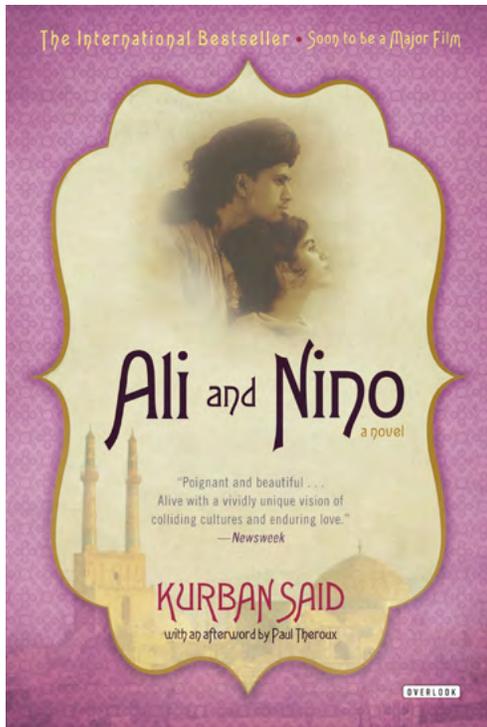


EURASIA

ALI & NINO: THE TRUE STORY BEHIND THE FICTION BY CREES OUTREACH COORDINATOR ADRIENNE LANDRY



Ali and Nino, published in 1937, is arguably the seminal literary work of Eurasia. A sweeping novel of romance and adventure, *Ali and Nino* tells the tale of Ali, a Muslim schoolboy from a proud and aristocratic Azeri family who falls in love with Nino, a beautiful Christian girl with distinct European sensibilities. In order to be together they must overcome personal scandal, family blood feuds, and World War I. In the end, they must choose between loyalty to their cultural beliefs and ardent devotion to each other in a world that increasingly rejects both.

But it is not just the fictional romance that makes *Ali and Nino* the seminal literary work of Eurasia. The mystery behind its authorship is equally representative of the tangled European-Asian web.

In a tale that sweeps from Azerbaijan to Germany, the story behind the book involves an ostentatious Jewish society writer, an adulterous Baroness, a lovesick Azeri dissident, a duped Georgian writer, rampant plagiarism, death in political camps, Nazi double-agents, crooked Fascists, and suicide by means of stabbing oneself in the foot. In fact, the reality behind the creation of the book in many ways is more fantastic and more Eurasian than its fictional narrative.

Ali and Nino was first published by EP Tal Verlag, a Viennese publishing company, in 1937 under the pseudonym Kurban Said, and was an immediate success. The only problem was no one knew who Kurban Said was.

For a time it was thought that famed writer and journalist Lev Nussimbaum, who commonly wrote under the pseudonym Essad Bey, was the true author. Nussimbaum, born in Ukraine, spent his childhood in Azerbaijan before fleeing the Bolsheviks in 1920 at the age of 14. As a celebrated member of the European literary scene, he was known for writing on subjects like the Caucasus region; subjects that many in Western Europe knew nothing about.

That said, historians and critics who did know about these subjects uniformly disregarded Nussimbaum as a credible source, and often accused Nussimbaum of outright plagiarism. Nussimbaum was a personal acquaintance of the Georgian writer Grigol Robakidze, author of *Snake's Skin*, from which it is evident whole passages were “borrowed” for *Ali and Nino*.

In fact, there are only two remaining arguments upholding Nussimbaum as the primary author of *Ali and Nino*. For starters, Nussimbaum and Robakidze were friends, and therefore it would have been fairly easy for Nussimbaum to “borrow” Robakidze’s work. Second, there are several significant errors in *Ali and Nino* that are the same mistakes Nussimbaum had made in earlier works.

But surely mistakes alone are not enough to give Nussimbaum full credit for the work. And if Nussimbaum wasn’t the author, who was?

Many believe that Azeri writer and statesman Yusif Vazirov Chamanzaminli is the actual author of *Ali and Nino*. Born in Nagorno-Karabakh, Vazirov wrote under the pen name Chamanzaminli, as well as 15 other known pseudonyms throughout his lifetime, making his work sometimes hard to identify.

Researchers point to Vazirov’s life experience, diaries, articles, and other published works as evidence that he is the primary author of *Ali and Nino*. According to Vazirov’s



TOP: Book cover of *Ali and Nino*. **MIDDLE:** Lev Nussimbaum in flamboyant attire “of the caucasus.” **BOTTOM:** Lev Nussimbaum posing as author Essad Bey.

diaries, Nino is a prototype of a young girl Vazirov met and romanced while attending high school in Baku. Vazirov’s true authorship of the manuscript has never been officially confirmed, however, and likely never will. Vazirov died of malnutrition and disease in a Stalin prison camp in 1943.

