



Representing, Forgetting, and Heritage-Making: The Battle of Gökdepe in Turkmenistan (1881) through the Lens of Colonial Legacies and Post-Imperial Reconfigurations

International Workshop

Salle de conférence (2^e étage), Institut d'études slaves, 9 rue Michelet, 75006 Paris

18 May 2026

9:00–17:00

Organizer

Svetlana GORSHENINA

Workshop Rationale

Objectives

The siege of Gökdepe in 1881, led by Mikhail Skobelev, stands as one of the most violent episodes of the imperial conquest of Turkestan. The battle turn out to be a breaking event and key reference point in modern Turkmen history. From the Tsarist period onward, it generated multiple forms of commemoration — mass graves, monuments, museums — as well as an extensive body of discourse, ranging from military reports to literary narratives. During the Soviet era, however, the event was largely silenced, only to re-emerge in the context of perestroika. In independent Turkmenistan, the battle has been reinterpreted as a foundational moment of the nation, embedded in official narratives closely tied to ideological constructions and the personality cults of successive leaders. A particularly devastating military defeat has thus been transformed into a structuring national myth. In this context, the workshop seeks to examine, from a diachronic (nineteenth to twenty-first century) and comparative perspective, the processes through which the memory of Gökdepe has been constructed, transformed, and instrumentalized. It aims to shed light on the political, cultural, and epistemological mechanisms that shape historical writing, while contributing to a critical and decolonial re-reading of the event, attentive to asymmetries between the narratives of victors and the vanquished.

Key Themes

The workshop adopts an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together history, visual studies, literary studies, critical museology, and memory studies.

A first axis interrogates the regimes of visual representation of the battle. The near-total absence of photographic documentation — despite the rise of war photography in the nineteenth century — reveals the decisive role of censorship imposed by Skobelev, who prohibited the presence of journalists. This absence contrasts with the abundance of pictorial representations, particularly those of Vasily Vereshchagin, whose medium allowed for the dissemination of ideologically acceptable versions of the conquest. This imbalance calls into question the supposed “truthfulness” of images and their role in constructing imperial narratives.

A second axis explores forms of cultural memory of Gökdepe in Turkmen society. Literature, poetry, music, theatre, and contemporary media rework the event through motifs of trauma, resistance, and heroism, contributing to a dynamic and continuously reconfigured collective memory. These forms also demonstrate how memory is mobilized as a central resource in the construction of national identity.

A third axis examines the musealization and political instrumentalization of memory, particularly in the post-Soviet context. Museums and panoramas of Gökdepe, in Gökdepe and Ashgabat, stage immersive dispositifs that transform a historical defeat into a symbolic victory. These “mythscape” underpin personality cults, particularly under Saparmurat Niyazov and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, before experiencing a relative decline from the 2010s onward.

A fourth axis addresses the politics of remembering and forgetting through the notion of “blank spots.” It shows how the memory of Gökdepe has been selectively constructed, oscillating between initial decolonial impulses and rapid appropriation by a centralized state, thereby revealing contemporary power relations and the specificity of the Turkmen case within the Central Asian context.

Finally, a fifth axis investigates the conditions of knowledge production based on local sources. It examines the collection, translation, and reconfiguration of Turkic-language narratives of Gökdepe by Orientalists and imperial and Soviet institutions, highlighting violence not only as a historical object but also as a structuring epistemological category.

Scientific Contribution of the Workshop

The workshop offers an integrated and transmedial reading of Gökdepe, articulating textual, visual, performative, and museological sources in order to overcome fragmented approaches. Grounded in a critical and decolonial perspective, it interrogates asymmetries of power in the production of narratives, images, and knowledge, while highlighting processes of marginalization and reappropriation. It further explores the relationship between violence and knowledge production, demonstrating how colonial violence has been integrated and instrumentalized within academic frameworks. Through its comparative approach, it contributes to the analysis of memory politics in Central Asia, emphasizing the specificity of the Turkmen case. At the intersection of scientific, epistemological, and contemporary concerns, the workshop renews the study of interactions between memory, power, and representation, while shedding light on the processes of national identity formation and the tensions between official and alternative memories. Gökdepe thus emerges as a privileged laboratory for examining the relationships between violence, memory, and power in post-imperial and post-colonial societies.



