a demonstration of the dismantling of the old cult of President Niyazow, while the new president uses other tools and occasions for his self-presentation.

Conclusions

Over a span of more than 100 years, the interpretation of the Battle of Gökdepe has undergone several phases involving the creation of a mythological space. During the first phase, parallel Turkmen and Russian interpretations were in place in the period of Tsarist Russia. These interpretations were mutually contradictory, but they coexisted without any substantial ideologization. This process was initiated later in the Soviet period, when the regime tried to replace several discourses with a single ideological framework involving the friendship of both nations and the class struggle. The Marxist interpretation became the only one permissible. However, it defined a fairly clear, stable methodological framework for research, based upon thorough, positivist research into the sources.

The post-Soviet interpretation of Turkmenistan's history, including the Battle of Gökdepe, has been characterized primarily by a significant attempt to create a discontinuity in the

historiography. The results of the Soviet regime's historical research and its interpretations were rejected, while an ethnic, and, in this case sub-ethnic (Akhal Tekke) interpretation of history prevailed. The key emphasis was placed upon the ethnogenesis of the Turkmen nation, its 'originality' and 'historicity' (Laruelle 2010). Colonialism – in this case Russian and Soviet – is severely ostracized, while the pre-colonial and (the subsequent) post-colonial periods are positively mythologized. Following the previous Marxist framework, this approach was set as the only interpretation in the national historiography. Radical turning points between these two periods were the end of the idealized pre-colonial period and the glorified breakaway from colonial power in 1991. In the case of Turkmenistan, the local historical narrative of the 'defeat by the colonial superpower' was concentrated into a key event – the fight of the Akhal (with a little help from the Mary) Tekke against the Tsar's army in 1879–81, ending with the defeat at the Gökdepe fort. This defeat was glorified and sanctified to such an extent that it could actually be spoken about as a victory. It is paradoxical that the resistance of the Akhal Tekke at the Battle of Gökdepe, together with other circumstances (i.e., the formation of the Turkmen SSR and an independent Turkmenistan), formed the basis for their dominance over other tribes during the post-Soviet period.

This significantly nationalistic conceptualization of history, however, has had to tackle some underlying issues. One consists in the excessive embedding of contemporary historians and ideologists in the Marxist approach to history. As a result, the research framework and (in the case of education) the teaching methods of the new generation continued in this spirit even though the content had been significantly modified. The degradation of the educational system, as well as the intensified role of ideology in history resulted in a certain vulgarization of historical research. New historians and ideologists no longer turned to the sources but often took (or were forced to take) as their basis a simplified interpretation of history created by the great leader and those close to him.

Here the character and personal attitude of the president was demonstrated, among other things. The new historians could thus primarily develop theses designated from above without engaging in a critical study of sources that were in fact no longer necessary. The glorified role of the president and his ancestors became key to the history of the Turkmen nation in general and the Battle of Gökdepe in particular.

This interpretation was once again transmuted to some extent following the death of the first president into a form satisfactory for the new Turkmen leader. Even if the effort to interconnect the second president and his ancestors with the Battle of Gökdepe was demonstrated, the emphasis was shifted (in addition to continuing the cult of the battle and those who took part in it) more towards the region in which the president's power base is located. For this reason, the achievements and merits of the president in the development of Gökdepe and its surroundings are commemorated annually on 'Memory Day'.

If we evaluate how the interpretation of the Battle of Gökdepe developed during the post-Soviet era, we have to take into account the significant context of the political culture created during the reign of the first president and that was slightly adapted for the second one. This political culture is primarily designated by the unchallengeable position of the president and also by the exclusive position of Akhal Tekke in contemporary Turkmenistan. Given this, the glorification of a battle whose key participants and victims were in fact Akhal Tekke and the creation of 'mythscape' is rather understandable. In spite of all the mythologization of the Battle of Gökdepe, its key significance for Turkmen history (and the history of the Akhal Tekke) cannot be denied. Therefore, its annual commemoration will be (and should be) maintained regardless of who is in power in Ashgabat. However, it would be appropriate to give more room to real historical research based upon possible alternative interpretations and the critical analysis of both written and oral sources. In the country's current situation, however, this development is impossible for many reasons.

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Notes

1. With regard to differing transcriptions of the name in the literature (Geok-Depe, Geokdepe, Geok Tepe, Gök Tepe etc.), the name has been unified to correspond to the norms of the current Turkmen language. Different transcriptions are used only in the case of cited literature.
2. According to contemporary Turkmen sources (Gundogdyýew 2005, 153), 45,000 people were in the fort. This would represent practically the entire Akhal Tekke population. However, other sources indicate that approximately 30,000 inhabitants lived at the oasis (Baranovskii 1881). Researching the Akhal oasis in 1887, M. Baev (Baev 1887), a Russian clerk, indicated a total of 33,000 inhabitants. For this reason, all counts are rather controversial.
3. Some publications indicate 8000 dead (Gundogdyev and Muradov, 2000, 95–96). However, the same historian indicates the highest number of victims – 20,000 (Gundogdyýew, 2005, 153) – using a similar account by Lord Curzon (Curzon, 1889, 83). This number likely refers to the total number of victims of the 1879–81 war (Kadyrov, 2009, 65). If we accept the conclusions of Baev (1887), who made the first serious attempt to count the population of the oasis, and add in a certain amount of recovery for the population post-1881, then approximately 40% of the Akhal Tekkes died in the Battle of Gökdepe.

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