Historians have concluded that *Ali and Nino* is most likely the result of not one but several writers. Vazirov seems to be the core author, although clearly the book was given the once-over by Nussimbaum who inserted passages from Rabakidze. But the story of *Ali and Nino*’s publication doesn’t end there...

When it came to translating and re-printing *Ali and Nino* in 1971, the rights to the book legally belonged to Leela Ehrenfels, the daughter

of Rolf von Ehrenfels, whose second wife, Baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels von Bodmershof was listed in the Third Reich's equivalent of "Books in Print" as the author of *Ali and Nino*.

The family of Baroness Ehrenfels, able to produce multiple legal papers and publishing contracts confirming the Baroness' pen name as "Kurban Said" only agreed to reprint the book if they could write the afterword for the new publication in which they claim that *Ali and Nino* was the result of an "intense friendship" between Lev Nussimbaum and Baroness Ehrenfels.

Despite his Jewish heritage, Nussimbaum had for many years enjoyed the protection of Nazi Germany's Propaganda Ministry due to his popularity and high profile attacks on the evils of Stalin's empire. But in 1935 when the Nuremberg race laws ended his publishing career in Germany, Nussimbaum headed to Vienna where it seemed all of Europe's literary exiles were convening in cafes.

It was in Vienna, two years later, that *Ali and Nino's* book contract was signed. But if Nussimbaum was the one publishing the manuscript, how did Baroness Ehrenfels' name get on the contract?

In 1930s Europe, it was quite common for Jewish authors to use non-Jewish covers when publishing their manuscripts to ensure receipt of royalties through trusted Aryan friends. It is possible, then, that Nussimbaum's Aryan cover for publishing *Ali and Nino* was his suspected lover, Baroness Ehrenfels.

It was around this time that Nussimbaum came up with a plan to become the official biographer of Italy's fascist dictator, Mussolini – an audacious ambition for a Jewish writer in 1930s Axis Europe, and one quickly put to rest after an informant denounced him as a Jew.

Still, the project had afforded him a high level network of friends and officials who assisted him in evading the secret police when Germany invaded Austria in 1938. After an adventure that led him from Austria, through North Africa, and finally to Italy,

Nussimbaum escaped arrest by posing as an American. In this guise he lectured all over Europe and the United States. In an odd twist of fate, his host in the US, George Sylvester Viereck, was in fact a secret Nazi agent working in America, thus Nussimbaum's lectures were unwittingly funded by the Third Reich's Propaganda Ministry.

Nussimbaum settled in Positano, Italy, where he continued to interact with Baroness Ehrenfels, addressing his letters "To Mrs. Kurban Said" – further evidence for Baroness Ehrenfels' family when claiming authorship. More likely, this was the way that Nussimbaum continued to receive royalties for *Ali and Nino* via his lover Baroness Ehrenfels.

It was in Positano that Nussimbaum contracted Raynaud's disease – a disease that affects the vascular system eventually leading to gangrene. Baroness Ehrenfels continued to visit and care for him during this time, always referring to herself as Mrs. Kurban Said.

Eventually it became necessary to amputate parts of Nussimbaum's left foot, the beginning of a series of medical procedures that eventually culminated in his death in 1942 – thus starting the myth that Nussimbaum committed suicide by stabbing himself in the foot. Throughout her life, Baroness Ehrenfels continued to receive royalties for *Ali and Nino*, openly acknowledged the name Kurban Said, and it is her descendants who own the rights of the book today.

So what does it all mean?

The complex and often bizarre tale behind this little book's authorship is one of the best representatives of and advocates for the philosophical and geographical grey area we now call "Eurasia." A relatively modern term, some academics dislike the word's ambiguity, preferring the more rigid and traditional structure of Europe vs. Asia. Still, recent scholarship tends to appreciate the term because it acknowledges a cultural gradient between the two continents. It recognizes a shared and even common European and Asiatic history yet remains distinct and apart. *Ali and Nino* and its author (or authors) belong neither to Europe nor Asia, yet could not exist without either.

To put it another way, how else would you define a novel about star-crossed Muslim and Christian lovers, written by an Azeri communist dissident, supplemented with plagiarized passages from a Georgian literary expat, stolen by a Ukrainian Jew with a Nazi mistress? If nothing else, the book is Eurasian.



TOP LEFT: Azeri author Yusif Vazirov. TOP RIGHT: Georgian author Grigol Rabakidze. MIDDLE: Baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels von Bodmershof. BOTTOM: Memorial plaque on Lev Nussimbaum's house in Berlin that identifies him as both Essad Bey and Kurban Said.