Program

9h00-9h15 — **Svetlana GORSHENINA, Slavomir HORAK**, *The introduction to the idea of the project, genesis of the project*

9h15-10h15 — **Svetlana GORSHENINA**, *The Battle of Gökdepe: The Russian Visions between Censorship and Commemoration*

10h15-10h30 — Coffee break

10h30-11h30 — **Oguljamal YAZLIYEVA**, *Remembering Gökdepe: Collective Memory Across Literature, Performance, and Media in Turkmen Narratives*

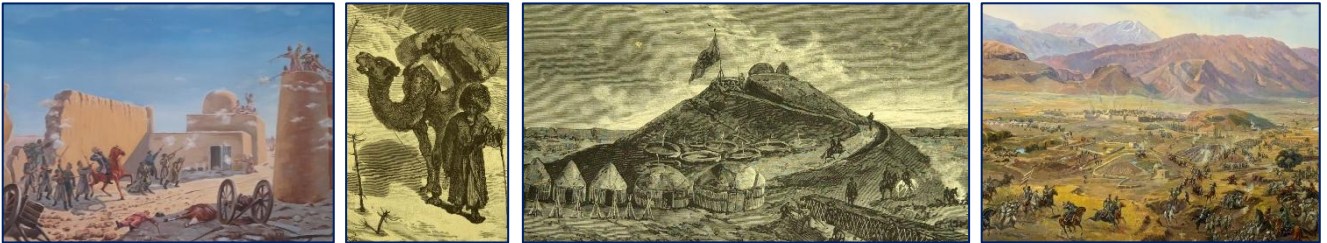
11h30-12h30 — **Anton IKHSANOV**, *“No Other Community Has Made Such an Impact on History as the Muslim”*: Reframing the Gökdepe Events through World Literature and World History

12h30- 14h00 — Lunch break

14h00-15h00 — **Victoria CLEMENT**, *From Trauma to Template: Gökdepe, ‘Blank Spots,’ and the Politics of Remembering in Central Asia*

15h00-16h00 — **Slavomir HORÁK**, *Gökdepe battle memorialization in the context of the personality cults. Walk through the museums and panoramas of the Gökdepe battle in Gökdepe and Ashgabat*

16h00-17h00 — Discussions



Abstracts

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The Battle of Gökdepe: The Russian Visions between Censorship and Commemoration

This presentation is structured in three parts. The first examines why, forty years after the invention of photography—and at a time when a well-established tradition of photographic reporting from battlefields already existed—we have virtually no photographic evidence of the capture of Gök-Tépé. Through a systematic examination of the various hypotheses that might account for this striking absence of visual documentation, I argue that this gap is primarily the result of the strict censorship imposed by Mikhail Skobelev, who prohibited the presence of journalists during the campaign.

At the same time, the few images that evoke the broader context of the conquest already reveal much about the nature of the expedition and the mechanisms through which representations circulated. The analysis of these visual materials shows that the very quality most often attributed to photography—its claim to “truthfulness”—made it ideologically more problematic and therefore less acceptable than the paintings of Vasily Vereshchagin and Nikolai Karazin, which widely illustrated the Russian conquest of Turkestan in accordance with official narratives.

The second part of the presentation focuses on paintings, watercolours, and engravings that contributed to constructing the image of the battle as a major episode of the Russian army in Central Asia, intended to commemorate Skobelev’s victory both within military museums and among a broader public, particularly readers of popular illustrated journals.

The third part analyses the organization of the first museum of Gök-Tépé, established by Aleksey Kuropatkin as a central element of the commemorative complex of the site—from the Transcaspian railway to the soldiers’ graves and the officers’ cenotaph—as well as its reception by the public.

Finally, the presentation situates the representations (or their absence) of Gök-Tépé within the broader context of nineteenth-century European war photography and painting. Particular attention is paid to the asymmetry of the visual legacy between colonizers and colonized, as well as to the possible ways of overcoming this imbalance in the contemporary context, especially through a Central Asian museography capable of adopting a more assertive decolonial stance.

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Remembering Gökdepe: Collective Memory Across Literature, Performance, and Media in Turkmen Narratives

The presentation examines how the memory of the Gökdepe battle is constructed, preserved, and used in Turkmen cultural narratives, highlighting its pivotal role in shaping the nation and its identity. It starts by exploring collective memory, especially how oral and written traditions work together to shape how history is remembered. The study points out that trauma, resistance, and heroism are central themes in this cultural memory.

The study looks at how Turkmen literature represents the Gökdepe battle, focusing on the novel "*Perman*" by Ata Gowşudow and the story "*Erkinlik Galasy*" by Hudaýberdi Hally. These works blend history with creativity to retell the events of Gökdepe. The presentation also discusses how poetry and music help keep these memories alive, highlighting the work of well-known Turkmen poets and the enduring emotional impact of folk songs like the *Gökdepe mukamy*.

Furthermore, the presentation explores performative memory through theatrical productions, such as "*Gala*" (Fortress), illustrating how staged interpretations facilitate public engagement with the past. Finally, it examines contemporary representations of the Gökdepe battle in media and digital spaces, including film and online commemorative practices, reflecting evolving modes of remembrance. The memory of the Gökdepe battle is continuously reconstructed across genres and media, serving as a powerful ideological tool.

