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**TҮRK DÜNYASI ARAŞTIRMALARI VAKFI**  
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## NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN INTERNATIONAL ALTAIC STUDIES

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This paper will give a short overview of the concept and the history of Altaic Studies. In this aim, I will first try to define the meaning - or rather the meanings that have been given to the discipline of Altaic Studies in the past, and following this I would like to put some life into this rather stern picture by sketching the biography (so-to-speak) of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference (PIAC) which, over the last 50 years constituted, to my mind, the main platform for scholars and researchers engaged in Altaic Studies in various branches.

I. The common definition of Altaic Studies – or Altaistics – is basically a linguistic one, in the sense that it assumes a genetic or other relationship between Turkic, Mongolian, and Manchu-Tungus language families. The name “Altaic” is based on the hypothesis that the forefathers of the peoples speaking one of the Turkic, Mongolian, or Manchu-Tungus languages today, might originally have come from the area around the Altai mountains, or rather from the neighboring steppe regions. Some scholars are even inclined to put Korean and Japanese into the basket of Altaic languages, but here we touch on a discussion that is still going on. It cannot be overlooked, that the term Altaic languages is not a very convincing name for the language families (and languages) involved, as it is based on a hypothesis, or, for that matter, related to a dot on the map of Asia, but it is a convenient term, and it has been adopted into the canon of academic disciplines for a long time.

The Swedish officer Johann von Strahlenberg who had been taken prisoner at the battle of Poltava (1709) by the Russians and who had the opportunity for almost 20 years to study the various peoples of the Russian empire, was the first scholar who noticed certain structural similarities among the languages he encountered, among them Turkic, Mongolian, and Manchu-Tungus languages, as well as Ugric ones (Poppe 1965:125). Strahlenberg was wrong in many respects, but with some justification he can be considered the ancestor of Altaic Studies. Many a great name in the scholarly genealogy of Altaic Studies flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although, it must be said, it was the incredibly productive work of the polyhistor-explorers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that paved their way – let me only mention here the multinational members of the Russian imperial expeditions! A multitude of written and spoken languages was their starting point and precious basic material, but let us not forget that these scholars as a rule were interested not only in languages, but no less in history, literature, religion, law, political ideas, and material culture of the peoples they encountered.

Until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, peoples, speaking one of the so-called Altaic languages were primarily found in Asia – from Siberia to the Bosphorus and from the White Sea to the sands of Turkestan. The extraordinary migration movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century swept speakers of Altaic languages into every corner of the five continents. This might have contributed to the fact that individual scholars who devote their time to Altaic Studies in the original linguistic sense can nowadays be found all over the world – and be in Australia or Hawaii. But this does not necessarily mean that there are many of them. And there are even less university institutes or chairs or Academy posts in the world that have explicitly and officially ‘Altaic’ in their name. But let us not complain! The small number of researchers working on Altaic linguistics has also its advantages: they all know each other and they have the opportunity to engage in intensive dialogues.

Although comparative linguistics can be considered the core of Altaic Studies, over the decades, three other basic methodological approaches have in practice also been subsumed into this discipline: 1) is represented by linguists who devote themselves to only one of the language families of the Altaic group, be it Turkic, Mongolian, or Manchu-Tungus; 2) is represented by scholars whose comparative research is not related to linguistics, but to another discipline – history, literature, ethnology, religion etc., albeit within a Turkic, Mongolian, or Manchu-Tungus context; 3) is represented by scholars who are grounded in one of the disciplines just mentioned, but only within the framework of just one of these language families or of one language only. This is why we can come across the idea that somebody who is a historian of the Ottoman empire is called an Altaist. I might be exaggerating, but it is exactly this more practical than orthodox idea that brings me to the second part of my paper.

## II. History and function of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference (PIAC)

The PIAC is, of course, neither permanent nor a conference in the literal sense of the word; it is a conference in the sense that it gets a group of experts of Altaic Studies, old and young, famous or not,

to sit around a conference table and to communicate; in other words, it is an informal gathering of scholars and experts interested in Altaic Studies in a comprehensive understanding of its themes and methods. The PIAC is permanent insofar as it understands scholarly communication as a process and not limited to official scholarly encounters called “conference”; in other words, the scholarly gathering is meant to continue in its communication over months and years, or a lifetime – becoming “permanent” in this way. The history of the PIAC shows that this procedure is not only *possible*, but also answers a basic need. There can be pleasure in this, too. Many members of the so-called PIAC family have become close friends over the years, while cooperating in their research ideas, books, journals, conferences etc. The PIAC has no permanent membership, and there is no membership fee. Some people join it for just one annual meeting, others attend every single one of the meetings, if at all possible – after the PIAC meeting becomes before the (next) PIAC meeting.

Most periodic conferences meet once in two or three years, even less frequently. The PIAC meets every year, or in other words, it asserts its permanence regularly, and it can be called no small feat that it has managed to do so for now 50 years. The frequency has been made possible by the fact that the meetings carry the character of symposia, rather than large conferences. One of their special features is the so-called confessions at which each participant in his (or her) turn informs the plenum of his (her) work, projects, and recent and future publications (cf. Sinor 2002:2).

Meetings usually unite scholars and experts from between 15 and 20 countries, but Europe, with its long tradition in Turkic and Mongolian studies, has been the venue more often than any other continent. During the years of the Cold War, some of the meetings took place in countries of the Socialist bloc, thus offering experts from “both parts of the world” a rare opportunity for personal encounters in a scholarly atmosphere. Let me add that in 1993, the PIAC convened in Almaty – another unforgettable event. The proceedings that were published for most meetings reflect the history of Altaic Studies in the last half-century.

The PIAC was founded in 1957 during the 24<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Orientalists (later renamed ICANAS – International Congress of Asian and North African Studies) held in München. Its first Secretary-General was the mongolist Walther Heissig (Bonn), followed by Denis Sinor, certainly the PIAC’s most prominent representative. There can be no doubt that the PIAC and its meetings have influenced the development of Altaic Studies. The lists of participants of the meetings often read like a *Who is Who* of Altaic Studies. A broad selection of linguistic themes has always played an important role. In more recent years, papers on aspects of history, literature, anthropology, religion, and history of art of the Altaic peoples increased in number, reflecting an international tendency towards more transdisciplinary approaches.

The concept of Altaic Studies, no less than its objects and methods, is not undisputed, but it continues to offer a set of challenging questions and theories. Moreover, it has proven a useful vehicle of interdisciplinary and international scholarly cooperation and exchange of ideas. In the Permanent International Altaistic Conference (PIAC) it has probably its most effective instrument and its liveliest resource.

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