It concludes that the memory of the Gökdepe battle has been deliberately shaped by the Turkmen political powers throughout both the Soviet and post-independence periods, illustrating the persistent impact of Russian-centered ideological frameworks. During the Soviet era, narratives were selectively constructed to align with imperial and socialist interpretations. In the post-independence period, the state has continued to reconstruct this memory in ways that balance national identity-building with the legacy of Russian political and cultural influence.

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"No Other Community Has Made Such an Impact on History as the Muslim": Reframing the Gökdepe Events through World Literature and World History

The recent shift toward new interpretations of Central Asian and Ottoman history, grounded in the in-depth re-evaluation of local sources, has created new opportunities for the study of texts written in Turkic languages. At the same time, scholars have increasingly turned to critically examining the practices through which earlier generations collected, read, translated and conceptualised these materials. Together, these developments have reshaped contemporary understandings of knowledge production about Central Asia.

This article addresses a central question: can violence be understood as constitutive of history? Engaging with recent approaches in the intellectual history of Oriental studies and colonial knowledge production, it argues that violence has often been appropriated within philological scholarship as a fetishised category used to assert authority over the production of meaning.

To substantiate this claim, the article examines local narratives concerning the *Gökdepe dagwasy*, an episode of colonial warfare, and traces their reinterpretation in imperial and early Soviet contexts up to the mid-twentieth century. It focuses on how these texts were reconfigured within the frameworks of philology, literary studies, colonial administration and historiography, and how such reconfigurations shaped subsequent interpretations.

The original texts devoted to the *Gökdepe dagwasy*, composed by Islamic polymaths and poet-improvisers, were collected by Orientalists and colonial administrators for various purposes. Their reworking contributed to the formation of specific representations of local culture, political and social institutions. These representations were mobilised both by Turkmen modernists, who sought to establish a national, positivist historiography and reform the social order, and by Soviet institutions, including NKVD analysts, in interpreting the Civil War in the Transcaspian region. During the Soviet period, these events also attracted sustained attention from the Academy of Sciences as part of broader nation-building efforts in the Turkmen SSR.

Furthermore, the article highlights persistent issues in contemporary analyses of these processes of textual circulation, particularly the relationship between language, genre and the interpretive frameworks imposed on these texts.

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From Trauma to Template: Gökdepe, 'Blank Spots,' and the Politics of Remembering in Central Asia

This paper examines how the Battle of Gökdepe has been remembered, commemorated, and instrumentalized in post-Soviet Turkmenistan as part of a broader politics of memory in Central Asia. It argues that while early independence-era efforts to reclaim historical trauma and promote linguistic and cultural revival—initially advanced by grassroots movements such as *Agzybirlik*—resembled regional patterns of post-Soviet “decolonization,” these initiatives were quickly absorbed and reshaped by a highly centralized state project. Drawing on the concept of “blank spots,” the paper shows how selective remembering and strategic forgetting reveal contemporary power relations rather than simply competing interpretations of the past. In comparative perspective, the Turkmen case stands out for the extent to which memory was monopolized and curated, in contrast to the more plural and contested memory landscapes that emerged elsewhere in Central Asia. The paper thus demonstrates that remembering Gökdepe is not only about historical justice, but about defining national identity, political authority, and the boundaries of permissible memory in the present.

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Gökdepe battle memorialization in the context of the personality cults. Walk through the museums and panoramas of the Gökdepe battle in Gökdepe and Ashgabat

The paper analyzes how post-Soviet Turkmenistan transformed the 1881 Battle of Gökdepe into a central "mythscape" to legitimize state authority and personality cult. Drawing on memory and critical museum studies, I examine the state's mnemonic hegemony, which reframed historical trauma as a symbolic victory and the "founding moment" of the modern nation. A primary focus is the battle's integration into presidential personality cults and its

presentation in the two museums established by the second president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow.

Saparmyrat Niyazov linked Gökdepe to his ancestors and his personality cult, which was replaced by the attempts of the second president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, to establish his own cult and overshadow his predecessor. However, the research also addresses the decline in official memorialization after 2014, driven by geopolitical factors (abandoning post-colonial narratives towards Russia) and the lack of genuine personal connections to the event. The principal commemoration of the event migrated to virtual memory in exiled Turkmen community, while inside the country the official narrative left the mythscape set up by his predecessor, although it maintained the heroic Turkmen (and even Russian) components of the battle.

Finally, the study investigates the instrumentalization of space via panoramic architecture. I argue that immersive panoramas in Gökdepe and Ashgabat function as “ideological weapons”, underlining the Turkmen defender’s perspective and sensory manipulation to overwrite historical defeat with hyperbolized heroism. This case illustrates how authoritarian regimes utilize museums and monumentalism to navigate narrative control.